

Childhood internal migration and the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic inequalities

Aude Bernard | September 11, 2023



Using lifetime data for baby boomers from 15 European countries, Aude Bernard shows that (i) children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to migrate and (ii) individuals who migrated in childhood are more likely to migrate in adulthood. Thus, poorer children are doubly disadvantaged in coming from a lower socioeconomic background and being less migratory, which limits the economic benefits of changing region of residence in adulthood and exacerbates social reproduction.

The widening of income inequalities has stimulated research on the intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage. We now know that social reproduction is a multidimensional process underpinned by various mechanisms, including parental time and resource investments, parental socialisation, wealth assortative mating and neighbourhood effects. Internal migration may be an additional mechanism.

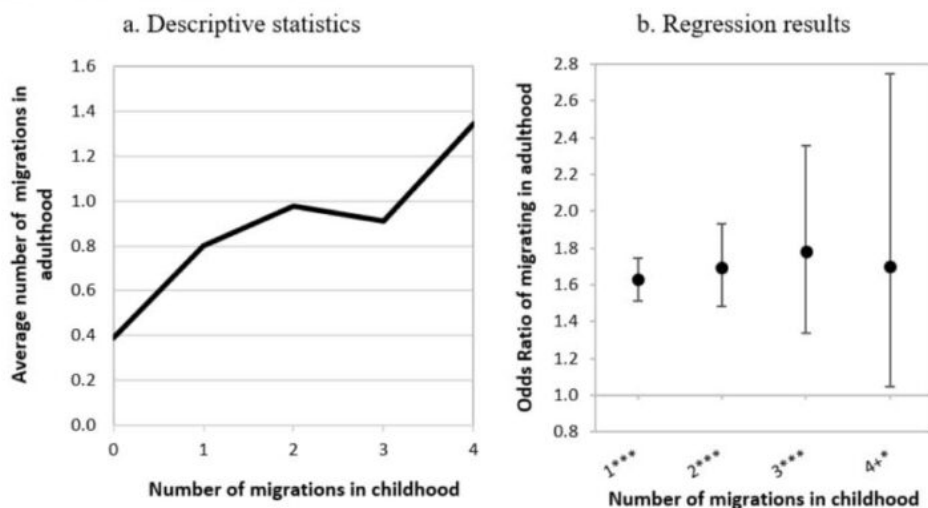
In a recent paper, I used retrospective data from the Survey of Health and Ageing in Europe (SHARE), which, at Wave 7 in 2017, collected complete migration histories from birth to age 50 in 15 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland (Bernard 2023). I defined migration as a change of NUTS-2 region (i.e., regions in France, Hungary, and Italy; provinces in Belgium; national areas in Sweden; and autonomous communities in Spain), which means that I focused on relatively long-distance internal migration and on its role in the perpetuation of socioeconomic inequalities

Migration is intergenerationally transmitted

Mounting evidence indicates that migration is transmitted from parents to children (Bernard

and Vidal 2020; Myers 1999): individuals who migrated in childhood and adolescence (0–17 years) are more likely to migrate throughout adulthood (18–50 years). By leaving and entering new social contexts, children are likely to develop social skills that they can mobilise for future migration. Panel a in Figure 1 shows a clear linear association between the number of childhood internal migrations and the number of adulthood migrations. Individuals who did not migrate in childhood report an average of 0.40 migrations in adulthood, compared with one or more migrations among individuals who migrated at least twice in childhood. This association holds when parental socioeconomic background is controlled, as in Panel b.

Figure 1 - Association between number of childhood migrations and number of adulthood migrations in 15 European countries.



Source: Bernard (2023), Calculations from Wave 7 of SHARE (2017).

Note: ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.001$. For panel b, the reference category is no migration. Control variables include parental education, urban status of region of birth, sex, birth cohort and a country fixed effect. Childhood migration is measured between birth age and 17. Adulthood migration is measured between age 18 and age 50.

This finding supports the idea that internal migration is intergenerationally transmitted. More importantly, panel b shows that migrating at least once in childhood is paramount to increasing the odds of migrating in adulthood. The overlapping confidence intervals imply that the number of childhood migrations is not relevant to subsequent migration decisions in adulthood.

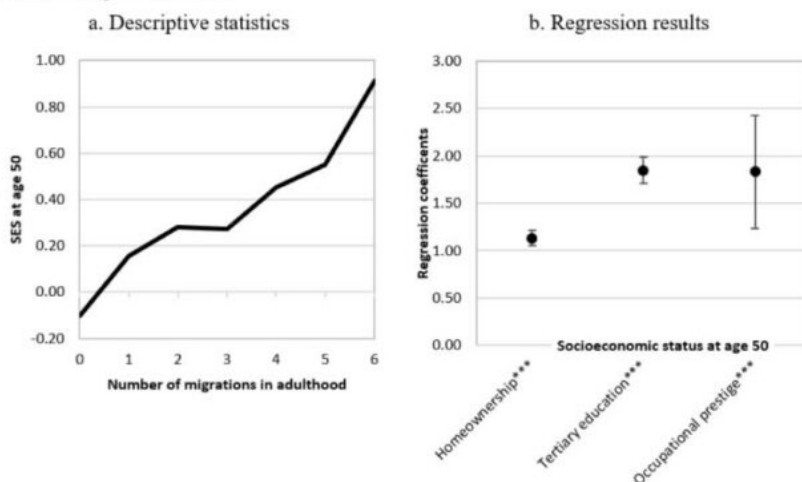
Migration is socioeconomically beneficial

Children who migrated in childhood are more likely to reside in large cities which provide greater educational and employment opportunities. Considering sociospatial inequalities, this means that childhood migration can promote upward social mobility without the need to migrate in adulthood. However, individuals who migrated in childhood are more likely to migrate in adulthood than stayers even if they reside in large cities (results not reported here).

This is important because internal migration in adulthood promotes upward occupational mobility (Fielding 1992; Mulder and Van Ham 2005). Panel a in Figure 2 depicts a positive linear association between the number of adulthood internal migrations and SES at age 50: individuals who migrate in adulthood multiple times are more likely to report higher SES at age 50. Regression coefficients in panel b confirm this association when controlling for

possible cofounders. Migrating in adulthood promotes all three components of SES: homeownership, tertiary education and higher occupational prestige. The effect of migration on the latter two is particularly pronounced for migration to large urban centres (Results not reported here).

Figure 2 - Association between adulthood migration and socioeconomic status (SES) at age 50 in 15 European countries



Source: Bernard (2023), Calculations from Wave 7 of SHARE.

Note: ** p<0.05, *** p<0.001. Adulthood migration is measured between age 18 and age 50.

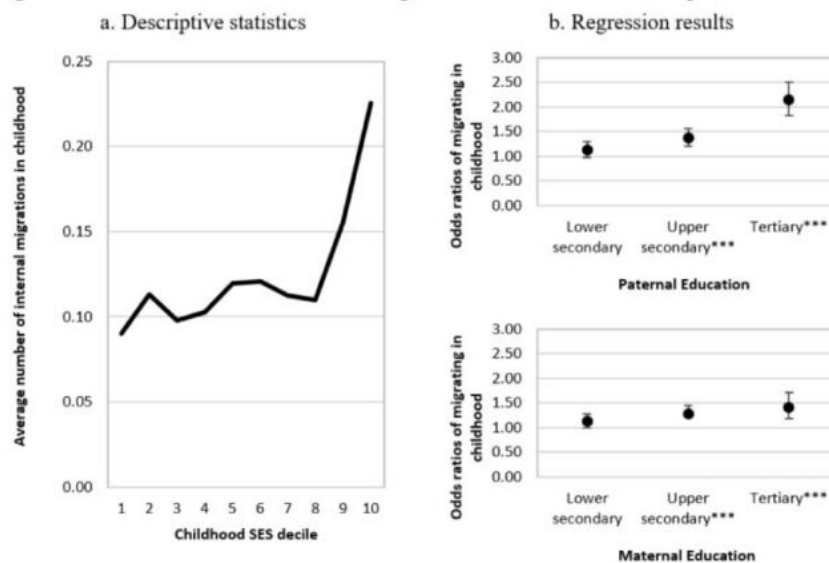
SES at age 50 is a composite index obtained from principal component analysis of homeownership, tertiary education and occupational prestige. The higher the SES score, the higher the socioeconomic advantage. Regression analysis in panel b controls for urban status of region of residence at age 18, birth cohort, sex, ever married, ever had children, personality traits and a country fixed effect. Homeownership, tertiary education and occupational prestige are modelled separately. Odds ratios are reported for homeownership and tertiary education and standard regression coefficients for occupational prestige.

Migration is selective

The results so far mean that individuals exposed to internal migration early in life are more likely to migrate in adulthood and thus more likely to report a higher socioeconomic status at age 50. This finding has important implications for understanding social mobility and social reproduction. On the one hand, internal migration could be an important mechanism for individuals to achieve intergenerational upward social mobility. On the other hand, because migration likelihood increases with educational level (Wagner 1990) and because this relationship is nearly universal (Abel and Muttarak 2017), children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to migrate than children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Panel a of Figure 3 shows that European children from the top two deciles report more than twice as many internal migrations, on average, as children from the lower deciles, suggesting that the propensity to migrate internally in childhood is socially determined.

Figure 3 - Association between SES and migration in childhood in 15 European countries



Source: Bernard 2023, Calculations from Wave 7 of SHARE.

Note: ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Childhood migration is measured between birth and age 17.

Childhood SES at age 50 is a composite index obtained from principal component analysis of parental education, number of amenities and books at home and main occupation of the breadwinner at age 10. The higher the SES score, the higher the socioeconomic advantage. Regression analysis in panel b controls for urban status of region of residence at birth, birth cohort, sex and a country fixed effect.

This association holds when country, birth cohort and sex are controlled for in panel b: the higher the level of parental education, the greater the odds of migrating in childhood. The effect of education is gradual and holds for both paternal and maternal education.

Implications

Collectively, my results show that European children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are doubly disadvantaged in having a disadvantaged background and being less migratory, which exacerbates social reproduction by limiting their mobility in adulthood and the economic benefits of changing region of residence.

The relevance of the processes described here for international migration deserves to be explored. Growing evidence suggests that international migration is also transmitted intergenerationally (de Jong and de Valk 2023). A continued increase in cross-country migration within Europe points to the importance of understanding its potential role in the transmission of inequalities between generations.

References

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