Comments on the overview paper “Well-being of Migrant Children and Youth in Europe” by Kenneth Harttgen and Stephan Klasen

By

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1. Introduction

The overview paper by Harttgen and Klasen was commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation to map the existing state of research on the topic of “child and youth migration in ...developed nations”\(^1\). It was intended to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the current knowledge base as a means for evaluating the circumstances of child migrants in the area surveyed, and to suggest areas for future research on the topic.

The title of the submitted draft paper suggests a more limited topic in terms of both subject matter and geographical focus: “well-being” rather than child and youth migration more comprehensively, and “Europe” rather than the developed world more generally. Neither of these limitations are discussed or justified in the paper. The second part of the paper reflects the title’s focus; it covers the literature on migrant child wellbeing in Europe, and raises a host of stimulating questions and suggestions about future possible research directions. The first part of the paper is much broader than its title would lead one to expect. It is more responsive to the original commissioning brief, and indeed even broader than that. It surveys some of the main frameworks and theories of contemporary migration, usefully setting out various key definitional typologies and relating migration studies to broader questions of development and poverty. The first two thirds of this part of the paper have no specific European focus, and apart from the first couple of pages, there is no sustained focus on questions of children and youth.

Both parts of the paper contain valuable synthetic information and raise questions and suggestions which I look forward to discussing. However, there is little connection between the two parts, and accordingly, it does not seem particularly useful to comment on the paper as a whole. Rather I will direct my remarks to each section in turn. As a general point, I would suggest some reconsideration of the structure of the paper to reflect on whether it really hangs together as an integrated piece of work. It might be useful to consider either reframing the two parts so that they have a more consistent and common focus, or separating them so that they are not artificially yoked together. Clearer pointers to the direction of the argument would also assist the reader.

2. Determinants and Effects of Migration

This part of the paper performs a useful overview role in introducing the reader to the main typologies and theories of international migration (though see below for my queries about the intended audience). Given the complexity of the phenomenon, the multiple vantage points from which it is studied and the plethora of agendas that surround the study of international migration, this is no mean feat. As the paper clearly demonstrates, many different schools of social scientific thought have developed their own approaches to the phenomenon. At the same time concrete information and high quality data have been fairly thin on the ground. In part this is a reflection of the lack of coordination across national research institutions and a related absence of common research frameworks. Moreover, and this is a point which is perhaps somewhat neglected by the paper, political and policy agendas have often driven both theorizing and research, with deleterious effects on the quality of data and the reliability of the conclusions produced. For example, the paper cites Borjas’s research to support the claim that immigration has no significant adverse effect on wages\(^2\); infact, however, much of Borjas’s work has made the opposite claim\(^3\), though it is true that recent research has led him to qualify his earlier assertion that immigration was a factor in lowering wages at the bottom of the employment ladder to a more cautious set of statements about local or regional impact\(^4\).

In any event, the point remains hotly contested with groups such as Mark Kirkorian’s Center for Immigration Studies regularly disseminating research findings claiming that immigration into the US has a chilling effect on native wage and labour prospects\(^5\).

A more general observation about this part of the paper builds on the point just made. Because it spans such a large body of scholarship in a relatively short space, the paper is somewhat superficial. This is probably inevitable, and perhaps not a serious issue, since the purpose of a review of this nature is to survey the field rather than delve into the niceties of specialist controversies and debates. However, at times this superficiality seems to me to border on inaccuracy, or at least to significantly elide some important critical issues which should be clarified in the overall research design. A few examples, following the order in which they arise in the paper, are enumerated:

(a) The distinction between “voluntary” and “forced’ migrants (p.4).

The paper states “While conceptually clear, distinguishing between the two types of migrants in practice is not an easy task”. In fact, a growing body of work (Crisp\(^6\); Gibney\(^7\); Ghosh\(^8\); challenges the conceptual clarity or viability of the distinction. At

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\(^2\) At p. 14.


\(^4\) See his blog, *The Borjas Blog*.


heart this might be a philosophical debate about what constitutes “coercion” or “choice”\(^9\) but it certainly is also a key issue for social science and policy. It is not just that one kind of migration changes into another, as the paper suggests; it is that the very concept of what constitutes a forced migration is under-developed. Is crossing the US/Mexico border illegally to secure funds to buy life saving drugs or medical treatment for a sick child forced or voluntary? Is leaving a relatively fighting-free area of Iraq forced or voluntary? Applying these questions to child migration, how should we characterize the migration of Moroccan children whose parents have left them behind in the care of ageing grandparents with sub subsistence income resources? Or the journeys of Somali or Sudanese children escaping from years of destitution in Kenyan refugee camps? In terms of framing future research agendas, this is a key issue.

(b) The relative vulnerability of accompanied or unaccompanied children (p. 6)

The paper states “In general, [unaccompanied children] are likely to be more vulnerable”. This is perhaps a somewhat misleading oversimplification. A growing body of work suggests that, contrary to common sense and previous assumptions, accompanied children in undocumented, refugee or impoverished families may be as vulnerable than their unaccompanied counterparts. Recent work by Save the Children in Italy, corroborated by the findings of belgian NGOs and some US advocacy groups, suggests that children in poor and marginalized families might be even more at risk of exploitation (including by their families – eg Roma Romanians in Italy, undocumented Nigerians in UK) than unaccompanied children, at least those who come into contact with social services. For example, undocumented parents may withhold their children (including in the US, in some cases, their citizen children) from school and health care for fear of detection; impoverished and marginalized parents (eg Roma and Albanian parents) may induct their children into forms of exploitation (sex work) or criminality (thieving, begging) – dangers that children within the care of state social welfare services would not face. This is obviously an area which requires much more research. Quantitative surveys alone will not do the trick – qualitative studies are required.

(c) The distinction between trafficking and smuggling (p. 6)

The paper seems to equate these two forms of irregular migration, and to suggest that children who are smuggled are not acting on the basis of decisions made by themselves or their families, but – like trafficked children – that they are forced to migrate by others. Infact many children who are smuggled across borders are acting on family decisions – smuggled to reunify with family members already in the destination state (very common in the US), smuggled because other avenues of escape from persecution don’t exist (very common for Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans), smuggled because they want to leave oppressive home situations (Chinese children escaping one child policy, forced marriages etc). And the distinction between trafficking and smuggling, while complex and less clear than presented by international legal definitions\(^10\), needs at least to be acknowledged rather than elided. Also, if the impact of migration on children is the target of the inquiry, then

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\(^10\) See The Palermo Protocols to the UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime
some mechanism for disentangling family from children’s decisions needs to be explored. My work interviewing undocumented unaccompanied children indicates that identifying who in a family makes the decision to migrate and why is challenging; children typically defer to their parents’ wishes, their views are rarely elicited\textsuperscript{11}. Does this mean they are forced migrants?

Space constraints preclude discussion of other examples of overbroad generalization, but these include the distinction between temporary and permanent migration (a problematic division which needs much more unpacking – where does circular migration fit in? is this a post-facto or an ex-ante distinction?), the discussion about the correlation between age and migration incentives (isn’t it too simple to claim that “young people” are more likely to migrate, how young, are there gender effects?), the claim that the prospect of migration leads to greater investments in human capital in sending countries (there is evidence of the opposite trend too, eg depletion of educational and social resources because of migration).

I would like to conclude my comments on the first part of the paper with two more general observations:

1. Since the whole focus of the research endeavour is on child and youth migration, the paper needs to include a more thorough and accurate discussion of these terms. I would suggest that the overbroad conflation of “child”, “youth”, “adolescent” and “young adult” (p. 5) be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced approach that is in line with legal, anthropological and social policy scholarship in this field. It is now widely accepted that, as a matter of international law and widespread domestic practice, the term “child” is understood as referring to persons under 18. Youth, by contrast, covers a broader demographic group, typically up to 25. As the second part of the paper correctly observes, there is by now a large body of scholarship interpreting the child specific human rights entitlements enumerated in the very widely ratified 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is a good reason for focusing on this group. In terms of sexual exploitation, sex trafficking and prostitution, 18 is again a critical cut-off point in international law, so this should be reflected in the research agenda. At the same time, in terms of migration issues and areas which require future research attention, there is a significant body of work to be done on “youth” related issues – access to employment, social exclusion and identity issues (not least insertion into radical and fundamentalist groups as protest against racism and marginalization); gang involvement, deportation, second generation double jeopardy problems, gender issues and cultural conflicts. In my view, the research team as a whole will need to make a decision about whether it is going to focus on the 0-18 group, using international legal definitions of the child as a key framing construct, or whether it is going to expand its focus to include both children and youth, in which case a quite different set of legal, labour and other frameworks will also have to be engaged.

2. I think the first part of the paper, partly because of its ambitious scope and broad reach, needs to be somewhat reconceptualized and restructured. As presently drafted, it

is a little difficult to follow; the information is presented in a somewhat confusing and repetitious way, so that it is not always clear what the issue being addressed is. The absence of a concluding summary or paragraph leaves the reader rather up in the air, with inconsistent statements and findings unresolved (e.g., is migration, including irregular migration, going to grow or diminish?) Moreover it was not always evident to me who the paper was addressed to; sometimes the statements made are too general and simplistic for a reasonably sophisticated or expert audience (“women migrating illegally face a very high risk of being forced to [sic] prostitution”, p. 5; “policies towards economic immigration have generally become more welcoming”, p. 20); at other times, I found the argument somewhat too dense to follow (“Cross-country studies … found that the negative effects on the wages of young workers tend to be higher if labor market restrictions are more rigid…” and note 16 about the “capital intensity” of work, p. 14).

3. Migration and Well-being of Children and Youth

This part of the paper provides a rich overview of the concept of human well-being and a fairly detailed analysis of what a research program applying the concept to migrant children would look like. It opens up a very wide range of different research topics and issues, many of which are to date completely neglected in the literature. I found the discussion of social inclusion and exclusion particularly rich (though the review of work on access to health care, including mental health care, was perhaps less comprehensive). It might be useful to situate the discussion of well-being and migrant children in broader discussions about well-being of migrants on the one hand, and well-being of children on the other, and discuss the relevance of indicators used in each of those domains.

Most of the suggestions advanced in this part of the paper are very much on point. I am not in a position to assess the accuracy of some of the more technical economic arguments, nor am I qualified to comment usefully on the analysis of data sets, broadly based survey material or other macro and micro level research reviewed in this part of the paper. My only reflection on this aspect is that indeed, there is a very serious need for some integration and coordination of indices so that data collected in different countries and/or by different organizations can be usefully compared. My research on trafficked and smuggled children, and on irregular and undocumented child migrants (including on detention and deportation or removal of children), suggests that the lack of uniform data is a very serious obstacle to research and policy progress in this area. I am aware of some, preliminary initiatives within the UN to advance a case for harmonizing and encouraging the collection of state-based data on statelessness, irregularity and access to citizenship – and clearly it would be useful to include within the frame of this strategy pressure for attention to relevant measurements of child migration and the impact of migration on children more generally.

My other observations on this part of the paper are as follows:

(a) The paper suggests that Sen’s capability approach can be equated with a rights-based approach (p. 29). This is not entirely accurate. While there are extensive overlaps to be sure, there are also some significant differences. These relate to the indicators used to assess functioning and capability, and to the outcomes that are
measured. For example subjective and emotional aspects of well-being do not directly feature in the human rights context (p. 31, 32). Moreover, the instrumentality argument, plausibly advanced in the paper as a second aspect of the concern about child migrants (the concern that child well being impinges on adult functioning) is foreign to the human rights approach. I do not wish to overstate my point: clearly there are important synergies and complementarities between the two approaches. But there are also differences. Given the very widespread take up of human rights instruments and precepts, and the much more limited and recent impact of the capabilities approach, it may not be wise to merge the two approaches. It might be less arbitrary in terms of political accountability, and more productive in terms of the potential for progressive policy outcomes to stick to the widely accepted human rights entitlements and assess the extent to which these dimensions of well-being are given effect. Though the paper proposes a “pragmatic ….focus on established indicators of capabilities” (p. 34), “established’ in what context and for what purpose? The conflation of “children” and “youth” should be avoided – my earlier comments apply.

(b) The second part of the paper, while concentrated on European material, makes frequent references to the US situation, but some significant research on migrant children in the US is overlooked (eg work of Manuel and Carola Suarez Orosco on hispanic immigration and the impact of migration on children, David Thronson on the links between immigration and family law and the complications facing mixed status families, MaryWaters on upward vs downward mobility,.; the growing literature on obesity and nutritional deficits among migrant communities). My earlier comment about the need for greater clarity about the geographic scope of this paper applies. If the US is part of the frame, then it should be more comprehensively addressed; the justification for excluding Canada and Australia would also need to be considered. Moreover the particular complexity of the relationship between migrants and the African-American population is not addressed, though one would expect this to be an important area of inquiry (instead the European finding that second generation children do worse than their native born counterparts is directly and inappropriately applied to the US, p. 39).

(c) The invocation of the concept of “citizenship” to examine children’s entitlements (p. 43) is most welcome, but the discussion is somewhat underdeveloped and confusing. Children are not citizenships but, perhaps, citizens. However, as I have argued elsewhere, the extent to which they really are citizens given their exclusion from cardinal attributes of citizenship such as voting and political representation is not as self evident as seems to be suggested12. In my view, the value and “heft” (to borrow Macklin’s term) of citizenship for children, including child migrants is a key question that merits further research. Related to this, the paper, touches on the beneficial role of social networks for migrants – but there is

some suggestion, both from work on gender\textsuperscript{13} and on children\textsuperscript{14}, that family networks can be sources of exploitation and even danger (domestic violence, dependence on abusive spouse for continued permission to remain). This is another important area for future research.

(d) More attention might perhaps be paid to the impact of immigration status on social exclusion. I have seen some recent research in the US showing that child and adolescent migrants who are undocumented experience this lack of legal status as a major obstacle to integration with friends – a guilty secret they have to conceal, an obstacle to common behaviour (such as getting a driving licence or travelling on a school trip abroad) that they have to explain away. The paper only references this in passing (p. 45), perhaps an underemphasis given the growing importance of this aspect of relative social disadvantage for undocumented populations.

(e) The paper is silent on the legal framework governing access to key aspects of social inclusion such as entitlement to family reunification (age limits, gender differences) education, health care, welfare support etc. This, it seems to me, is a serious omission. For example, the “ability to participate in mainstream education” (p. 46) comprises several distinct components – legal ability (first and foremost), physical access, intellectual and linguistic competence, emotional ability (the problem of bullying, racism and classroom and playground interference, sometimes rising to the level of brutality, should be referenced). Without a clear understanding of the legal entitlements (or lack thereof – e.g. for undocumented child migrants accessing public secondary or tertiary education) the other issues regarding access are difficult to put into context and research might draw misleading conclusions about causes of exclusion.

4. Conclusion

The paper is a useful first mapping of a set of research issues for a broadly based venture into documenting contemporary child migration and impact of migration on children. Inevitably, given the breadth of the topics covered and the limited space available, there are some omissions, some inaccuracies and some inconsistencies. These are less significant than some lack of clarity about the overall scope of the mapping exercise that is undertaken. It would be useful to clarify this before the authors embark on a redraft of their paper.

\textsuperscript{14} See Save the Children website.