

Negotiating Migration: The Experiences of Haitian Youth and Their Families

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Abstract

Despite the high prevalence of youth migration, both in Haiti and worldwide, little is known about how migration decisions unfold. Whereas imbalanced opportunities motivate migration, a more threatening urban environment, including a 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, has transformed both the opportunities and risks that youth from southeast Haiti encounter in their primary destinations. I draw on two data sources: 1) the nationally representative 2009 Haiti Youth Survey and 2) the Haitian Youth Transitions Study, a prospective mixed-methods study of youth when they have a high propensity to migrate. Preliminary findings reveal a long and expensive time horizon for youth migration investments. Additionally, multi-level models that compare recent primary school graduate to their older siblings reveal that families are making more conservative migration decisions. Continued analyses will refine these findings and test what characteristics predict youth migration.

Negotiating Migration: The Experience of Haitian Youth

The transition to adulthood in developing countries is undergoing dramatic transformations, and many rural youth view migration as the most promising option for a productive future. Burgeoning globalization facilitates exposure to new ideas and potential opportunities, and the increased availability of transportation and communication infrastructures facilitates geographic mobility (Behrman & Sengupta 2005). Many youth are also revising their expectations beyond traditional roles and delaying long-established markers of adulthood, such as marriage and family formation, in favor of the anticipated returns to education (Quisumbing & Hallman 2005). In response to these changing global contexts, rural youth leave the perceived vacuum of opportunity in their natal homes and seek enhanced urban prospects.

Despite the prevalence of youth migration, little is known about how migration decisions unfold and how youth transform as they experience a dramatic shift in both structural and ideological contexts. Haiti is an ideal setting to examine youth migration, because 70 percent of all internal migrants are youth (Metz et al. 2001). The escalating demand for education, cultural values that encourage migration, and land pressures that restrict farming opportunities act jointly to encourage youth migration (Bredl 2011; Mintz 2010; Schwartz 2009). Whereas imbalanced opportunities motivate migration, a more threatening urban environment has transformed both the opportunities and risks that young people encounter (Brockhoff & Brennan 1998). Further obfuscating the risks and rewards of migration, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti in January 2010, severely damaging the physical, social, and economic infrastructures in the primary destinations for potential youth migrants in southeastern Haiti. This paper addresses a gap in the current literature and unravels specific aspects of the migration process as experienced by Haitian youth.

Families in the Youth Migration Experience

Families use diverse and complex strategies to adapt to the demands of changing global contexts. Independent youth migration, experienced when youth migrate separately from their parents, is one family-based strategy, but it receives scant attention in the academic literature. Despite the widely used term, independent youth migrants are neither alone, nor outside the family system. Often they migrate with friends and kin and receive financial support from their families (Thorsen 2010). Parents often continue to exert authority over them (Castellanos 2007), and many youth reside with kin, a practice that reinforces existing social ties (Hareven 1982). Most current literature integrating migration and family processes emphasizes children left behind by migration and those who follow or move with parents (Tienda et al. 2007). Independent youth migrants cannot be ignored; theirs is a common reality, whereby they leave their natal homes without their parents seeking educational and economic opportunities (Punch 2007).

A current challenge to understanding independent youth migration is the lack of a conceptual framework that integrates well developed, but separate, theories about both migration and youth as a unique life course phase. Current theories primarily invoke labor explanations (Lloyd 2005). These adult specific approaches suggest that motives and experiences are stable throughout the life course, other than to note that earlier migration affords the greater potential of returns over a lifetime (Tienda et al. 2007). Many youth migrate for non-labor reasons, such as to facilitate education or as part of a culturally based transition into adulthood roles, and their migration determinants are distinct from adults', due to age-graded life course experiences (Punch 2007). Additionally, there is a long time horizon for any returns to investments in migrating youth. For the majority of youth who do not earn cash income for the work they do, the costs of education and sustenance living are high, particularly for rural families. Thus any investments in youth migration must be carefully considered.

Motivating and Inhibiting Factors

To examine how Haitian youth and their families make and negotiate migration decisions, I consider the potential factors that may drive youth migration. I build on Todaro's (1969) explanation of rural-to-urban labor migration, which posits that ruralites will migrate to urban areas if the potential for returns in an urban destination exceeds migration costs. As population pressures reduce agricultural production potential in rural Haiti, youth perceive higher returns to urban-sector jobs available in Port-au-Prince and regional cities, and families will prefer that youth migrate (Mintz

2010). The increased circulation of ideas, values, attitudes, culture, and language lead youth to develop new ideas about what their futures should hold (Guillén 2001; Sklair 1999), and further spur migration among when natal homes cannot adapt to the dramatic shifts in demand for education and labor opportunities (Lam 2006). Youth migration is one way that families respond to opportunity imbalances.

Youth migration motives are also rooted in psychosocial and cultural dimensions (Punch 2007). As adolescents transition to being interdependent household contributors and negotiate new aspects of their identity, they desire to make their own decisions and many seek forms of autonomy (Collins & Steinburg 2006). Expectations and the promise of potential returns are highest among youth, and in areas with few opportunities, social mobility must follow geographic mobility (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson 2006). Hence, labor and education opportunities are often the direct motives for migration, but they may be embedded in a broader coming-of-age experience. Return migrants may be perceived as more mature, experienced, and ready for adult roles. Migration experiences, by providing economic status, may also facilitate family formation (Schwartz 2009). Additionally, as peer influences drive youth behaviors (Collins & Steinberg 2006), returned youth transmit migration-related values to local youth by demonstrating their worldliness and possession of new material goods (Castellanos 2007).

Extrapolating Todorov's model and specifying it for youth can account for the directional flow of youth migrants motivated by both education and labor opportunities. However, it fails to account for how youth migrants are selected. Migration behaviors are also dictated by feasibility and constraints. Rural-to-urban youth migration is a long-term investment, and during this time, the movement of wealth is primarily from rural parents to their children in urban areas. This experience among youth migrants and their parents differs from the typical expectation that resources will flow from the migrant to their rural family after an initial brief investment period (Massey et al. 1993). For families with multiple children, they are faced with whether to spread their investments thinly across multiple children, or focus their hopes on the most promising child. Families hope their children will support them in the future, but the returns are uncertain. Investing in youth migration differs from investing in the migration of other family members; as one parent explained, "Investing in your kid is like playing the lottery." Thus the family's willingness to support migration may depend more on youth characteristics or on how likely it is that the youth will garner returns that can benefit the family.

Migration constraints are also manifested in concerns about physical health and safety (da Laet and Archambault 2007). Since the 1970s, urban living conditions have declined in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, driven by economic stagnation and population growth (Brockhoff and Brennan 1998). Though the Haitian countryside is devoid of basic resources, it remains relatively secure from the violence that plagues urban areas, particularly the capital of Port-au-Prince. Rural-to-urban migration has led to the chaotic growth in Port-au-Prince since the 1970s, and the entire city is disorganized and devoid of basic services (Manigat 1997). Concerns about girls' safety are more salient than those for boys', as girls are even more difficult to supervise post-puberty (Sommer 2010). This serves to further differentiate migration opportunities and its potential rewards for along gender lines. Adding to concerns about the potential welfare of youth migrants are the consequences of the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010. It severely damaged both the physical and social infrastructures in Port-au-Prince and Jacmel, the primary destinations for potential youth migrants in southeastern Haiti.

To construct a more comprehensive profile of youth migration and answer key questions about how this process unfolds, I draw on two data sources. The first is the Haiti Youth Survey collected by FAFO in 2009, a nationally representative youth survey. The second is the Haiti Youth Transitions Study, a prospective mixed-methods study of youth during a time when they have a high propensity to migrate. In the following section I describe these data sources in more detail, propose the key research questions, and provide the preliminary analyses for these questions

Data: The Haiti Youth Survey

The Haiti Youth Survey was collected by FAFO in 2009. It is a cross-sectional survey of youth aged 10 to 24 and uses a multi-stage stratified random sample in order to produce a nationally representative portrait of Haitian youth. This household based survey interviewed 3,045 youth,

includes a migration history module, and collected data on youth who migrated from the target household during the three years preceding the interview.

Data: The Haitian Youth Transitions Study

Participants in the Haitian Youth Transitions Study are 225 rural Haitian youth and their families. They represent a cohort of students systematically selected from a fixed geographical area using school records, at the completion of primary school in 2011. Both the target youth and a parent completed interviews in August/September 2011 and again in February/March 2012. The mixed-methods data collection strategy includes structured interviews with all individuals and additional semi-structured interviews with a selection of parents and youth. The structured interviews are grounded with a youth-focused life history calendar to improve interviewer rapport, respondent recall, and the intricacies of event timing and sequencing (Axinn & Pearce 2006; Luke et al. 2011).

Initial recruitment was successful; the research team successfully contacted and recruited over 90% of the targeted families. Additionally, follow-up was excellent, and less than 4% of the sample was lost to attrition. Successful follow-up, even among migrants, was achieved due to meticulous administrative records, including photographs to confirm identity, and recent improvements to the rural mobile phone infrastructure. During the time between the first and second wave of migration 25% of the youth left their rural home to reside in either a town or city. The majority of these youth were interviewed at their destination, a quarter were interviewed by telephone, and two individuals were interviewed while visiting their rural family. Currently, the data needed to conduct the analyses described in this paper have been collected and processed.

The structured and semi-structured interviews covered a variety of domains. Several topics are of particular importance to this paper. Parents were asked to report on the migration and education experiences of the next-older sibling of the target youth. Both parents and youth provided information on youth migration aspirations and life goals. Migrant youth were asked to report on the sending and receiving of resources between them and their rural families.

Sample Generalizability

Because qualifying for the sample selects only a small segment of the population, it is important to examine the sample characteristics in light of national population characteristics. I match parent reports of floor material, roof material, and ownership of agricultural land to identify similar households in the Haiti Demographic and Health Survey 2005-06 (DHS). A wealth index factor score was assigned to each household in the Haitian Youth Transitions Study based on the mean wealth index factor score of similar households in the DHS. This revealed that 8 % of households were similar to the poorest quintile of houses in the DHS, 71% with the poorer, 6 % with the middle, 10 % with the richer, and 6 % with the richest. Furthermore, I compared the ages of youth in the Haitian Youth Transitions Study to rural youth completing primary school in the DHS. The ages of the target youth closely match the distribution of the DHS sample, with a mean of 16 years.

Method and Preliminary Results

What are the resource transfer patterns between youth migrants and their natal households?

Migration decisions are embedded in expectations about the expectations of costs and wealth transfers. I first use the Haiti Youth Survey to examine the direction of remittance patterns from the perspective of the sending household. I use the Haitian Youth Transitions Study to examine remittance patterns from the youth perspective.

Preliminary results reveal that in both samples resources flow more heavily from rural families to their children residing in more-urban areas. The transfer of material goods, such as food products, is more common than exchanges of cash, because parents more commonly have these items available. Their transfer is facilitated by tight rural social networks. The truck drivers on the rural-to-urban transportation routes often facilitate their delivery. Occasionally, parents also deliver these items themselves.

What are the key factors that predict migration among Haitian Youth?

The unequal distribution of resources between rural and urban areas underpins the flow of youth migrants from rural-to-urban areas. However, it is important to identify the characteristics the

select youth migrants. The identification of potential factors that predict youth migration is grounded in the in-depth analyses of the semi-structured interviews with both parents and youth, part of the Haitian Youth Transitions Study and preliminary fieldwork for it.

The potential characteristics that have been identified will be tested in multivariate logistic regression models. The semi-structured interviews will further aid in the interpretation of these findings. Some potential factors include the parent’s perception of youth’s ability, perceived youth maturity, the quality of youth’s school performance, and the quality of social networks at potential destinations.

Have Haitian families changed their migration decision making patterns following the January 2010 earthquake?

In responses to the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake that occurred in January 2010, many urban residents fled to their homes of origin. Haitians continue to perceive these areas as hotbeds of violence and unrest and consider them more dangerous than before the earthquake. Given the dramatic shifts in the migration destinations for youth in southeast Haiti, families are recalculating migration decisions for their children.

In order to examine if migration behaviors have changed for rural youth, I combine data on the current location of youth and their reported residential changes between the first and second round of the Haitian Youth Transitions Study with the parent report of the target child’s next oldest sibling to complete primary school prior to the earthquake. I then predict education migration using a multi-level model where siblings are nested within families (Ruadenbush, & Bryk 2002). Preliminary results reveal that older siblings who completed primary school prior to the earthquake have nearly three times the odds of migrating to an urban area to attend a higher-quality school than the youth in the target cohort who completed primary school in 2011.

Table: Results of multi-level logistic regression predicting migration in the year following primary school

	O.R.	S.E.	p value
Prior to Earthquake ¹	2.85	0.85	0.000
Constant	0.18	0.05	0.000
Family level effects	1.70	0.38	
n =	390		
Groups =	229		

Source: Author's calculations

¹Refers to the target child's older sibling, who completed primary school prior to the 2010 earthquake

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper will examine how Haitian youth and their families negotiate rural-to-urban migration amidst dramatic social and economic change. Preliminary findings reveal the long and expensive time horizon of investments in youth migration that are borne primarily by parents. Additionally, families are making more conservative migrations decisions for their children following the January 2010 earthquake. Further development of this paper will refine the preliminary analyses and test the characteristics that select youth migrants. This paper has the potential to inform important discussions on the nature of youth migration and how families invest in their children.

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