

The association between reason for migration and fertility in Sweden

Long abstract

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Introduction

This study examines the association between immigrants' reason for migration and fertility, using Swedish population register data.

It is reasonable to expect an association between an immigrant's reason for migration and their fertility. For example, individuals immigrating for family formation or reunification purposes may have relatively high fertility in the destination country, especially in the period shortly after immigration. Labor market migrants, on the other hand, may wish to prioritize income generation or career progression over family formation. Thus, labor market migrants can be expected to have relatively low fertility in the destination country, especially in the period shortly after immigration. Regulations relevant to fertility behavior may also vary between permit types, for example in terms of permit length and the possibility for first moving migrants to bring family members to the destination country.

Exploring how immigrant fertility vary by the reason for migration is important for two main reasons. First, the reason-for-migration composition of migrant flows may shift over time. Many European countries, including Sweden, are introducing new regulations that aim to limit the immigration of refugees and family migrants, which means that these two groups are likely to make up smaller shares of future immigrant cohorts compared to past cohorts. Understanding how fertility patterns have varied by reason for migration among recent immigrant cohorts can contribute to better predictions of fertility patterns among future immigrant cohorts.

Second, immigrants' fertility patterns can be considered an indicator of their integration into the destination society. Studying how immigrants' fertility patterns vary by the reason for migration can contribute to a better understanding of how different factors matter for immigrant integration.

Earlier research, the Swedish context, and data

Earlier research from European countries has shown that immigrants' fertility patterns vary by the reason for migration. In Italy, family migrants tend to have higher fertility compared to labor migrants (Mussino and Strozza, 2012) as well as independent migrants and first movers (Ortensi 2015). In Norway, fertility patterns among labor market migrants are relatively similar to those of natives, whereas refugees and family migrants have considerably higher fertility (Tønnessen & Wilson, 2023). Among family migrants in Norway, fertility is high especially shortly after immigration (Tønnessen & Mussino, 2023).

An important difficulty in studying the relationship between reason for migration and fertility is that immigrants' reason for migration and geographical origin tend to correlate

strongly. For this reason, it may be difficult to ascertain whether variation in immigrant fertility should be attributed to the geographical origin or the reason for migration. The present study uses a research design that aims to mitigate this problem.

First, Sweden considerably liberalized its labor market migration regulations in 2008. According to an OECD report that reviewed the new legislation, Sweden's post-2008 labor market migration policies qualified as one of the most liberal within the OECD (OECD, 2011). The reforms meant that labor market migrants started to arrive to Sweden from countries that are also important sending countries for refugees and family migrants. Thus, the present study can compare labor market migrants, family migrants, and refugees within specific geographical origin groups, thereby avoiding that any relationship observed between reason for migration and fertility is confounded by geographical origin.

Second, this study uses Swedish population register data. The large number of observation units available in population register data facilitate the exploration of variation among narrowly defined minority groups. Whereas Sweden has a large and heterogeneous immigrant population, interacting geographical origin and reason-for-migration categories inevitably means that each category constitutes a relatively small minority of the overall population. The research questions addressed in the present study would be considerably more difficult to analyze with other types of data, such as survey data.

Preliminary results

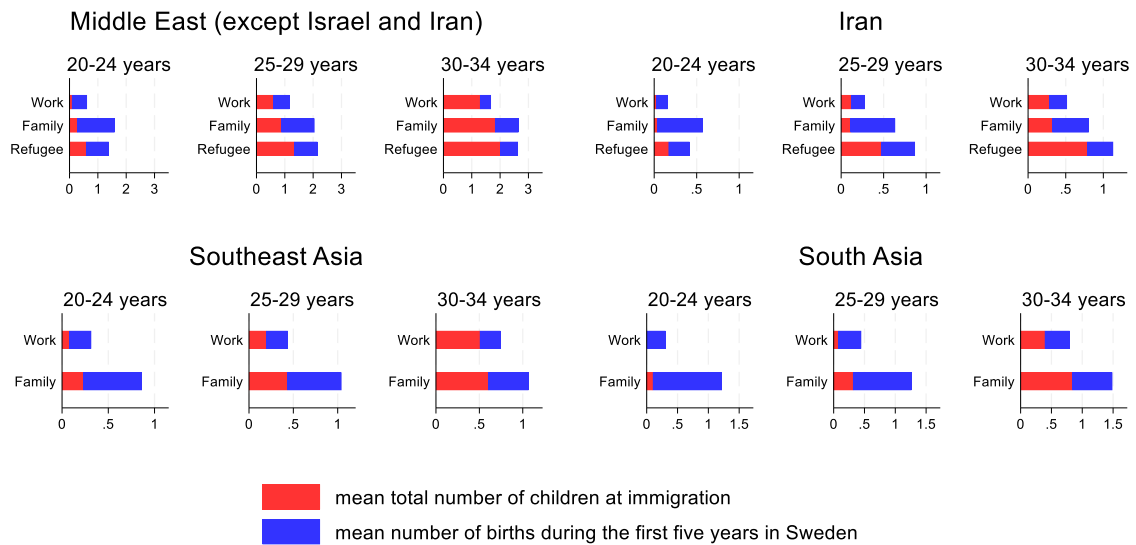
The figure below compares the mean number of children at the time of immigration (red part of the bars) and the mean number of children five years after immigration (red + blue parts of the bars) across reasons for migration. The study population is stratified by country/region of birth and age at immigration.

The figure shows that labor market migrants tend to have lower fertility than family migrants in all regions and across ages at immigration. In both of the two refugee-sending regions shown in the figure (i.e. Iran and the rest of the Middle East), labor market migrants also tend to have lower fertility than refugees, a pattern that holds across ages at immigration. Within age-at-immigration categories, labor market migrants tend to have fewer children than other reason-for-migration categories both at the time of immigration and during the first five years in Sweden.

Among immigrants from both Iran and the rest of the Middle East, refugees tend to have more children at immigration than family migrants who immigrated at the same age. However, family migrants from both Iran and the rest of the Middle East tend to have more children during the first five years in Sweden than refugees from the same region, thereby closing some or all of the gap between the two reason-for-migration categories.

As stated in the introduction, Sweden is introducing new migration policies that aim to decrease the immigration of refugees and family migrants. If such legislation leads to a decrease in the share of refugees and family migrants among future cohorts of immigrants to Sweden while the share of labor market migrants increases, the preliminary results suggest that such a shift could lead to lower aggregate-level fertility among immigrants to Sweden.

Mean total number of children at immigration and 5 years after immigration
by region of birth, age at immigration, and reason for migration
women immigrating in the period 2009-2016



Planned extensions of the study

- In Sweden, rules for different types of residence permits have changed over time, for example in terms of permit length and requirements for bringing family members to Sweden. I intend to compare fertility patterns among immigrants who arrived with one set of rules to patterns among immigrants who arrived with another set of rules in order to examine how specific policies related to residence permits may affect fertility patterns.
- To explore heterogeneity in fertility patterns within the group of family migrants, I intend to distinguish by type of partner (e.g. native, refugee, labor market migrant) and the partner's length of stay in Sweden.
- I intend to explore gender differences within reason-for-migration categories. For some origin regions, the great majority of labor market migrants are men. It is possible that fertility trajectories differ markedly between male and female labor market migrants from such origin groups. I also intend to compare fertility patterns for male and female first and independent movers to those of couples moving together. Earlier research on immigrant fertility has primarily focused on female immigrants whereas fertility patterns among male immigrants remain largely unexplored.
- I intend to compare how the reason for migration relates to fertility beyond the first five years after immigration. It may be expected that the effect of the reason for migration on fertility is greatest in the years shortly after immigration. Thus, it is possible that labor market migrants tend to recuperate some of their fertility disadvantage compared to other reason-for-migration categories after the first five years in Sweden.

- Within the group of labor market migrants, I intend to explore fertility differences across occupational categories. This is interesting since regulations regarding labor market migration may vary for different occupations across countries and across time within countries.

Contribution

The richness of Swedish population register data combined with the fact that Sweden has a large and heterogeneous immigrant population makes Sweden an ideal case to study the relationship between the reason for migration and fertility. Given the many possible research questions that can be explored with the data at hand, I expect that the planned study will produce much new and valuable knowledge about the association between immigrants' reason for migration and fertility.

References

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