

Migration and households

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Focus on Research

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The migration of a household member correlates with further modifications in household composition in Mexico. The observed endogeneity in co-residence choices entails that some migration episodes go unrecorded in surveys that rely on retrospective questions, such as those employed in the 2000 Mexican population census.

Household surveys represent a cornerstone for economic analyses, as they are the most relevant data source that is used for observational studies. As Foster and Rosenzweig (2002) observed, “[h]ousehold structure is pervasively treated as an exogenous or fixed characteristics” (p. 839). Regarding household composition as invariant over time, or at least has exogenous with respect to the object of the analysis can have relevant implications both for the data collection, with longitudinal surveys that often do not follow split households, and also for the empirical analysis.

The literature on migration makes no exception in this respect. The design of surveys conducted at the origin to record international migration episodes reflects the assumption that household composition remains unchanged over time. Let us consider the question used in the 2000 Mexican Population Census, which is line with the recommendations put forward by the United Nations (see UNDESA, 2017):

(Question IV.1) “During the last five years, that is, from January 1995 to today, has any person that lives or lived with you (in this household) gone to live in another country?”

A key feature of this question is the specification that is given between parentheses: the question only related to individuals that were members of the household that is surveyed at the time in which they left Mexico. More precisely, if a household provided an affirmative answer to Question IV.1, then the enumerator asked the number of persons had moved out of Mexico, and she wrote

down the names of these migrants. Then, the enumerator verified the residency condition at the time of migration was fulfilled for each migrant that had been previously listed:

(Question IV.5) “When [name of the migrant] left (for the last time), was he or she living with you?”

If the respondent provides an affirmative answer to Question IV.5, then the enumerator collects information on the migrant, while no information is collected if the residency condition is violated, and the record related to this migrant is deleted from the data. The rationale behind the choice to collect data only for migrants that meet the co-residence condition at the time of migration is to avoid a possible double-counting problem. For instance, if an individual migrated out of Mexico after having formed an independent household when getting married, then both the household of his or her parents as well as his or her spouse could report the same migration episode in the absence of the co-residence condition in Question IV.5. However, this creates the risk of not recording a migration episode if the household of origin of the migrant has dissolved after one of its members migrated out of the country. In the case of Mexico, the anthropological literature suggests that women left behind with her children by their husband often start co-residing with their parents or with their parents in-law (see Boehm, 2012). This household should not report this migration episode, as the migrant was not a member of the household that his wife joined after he left Mexico. More generally, when Individuals left behind by the migrant start co-residing with other individuals, the migration episode is at risk of remaining unrecorded as soon as the resulting larger household is not be perceived as the continuation of the household of origin of the migrant.

Bertoli and Murard (2019) rely on panel data from a Mexican survey, the Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, which allows identifying migration episodes from the variations in the household rosters across waves of the survey. The analysis reveals that households recording a migration episode are (i) more likely to receive new members, and (ii) more likely to drop out of the sample, with household dissolution partly explaining this differential probability of attrition. Point (i) entails that an empirical analysis of the effects of migration on the individuals left behind (say, on their labor supply) can confound the effect of interest with the one due to the variation in household composition. Point (ii) entails that retrospective questions incorporating a co-residence condition can indeed fail to record some migration episodes. The analysis of the survey connected to the 2000 Mexican Population Census reveals that this is indeed the case. When focusing on a group of women whose husband is very likely to be a current migrant out of Mexico (namely, women that are married, whose spouse is not a member of their household, and that report receiving directly remittances from abroad), Bertoli and Murard (2019) observe that the probability that these women report the migration of their husband is twice lower among those who have moved to another household (and changed their living arrangements in Mexico). Thus, data collection at origins is not only exposed to the threats related to whole household

migration (Ibarraran and Lubotsky, 2007) or to deliberate misreporting (Hamilton and Savinar, 2015), but also to the interplay of the co-residence condition with endogenous variations in household composition.

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