

Left Behind

The impact of economic migration on
Children Left Behind and their families

Hotel Leopold - European Parliament

2 March 2011



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*Family Migration: the role of children and
education in family decision-making
strategies of Polish Migrants in London*

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Our presentation draws on findings from 3 studies:

1. *Recent Polish Migrants in London: social networks, transience and settlement* (2007) funded by the ESRC.

2. *Polish Pupils in London Primary Schools: opportunities and challenges* (2008) funded by Multiverse.

3. *Stories from Three Generations of Polish Migrants* funded by Heritage Lottery (2009)

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Ryan and D'Angelo Family Migration

EU enlargement in May 2004 brought large scale and unanticipated migration from Eastern Europe, especially Poland.

Almost 600,000 registrations by Polish people up to March 2009 with the UK Workers Registration Scheme

Official figures may under-estimate numbers - not all migrants are required to register with the WRS.

Some newspapers have claimed that there may be a million new Polish migrants in Britain (The Times, 16 February 2008).

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Little was done to prepare for these new forms of migration, particularly the needs of family members e.g. for education (Ackers and Stalford, 2004).

Rapid increase in migration had the unexpected result of large numbers of Polish children arriving in British schools - there are now over 40,000 school pupils in England whose first language is Polish (DCFS, Schools Census, 2010).

The presentation explores ways in which parents' migration decision making is shaped by considerations such as maintaining families, the age of their children, their stage of education and the assumed speed with which they learn a new language.

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Many initial forecasts suggested that this migration was largely temporary (e.g. Fihel *et al.* 2006), but qualitative research suggests more varied and complex migration strategies.

Family migrants, in particular, are considering more long-term if not permanent settlement in Britain (Eade, et al, 2006, Ryan, et al, 2008; Sales, et al, 2008).

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In Poland there have been debates about so-called Euro-Orphans, children who are left behind when one or both parents migrate.

while children may benefit from the improved economic well-being of the family, the absence of their parents may have emotional consequences which manifest themselves in lower motivation to learn, lower attendance at school and falling grades (Walczak 2008).

Some of our participants spoke about children's school work suffering because of the emotional impact of separation from their fathers.

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In both studies we interviewed women and men who had engaged in family reunion – usually, but not always, the husband arrived first followed by the wife and children. Reasons for family reunion varied.

Sometimes reunion was planned in advance - the husband would find a flat and a job and then the family would follow.

In other cases the decision-making had involved changing circumstances, compromise and fear of relationship breakdown.

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Children's age and their stage of education were key factors in migration decisions of several participants.

There was a general view that younger children will adapt quickly English language and British educational system but older children will have more problems.

Several participants in our first studies had left teenage children behind in Poland to complete their education.

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In one study we included a small number of children :

All had been involved in some kind of family reunion – after a period of separation

In several cases close relatives had remained behind in Poland.

The migration had been a project for their parents and they had little choice about it

They had all found it a very emotional experience

They were not sure if the family would go back to Poland

They experienced various degrees in difficulty in adaptation

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Ryan and D'Angelo Family Migration

Our research suggests complex family strategies:
Migration is not a once-off decision but may
involve on-going negotiation and re-appraisal

Women are not merely 'trailing wives' but active
decision makers

Considerations about the needs of children
(economic, educational and emotional) inform
migration decision making in complex ways

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Failure by policy makers to learn from the history of previous waves of migrants – migration is a social process

‘Open borders’ and a culture of emigration may have led to under-estimation of the difficulties encountered upon arrival, particularly for parents and children.