

Social Networks and Migration: Theory and Evidence from Rwanda

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Abstract

How does the structure of an individual's social network affect his decision to migrate? We study the migration decisions of over one million individuals in Rwanda over a period of several years, using novel data from the monopoly mobile phone operator to reconstruct the complete social network of each individual in the months prior to migration. We use these data to directly validate several classic theories of migration that have historically been difficult to test, for instance that individuals with closely-knit networks in destination communities are more likely to migrate. Our analysis also uncovers several empirical results that have not been documented in the prior literature, and which are not consistent with common theories of how individuals derive value from their social networks. We propose a simple model of strategic cooperation to reconcile these results.

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