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Descriptive Finding

The scale of transnational family separation: Evidence from the United Kingdom

Claudia Brunori

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Claudia Brunori[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Transnational separation is a reality for many families in and from high-emigration countries. Studies on this phenomenon have typically focused on non-migrant populations in high-emigration countries, and only relatively recently has research in destination countries, especially in Europe, started looking at its consequences for the migrant population. However, studies have mostly been based on relatively small, non-representative samples of specific origin groups, and do not estimate the scale of the phenomenon in the general immigrant population.

OBJECTIVE
In this study I attempt for the first time to assess the size of the phenomenon of transnational separation from a parent in the immigrant population in a major European destination country, the United Kingdom.

METHODS
I use data from Understanding Society, using the available information on year of first immigration of respondents and their parents to assess childhood experiences of transnational separation from a parent in the adult immigrant population.

RESULTS
I find that at least half of the individuals who immigrated during childhood were transnationally separated from one or both parents in the migration process. However, these estimates rely on information collected for different purposes, leading to high missingness and a likely underestimation of the size of the phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS
The results show that transnational separation from a parent is very common, pointing at the need to include low-difficulty questions on different forms of transnational separation in surveys, and to study the short- and long-term consequences of experiences of transnational separation.

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CONTRIBUTION
This study offers the first empirical assessment of the scale of transnational separation from a parent during childhood among adult immigrants in a major European destination country. The findings highlight the need to incorporate direct measures of this phenomenon in surveys and to investigate its long-term consequences.

1. Introduction

International migration is a decision and a process that often takes place at the family level, rather than the individual level. Due to legal constraints and logistical concerns and preferences, nuclear families often get at least temporarily separated across borders in the migration process. This is known to lead to high shares of children in high-emigration countries spending months or years being Transnationally Separated (TS, also the acronym for Transnational Separation) from a parent, although precise estimates are rarely available (Yeoh and Lam 2007). Research estimating the prevalence of experiences of TS from a parent among children of immigrants in common destination countries, especially in Europe, is lacking.

In this report, I use data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS, a.k.a. Understanding Society) to estimate for the first time how many immigrants in a major European destination country, the United Kingdom, experienced TS from a parent in childhood.

2. Background

2.1 What leads to transnational family separation?

Several factors lead families to separate across borders in the migration process. First, there are legal obstacles to family migration and reunification. Many immigrants are initially undocumented or have short term residence permits that do not allow dependent family members to move with them, at least for a period of time (Kofman 2004; Poeze 2019; Sirriyeh 2015). Even once the first mover's residence permit allows them to apply for family reunification, additional criteria can be an obstacle, such as that of a minimum income level (see Sirriyeh 2015), or the requirement that the family members are under a certain age and unmarried (children), or not working (partners) (e.g., Parreñas 2005). Reunification can be especially complicated for 'non-standard' families (Eremenko and González-Ferrer 2018). Finally, the process of securing a visa for family reunification

can be expensive, lengthy, and uncertain due to administrative backlog and discrimination by street-level bureaucrats (Descamps and Beauchemin 2022). These legal barriers often lead to the postponement of reunification until children can migrate independently as adults (Descamps and Beauchemin 2022).

A second factor leading to TS are immigrants' working conditions. Immigrants tend to experience a substantial downgrade relative to their pre-migration occupational status (Fellini and Guetto 2019) and to work in time-intensive jobs with low pay (Clark and Drinkwater 2008; Dustmann and Fabbri 2005). Therefore, TS from children is more efficient both financially, as origin countries are generally characterised by lower living costs, and in terms of time, as migrant parents can rely on extended kin and neighbours in the origin country for childcare.

Finally, migration is a stressful process, so parents might opt for TS to protect their children from disruption to their education, social networks, and housing, and to shelter them from discrimination and financial and legal status uncertainty. This is especially relevant if parental migration is initially meant to be temporary and followed by reunification in the origin country (Zentgraf and Chinchilla 2012).

2.2 Migration and family reunification in the United Kingdom

Requirements for family immigration and reunification varied greatly in the United Kingdom across time, origin, and gender of the first mover (see Bhabha and Shutter 1994 for a detailed review). Immigrants from non-Commonwealth countries have always been subject to very restrictive family reunification laws, family reunification being conditional on the sponsor's ability to provide for dependent family members. When the UK accessed the European Community (EC) in 1973, EC citizens gained the right move with their family members in line with EC law.

Commonwealth citizens experienced the opposite trend. While they could move to and settle in the United Kingdom without restrictions until the 1960s, in 1962 they were subjected to immigration control for the first time, limiting access to those who possessed an employment voucher, who came to study, or who had independent means to sustain themselves and their dependents. While men had the right to be joined by their wives and children under the age of 16, women lacked such right, making their access to reunification dependent on arbitrary decisions by immigration officers, or to independent migration by their partners and children. In 1988, Commonwealth men's right to move with their wives and children was repealed (Baptiste 1988), subjecting them to the same restrictions as non-EC citizens. Another group to which separate family reunification rules apply are refugees, who, however, are a relatively small group in the United Kingdom and impossible to identify in the available data.

3. Data

I use data from waves 1 to 14 of the UKHLS (University of Essex 2024), a household panel survey conducted yearly in the United Kingdom since 2009. The data include an ethnic and minority boost (EMB) sample and immigrant and ethnic minority boost (IEMB) sample, introduced in waves 1 (2009–2011) and 6 (2014–2016) respectively, targeting individuals of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, or Black African origin (both EMB and IEMB) and immigrants (IEMB only). While the sample is not fully representative of the immigrant population in the United Kingdom, the distribution of educational titles, genders, and reasons for migration do not deviate from it excessively (Lynn et al. 2018).

The analytical sample includes individuals aged between 18 and 60 who were born outside of the United Kingdom with two foreign-born parents. In total, 13,793 respondents fit the selection criteria. I exclude respondents who did not provide a valid year of arrival (N = 6), and those who never completed a full interview (N = 643). The final analytical sample comprises 13,144 respondents, of which 3,579 migrated before age 18 (1.5 generation).

4. Variables

I measure childhood experience of TS based on the information on the respondent's and their parents' year of first arrival to the United Kingdom, as reported by respondents or by their parents if part of the sample (N = 436 for mothers, 318 for fathers). I first measure childhood experience of TS separately for each parent. The respondent is coded as having experienced TS from their father/mother in childhood if the parent first migrated to the United Kingdom when the respondent was a child (0–18 years old) and before the respondent first arrived in the United Kingdom, or if the respondent migrated to the United Kingdom as a child and the parent migrated afterwards or never migrated.

There are several cases in which TS from a parent cannot be assessed. The first and most common is when the information on parental migration is not available for the respondent, either due to non-response to a question or because of absence in the waves when key information was collected (importantly, the year of first parental arrival in the United Kingdom was only collected in waves 1 and 6). The second is when the information collected in the survey is insufficient to assess TS for the respondent. This is mostly the case (N = 774) when the first parental arrival in the United Kingdom predates the respondents' birth. Given that only the year of first parental migration was asked, in these cases it is impossible to assess whether the parent moved back to the country of origin prior to the respondent's birth or, if so, whether and when they then returned to the

United Kingdom. A rarer case (N = 75) is respondents who arrived in the United Kingdom before age 14 and who had a parent who never lived in the United Kingdom and who was dead when the respondent was 14. As the detailed year of parental death was not recorded, I cannot assess whether the respondent migrated before the parents' death (and thus experienced TS) or afterwards (and thus did not).

I then combine the two variables into one, distinguishing people who experienced *no TS* (migrated as minors in the same calendar year as both parents or migrated as adults and their parents did not migrate to the United Kingdom when the respondent was a minor); *TS from their father* and migrated with their mother; *TS from their mother* and migrated with their father; *TS from both parents* as secondary migrants, i.e., they migrated after at least one of their parents; *other forms of TS* (experienced TS from one parent but there is missing information on the other parent's migration); migrated as minors before either parent (including if parents never lived in the United Kingdom). I refer to the last group as 'independent minors': this might include unaccompanied minors and children who migrated for study reasons. I then identify three 'missing' categories. The first category, *not asked*, refers to respondents with one parent who lived in the United Kingdom but for whom the year of first migration is not available due to respondents not being interviewed in the waves in which this information was collected (the parent not being part of the sample). The second, *doesn't know*, refers to cases where respondents gave an invalid reply (don't know or refusal) to one of the questions on parental migration (did the parent ever live in the United Kingdom, year in which the parent first moved to the United Kingdom). The third, *insufficient information*, refers to cases where the information collected in the survey is insufficient to assess TS from a parent (see previous paragraph). Respondents who migrated together with one parent but for whom TS from the other cannot be assessed are coded in the relevant 'missing' category.

I then measure *longest TS from a parent* for respondents who experienced some form of TS in childhood. This is measured as the maximum number of years that a respondent spent TS from a parent. The variable identifies four TS length categories (less than 2 years, 2–3 years, 4–9 years, 10 or more years) with an additional category for those who never reunited during childhood (because the TS parent never lived in the United Kingdom during the respondent's childhood). This variable is only calculated for 1.5 generation respondents, as it is impossible to assess whether the first-generation migrants who experienced TS from a parent as children achieved reunification through migration, as the parents who had moved to the United Kingdom during the respondent's childhood might have remigrated or died before the respondent's arrival. As this is also possible, although less likely, for 1.5 generation migrants, this variable is likely to overestimate TS length.

Other variables are age at arrival categories (0–5, 6–12, 13–17, 18–25, 26+), year of arrival categories (before 1980, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s), and country of origin/ancestry. The

latter is constructed combining information from the country of origin (23 detailed countries and one 'other' category) with that on race/ancestry in order to achieve as much detail as possible. I separate an 'Indian diaspora' category from other African-born respondents as the former represent a distinct sociocultural group.

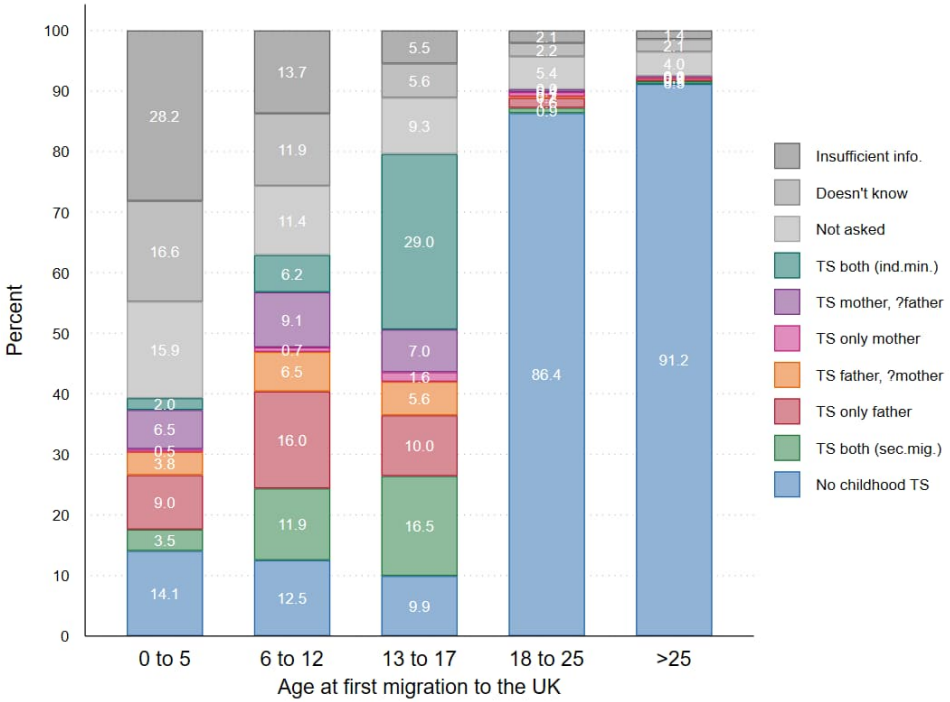
All results in the text are relative to the whole pooled sample (one observation per respondent) and unweighted, given that the provided population weights are not designed for the immigrant population specifically, and would require restricting the analytical sample to respondents who participated in one specific wave.

5. Results

In Figure 1 I present the distribution of childhood experiences of TS by age at first arrival. Only about 12% of the 1.5 generation moved together with both parents. About 24% experienced TS from both parents, including 13% who migrated as independent minors. In addition, about 13% of the 1.5 generation experienced TS from one parent but given the available information it is impossible to assess whether they migrated with the other parent. Thirteen per cent of the 1.5 generation experienced TS from only one of their parents (in the vast majority of cases, their fathers), and migrated in the same year as the other parent.

For 38% of the 1.5 generation, it is impossible to assess childhood TS with the available data. This percentage is higher the younger respondents were at their first arrival in the United Kingdom, reaching 61% among those who arrived before age 6. Younger age at arrival is associated with higher shares in all three missing categories, but especially in the 'insufficient information' and 'doesn't know' categories. Respondents who arrived before age 6 are more than twice as likely to have one parent who first moved to the United Kingdom before their birth compared to respondents in the next age-at-arrival category.

Figure 1: Childhood experience of TS by age at first migration to the United Kingdom. UKHLS waves 1–14, unweighted results

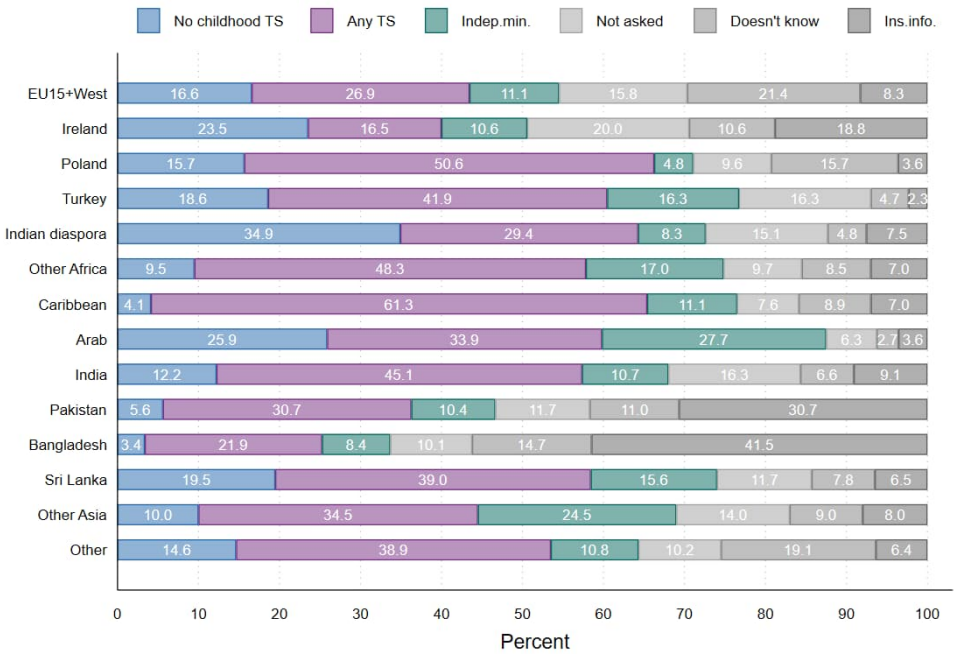


Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of first-generation respondents did not experience TS during childhood. However, 4% of those who moved to the United Kingdom between ages 18 and 25 experienced TS from a parent as children, due to the latter's migration to the United Kingdom. The same is true for about 1% of those who moved after age 25. Given the relatively low prevalence of childhood TS in the first generation, I restrict the remaining analyses to the 1.5 generation.

In Figure 2, I report childhood TS by country of origin or ancestry, restricted to the 1.5 generation. TS is common across all origin groups: even within the most privileged groups, such as the EU15 and other western countries (mostly the United States and Canada), less than 20% of respondent moved with their parents. Within almost all origin groups and even without considering the special case of independent minors, the 1.5 generation who experienced TS as children outnumber those who migrated with their parents. TS is especially common among 1.5 generation immigrants from Poland (51% excluding independent minors), the Caribbean (61%), Africa excluding the Indian

diaspora (48%), and India (45%). The percentage of unclassifiable cases is particularly high among respondents born in Pakistan or Bangladesh, largely due to the high share of respondents in these groups with a parent who moved to the United Kingdom before their birth (31% and 41% respectively, versus 16% overall).

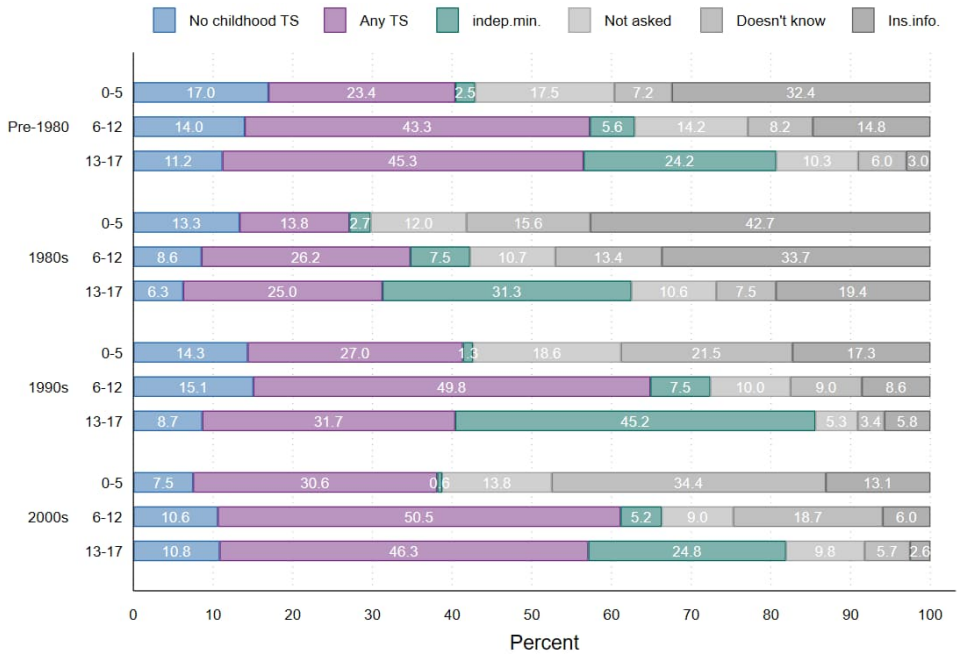
Figure 2: Childhood experience of TSP by country of origin or ancestry among the 1.5 generation.



Source: Understanding Society waves 1–14.
Note: Unweighted results.

In Figure 3 I report the distribution of childhood TS by age at arrival and year of first arrival in the United Kingdom, to illustrate variation over time. Despite oscillations in the exact share of joint migrations and TS, the overall result is that TS has consistently been the modal experience for the 1.5 generation in the United Kingdom (among the classifiable cases), including in recent years: Almost half of the 1.5 generation respondents who arrived in the United Kingdom in the 2000s migrated in a different year from at least one of their parents.

Figure 3: Childhood experience of TSP by age and year of immigration in the United Kingdom among the 1.5 generation.



Source: Understanding Society waves 1–14.
Note: unweighted results.

Finally, in Table 1 I report the distribution of length of TS by age at arrival, year of first arrival, and country of birth/ancestry. I only report figures for 1.5 generation respondents who experienced TS as secondary migrants, as 92% of 'independent minors' did not reunite with their parents during childhood.

Overall, most respondents experienced prolonged TS from at least one of their parents: only 20% of the 1.5 generation migrated in consecutive calendar years to their parents, and more than half were TS from a parent for more than 4 years or never reunited during childhood. Younger arrivers are more likely to have experienced shorter TS: 43% of those who arrived in the United Kingdom before age 6 were TS from a parent for less than 2 years. However, even within this group, 16% of respondents never reunited with a parent during childhood (meaning that one parent never moved to the United Kingdom or only moved after the respondent turned 18), which might in some cases be due to parental separation/divorce or death. To some extent, more recent arrival cohorts have experienced shorter TS from parents.

Table 1: Longest transnational separation from a parent (in years) in childhood among 1.5 generation who experienced TS as secondary migrants, by age at arrival, year of arrival, and country of birth/ancestry

	Longest TS (years)					
	Less than 2	*2 to 3*	*4 to 9*	*10+*	*No Reun.*	*Total*
	%	%	%	%	%	% (N)
Age at arrival						
0–5	43.3	27.3	12.6	1.3	15.6	100 (238)
6–12	16.9	24.1	34.5	4.4	20.1	100 (597)
13–17	13.0	18.1	21.6	20.6	26.7	100 (491)
Year of arrival						
Pre-1980	15.6	19.5	37.3	14.8	12.9	100 (467)
1980s	23.3	16.7	19.2	10.0	30.8	100 (120)
1990s	21.2	26.8	20.1	4.1	27.9	100 (269)
2000s	23.4	24.5	19.4	8.1	24.7	100 (470)
Origin/ancestry						
EU15+West	30.8	17.8	14.0	2.8	34.6	100 (107)
Ireland	14.3	7.1	0.0	7.1	71.4	100 (14)
Poland	45.2	31.0	4.8	0.0	19.1	100 (42)
Turkey	22.2	44.4	22.2	11.1	0.0	100 (18)
Indian diaspora	32.4	33.8	20.3	4.1	9.5	100 (74)
Other Africa	10.3	25.5	23.5	9.0	31.7	100 (290)
Caribbean	9.3	15.5	40.4	17.6	17.1	100 (193)
Arab	29.0	21.1	26.3	10.5	13.2	100 (38)
India	31.3	32.6	25.7	6.3	4.2	100 (144)
Pakistan	19.0	19.0	33.8	9.9	18.3	100 (142)
Bangladesh	11.5	10.6	32.7	20.2	25.0	100 (104)
Sri Lanka	33.3	26.7	23.3	3.3	13.3	100 (30)
Other Asia	15.9	29.0	21.7	13.0	20.3	100 (69)
Other	36.1	11.5	14.8	4.9	32.8	100 (61)
Total	20.2	22.5	25.8	9.8	21.7	100 (1,326)

TS length varies substantially by country of origin/ancestry. Groups who had privileged access to family migration (such as EU citizens, including Poles), while still likely to have been TS from a parent (ref. Figure 2), are the most likely to have reunited within two years (31% of EU15 and West and 45% of Poles). However, EU15 citizens (and those from other Western countries) are also the most likely to never having achieved reunification during childhood (35% versus 22% overall). This could be due to parental divorce, but also to measurement error (for example, if some of them had not lived continuously in the United Kingdom since their first migration, thus reuniting in the country of origin or in a third country). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Black African and Caribbean 1.5 generation migrants experienced the longest TS, with only 10% reuniting with both parents within 2 years.

6. Conclusions

Research on non-migrant children living in high-emigration countries has shown that TS from parents can be an important source of stress. However, the extent to which this holds for migrant children is unclear. Some research has shown that children who reunite with their parents in the destination country have worse emotional health and parent–child relationships than those who migrate with their parents (Cebolla Boado and González Ferrer 2022; Eremenko and Bennett 2018; Fernández-Reino and González-Ferrer 2019; Suárez-Orozco, Kim, and Bang 2011). However, this research is scarce and so far mostly focused on the short-term consequences of TS for emotional health. Moreover, due to the reliance on relatively small samples, it has not fully investigated how factors such as age at TS, time since arrival, and TS length might moderate the association.

There is limited awareness of the topic of childhood TS in European quantitative social research, to the extent that surveys including large immigrant subsamples seldom collect information on transnational family separation. This contributes to the invisibility of this phenomenon, and to the near impossibility of assessing its consequences, especially in the long-term. In this report I used data from Understanding Society, a survey with a large sub-sample of foreign-born individuals, to assess how many of the adult immigrants living in the United Kingdom experienced TS from a parent during childhood.

I found that TS is an extremely common experience among the 1.5 generation in the United Kingdom, with at least half of the 1.5 generation having experienced TS from at least one parent during childhood. This figure includes those who migrated to the United Kingdom as secondary migrants (i.e., following their parents' migration) and those who moved to the United Kingdom without their parents (who I labelled 'independent minors', a category rarely included in studies on transnational family separation). Respondents who migrated in the same calendar year as both parents are a relatively small minority in the 1.5 generation, about 13%. While there is variation in the rates and length of TS by country of origin/ancestry and over time, overall the main conclusion of this article, that TS from a parent is a common experience among the 1.5 generation and that it tends to outnumber joint migration, holds across origin groups and over time. Even groups that (used to) have a privileged access to family migration, such as EU citizens, are more likely to have experienced TS than to have migrated jointly as a nuclear family; their privileged position is reflected in the shorter length of TS, rather than in its absence. This suggests that not only legal obstacles but also practical considerations and preferences lead families to TS in the migration process. I also found that a small but not irrelevant minority of the first generation experienced TS in childhood as a consequence of parental migration to the United Kingdom (4% among those who migrated aged 18–25), supporting a previous finding that independent migration in adulthood is a strategy

commonly adopted by families that did not achieve reunification through the legal pathways (Descamps and Beauchemin 2022).

Using information collected for different purposes results in several limitations and to the likely underestimation of the phenomenon. The main issue is that the UKHLS only includes information on respondents' and their parents' first arrival in the United Kingdom, with no information on remigrations or migrations to third countries. As a consequence, first, it is impossible to assess whether people experienced TS when their parents' first migration to the United Kingdom happened before their birth. Second, some parents might have migrated to other countries during the respondents' childhood, again resulting in some underestimation of TS experiences. In addition, my estimate of TS length relies on the assumption that neither parents nor children engaged in further migrations or died, which might lead to length overestimation in some cases (e.g., a parent might have moved back to the home country shortly after their first migration to the United Kingdom, and then moved back with the rest of the family), and to wrongly identifying reunifications in other cases (e.g., a parent might have migrated to the United Kingdom without the respondent and died there before the respondent migrated). Finally, relying on a sample of the adult immigrant population, I cannot infer rates of TS among children who arrived in particular years, due to possible selective remigration and mortality.

A consequence of the limitations listed above is the high percentage of cases in which I could not assess childhood experiences of TS from a parent, largely due to parents having moved to the United Kingdom before the respondents' birth and/or to respondents' inability to recall their parent's year of first arrival in the United Kingdom. This, together with this article's main finding of the ubiquity of the phenomenon among the 1.5 generation, highlights the need to develop and include low-difficulty questions aimed at assessing different forms of transnational family separation in surveys that include large immigrant sub-populations, and ideally in all large-scale surveys.

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