

Understanding Migration: Why “Push Factors” and “Pull Factors” Do Not Explain Very Much

Part of an occasional series

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Five years ago, Michael Clemens and Justin Sandefur, [in an interesting essay for *Foreign Affairs*](#), wrote that “in many crises, assistance in the original country of origin largely cannot deter departure” of migrants. Elsewhere they wrote, “What each rich country can do is alter what pulls people to that country specifically, once they have decided to flee their own land.” Clemens’ and Sandefur’s larger point was to critique the international governance of migration in its present system, in which underdeveloped countries receive development assistance to deter migration and rich countries compete to be unappealing to migrants. To make their critique, they invoked a common idea: that of “push factors” and “pull factors.”

While there is often a divide between experts who are respected in academia and experts who are respected among policymakers, Clemens is the rare expert who enjoys influence in both worlds. The article’s knowing use “push” and “pull”—employed four and five times—was a risky choice for him. Although common in public debate and among policymakers, academics avoid the use of push-pull. For academic researchers, push factors and pull factors are useful as far as they help students and the general public to understand that migrants have reasons for leaving and reasons for where they choose to arrive. But push-pull is heuristic, and not an explanation.

This brief discusses the use and limitations of the push-pull model, as a whole and disaggregated as push factors and pull factors.

A Brief History of Push-pull Factors

Most readers will be familiar with the concepts of push factors and pull factors. Push factors describe

the reasons that individuals might emigrate from their homes, including poverty, lack of social mobility, violence, or persecution. Pull factors describe the reasons that an individual might settle in a particular country. Push factors are commonly supposed to include higher wages, social services such as education or health care, or more nebulous concepts like equality or freedom. This conception is not supported by contemporary academic research, but it continues to be pervasive in discussions of migration in public discourse and in policy circles.

Like all concepts, the push-pull model has a history, and as a model, push-pull’s history is long. In short, the model is old. An [academic paper in 1946](#) used push factors and pull factors to refer to the autonomous social forces, outside the scope of what politicians could influence, that influenced human movement. By the late 1950s and through the 1960s and 1970s, push factors and pull factors took on more familiar contours. The economist Michael Todaro used push and pull factors to [model](#) rural-to-urban migration within countries as the industrialized, or “modernized” in the language of the era. Push factors and pull factors were largely employed to study domestic, rather than international, migration. By the early 1980s, one [key debate](#) was whether the economies in industrializing cities attracted rural migrants, or if modernization displaced rural people from subsistence livelihoods. In other words, the debate asked whether individuals were pushed or pulled.

One problem, known as early as 1977, was that supposed [push factors mattered much more than pull factors](#). As migration researchers tried to model push and pull factors mathematically to predict migration,

[the push-pull model fell apart](#). By the 1990s, migration researchers had identified a host of issues with the push-pull model: individuals' social networks, which were neither push nor pull factors, played a strong role; causation was often cumulative and societal, which meant that the strength of the factors that might "push" or "pull" changed constantly; individual migration decisions and population-wide movements seemed to have different causal factors; cultural values changed migration aspirations, which made general laws across societies less useful and harder to identify; many migration decisions were made collectively, at the household level, even when it was an individual migrating; and individuals' migration decisions were commonly "overdetermined," meaning that while an individual only makes a single "yes" decision to leave, multiple causes can fully account for that decision.

At an abstract level, push factors and pull factors are asymmetrical. A push factor attempts to describe why an individual leaves home. The push is large, but general—the person is leaving, to go wherever they might evade or circumvent that which is pushing him or her out. This might be poverty, lack of social mobility, generalized violence, or directed persecution. By contrast, a pull factor attempts to describe why a person settles in a specific locale, that is, why here and not over there. A pull factor, even in academic discourse, rarely explains the choice to leave home. The scope of explanation is much smaller—why an individual migrant or group of migrants chooses one place for settlement, after their movement has been assumed. Yet, in public discourse as well as among policymakers, push factors and pull factors are often taken to be equally important and equally influential, such as when European politicians and bureaucrats [worry](#) that more generous welfare systems attract undocumented and/or unskilled migrants.

The Limitations and Uses of Push-Pull

The categories of public debate around migration are not always empirically grounded, and push-pull is an

old model that is used to explain too much. Historically, push-pull was less a theory created by migration researchers and more a theory created and sustained by researchers whose areas of expertise—development, economics, rural sociology—had to address migration. When discussing the forces that prompt migrants to leave, or in some cases to settle, migration experts now prefer the notion of determinants. (A determinant refers to something with a measurable causal influence.)

Push factors and pull factors are approximations—part of a cognitive model of how migration operates—rather than an adequate description that provides actionable insights. Even academics who have tried to resuscitate the push-pull model recognize that it needs to have more specificity. One [2018 paper](#) divided push factors into "predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers." Push-pull's value is as a shorthand for discussion, and that it can be used to humanize migrants in policy discussion that often do the opposite, such as "tidal waves" of asylum seekers. Because they are so forceful, push factors can be used to remind policymakers of the human need for refuge or opportunity. This is because the push-pull model, for all its limitations as social science, requires individuals who are making decisions, who fundamentally choose to remain or to emigrate in search of what they need.