TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN YOUTH MIGRATION RESEARCH: A BIBLIOMETRIC REVIEW

Patrik Królik – Rajmund Mirdala

Abstract

Youth migration has become an important area of research within international migration and population studies, requiring systematic mapping of its development and emerging themes. This study conducts a bibliometric review of youth migration research in Europe to identify major trends, patterns, and structural relationships in the literature. Using the Web of Science database, 162 documents published between 2000 and 2025 were retrieved through a search combining youth migration terms with European geographic identifiers. Data were analysed using R and the Bibliometrix package to assess publication trends, author productivity, geographical collaboration, and conceptual structures. Findings reveal positive annual growth, with research output increasing notably after 2017 and reaching 23 articles in 2025. The dataset comprises 328 authors across 75 sources, averaging 12.08 citations per document and 7,056 references. Bradford's and Lotka's laws identify core journals and prolific authors, while co-word analysis and thematic mapping reveal the field's conceptual evolution, emerging topics, and shifting research priorities. Overall, the study demonstrates a growing and increasingly collaborative research field, synthesizing fragmented scholarship into a coherent structural map and highlighting research gaps that can guide future interdisciplinary studies of youth migration and mobility across Europe.

Key words: Youth migration, bibliometric analysis, research trends, international migration, youth mobility

JEL Code: J61, J13, O15

Introduction

As Cairns (2017) mentions, youth migration represents a distinct and increasingly important area of migration studies because mobility during young adulthood is closely linked with major life transitions, including education, employment, independence, and identity formation. Young migrants are not only influenced by economic opportunities but also by

social expectations, personal aspirations, family strategies, and changing global conditions. Therefore, research on youth migration provides valuable insights into how mobility shapes individual trajectories and contributes to wider demographic and social transformations.

According to King (2012), migration among young people differs from other forms of migration because it often occurs during a period of transition when individuals establish professional, social, and personal identities. Youth mobility is therefore not simply a geographical movement but a complex social process connected with future aspirations, opportunities, and constraints. As highlighted by Massey et al. (1993), migration decisions are shaped by multiple levels of influence, including economic structures, social networks, institutional factors, and inequalities between regions. As per Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2020), contemporary migration research has increasingly moved away from viewing migrants only as responses to structural pressures and instead recognizes them as active participants who make strategic decisions within changing social environments. This perspective is especially relevant to youth migration because young migrants demonstrate agency through educational mobility, labour migration, transnational connections, and adaptation strategies. According to Levitt (2001), migration also creates transnational social spaces where young people maintain relationships and identities across national borders, influencing processes of belonging and integration. The growing importance of youth migration research is reflected in the increasing scientific attention given to this field.

According to the bibliometric analysis conducted in this study, research on youth migration has developed from a relatively marginal academic topic into a significant interdisciplinary research area. Between 2003 and 2025, the field produced 162 scientific documents across 75 sources, demonstrating a gradual but consistent expansion with a positive average annual growth rate. Although scientific production remained limited during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the field experienced substantial growth after 2017, reaching its highest level of publication output with 23 documents in 2025. This increase reflects the growing recognition of youth mobility as an important social, economic, and policy issue. According to Donthu et al. (2021), bibliometric analysis provides an effective method for examining the evolution of scientific fields by identifying publication trends, influential sources, collaboration networks, and emerging research themes. Similarly, Meho and Yang (2007) emphasize that bibliometric evaluations depend strongly on the quality and coverage of academic databases, as different indexing systems may influence citation patterns and assessments of research impact. This is particularly relevant for youth

migration research because the field combines contributions from sociology, geography, education, economics, and migration studies. The current structure of youth migration research indicates a high level of specialization, where a limited number of influential journals contribute significantly to knowledge production.

In this study, the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies emerges as the leading publication outlet, accounting for a substantial proportion of scientific output and demonstrating the consolidation of youth migration scholarship within specialized migration research communities. As demonstrated by Li et al. (2021), bibliometric mapping is particularly useful for identifying geographical and thematic patterns within mobility research. The findings of this study indicate a geographically concentrated research landscape, with Spain emerging as the leading contributor in terms of publication volume, while the United Kingdom demonstrates the strongest citation influence.

According to Czaika and de Haas (2014), migration patterns are constantly transformed by globalization, economic restructuring, and changing political environments. This transformation is also visible in youth migration scholarship, where research themes have shifted over time. Early studies primarily focused on structural and macro-level issues, such as youth unemployment, labour market conditions, and economic migration drivers. However, more recent research increasingly examines qualitative dimensions of migration, including identity construction, integration processes, belonging, aspirations, and lived experiences of young migrants.

As per Pritchard (1969), bibliometric approaches allow researchers to systematically measure scientific development and reveal patterns that may not be visible through traditional literature reviews. Therefore, analysing trends and patterns in youth migration research contributes to understanding not only what topics dominate the field but also how academic priorities have changed in response to new migration realities. This bibliometric review maps the structural, geographical, and conceptual development of youth migration scholarship and provides a comprehensive overview of how researchers currently examine the transnational trajectories of young people.

Methodology

For this bibliometric analysis, we retrieved articles from the Web of Science database, exported on 8th of April 2026. To identify relevant publications on the specified topic, we applied the following search query:

TS=(("youth migration" OR "young people migration" OR "youth mobility" OR "young migrants") AND ("European Union" OR EU OR Europe OR Austria OR Belgium OR Bulgaria OR Croatia OR Cyprus OR Czechia OR Denmark OR Estonia OR Finland OR France OR Germany OR Greece OR Hungary OR Ireland OR Italy OR Latvia OR Lithuania OR Luxembourg OR Malta OR Netherlands OR Poland OR Portugal OR Romania OR Slovakia OR Slovenia OR Spain OR Sweden)) AND WC=("Economics" OR "Sociology" OR "Social Sciences Interdisciplinary" OR "Demography") AND PY=(2000-2025)

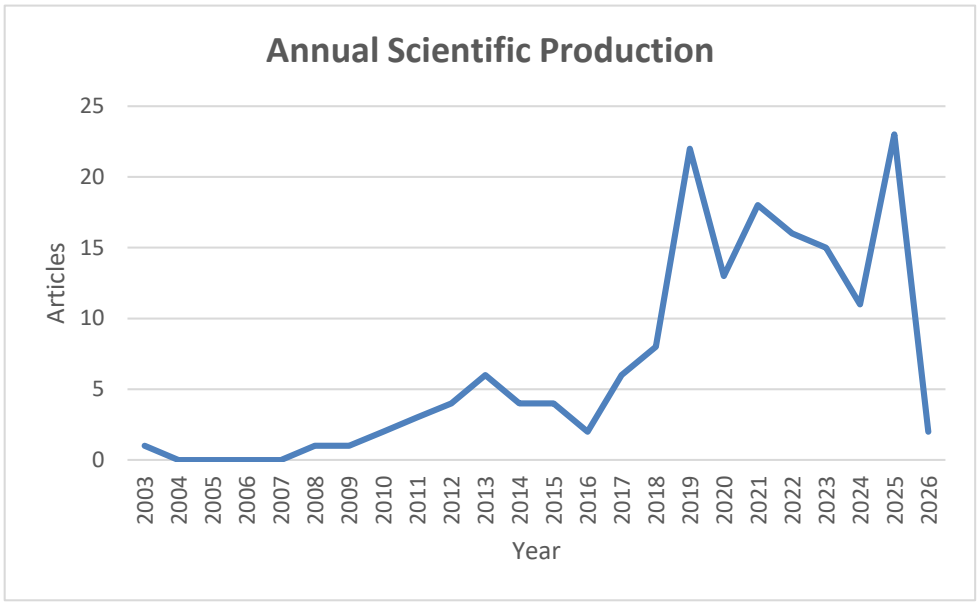
This query yielded 162 documents, which were subsequently analyzed by the authors. The bibliometric analysis was conducted using R statistical software, with detailed evaluation performed via the Bibliometrix package. The documents span the period 2003-2025, with a small number of records carrying a 2026 early-access date at the time of export, and originate from 75 distinct sources, including journals and books. Only journal articles, book chapters and conference papers were retained, and duplicate records were removed prior to analysis. Web of Science was selected for its consistent metadata and citation indexing across the four subject categories. All indicators were computed in the Bibliometrix R package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

Results

The research landscape is defined by a corpus of 162 documents published between 2003 and 2025, sourced from 75 distinct academic outlets. Over the complete years 2003-2025 the field shows a positive average annual growth; the compound annual growth rate of 3.06% reported by Bibliometrix is computed across the full export window and is dampened by the partial final year (2026), captured only to the April export date. The literature is relatively contemporary, with a document average age of approximately six years and a high level of scholarly engagement, evidenced by an average of 12.08 citations per document and a total of 7,056 references.

The progression of annual scientific production illustrates a transition from a niche area of inquiry to a mainstream interdisciplinary priority. Research remained stagnant until 2008, followed by a decade of modest growth. However, a marked acceleration occurred after 2017, producing a local peak of 22 documents in 2019, followed by year-to-year variation and a maximum of 23 documents in 2025. Longitudinal citation metrics show 2008 with the highest mean citations per article (106); given the small number of documents that year, this figure is driven by one or two highly cited papers rather than broad-based impact.

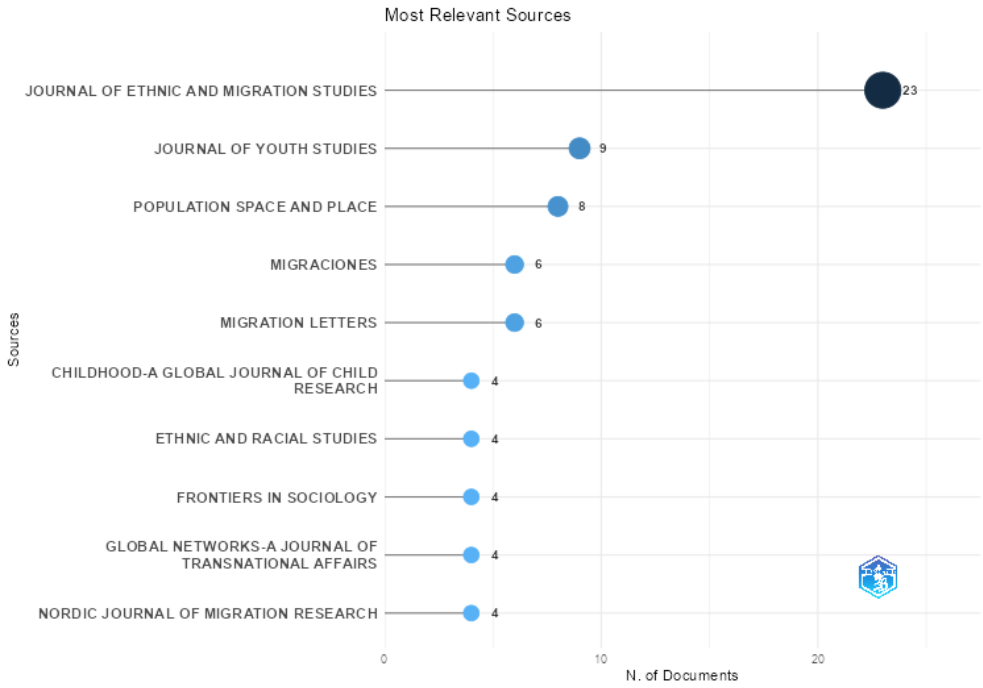
Fig. 1: Annual Scientific Production



Source: created by authors, 2026

A select group of high-impact journals anchors the dissemination of youth migration research. The Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (JEMS) is the leading outlet, contributing 23 documents to this dataset. Other vital venues include the Journal of Youth Studies and Population Space and Place, which serve as secondary pillars for the discourse.

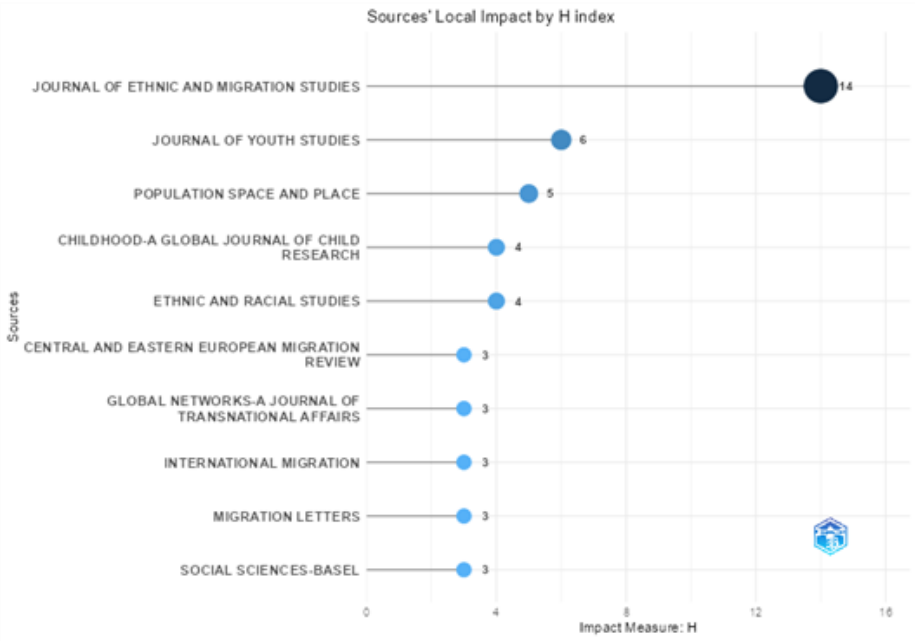
Fig. 2: Most relevant sources



Source: created by authors, 2026

The distribution of literature follows Bradford's Law, revealing a high degree of concentration where Zone 1 (the core) consists of only 6 journals (8% of sources) but generates 34.6% of the total scientific output. Qualitative impact measures reinforce this hierarchy, with JEMS maintaining a local H-index of 14. This concentration suggests that while the field is interdisciplinary, scholarly authority is tightly clustered within a small elite of prestigious migration and youth-focused journals.

Fig. 3: Sources' Local Impact by H index



Source: created by authors, 2026

Individual productivity identifies Monica Roman as the most prolific researcher with 7 documents, followed by Valentina Mazzucato and Birte Nienaber. When adjusting for co-authorship through fractionalized counts, David Cairns emerges with the highest leadership score of 2.83. In terms of internal authority, Valentina Mazzucato is the most cited author within this specific collection (19 local citations), solidifying her as a primary theoretical anchor.

Authorship distribution conforms strictly to Lotka's Law, with 87.8% of authors contributing only a single document. This indicates that the field is supported by a large base of occasional contributors but driven by a core elite of ~3%. Institutional leadership is centered at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (9 articles) and Maastricht University (7 articles). Nationally, Spain (21 articles) and Germany (19 articles) lead in document volume, but the United Kingdom holds the highest qualitative authority, commanding 509 total citations, nearly triple that of any other nation. The contrast between

institutional and national rankings reflects differing concentration: Romanian output is anchored in a single institution and author, whereas Spanish and German output is dispersed across many institutions.

The field's intellectual backbone is formed by a core set of highly cited papers. Globally, the article by Menjívar (2019) is the most influential with 144 citations. However, the paper by Van Geel (2018) in JEMS serves as the most important internal reference, receiving 10 local citations from within this community.

The results of the thematic analysis identify "migration" as the dominant anchor, accounting for 13% of all keyword weight. Research has evolved from macro-economic concerns such as "unemployment" (median year 2016) toward sociopolitical shifts like "Brexit" (2022) and current qualitative explorations of "experiences" (2024).

A Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) reveals a conceptual divide in the field: Dimension 1 identifies a cluster related to human capital, skills, and work, while Dimension 2 focuses on identity, belonging, and social integration. Outliers like "Brexit" and "children" indicate highly specialized research niches. Thematic mapping further classifies "Children" as the most developed niche, showing a Callon Density of 101.71, while "Migration" remains the primary "basic theme" connecting the discipline. Bibliographic coupling shows that works by David Cairns (2011–2014) form a tight intellectual "neighborhood" centered on economic recession and youth mobility.

Socially, the community is fragmented into 11 distinct collaboration clusters, dominated by small research teams. Monica Roman serves as the most central bridge in the social network, with a Betweenness Centrality of 22.38, followed by Birte Nienaber. This fragmentation suggests that while the field is intellectually anchored by common "grand theorists," it remains socially organized into localized, national research hubs that are only beginning to integrate globally.

Limitations and future research

Three limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the corpus is drawn from a single database, Web of Science; as Meho and Yang (2007) demonstrate, database coverage materially affects counts, rankings and citation impact, so the leading sources, authors and countries reported here are conditional on Web of Science indexing and may shift under Scopus or other sources. Second, the analysis is descriptive: it maps the structural, geographical and conceptual organisation of the field rather than testing relationships between

determinants and migration outcomes. Third, the thematic and multiple-correspondence results depend on the keyword fields and clustering parameters used, so the resulting clusters are indicative rather than definitive. These constraints bound the strength of the conclusions but do not affect the descriptive mapping that is the aim of this review.

These limitations define the agenda for the next stage of this research programme. Whereas the present bibliometric review maps the literature, a planned full-scale meta-analysis will move from description to synthesis, pooling the empirical determinants of youth migration and examining how they vary across contexts. That study will broaden database coverage beyond Web of Science, restrict the corpus to studies reporting extractable effect sizes, and treat the age profile of samples as an explicit moderator. The structural and conceptual map established here provides the scoping foundation for that synthesis.

Conclusion

The bibliometric and conceptual mapping of European youth migration research between 2003 and 2025 reveals a discipline that has transitioned from a localized niche into an essential interdisciplinary priority. While scientific output remained marginal for the first decade of the century, a marked acceleration occurred after 2017, culminating in a peak of 23 documents in 2025. This maturation of the field is accompanied by a profound thematic shift, where research has moved away from early macro-economic focuses such as youth unemployment toward contemporary qualitative explorations of identity, integration, and individual migrant experiences. Dissemination is characterized by extreme source concentration; a specialized elite of six journals, spearheaded by the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, generates over a third of all scientific output. Structurally, the field depends upon a small group of core authors, most notably Monica Roman, Valentina Mazzucato, and David Cairns, who provide the necessary theoretical scaffolding for a community where nearly 88% of researchers contribute only a single document. Geographic leadership is bi-modal, with Spain acting as the primary hub for document volume, while the United Kingdom commands the highest citational authority, nearly tripling the impact of other active nations. Conceptually, the field remains divided into two primary clusters: one focused on human capital and labor market transitions, and another centered on micro-level social integration and belonging. The most developed and cohesive research niche currently focuses on the transnational trajectories of children, which exhibits the highest density of all analyzed sub-themes. Intellectually, the entire discipline is anchored by foundational theorists of the

"mobilities paradigm," yet the social structure remains highly fragmented, consisting of eleven isolated collaboration clusters. This contrast highlights a field that, while sharing a unified theoretical language, continues to operate through localized national research teams that are only beginning to bridge into a globally integrated scientific consortium.

References

Aria, M., & Cuccurullo, C. (2017). Bibliometrix: An R-tool for comprehensive science mapping analysis. *Journal of Informetrics, 11*(4), 959–975. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joi.2017.08.007

Cairns, D. (2017). The Erasmus undergraduate exchange programme: A highly European mobility experience? *Children's Geographies, 15*(6), 738–751. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1328485

Castles, S., de Haas, H., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Guilford Press.

Czaika, M., & de Haas, H. (2014). The globalization of migration: Has the world become more migratory? *International Migration Review, 48*(2), 283–323. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12095

Donthu, N., Kumar, S., Mukherjee, D., Pandey, N., & Lim, W. M. (2021). How to conduct a bibliometric analysis: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 133*, 285–296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.04.070

King, R. (2012). *Theories and typologies of migration: An overview and a primer*. Willy Brandt Series of Working Papers in International Migration and Ethnic Relations, 3(12), 1–43.

Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520926707

Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A., & Taylor, J. E. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review, 19*(3), 431–466. https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462

Meho, L. I., & Yang, K. (2007). Impact of data sources on citation counts and rankings of LIS faculty: Web of Science versus Scopus and Google Scholar. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 58*(13), 2105–2125. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20677

Pritchard, A. (1969). Statistical bibliography or bibliometrics? *Journal of Documentation, 25*(4), 348–349. https://doi.org/10.1108/eb026482

Wang, S., Zhang, M., Hu, T., Fu, X., Gao, Z., Halloran, B., & Liu, Y. (2021). A bibliometric analysis and network visualisation of human mobility studies from 1990 to 2020: Emerging trends and future research directions. *Sustainability, 13*(10), 5372. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105372

Contact

Patrik Królik
Faculty of Economics, Technical university in Košice
Němcovej 32, 040 01 Košice-Sever, Slovenská republika
Patrik.krolik@tuke.sk

Rajmund Mirdala
Faculty of Economics, Technical university in Košice
Němcovej 32, 040 01 Košice-Sever, Slovenská republika
Rajmund.mirdala@tuke.sk