

FROM RETURN DECISION TO REINTEGRATION: EVIDENCE FROM RETURN MIGRANTS IN KANO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the transition from return migration decisions to reintegration outcomes and permanent return intentions among return migrants in Kano State, Nigeria. A mixed methods cross sectional design was implemented in eight purposively selected Local Government Areas of the state. Three hundred and eighty four returnees completed the study questionnaire, while a further twenty four return migrants participated in the in depth interview component of the study. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings show that return decisions were multidimensional, with health reasons accounting for 27.9 per cent, cultural and religious factors 26.8 per cent, deportation 26.8 per cent, lack of employment abroad 26.0 per cent, and investment opportunities in Kano 25.0 per cent. Reintegration outcomes were not uniform, since return migrants with higher income recorded better reintegration scores than those with lower income. A one way analysis of variance showed a statistically significant difference in monthly income by reason for return, $F(7, 376) = 2.47$, $p = 0.021$, which indicates that return motivations are shaped by post return economic outcomes. Health related return significantly increased the odds of intending to remain permanently in Kano State, as revealed by the logistic regression result, $OR = 1.70$, $p = 0.035$, while higher education also significantly increased the odds of permanent return intention, $OR = 1.21$, $p = 0.018$. Age, gender, deportation, income, investment motive, and political instability abroad were not statistically significant predictors of permanent return. The study concludes that return migration is not a single terminal event but is shaped by a combination of human capital, social acceptance, welfare needs, and livelihood opportunities. It recommends that policy responses should prioritise differentiated reintegration packages, psychosocial assistance, skills utilisation, livelihood support, health related support, and targeted interventions for involuntary returnees in order to promote sustainable reintegration.

Keywords: return migration; reintegration; permanent return intention; return migrants; Kano State; Nigeria

1. Introduction

International migration has been described as one of the most prominent population movements shaping societies. Past research interest in migration mainly dwelt on the study of emigration and immigrant integration in host societies. Return migration, the migratory process that takes migrants back to their country of origin after a period of stay elsewhere, whether voluntarily or under forceful conditions, has recently gained increasing attention in migration scholarship (Cassarino, 2004). Return migration has received greater attention in recent years owing to emerging concerns around irregular migration, border controls, deportation regimes, and migrant reintegration (Kuschminder, 2020).

The return migration process has gained increasing prominence in both developing and developed countries. The phenomenon has led governments, development agencies, and international organisations to channel resources into programmes aimed at facilitating the reintegration of returnees in their local communities. These interventions are premised on the assumption that return migration brings skills, knowledge, capital, and networks acquired during the migration process that may promote local development (Wahba, 2015). Existing studies have established that return migration has resulted in sustainable development for some migrants, while others are confronted with mixed or failed returns based on their return motivations, the resources at their disposal, and existing conditions in areas of origin (Black and Castaldo, 2009; Cassarino, 2021). The return experiences of migrants therefore differ largely depending on the socio economic conditions to which they return.

In Africa, return migration has recently received great attention owing to shifts in migration policies in destination countries, uncertainties arising from economic recessions, conflict and violence, and heightened efforts in return migration management through the implementation of various return programmes across the continent. Empirical evidence has shown that migrants from Africa return to their countries of origin voluntarily or forcibly in diverse circumstances such as assisted voluntary return, deportation, family reunion, health issues, and investment purposes, among other reasons (Awumbila, Teye, and Yaro, 2019; Schuster and Majidi, 2020). These differing circumstances largely influence the return experiences of migrants and how they reintegrate socially and economically after returning to their areas of origin.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and a migration hub in terms of emigration source, transit, and destination. The country shares both porous land borders and seascapes with various countries in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, as well as with other African nations. Increasing numbers of Nigerians have been returning home voluntarily or through deportation from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and other African countries over the last decade, owing to immigration restrictions, economic downturn, xenophobic attacks, political instability, and climate change induced conflicts (Nwozor, Olanrewaju, Ake, and Adebawale, 2022). While past empirical studies have focused on examining the drivers of migration from Nigeria, little attention has been given to understanding the lived experiences of migrants after returning, especially within the northern Nigerian context, which hosts a unique set of migration dynamics influenced by

socio economic, cultural, demographic, and environmental factors that vary from other regions.

The reintegration of returnees has been described as one of the toughest phases of return migration. While return generally involves going back to the country of origin, reintegration occurs when returnees establish a stable source of livelihood, rebuild broken social relationships, and become accepted members of society after returning to their places of origin (Cassarino, 2014). Studies reveal that most factors that affect the livelihood of migrants in host countries also influence their reintegration experiences after return. These factors include gainful employment, income levels, education, freedom to live as one chooses, social acceptance, access to support groups, family ties, and how the return was effected. Migrants who returned voluntarily may therefore have different reintegration experiences from those who returned through deportation or forced transfer.

Past studies have separately analysed the factors affecting the decisions of migrants to return and the lived experiences of returnees after return migration (Carling and Erdal, 2014; Kuschminder and Majidi, 2018). Although these studies have enhanced knowledge and understanding of return migration processes, there is limited research on how return motivations are associated with the reintegration experiences of migrants after return, particularly in Nigeria. Identifying the association between the return decision and the reintegration experience of returnees is essential, because the voluntariness and mixed motives that caused migrants to return may affect their capacity to reintegrate into their communities successfully. Consequently, this study analyses the transition phase from return decision to the reintegration experiences of return migrants in Kano State.

Examining both the determinants of return decisions and the factors affecting the lived experiences of returnees after returning is particularly important in Kano, because the state has been central to the history of the northern region as a commercial centre, boasts expansive migration networks, and is currently experiencing an influx of return migrants from different parts of the world. Specifically, the study aims to examine the determinants of return migration decisions among return migrants in Kano State, to identify how return motivations are associated with reintegration experiences after return, and to determine the factors influencing successful reintegration and the desire for permanent return among the study respondents. These aims are addressed through three research questions concerning the factors that influence return decisions, the relationship between return motivations and reintegration outcomes, and the socio demographic and return related factors that predict successful reintegration and permanent settlement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Return Migration

Return migration has long been defined as migrants returning to their place of origin after a temporary or permanent period in their destination country (Cassarino, 2004). Scholars now think about return migration as a long process marked by decisions made over time, as changing economic, social, and political conditions in both origin and destination countries influence these processes (King, 2000). There is also growing awareness that not all return

migration is the same, and scholars now distinguish between voluntary return, assisted return, and forced return, each of which differentially affects the ability of returnees to reintegrate (Kuschminder, 2020). One long standing debate concerns whether returns are motivated by individual migrants, by households, or by structural factors. Under the New Economics of Labour Migration, migration decisions are made at the household level as a way to diversify income sources and minimise risks to family earnings, and returns are understood as part of the original plan once goals have been met (Stark and Bloom, 1985). Neoclassical scholars, by contrast, argue that return is motivated by failed migration attempts or when expected earnings in destination countries do not materialise (Todaro, 1969).

2.2 Determinants of Return Migration

Previous research has revealed several factors that influence the decisions of migrants to return home. Employment, wages, and other labour market factors in destination countries are primary determinants of return migration (Dustmann and Gorlach, 2016). Non economic factors, including family ties, medical conditions, cultural attachments, and legal status, have also been shown to influence return migration decisions (Carling and Erdal, 2014). The relationship between voluntary and involuntary return to African origin countries has been noted in the migration literature. Awumbila et al. (2019) find that the forcedness and voluntariness of return among migrants from sub Saharan Africa can coexist, since returnees often experience both structural limitations such as deportation and irregular status and elements of voluntariness such as mobility aspirations. Recent scholarship has moved beyond binary categorisations of return as either voluntary or forced and instead recognises a continuum of voluntariness that acknowledges the degrees of agency and constraint that migrants may experience (Kuschminder, 2020; Schuster and Majidi, 2020).

2.3 Reintegration of Return Migrants

Reintegration can be defined as the process in which return migrants rebuild their economic, social, and psychosocial relationships within their place of origin (Cassarino, 2014). Indicators of successful reintegration include employment outcomes, earnings stability, social acceptance, and subjective feelings of wellbeing. Research suggests that reintegration is unevenly distributed among returnees, since those who migrated voluntarily and saved up resources, skills, and established social networks are most likely to reintegrate successfully, whereas involuntary returnees and those who lack resources often experience worsened economic conditions or exclusion (Black and Castaldo, 2009). Reintegration has also been argued to be contingent on structural factors within the place of origin, such as the capacity to absorb returnees into the labour market and the accessibility of reintegration programmes (Kuschminder and Majidi, 2018).

2.4 Linking Return Decisions to Reintegration Outcomes

One weakness identified within the existing migration literature is the lack of overlap between analyses of return decision making processes and research on the reintegration outcomes of returnees. Decision making and reintegration are often analysed sequentially, yet emerging research shows that the conditions surrounding return can shape different reintegration pathways (Cassarino, 2021). For

example, voluntary returnees have been shown to reintegrate more successfully than deportees because they possess greater levels of preparedness, savings, and psychological readiness upon return (De Haas, Castles, and Miller, 2020). Education and skill levels can likewise affect both the likelihood of return and reintegration outcomes, although the evidence is mixed, since some studies find that higher education increases positive reintegration while others find that it has little effect because skills do not match the labour market in origin countries (Black, Castaldo, and Vullnetari, 2013; Wahba, 2015).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The study employs a mixed framework that combines the New Economics of Labour Migration approach with a sustainable reintegration lens. It takes account of the idea that return migration decisions are multifactorial, comprising economic, social, and institutional elements, and that reintegration is conditioned by both the push of return motivations and individual traits interacting with the structural factors at origin. Three gaps emerge from the review. First, return migration studies have traditionally focused on southern states to the neglect of the north with its socio economic and cultural diversity. Second, limited studies have considered the determinants of return, the outcomes of reintegration, and the intentions for permanent return within an integrated framework. Third, the relationship between voluntary and forced migration and reintegration success remains empirically underexplored. These gaps are addressed in this study through a theoretically grounded, mixed methods analysis of return migration dynamics in Kano State.

The analytical logic that guides the study is summarised in Figure 1. Return determinants such as health, cultural and religious ties, and deportation feed into a set of individual and structural mediators, which in turn condition economic, social, and psychological reintegration and the intention to remain permanently. The feedback arrow signals the central theoretical claim that reintegration unfolds as an ongoing process rather than a terminal event.

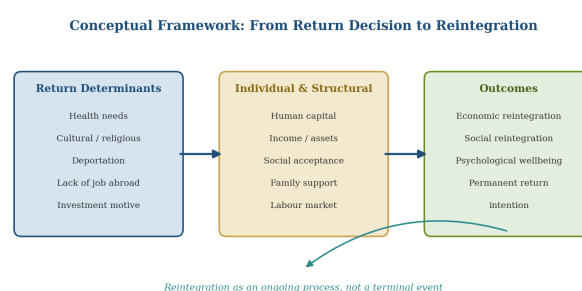


Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking return determinants, individual and structural mediators, and reintegration and permanent return outcomes. *Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis.*

3. Methodology

3.1 Study Area

Kano State lies between latitudes 10 degrees 33 minutes north and 12 degrees 37 minutes north and longitudes 7 degrees 34 minutes east and 9 degrees 25 minutes east, covering an area of about 20,131 square kilometres. It falls within the Sudan Savanna ecological zone of Nigeria, with high temperatures year round, distinct wet and dry seasons, and average annual rainfall between 600 and 1,000 millimetres. The land is primarily flat or gently rolling plains, which has supported a strong agricultural sector focused on crop farming and livestock rearing (Ayoade, 2004; Olofin, 2008). Kano State is one of the largest and wealthiest states in Nigeria and has historically served as a commercial hub for West Africa, developing extensive trade networks with other countries in West Africa, North Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Its economic vibrancy, transport connectivity through the interstate highway, railway, and the Mallam Aminu Kano International Airport, and its deep history of migration together sustain a large population of return migrants, which made the state a suitable location for this study (Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria, 2023; Meagher, 2010; National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The study area is situated in Figure 2, which identifies the eight Local Government Areas from which returnees were drawn. The locator is a schematic representation rather than a survey grade cartographic product, and it is intended to orient the reader to the northern position of Kano within Nigeria and the concentration of sampled areas around the metropolitan core.

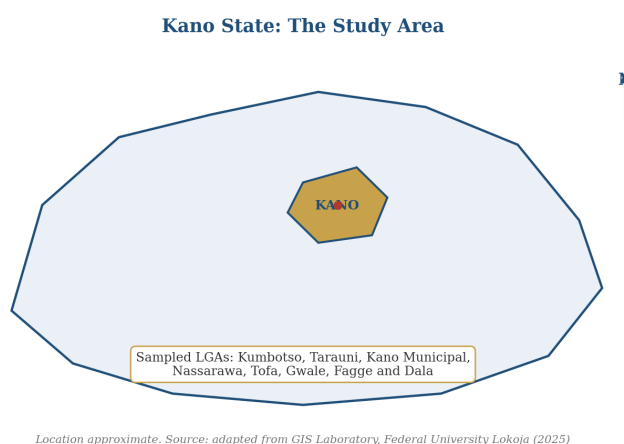


Figure 2: Location of Kano State and the eight purposively selected Local Government Areas. *Source: Adapted from GIS Laboratory, Federal University Lokoja (2025).*

3.2 Research Design and Population

The research design was a quantitative cross sectional mixed methods design. Quantitative data were obtained by administering surveys to return migrants, while qualitative data were obtained by interviewing returnees in depth. Employing both methods allowed numerical trends and human experiences related to return migration and reintegration to be understood, and it enabled triangulation that eased interpretation. The study population consisted of return migrants in purposively selected Local Government Areas of Kano State, defined as individuals who at one time migrated away from their place of origin, either within or outside Nigeria, but later returned to settle in Kano State.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The sample size for the quantitative survey was determined using the formula of Cochran (1977) for large populations, expressed as:

$$n = (Z^2 \times p \times q) / e^2$$

where n is the sample size, Z is the standard normal deviate at the 95 per cent confidence level, taken as 1.96, p is the estimated proportion of the population possessing the characteristic of interest, taken as 0.5, q is equal to 1 minus p, and e is the margin of error, taken as 0.05. Substituting these values gives the computation:

$$n = (1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5) / 0.05^2 \approx 384$$

The computation yielded a sample size of three hundred and eighty four respondents, which was considered adequate for statistical analysis and generalisation within the study area. Based on preliminary data from the Kano State Migrants and Returnees Desk and the International Organization for Migration (2024), eight Local Government Areas with the highest concentrations of returnees were purposively selected, namely Kumbotso, Tarauni, Kano Municipal, Nassarawa, Tofa, Gwale, Fagge, and Dala. Within each Local Government Area, snowball and purposive sampling were used to identify eligible respondents, since these techniques are recommended in studies involving migrant populations and other hard to reach populations (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the return migrants, covering socio economic characteristics, migration history, reasons for return, reintegration, and migration intention, among other aspects. In depth interviews were also conducted among selected returnees to elicit further information on their experiences after return, including job availability, acceptance or stigma, and intentions. The questionnaire was pilot tested with twenty five return migrants in Ungogo, a Local Government Area separate from those sampled, in order to assess completion time, comprehension, and clarity, and six ambiguous questions were reworded on the basis of the pilot feedback. The final instrument was translated into Hausa and back translated into English to ensure semantic consistency (Brislin, 1970).

Quantitative data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarise the demographic information and migration experiences of the respondents. Cross tabulations and the Pearson chi square test were used to determine associations between selected variables, one way analysis of variance was used to determine socio economic differences in reintegration indicators, and binary logistic regression was conducted to determine the factors associated with the intention to return permanently. Qualitative interview data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), with textual data read several times, coded, and organised under recurring themes relating to reintegration, the reintegration economy, acceptance, skills use, stigma, and the desire to migrate again. All analyses were conducted at the 95 per cent confidence interval, with a probability value below 0.05 considered statistically significant.

3.5 Reintegration Index and Ethical Considerations

Reintegration was operationalised through a composite index whose components were adapted from the Reintegration Sustainability Survey framework of the International Organization for Migration, comprising nine indicators across three dimensions, namely economic reintegration through employment, income, and assets, social reintegration through community acceptance, family support, and participation, and psychological reintegration through wellbeing, belonging, and satisfaction. Each indicator was assigned a three point scale, where one denotes low, two denotes moderate, and three denotes high, and the indicator scores were summed to obtain a total score for each respondent, so that a score of two to four indicates low reintegration, five to six indicates medium reintegration, and seven to nine indicates high reintegration. The index returned a Cronbach alpha of 0.78 in the pilot study, which is considered acceptable for a study of this nature. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, since participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and the data collected contain no identifiers that could be used to recognise respondents.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Factors Influencing Return Migration Decisions

The return decision is an important step of the migration process, as it reflects wider economic, social, institutional, and personal factors that influence migration decision making. The results show that there was no single dominant reason for return among respondents, but rather several interrelated reasons. A multiple response analysis, presented in Table 1, shows that respondents who returned owing to health reasons constituted the most predominant category (27.9 per cent), followed by cultural and religious factors (26.8 per cent), deportation (26.8 per cent), lack of employment abroad (26.0 per cent), and investment opportunities in Kano State (25.0 per cent).

Table 1. Major reasons for return migration (multiple response, n = 384)

Reason for return	Count	Percentage
Health reasons	107	27.9
Cultural and religious reasons	103	26.8
Deportation	103	26.8
Lack of job abroad	100	26.0
Investment opportunity in Kano	96	25.0
Political instability abroad	93	24.2
Family ties	86	22.4
Expired visa or legal issues	85	22.1

Percentages exceed 100 because respondents could select more than one reason. Source: Authors' computation, 2025.

The relatively high share of health related returns suggests that migration outcomes are not always primarily economically motivated. For many migrants, changes in health status or difficulties in accessing health care while abroad may have made remaining abroad less attractive or even impossible, an interpretation that coincides with the observation that return decisions are often shaped by life cycle events and subjective wellbeing (Kuschminder, 2020; Wahba, 2015). Health related return may also reflect the importance of family based care in many African contexts, with migrants preferring to convalesce among family and community. The prominence of cultural and religious reasons, which were cited almost as frequently as economic factors, underscores that social and cultural ties continue to play an important role in migration decision making despite the neoclassical prediction that income maximisation would dominate, a pattern also documented elsewhere in West Africa (Awumbila et al., 2019; Setrana and Tonah, 2016). Deportation, responsible for 26.8 per cent of returns, indicates that forced returns continue to account for a sizeable share of overall return migration and that immigration policies in destination countries play an increasingly important role in determining return among migrants who likely lack secure legal status abroad (Kuschminder and Majidi, 2018; Schuster and Majidi, 2020).

Figure 3 arranges the eight reasons for return in descending order of prevalence. The visualisation makes clear that the leading motivations, from health through to investment, are separated by only narrow margins, which reinforces the interpretation that return in this setting is genuinely multidimensional rather than driven by any single overriding cause.

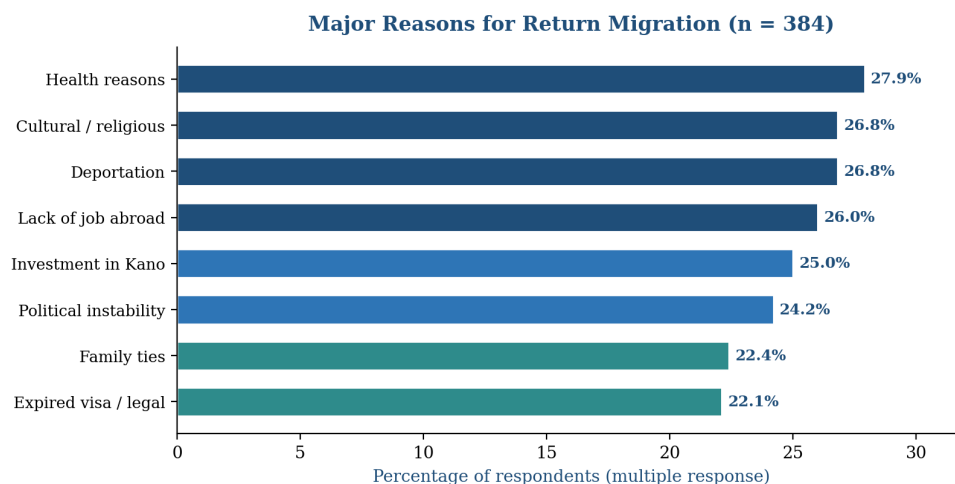


Figure 3: Major reasons for return migration, ranked by percentage of respondents. *Source: Authors' computation, 2025.*

4.2 Return Motivations and Reintegration Outcomes

Results from this study revealed that reintegration levels differ across economic classes, so that economic access or capital continues to play an important role in facilitating reintegration. As shown in Table 2, respondents who earned below twenty thousand naira had the lowest mean reintegration score (3.45), while those who earned above one hundred thousand naira had the highest mean score (6.15). Moreover, 71.4 per cent of respondents in the lowest income group recorded low reintegration, compared with only 24.3 per cent in the highest income group.

Table 2. Mean reintegration scores by monthly income category

Monthly income (₦)	N	Mean score	SD	Reintegration level distribution
Below 20,000	91	3.45	1.12	71.4% low, 21.0% medium, 7.6% high
20,000 – 50,000	85	4.12	1.24	59.0% low, 28.6% medium, 12.4% high
50,001 – 100,000	88	5.08	1.36	39.8% low, 33.0% medium, 27.2% high
Above 100,000	120	6.15	1.48	24.3% low, 36.2% medium, 39.5% high
Total	384	4.76	1.55	—

Reintegration scored on a 2 to 9 composite index. Source: Authors' computation, 2025.

This pattern indicates that financial capability shapes the reintegration experience of returnees in Kano State. Return migrants who earned relatively high incomes can more readily obtain shelter, establish businesses and meaningful investments, and meet the obligations expected of them by community members, which may in turn improve their acceptance and reduce their vulnerability after return. The outcome resonates with the assertion of Cassarino (2004) that the opportunities available to returnees prior to their return largely shape their reintegration, since those who migrated with, or were able to build, financial capital alongside social and human capital had better chances of reintegrating successfully. It also gives credence to the resource mobilisation perspective on return migration, which holds that reintegration depends substantially on the capacity of returnees to transfer social, human, and economic capital accumulated abroad (Black, Koser, Munk, Atfield, D'Onofrio, and Tiemoko, 2011; Wahba and Zenou, 2012).

Figure 4 renders the income gradient in reintegration as a rising sequence of means against the overall average of 4.76. The monotonic increase across the four income bands, together with the widening separation from the overall mean at the extremes, gives visual force to the statistical association between financial capability and reintegration success.

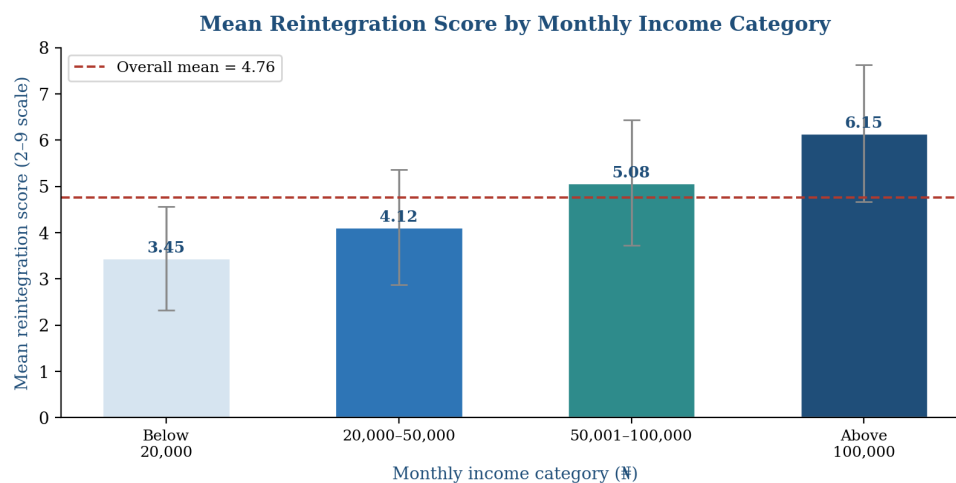


Figure 4: Mean reintegration score by monthly income category, with error bars showing one standard deviation. *Source: Authors' computation, 2025.*

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for monthly income by the reason for returning. The result of the one way analysis of variance indicated a statistically significant difference in average monthly income by migration motivation, $F(7, 376) = 2.47$, $p = 0.021$.

Table 3. One way analysis of variance of monthly income by reason for return

Source of variation	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p value
Between groups	142,530.74	7	20,361.53	2.47	0.021*
Within groups	3,083,415.62	376	8,199.52		
Total	3,225,946.36	383			

* Significant at $p < 0.05$. *Source: Authors' computation, 2025.*

The result reveals that migrants who returned had differential experiences of economic reintegration. Returnees who came back to invest may have saved money, acquired skills during migration, and planned well for their return investments before leaving the destination country, whereas those who returned owing to deportation, visa expiration, or legal issues may have experienced sudden and poorly planned returns. The economic implications of return migration depend largely on the preparedness and resourcefulness of migrants (Dustmann and Gorlach, 2016), and voluntary return migrants tend to fare better in the labour market than non voluntary returnees, a conclusion reached in comparable West African research (Awumbila, Teye, Yaro, and Benneh, 2020; Kuschminder and Majidi, 2018). The logistic regression model reported later showed acceptable fit, with a Hosmer and Lemeshow chi square of 6.21, $p = 0.624$, and a Nagelkerke pseudo R squared of 0.034, correctly classifying 72.9 per cent of cases, which indicates moderate predictive accuracy that is typical in migration research where behaviour is influenced by numerous unobserved variables.

4.3 Predictors of Permanent Return Intention

A critical aspect of reintegration is whether return migrants view their return as permanent or plan to migrate again. Table 4 presents the binary logistic regression estimated with demographic characteristics and reason for return as independent variables.

Table 4. Logistic regression predicting permanent return intention

Predictor	B	SE	z	p value	95% CI
Constant	-2.1080	0.6020	-3.50	0.0005	-3.288, -0.928
Health reasons	0.5285	0.2502	2.11	0.0347*	0.038, 1.019
Cultural and religious reasons	0.2038	0.2595	0.79	0.4322	-0.305, 0.713
Deportation	-0.3700	0.2632	-1.41	0.1598	-0.886, 0.146
Lack of job abroad	0.2415	0.2583	0.93	0.3498	-0.265, 0.748
Investment opportunity in Kano	0.1609	0.2591	0.62	0.5345	-0.347, 0.669
Political instability abroad	-0.1207	0.2718	-0.44	0.6569	-0.654, 0.412
Gender (male = 1)	0.3888	0.2263	1.72	0.0857	-0.055, 0.832
Education (higher = higher code)	0.1929	0.0812	2.38	0.0175*	0.034, 0.352
Income code	-0.0341	0.0975	-0.35	0.7262	-0.225, 0.157
Age group	0.0557	0.0954	0.58	0.5590	-0.131, 0.243

* Significant at $p < 0.05$. Dependent variable: intention to remain permanently in Kano State. *Source: Authors' computation, 2025.*

The results demonstrate that health related reasons for return have a positive and significant effect on the intention to return permanently ($B = 0.529$, $p = 0.035$), so that migrants who returned owing to health issues held stronger intentions to remain permanently in Kano State than those who returned for other reasons. Health related return can therefore be associated with stronger commitments to origin communities, as

migrants seek longer term access to family care and a culturally aligned social environment, an observation consistent with the finding that intentions to stay are influenced by household welfare needs (Wahba, 2015). Education likewise has a positive and significant effect on the intention to return permanently ($B = 0.193$, $p = 0.018$), suggesting that migrants with higher levels of education were more likely to intend to remain, since their skills may ease economic readjustment and reduce the motivation for onward migration (Black and Castaldo, 2009; Dustmann and Gorlach, 2016).

Figure 5 translates the regression coefficients into odds ratios arranged around the reference line of unity. Only health reasons and education fall clearly to the right of the line with significant effects, while the remaining predictors cluster around unity, which conveys at a glance the central finding that welfare and human capital, rather than classical economic or demographic variables, drive the intention to remain.

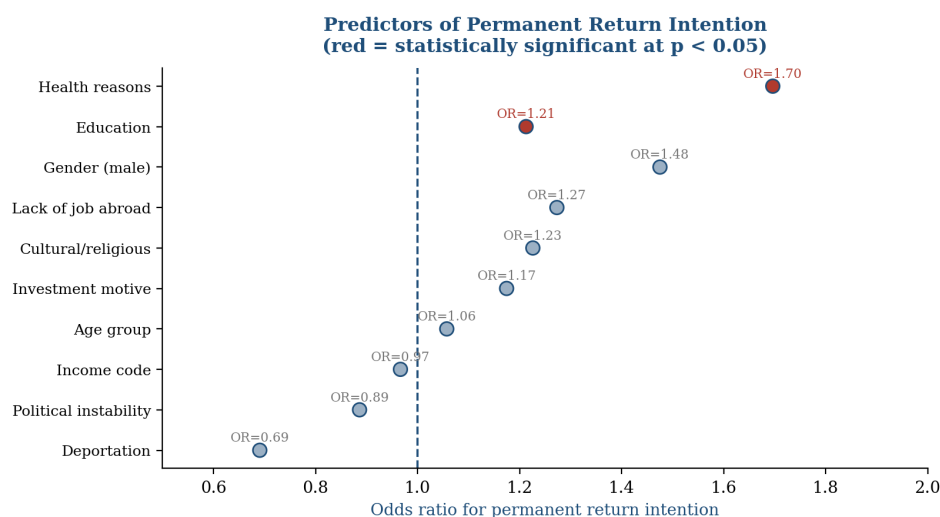


Figure 5: Odds ratios for predictors of permanent return intention, with statistically significant predictors highlighted. Source: Authors' computation, 2025.

Variables such as cultural and religious reasons, deportation, lack of foreign employment, investment opportunities, political instability abroad, monthly income, age group, and gender were not statistically significant. It is perhaps surprising that income did not significantly predict permanent return intention, given its strong association with reintegration in the descriptive results. This may reflect small sample sizes in the higher income brackets, but it may also suggest that a migrant can be economically reintegrated while still contemplating future mobility, since many migrants operate within circular or transnational migration systems in which life at origin and life at destination are not mutually exclusive (Carling and Collins, 2022; De Haas et al., 2020). The insignificance of deportation similarly points to the non finality of forced return, since deported migrants who experience difficult reintegration may still intend to migrate again (Kuschminder and Majidi, 2018). Taken together, the results lend credence to the idea that return should not be viewed as the terminating point of a migration journey but as one phase within a longer and often circular trajectory.

4.4 Explaining Reintegration Experiences

Although the quantitative findings pointed to statistical associations between return motivations, income levels, reintegration outcomes, and permanent return intentions, the interview transcripts reveal further context around these relationships. Respondents described how their reintegration was shaped not only by their financial situation but also by local acceptance and treatment. The first theme to arise concerned livelihoods, with several respondents noting that finding a source of income and stabilising financially upon return was vital for rebuilding their lives and status within the community. As one respondent observed:

“When I returned home I struggled to find work at first. If you have no money you cannot take care of your family, and people expect more from me since I had been away.”

This insight helps to explain why reintegration scores increased with income in the quantitative results, and it supports earlier findings that sustainable livelihoods contribute to long term reintegration (Cassarino, 2021; Ruben, Van Houte, and Davids, 2021). A second theme concerned community perception, since some respondents reported stigma attached to returning, particularly where the migrant had not fulfilled expectations or returned under difficult circumstances. One respondent stated:

“When I left, people thought I was going to make it big. But when I came back and could not find success, people began to treat me like I was useless.”

This account clarifies why some respondents recorded low reintegration scores despite achieving a measure of financial success, since acceptance and a sense of belonging matter alongside income, and discrimination can act as a barrier to reintegration (Schuster and Majidi, 2020). A third theme concerned the utilisation of skills acquired abroad, with several respondents noting an inability to apply their qualifications after return. As one respondent explained:

“I studied ICT abroad. The skills I learned were good, but there were no opportunities to do those kinds of jobs when I returned.”

This excerpt helps to explain the quantitative result that educational attainment was not a statistically significant factor in reintegration scores, since a mismatch between acquired skills and local labour market opportunities can blunt the returns to education (Black et al., 2011). Finally, several respondents highlighted the role of family in easing return and reintegration, which offers context for the finding that health related return increased the desire for permanent settlement, since proximity to family provided both practical support and a reason to remain (Wahba, 2015).

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study assessed the return decisions, reintegration experiences, and permanent return intentions of return migrants in Kano State, Nigeria. Using primary quantitative and qualitative data, it contributes empirical evidence on the role of economic, social, and institutional drivers in shaping return migration decisions, and on the factors influencing reintegration after return. The results reveal that return decisions were multidimensional, with health reasons, religious and cultural considerations, deportation, and work related factors emerging as key motivations. Returnees with higher incomes experienced better reintegration outcomes, while those who returned for health reasons and those with higher educational levels were more likely to desire permanent settlement. The qualitative findings show that reintegration was economic, social, and psychological in nature and depended on social acceptance, family support, the absence of stigma, and the opportunity to utilise skills acquired abroad.

The findings point to the importance of designing reintegration packages that take the livelihoods, skills utilisation, and social inclusion of return migrants into account, especially for those who are vulnerable or involuntarily returned. Both reintegration outcomes and return intentions are conditional on individual migrant characteristics as well as the context of return, so return migration programming should aim to promote sustainable settlement among returnees who can contribute to development with their skills and experience, while recognising that not every return will be permanent. Programme objectives should therefore centre on the wellbeing and success of return migrants rather than on attempting to prevent future migration.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the snowball sampling technique, though necessary for accessing hard to reach returnees, may have introduced selection bias by underrepresenting socially isolated returnees. Second, the recall bias usually associated with self reported data may have affected some responses. Third, the cross sectional design captures reintegration at a single point in time. Despite these limitations, the study provides empirical evidence on return migration dynamics in Kano State on which future longitudinal research can build.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that no conflicting interests exist.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical procedures were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were maintained. No personal identifying information was collected.

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