

# POLICY IN FOCUS

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## Overcoming food security and nutrition roadblocks in social protection

# Child poverty and cash transfers:

## Public opinion endorses an available solution

Merike Blofield,<sup>1</sup> Juliana Martínez Franzoni<sup>2</sup> and Fabián Borges<sup>3,4</sup>

Nearly 50 per cent of people in poverty worldwide are under 18 and disproportionately live in the global South (Black et.al. 2017; UNICEF 2022a). In Latin America, almost half (45 per cent) of children and adolescents experience income poverty, a rate three times higher than among those aged 65 years and older (ECLAC 2022). Income poverty has devastating effects on children’s present and future lives but also represents a missed opportunity for the economic growth and wellbeing of the societies of which they are part.

To respond and overcome this dire scenario, evidence suggests that access to regular cash transfers can offer simple and effective protection against child poverty, particularly extreme poverty, defined as the lack of access to a basic food basket. While helping families meet basic needs,

and often linked to healthcare and school services, transfers also improve child health, education, cognitive progress, and overall well-being, making them a highly beneficial investment for families and society in general (Black et al., 2017). Yet, while cash transfer programmes for vulnerable families with children exist across the region, they reach only a fraction of children in need, and most are far from covering the cost of a basic food basket.

Our survey addresses public opinion on cash transfers, a vital dimension of the potential political space under electoral democracies to engage in more robust anti-poverty efforts in the region. Surprisingly, despite these programmes’ role as the cornerstone of anti-poverty efforts in the region, none of the most significant regional public opinion surveys, including AmericasBarometer, Latinobarómetro, World Values Survey, and International Social Survey, have addressed this topic.

To address this gap, with the support of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Blofield and Martínez Franzoni created the database “Families and cash transfers” based on nationally representative telephone surveys conducted in seven countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru) between April and August 2022.

By relying on phone surveys, we follow the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), the most extensive in the region, which conducted phone surveys during the pandemic and confirmed the effectiveness of this data-gathering technique (Zechmeister 2020). Fieldwork was carried out by leading firms based in each country. Through random stratified sampling, 2 samples achieved a 95 per cent confidence level and a sample error of a maximum of +/- 3 percentage points. Sample sizes ranged

**FIGURE 1:** Dependent variables for overall sample and seven Latin America countries



Source: Authors' elaboration.



from 900 respondents (in Chile) to 1,500 respondents (in Guatemala). To ensure data reliability, the survey comprised 37 mostly closed questions.

These surveys represent the first systematic comparative surveys on attitudes toward cash transfers in the region. Our sample includes Mexico, two Central American countries (Costa Rica and Guatemala), two Andean countries (Colombia and Peru), and two Southern Cone countries (Argentina and Chile).<sup>5</sup> These countries vary in terms of economic development (from one of the poorest in Guatemala to the wealthiest in Chile), state capacity and social policy legacy (also from weakest in Guatemala to stronger in Chile, Argentina, and Costa Rica), and country size (from Mexico at 128 million inhabitants to Costa Rica's 5 million inhabitants), thus providing a reasonably representative sample of the region's countries.

We have summarised our initial findings in [seven country-based policy briefs](#) outlining the policy context, public support for cash transfers, attitudes on how generous they should be, and which groups of children they should cover (Blofield et al. 2022b).

### **Public opinion strongly supports cash transfers for children**

Regarding support for the existence of a programme, interviewees were asked, *"Would you be in favour of or against the government having a cash transfer program for households with children?"* Respondents could strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. As indicated by Figure 1, the overwhelming majority (89.99 per cent) of respondents either "agreed" (70.35 per cent) or "strongly agreed" (19.65 per cent) that governments should provide transfers to households with children. There is some cross-national variation in the total share of respondents in favour of transfers, with national averages ranging from 84.64 per cent in Argentina to 92.91 per cent in Colombia.

Regarding the breadth of a cash transfer programme for children, interviewees were asked, *"When government cash transfers specifically for children exist, who should receive them?"* Respondents were asked to choose from four options: only children living in extreme poverty, only poor

children, the majority of children, or all children. As Figure 1 indicates, opinion on the appropriate reach is more divided: just over half (52 per cent) expressed support for providing transfers to at least all children in poverty (summing up the latter three options: poor children, the majority of children, and all children). Almost half (48.03 per cent) support limiting transfers to those in extreme poverty. Although the majority in four of the seven countries (Argentina, Chile, Guatemala and Mexico) believes that at least all children in poverty should be covered, in three countries (Peru, Colombia and Costa Rica), which share ranges between 40 and 48 per cent support limiting transfers to children living in extreme poverty.

Universal transfers (24.59 per cent constitute the second most common answer. Considering the existing cash transfer programme coverage and the current poverty rates in these countries, the majority supports expansion in most countries.

Finally, regarding the adequacy or generosity of transfers, the survey asked, *"When government cash transfer programmes tailored specifically for children exist, what should they cover?"* Respondents were asked to choose from four transfer levels: equal to half the cost of the basic food basket (half of the extreme poverty line), equal to the total cost of the basket (the extreme poverty line), equal to the cost of the basket plus the cost of clothing, and equal to the cost of the basket and clothing plus the cost of other basic needs (the poverty line). Across the entire sample, as Figure 1 indicates, an overwhelming majority—over 97 per cent of respondents—support cash transfer values equal to at least the cost of a basic food basket (the extreme poverty line), while less than 3 per cent support restricting them to half a food basket. A plurality (49.34 per cent) prefers the most generous option (the poverty line). Support for the most generous option ranges from 36.3 per cent in Guatemala to 61.6 per cent in Chile. Transfers equal to the basic food basket are the second most common response in the countries other than Guatemala, with average support ranging from less than a quarter of respondents (22.7 per cent in Chile) to nearly half (49.5 per cent in Guatemala).

The overall results indicate overwhelming support for the existence of a cash transfer programme for children,

overwhelming support for higher adequacy of cash transfers where they exist—equal to at least the extreme poverty line that takes care of basic food needs—and significant support, although varying by country, for covering at least all children in poverty. We address respective policy contexts and political space in the policy briefs on each country.

Our analysis also addresses the critical issue of the immediate price tag for policy expansion in each country. Additionally, we produced a cost estimate for a global universal basic income for all children in poverty, equating to roughly 1.63 per cent of global Gross National Income (GNI) (Blofield et al. 2022a). The cost of ensuring coverage for every child in poverty at the level of a basic food basket varies in relation to national gross domestic products (GDPs). Our estimates indicate that the total cost of ensuring a food basket level coverage for every child in poverty would range from less than 0.7 per cent of GDP in Costa Rica and Chile to around 1 per cent in Colombia and Peru, to 1.47 per cent in Mexico. The cost jumps to a staggering 7.5 per cent in Guatemala, given the high share of a very young population living in poverty.

### **Policy recommendations**

These findings indicate that public opinion strongly supports strengthening one of the simplest, most effective, and well-known anti-poverty policies: cash transfers to children. Overwhelming support exists to ensure a value that covers at least a basic food basket. Opinion on the appropriate reach is split nearly in half between those who would include at least all children in poverty and those who would restrict transfers to children living in extreme poverty. Regarding the latter group, we recommend policymakers and advocates adopt communication strategies that emphasise the beneficial effects of cash transfers on child development *before* children experience severe deprivation, particularly food deprivation, and the cost-effectiveness of such transfers over addressing the future consequences of lack of protection. Once children experience extreme poverty, especially over time, much of the health, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural damage may already have been done. Similar arguments can effectively be made regarding fiscal cost, as evidence demonstrates that up-front

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Photo: WFP/Francisco Fión. Beneficiary women produce vegetables for their own consumption along with oyster mushrooms. Guatemala, 2013. CC BY-ND 2.0.

investments such as this more than pay for themselves, given the medium and long-term beneficial development effects.

On this basis, we argue that in the context of electoral democracies, countries in Latin America have both political leeway and economic resources to enact programmes that cover all vulnerable children with basic food basket-level transfers, representing immensely cost-effective investments for future development. While in broad terms there is space to increase progressive tax bases in the region, in the case of countries such as Guatemala—where the fiscal burden is very low and the needed increase in social investment represents several points of the GDP—a protection effort must also entail multilateral support. Children cannot represent themselves politically; therefore, significant political will from adult policymakers is needed to address the child poverty challenge. With this political will, in the context of supportive public opinion, policymakers should be able to establish the fiscal space required to enact a broad protective cash transfer programme to eliminate extreme poverty. ●

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1. University of Hamburg.
2. University of Costa Rica.
3. California State University, San Bernardino.
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5. Budget considerations made us unable to include Brazil.