

POLICY NOTE

# PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MEXICO

CLEAR SUPPORT FOR GREATER  
COVERAGE AND ADEQUACY



UNIVERSIDAD DE  
COSTA RICA



**POLICY NOTE**

PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH  
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CLEAR SUPPORT FOR GREATER COVERAGE AND ADEQUACY

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## MESSAGE

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Child poverty is a multidimensional challenge and decades of evidence show that access to regular cash transfers can provide simple and effective protection against poverty, especially extreme poverty. In this context, it is surprising how little is known about how public opinion perceives these programs, both in Mexico and in Latin America more broadly. As part of a comparative study of public opinion in seven Latin American countries, a nationally representative telephone survey in Mexico conducted in May 2022 indicates that cash transfer programs aimed at children and adolescents have very high support (90%). In addition, 96% support setting the value of the transfers to at least the cost of the basic food basket. Finally, a majority (56%) would extend transfers to include at least all children and adolescents in poverty, while 43% support restricting the program to those in extreme poverty.

1.

# WHY DO CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS MATTER?

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Poverty is disproportionately high among children and adolescents. In Mexico, more than half (53%) of children under 18 live in poverty, while the figure among people over 65 is less than three quarters of that level (38%) (CONEVAL, 2021). Child and adolescent poverty is a violation of the rights of children and adolescents and has devastating effects on their present and future lives. Decades of studies document how material deprivation during childhood leads to a decline in opportunities later in life, resulting in a huge waste of human capital for society (Black et al., 2017; Berens et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2017).

While poverty is a multidimensional challenge, evidence also shows that access to regular cash transfers can provide simple and effective protection, particularly against extreme poverty. By helping families meet basic needs, especially the purchase of food, such transfers

have been shown to improve health, education, and child development, as well as overall well-being. These types of transfers represent an immensely beneficial investment in children, their families and society as a whole (UNICEF, 2017; Bastagli et al., 2016; Harman, 2018; Cecchini, Villatoro and Mancero, 2021). Based on this evidence, there is a broad consensus among scholars, multilateral agencies, and policy officials regarding the importance of these transfers as an instrument of social protection, even if they debate the appropriate scope and adequacy of such transfers.

In this context, it is surprising how little is known about how the public perceives cash transfers. Does public opinion support cash transfers? Based on a nationally representative telephone survey in May 2022, this policy brief contributes to filling this gap.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The survey was conducted in May 2022 (between the 6th and 31st) by Data OPM ([www.dataopm.net](http://www.dataopm.net)) and included 1003 respondents. The appendix summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the nationwide sample.

## 2.

## CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY

In 1997, Mexico was the first country in Latin America to establish a national conditional cash transfer program targeting families living in extreme poverty<sup>3</sup>. Eventually called Prospera, the program had two main objectives. In the short term, the transfers would increase the resources of the neediest households, thus immediately reducing poverty. In the long term, the conditionality of the transfers would increase the human capital of the recipients, thus improving their opportunities in the labor market and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Prospera came to represent a broad political consensus on best practices in the fight against poverty in Mexico. Despite occasional name changes and reforms, the program persisted for two decades and four presidential administrations from different political parties<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, it captured the attention of the international development community, particularly the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, which helped export conditional transfers to the rest of Latin America during the 2000s (Sugiyama, 2011, 274-277; Morais, 2017; Borges, 2022, ch. 6).

Prospera has been one of the most studied social programs in the world (World Bank, 2014; Hernández Licona et al., 2019). In general, evaluations find positive results in terms of education, health, and nutrition levels, especially in rural areas (Fernald et al., 2008; Parker, 2019). However, Mexico achieved only a marginal reduction in extreme poverty during the program's two decades, while moderate

poverty remained virtually stagnant (Araujo and Ibararán, 2019, p. 200)<sup>5</sup>. The program's long-term effects have been inconclusive. While some studies have found a positive association between receiving the transfer during the entire school cycle and positive labor market outcomes (Kugler and Rojas, 2018; Acevedo, Ortega and Székely, 2019), other studies do not find a difference between the labor market outcomes of long-term recipients and non-recipients (Yaschine, 2015).

The government that took office in 2018 replaced most of the existing non-contributory social programs. Prospera and its conditional and highly targeted transfers were replaced by the Benito Juárez transfers (called scholarships in their original language), which are unconditional and more broadly targeted (Borges, 2022)<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the government replaced the Estancias Infantiles Program, through which the government paid the cost of child care services, with direct transfers through the Programa de Apoyo para el Bienestar de las Niñas y Niños Hijos de Madres Trabajadoras (Support Program for the Welfare of Children of Working Mothers)<sup>7</sup>. The government also extended non-contributory transfers to children with disabilities. However, these last two programs are small compared to the Benito Juárez transfers.

Through the Benito Juárez transfers, poor households with children in grades 1 to 9 (usually up to age 15) are eligible for a monthly transfer of MXN 875 (USD 48.8)

3 Similar programs were established at the subnational level in parts of Brazil beginning in 1995.

4 Originally called Progresa and limited to rural areas, the program was named Oportunidades and expanded to urban areas in 2001. In 2014, the program was renamed Prospera. Evaluations and academic studies informally call the program POP (Progresa-Oportunidades-Prospera) (see for example: Hernández Lico et al., 2019).

5 In 2016, 33.1% of Mexicans lived in moderate poverty, compared to 31.2% in 1994. Without transfers, extreme poverty would have increased from 17.5% to 19.4% (Araujo and Ibararán, 2019, p. 200).

6 Compared to Prospera, Becas Benito Juárez increased the proportion of students eligible for cash transfers by expanding eligibility to the upper secondary student population not in extreme poverty, moderately poor parents with sons and daughters under 15 years of age, and young adults. It also extended noncontributory pension benefits to all persons over age 68 (including those with contributory pensions) and to indigenous persons over age 65 (Borges, 2022, p. 184).

7 This program also provides transfers to young people under 23 years of age in vulnerable situations as a consequence of the death of one or both parents.

Clear support for greater coverage and adequacy

per household for the 10 months of the school year<sup>8</sup>. In addition, each public upper secondary school student (grades 10 to 12, generally ages 15 to 18), regardless of their family's income, is eligible for an individual transfer of equal value and frequency. Unlike Prospera, which was national in scope and determined eligibility through an indirect household means test, the Benito Juárez transfers target according to the conditions of the localities where the schools are. Only students from schools in priority localities are eligible. A locality is considered a priority if it i) is located in an indigenous area, ii) has less than 50 inhabitants; iii) has very high marginalization or iv) has high marginalization (CONEVAL, 2022b, p. 33)<sup>9</sup>. However, there is a lack of precise information on how these criteria are determined and applied (CONEVAL, 2022a, p. 94) and on the criteria for not selecting families who apply from priority localities (CONEVAL, 2022b, p. 160).

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Latin America, starting in March 2020, the current administration's three cash transfer programs targeting children and adolescents had just been initiated, and the government maintained them. In terms of coverage, a study of cash transfer programs targeting children in 10 Latin American countries between 2019 and 2021 measured coverage in Mexico at 18.3% of children in 2019, 19.5% in 2020 and 19.4% in 2021 (Blofield, Pribble and Giamb Bruno, 2023)<sup>10</sup>. This placed Mexico in next to last place in 2021, behind only Peru. Furthermore, while 7 of the 10 countries increased the value of transfers to children and adolescents during the pandemic, the Mexican government was one of three that did not. In addition, Mexico was the only one of the 10 countries that did not create a national emergency

cash transfer program for workers in the informal sector and their children (Blofield, Giamb Bruno and Filgueira, 2020). Studies indicate that the lack of social assistance had significant consequences on economic hardship and food insecurity, especially among families with children<sup>11</sup>.

Currently, according to official data and program evaluations conducted by Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL, 2022a; 2022b), cash transfers are estimated to cover between 9.3 and 9.5 million children. This would mean a coverage among children and adolescents of about 25% (CONEVAL, 2021). However, direct recipients amount to only one third of the 27 million recipients covered by Prospera during its last year and are less targeted (Boltvinik, Damián and Jaramillo Molina, 2019, p. 180). In addition, approximately 256 000 children under 6 years of age received the Working Mothers transfer during the first quarter of 2023 (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2023)<sup>12</sup>. No data are available on how many disabled minors receive transfers<sup>13</sup>.

In terms of adequacy, the value of the monthly Beca Benito Juárez transfer is equivalent to 41% and 54% of the per capita urban and rural extreme poverty lines for January 2023, respectively, or 20% and 28% of the per capita urban and rural poverty lines, respectively<sup>14</sup>. Since each household with children in grades 1-9 is only allowed one transfer, the per capita value, if other siblings or parents are included, is therefore much lower than under Prospera<sup>15</sup>. In general, there are no scenarios where a family with two or more children aged 0-14 receives more under the current programs than under Prospera<sup>16</sup>.

8 In June 2023, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that, starting in 2024, scholarships for basic education would be extended to all students residing in priority localities (García Rojas, 2023).

9 Starting in 2022, priority localities can be urban or rural. Previously, only rural localities could be priority localities (CONEVAL, 2022b, p. 75).

10 Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay.

11 For example, a UNICEF-sponsored survey in August 2020 revealed that 79% of households with children did not meet basic nutritional needs (UNICEF, 2020). Oxfam Mexico (2020), the Pan American Health Organization (United Nations, 2020) and the NGO Acción Ciudadana Frente a la Pobreza (EFE, 2020). Also raised the alarm on the hardships experienced by families.

12 This number represented only 16% of the program's target population (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2023, p. 6).

13 Approximately 555 000 people received the disability transfer during the first quarter of 2023. However, these data do not distinguish between adults and minors (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2023, p. 24).

14 Own calculations based on January 2023 CONEVAL data. The Extreme Poverty Line by Income is equivalent to the monetary value of the food basket per person per month. The Income Poverty Line is equivalent to the total monetary value of the food basket plus non-food basket essentials per person per month. CONEVAL updates these amounts every month. <https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Paginas/Lineas-de-Pobreza-por-Ingresos.aspx>.

15 Calculated based on the national urban extreme poverty line.

16 Own calculations based on Prospera (2018, p. 10). This includes a scenario where a household receives a transfer for having children in grades 1-9 plus a transfer for having another child in grades 10-12. The Working Mothers program covers a maximum of three children under the age of 6. The transfer for persons with disabilities does not define a maximum number of recipients per household. Both transfers can be combined with

### 3.

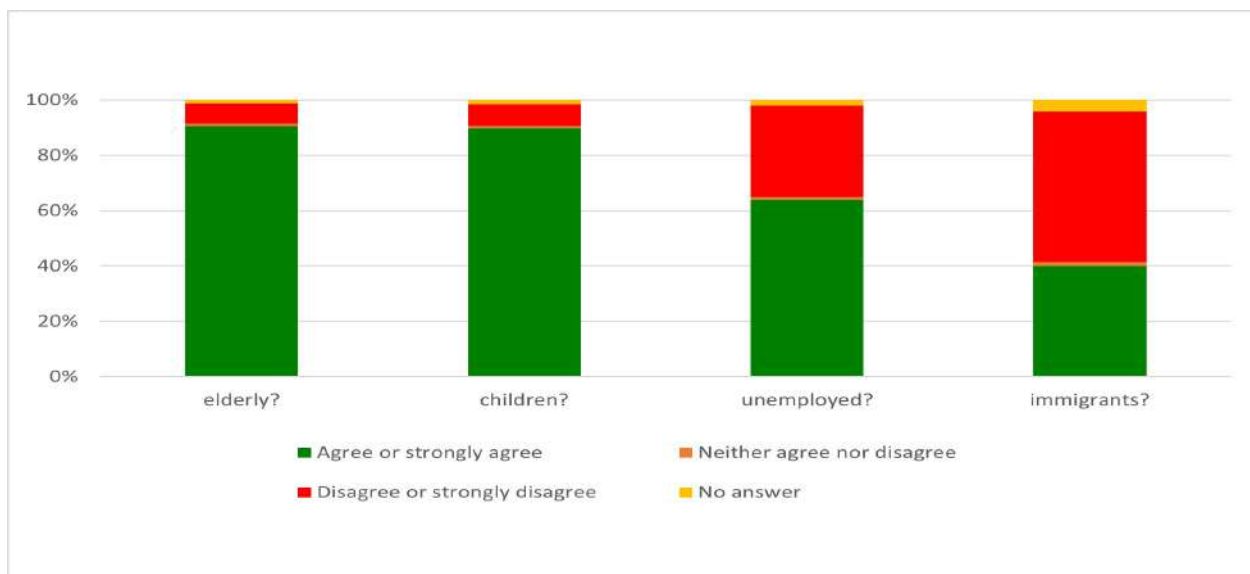
## PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The survey asked whether cash transfers should be a right. Three quarters (76%) of those surveyed agreed with the statement, indicating that the majority support the existence of a statutory cash transfer program.

The survey contains a series of questions on attitudes towards cash transfers aimed at four different population groups: the elderly, children, the unemployed and immigrants.

Figure 1 shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) are in favor of cash transfer programs for the elderly and children. Support for transfers to the unemployed and immigrants is more divided. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of respondents agree with cash transfers for the unemployed, while one-third (33%) do not. Fifty-four percent of respondents disagree with cash transfers for immigrants and 40 percent agree.

**Figure 1.** Would you agree or disagree with the government having a cash transfer program for...?



**Source:** Own elaboration using data from the Covid survey, families and social programs of Mexico case, 2022.

### 3.1

the Benito Juárez transfers. Even so, it is worth reiterating that the coverage of the latter two programs is very low compared to that of the Benito Juárez transfers.

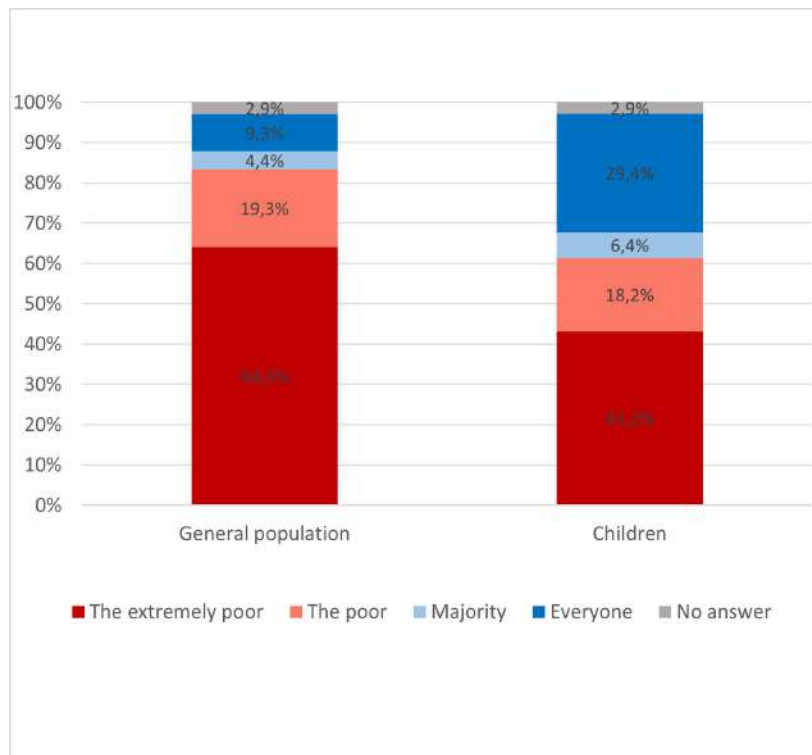


## COVERAGE OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The survey contains additional questions to elucidate preferences on the scope and coverage that transfer programs should have, both for the general population and for children and adolescents. As shown in Figure 2, respondents support broader eligibility criteria for cash transfers targeting children than for transfers aimed at the general population. A slight majority (54%) of respondents reported being in favor of cash transfers to at least all children in poverty. This includes those who support cash

transfers for all children (29.4%), the majority of children (6.4%) and those in poverty (18.2%). Slightly less than half of the respondents (43%) would limit cash transfers to those in extreme poverty. In contrast, almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents would limit cash transfers for the general population to people in extreme poverty.

**Figure 2.** When cash transfer programs exist, who should receive them?



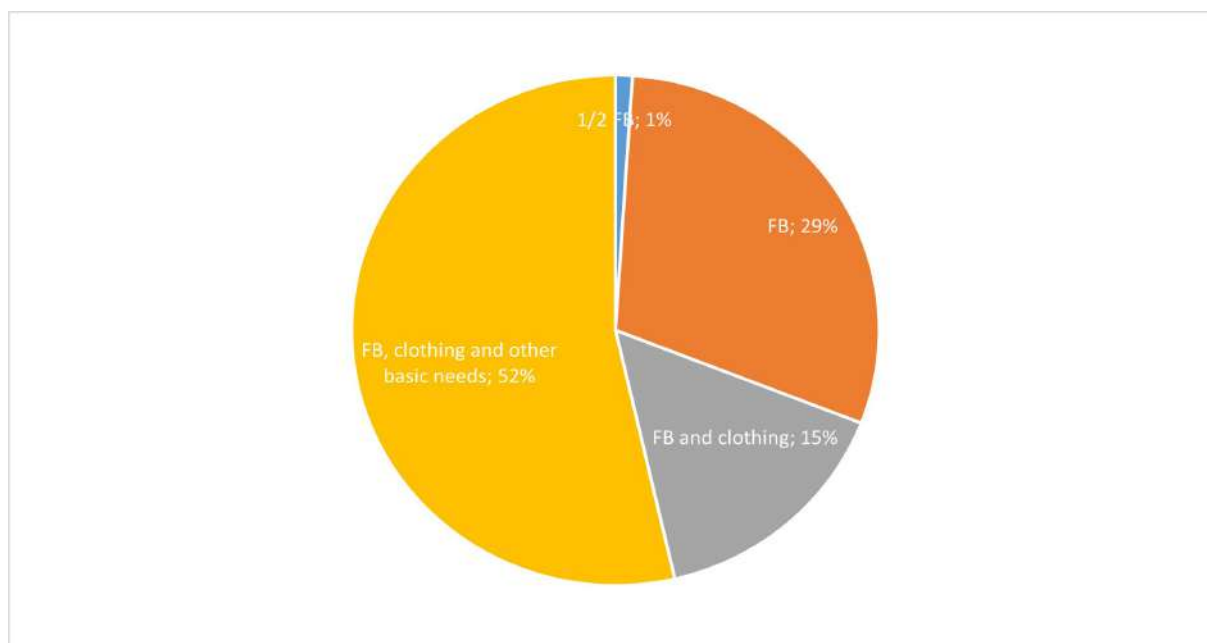
**Source:** Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs, Mexico case, 2022.

### 3.2 ADEQUACY OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

In order to evaluate public opinion on the optimal value, or generosity, of cash transfers, the survey presented respondents with four very concrete options that form a scale from less to greater adequacy in transfer amounts. These options include a transfer that is equivalent to: (i) half of a basic food basket (FB)<sup>17</sup>, (ii) a basic food basket, (iii) a basic food basket plus the cost of clothing, and (iv) a basic food basket plus the cost of clothing and other basic necessities.

Figure 3 presents the distribution of preferences among the four categories. When adding the three that include at least one basic food basket (FB, 29%; a FB and clothing, 15%; and a FB, clothing and other basic needs, 52%), an overwhelming majority (96%), believe that, if the government were to make these cash transfers available, they should cover at least the value of a basic food basket. Only one percent would set the value at half the value of a food basket and thus half the extreme poverty line.

**Figure 3.** What should cash transfer to children and adolescents cover?



**Source:** Own elaboration based on data from Covid survey, families and social programs, Mexico case, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> The extreme poverty line is calculated based on a basic food basket, so this provides a way to measure the preferences of the population in relation to the extreme poverty line.

## 4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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In Mexico, more than half of the population under 18 years of age (a quarter of the country's population) lives in poverty. The survey conducted shows broad support for a cash transfer program with greater adequacy and scope than currently exists in Mexico. An overwhelming majority (96%) support a significant increase in the value of the transfers to cover at least the basic food basket. A majority (54%) support extending transfers to at least all children in poverty. This would mean at least doubling both transfer amounts and coverage. To ensure that transfers reach all children in poverty would require extending coverage to approximately 19.14 million additional poor children (4.13 million in rural

areas and 15.01 million in urban areas). Such a policy would imply tripling the amount spent on transfers to a total of USD 18.7 billion per year, or 1.47% of GDP as of 2021<sup>18</sup>.

Such an expansion in the scope of social protection in Mexico would find supportive public opinion. Transfers of such scope and generosity would also be consistent with the evidence regarding the overwhelming effectiveness of cash transfer programs in improving the well-being and human capital of children and adolescents.

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18 This calculation uses the June 2022 Extreme Poverty Line by Income values, which are equivalent to 154.88 in rural areas and 2011.99 in urban areas. Extending transfers of a value equivalent to the extreme poverty line by income to poor children would require increasing government spending on transfers by between US\$13.39 billion (1.05% of GDP) and US\$13.49 billion (1.06% of GDP). These amounts were estimated based on data from SEC (2023) and CONEVAL (2022a; 2022b) and the National Household Income and Expenditure Survey (INEGI, 2020).

## APPENDIX

### Characteristics of the sample in Mexico

Number of people interviewed between May 6th and 31st, 2022: 1003

Margin of error of +/- 3 % at 95 % statistical reliability.

Gender	
Woman	49%
Men	51%
Age	
18 to 24 years	14%
25 to 34 years	23%
35 to 44 years	21%
45 to 54 years	17%
55 to 64 years	14%
65 years and older	12%
Occupation	
Works	53%
Works and studies	5%
Retired	5%
Unemployed	7%
Only studies	3%
Dedicated to unpaid domestic work	25%
Does not study or engage in paid or unpaid domestic work	1%
Education	
No education or incomplete primary	11%
Completed primary or incomplete secondary	16%
Secondary school complete	26%
Incomplete or complete technical	23%
Incomplete or complete university	23%
Household composition	
Without presence of children under the age of 15 years	66,5%
With presence of minors under the age of 15 years	33,5%
Without the presence of older adults	71%
With presence of older adults	20%
<b>Source:</b> National telephone survey, GIGA-UCR with the support of the German Research Foundation; by Datavoz.	

No quotas were considered in the sample design/selection. The sampling took two frames of reference (dual frame): the list of fixed telephone number series and the list of cellular telephone number series, both from the Federal Telecommunications Institute (IFT) of Mexico ([www.ift.org.mx](http://www.ift.org.mx)). According to IFT data, more than 93% of the Mexican population has either mobile or fixed telephone service.

Random numbers were generated and validated by means of an automatic dialer. After filtering, the records of the valid or existing telephones were used, using an automatic dialer to reach as many numbers as necessary to complete the required sample.

When the sample was completed, weighting was used in order to normalize the sample to population parameters based on INEGI's 2020 Population and Housing Census.

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