



Organización  
Internacional  
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## Executive summary

# ► Child labour and family dynamics

Corina Foressi  
Luis Costa  
Cristóbal Morano



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Since 2020, the world has been immersed in an unprecedented health, social and economic crisis due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19. This pandemic has affected, and continues to affect, not only health but also the economy, production and work. The downturn in production, unemployment and a lack of access to social protection are conditions that favour an increase in child labour, depending on the additional economic pressures to which families are subject. Those that find themselves in a situation of greater socio-economic vulnerability could be forced to involve their children and adolescents (C&As) in labour activities to ensure the subsistence of the family. In addition to socio-economic factors, there are also cultural factors related to social attitudes and imaginaries that normalize the early insertion of C&As into the labour market.

According to the ILO's estimates, in recent years the presence of child labour in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean has shown a decreasing trend (from 10 per cent in 2008 to 7.3 per cent in 2016 and 6 per cent in 2020), yet 8.2 million C&As in the region continued suffering from this in 2020. Specifically in Argentina, the occurrence of child labour was showing the same trend in recent years. According to the latest available information provided by the 2016-2017 National Survey on the Activities of Children and Adolescents (EANNA), conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) and the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security (MTEySS), overall in the country 10 per cent of the C&A population of between 5 and 15 years of age and 32.7 per cent of adolescents aged 16 and 17 years were performing at least one production activity

(the employment of 16- and 17-year-olds in the Republic of Argentina is regulated by Law No. 26.390 of 2008, according to certain conditions and with special protections).

In the years that have elapsed since those data were compiled, there has been an increase in the poverty rate in Argentina, with the consequent deterioration of the economic capacity of a large part of the population. According to the results of the Permanent Household Survey (EPH) of the INDEC, while in the first half of 2018 income poverty reached 27.3 per cent of the population, by the second half of 2019 it represented the situation for 35.5 per cent, increasing to 42 per cent by the end of 2020. Within this context and considering the close link between poverty and child labour, the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic could mean even a greater presence of C&A labour among the population groups where the incidence is greatest.

This study, conducted in Argentina in 2020 in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires (AMBA), is framed within the ILO's global project, Measurement, Awareness-Raising and Policy Engagement Project to Accelerate Action against Child Labour and Forced Labour (MAP16). This initiative, aimed at building the knowledge needed to inform policy choices to combat child labour and to support measures that address these challenges, has the overall objective of learning the family dynamics and analysing the aspects that have an impact on the decision-making that enables C&A labour. It consequently seeks to contribute information that allows exploring the material and symbolic assumptions behind the decisions related to C&As becoming involved in

production activities, and it seeks to gauge the presence of factors that act as preventive measures of child labour.

To understand these dynamics, the study focuses on socialization processes in the lives of C&As who are anchored to work, on access to education and leisure and on household strategies related to family reproduction, which are understood to be conditioned by the structural situation and configured according to the universe of meanings of each individual. The specific objectives of the study are oriented at a) analysing the construction of meaning (perceptions, assumptions, myths) around C&A labour; b) characterizing C&A labour and identifying the links and tensions related to access to education and leisure; and c) describing family reproduction strategies and, within those strategies, analysing the material and symbolic factors that have an impact on the decision-making that enables C&A labour.

The findings from the field work are structured into two parts. The first characterizes the participation of C&As of the sample in production activities and their modes of schooling and uses of free time, regarding both the manifest aspects of these activities and the guiding reasons behind them. The study seeks to identify in what ways C&A labour is linked to or places stress on access to the right to education and leisure. The second part describes the family reproduction strategies of households and the role that C&A labour plays in them, consequently highlighting the material and symbolic conditioning factors that are present in decision-making related to assigning roles and responsibilities to the different family members. The analysis essentially focuses on the actions taken to earn income (coming from the labour of household members – including C&As – and from public policies), in conjunction with domestic work.

The methodological perspective of the study is framed within a qualitative paradigm. It aims to

understand the problem from the point of view of the protagonists. The analysis therefore includes their conflicts, interests, feelings and motivations – aspects that cannot be captured in statistical studies. The perspectives of the C&As and the adults who were comprised in the sample were revealed through semi-structured interviews.

The sample is composed of 17 family households<sup>1</sup> of the AMBA that are in a situation of socio-economic vulnerability and where there is at least one C&A who carries out production activities. To determine the socio-economic vulnerability of the households, selection criteria related to the presence of at least two of the risk factors that have an impact on child labour linked to families and households were used, namely: a) households with Unsatisfied Basic Needs (NBI), b) adults who have not completed secondary education and c) heads of household occupied in informal jobs (unregistered wage earners and independent contractors)<sup>2</sup>. The proportional segmentation strategy of the households respected the areas of residence in the AMBA (City of Buenos Aires, Greater Buenos Aires North, Greater Buenos Aires South and Greater Buenos Aires West).

The determination of the presence of C&As who performed a production activity was based on the definition of child and adolescent labour used by the 2016-2017 EANNA, which includes “all production activities – economic and non-economic – that are performed by C&As who have not reached 18 years of age (between 5 and 17 years)”. For selecting the 19 C&As of between 13 and 17 years of age, proportional shares of gender and age were used. The inclusion of younger girls and boys (between 5 and 12 years) was limited by the virtual mode of the field work within the context of the pandemic. In each selected household, both the father and the mother or the responsible family member were included as respondents, in addition to the C&As who were performing a production activity, eventually totalling 27 people (17 women and 10 men).

1 The definition of household proposed by the INDEC was used: “a group of persons, relatives or not, who live under the same roof and share food expenses”. Households were recruited based on a “snowball” procedure.

2 To operationally identify aspects linked to the socio-economic level of the individuals, some of the indicators proposed in the simplified version of the Socio-economic Level Index (INSE) were applied to the contacted head of household. This index is produced by the following institutions of social market research and opinion: AAM (Argentinian Marketing Association), SAIMO (Argentinian Society of Marketing and Opinion Researchers) and CEIM (Chamber of Social and Market Research Companies).

Some of the relevant issues that shaped the final make-up of the sample included the naturalization of these practices due to not being understood as labour, by both the C&As performing the activity and their families, as well as concealment of the activity due to legal penalty or social taboo. Likewise, the fact that the field work was not done in person (because of the pandemic) conditioned the participation of the respondents, insofar as it required having mobile phones with technology that allowed access to connectivity, as well as certain environmental and privacy conditions. The field work took place over one month (between 20 November and 18 December 2020), during which time 46 interviews were conducted (27 of adults and 19 of C&As) using the video call mode of WhatsApp.

Based on the study, it was concluded that the first experiences of C&As in production activities for which they were paid appear at 10 years of age, generally performed with or for a relative. The context of the pandemic was a critical juncture when half of the C&As in the study began taking part in production activities, which in some cases represented their first experience in the world of work. There are differences with respect to the intensity of these production activities, the occupational situation of the C&As and the scope within which the activities are performed – conditions that change to the extent that C&As become older. Apart from these distinctions, the observed pattern is a pre-eminence of performing market activities, oriented at earning monetary income. In the group of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 15 years, there is a predominance of activities performed with relatives or known persons and within the scope of the home, while among older C&As, there is an increased presence of production activities performed outside the home and with employers who do not belong to the circle of known persons. Regarding activities performed within the home, while protective aspects could be observed in the majority of families, occasionally the work of C&As is invisible, and the intensity of that work is difficult to estimate. Regarding C&As of 16 and 17 years of age (whose labour is regulated and protected), they tend to perform their labour activities under conditions that are not contemplated within the legal framework. Specifically, such activities fail to respect legislation regarding the duration of the workday, break times, coverage

against occupational risks, the provision of protective elements and leaves for studying, illness or holidays. This situation is complicated even more by the disinformation that predominates among these C&As regarding the regulatory framework.

With respect to access to education, all C&As are included in the education system. One third have repeated some years in school, while the remainder have followed the expected education paths, albeit having a connectedness to education that is more or less significant and having dissimilar academic performance. The context of the pandemic and the fact that students were not present in school meant that strategies to sustain the learning process had to be developed. The main difficulties were related to both a lack of access to material resources (connectivity and suitable technological devices) and the scarce cultural capital of the majority of the adult relatives who supported the processes (whose education levels are mid-level or low). On the other hand, the availability of time created by not being present in school, within the context of a worsening economic situation for families, encouraged both the beginning of new production activities by C&As and the intensification of other activities already being performed by other C&As – a situation that, for those with learning difficulties or with weaker school connectedness, had an unfavourable impact on their education processes. The question that is inferred is how reversible these decisions are with respect to a hypothetical change in the income of households or in educational conditions.

Regarding the right to leisure, free time is generally an aspect that is valued by all the interviewed C&As, although it comes under stress because of the time that C&As are engaged in production activities. For C&As who perform activities that involve greater physical effort, under inadequate environmental conditions and over long workdays, the fatigue they experience or the reduced time available as a consequence of these factors have an impact on the enjoyment of free time. Likewise, associations of meaning are observed, which identify study and work as the only possible options for C&As or which associate the time spent working with staying away from socially dangerous behaviours. In this sense, leisure time is undervalued. Within these links between work and leisure (not without stress), for a majority of this C&A group, work provides them

with material resources for enjoying free time due to being able to access valued goods and services that cannot be provided by their families. For subsequent studies, it would be important to delve deeper into an analysis of not only the offer of free options related to recreation and leisure that are available to C&As who live in households subject to socio-economic vulnerability, but also the reasons (material and cultural) that keep C&As away from the possibility of accessing those options.

From the analysis of family reproduction strategies according to the type of household, a greater degree of socio-economic vulnerability is observed in the half of single-parent households that have a female head where, as a part of the labour strategies within the context of the pandemic and to cover food needs and other basic necessities, C&As have joined remunerated, market-oriented production activities. All other households in the sample with a female head – including extended households – show situations of less socio-economic vulnerability when the family group has a greater number of young persons and adults for generating income, when the female head of household has a registered job that is not affected by the pandemic and when there are outside contributions from the father of any children.

In the case of complete nuclear households (whose needs are generally considered to be satisfied), the difficulty of generating income by adults in the household within the context of the pandemic resulted in strategies that were oriented at not only reconfiguring the adult work but also including C&As, basically in family consumption activities, in intense domestic work or in contributing their labor to productive enterprises by accompanying adults. In those complete nuclear households that have a lower capacity to reconfigure their labour strategies – depending on factors such as the presence of fewer adults or young people with the capacity to generate income or a greater quantity of young children – prior situations of greater socio-economic vulnerability and C&A labour can be observed.

Regarding monetary transfers from the state, associated mainly with receiving the Universal Child Allowance (AUH), we have observed almost complete coverage in the majority of the households in the study, given the conditions of labour informality of the adult heads of household. There are some cases of non-coverage linked to family situations that would require greater support and advising, mainly in order to detect the possible needs of C&As related to functional alterations in their development and related to access to public policies that guarantee the necessary aid for their educational and social inclusion. In general, the income from state transfers is used by households to cover basic needs, although in some cases these resources have been used for other purposes, thereby reducing their relevance as a supplement of the household's economic income.

Regarding symbolic aspects related to C&As labour, it is inferred from the analysis of the interviews that such aspects work as a kind of protective factor in some households, thereby creating alternatives to the generation of income, while in other households, those same aspects have the opposite effect and favour work by C&As under conditions that place stress on their education and the enjoyment of free time. A majority of the adults and C&As in the study notice meaningful links between child labour and labour insertion in adulthood, which are associated with the development of a labour culture in which the values of responsibility and sacrifice predominate, consequently having an unfavourable impact on being able to see alternatives to child labour based on a perspective of rights.

The study seeks to contribute to understanding the presence of C&As labour according to how it is connected to certain factors that are inherent in family dynamics and according to the presence of other factors that act to prevent child labour. These findings should be delved into more deeply in future research in order to be able to measure how the living conditions of individuals have an impact on the family decision-making processes that enable child labour and how such labour is configured over time, thereby defining different childhood paths in terms of the recognition and exercise of rights.

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