

POLICY NOTE

PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN ARGENTINA

NINE OUT OF TEN PEOPLE SUPPORT GREATER ADEQUACY



UNIVERSIDAD DE
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POLICY NOTE

PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH
TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND
ADOLESCENTS IN **ARGENTINA**

NINE OUT OF TEN PEOPLE SUPPORT GREATER ADEQUACY

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MESSAGE

Child poverty is a multidimensional challenge and decades of evidence show that cash transfers can provide simple and effective protection against poverty, especially extreme poverty. A nationally representative survey conducted in Argentina between July and August 2022 indicates very high support (85%) for targeted cash transfers to children and adolescents. In addition, 94% support setting the value of the transfers to at least at the basic food basket. Finally, opinion is divided on eligibility criteria: slightly more than half (53%) support cash transfers targeting at least all children and adolescents living in poverty, while 45% prefer to restrict them to those living in extreme poverty.

1.

WHY DO CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS MATTER?

Poverty is disproportionately high among children and adolescents: in Argentina, more than half (54.6%) of people under 18 years of age live in poverty, compared to 14.5% of people over 65 years of age (INDEC, 2023). This demographic gap is one of the largest in the region among the countries for which data are available. Child and adolescent poverty is a violation of the basic rights of children and adolescents and has devastating effects on their present and future lives. Decades of studies document the impact of material deprivation early in life on the lack of opportunities later, along with the huge waste of human capital for society it entails (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 a simple and effective protection, especially against extreme poverty. By helping families meet their basic needs, mainly food, cash transfers have been shown to improve health, education, and child development, as well as overall well-being. This represents an immensely beneficial investment for

children, their families and society (UNICEF, 2017; Bastagli et al., 2016; Save the Children, 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 cash transfers are perceived by the public, both in Argentina and in Latin America in general². Does public opinion support cash transfers? Based on a nationally representative telephone survey conducted between July and August 2022, this policy brief provides new evidence on this question³.

2 A precedent is the “Survey of Perception and Attitudes of the Population” that UNICEF Argentina has been conducting since 2020 and which includes two questions on perceptions about cash transfers (UNICEF, 2023b).

3 The survey was conducted between July 15 and August 9, 2022, by Opinaia, to 1102 respondents, and is representative at the national level.

2.

CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Argentina's most massive conditional cash transfer program targeting children and adolescents (Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH)) was created in 2009 and currently covers approximately 34.5% (MTESS, 2022) of children and adolescents in the country. The cash transfer is aimed at children whose parents work informally, in domestic work or popular cooperatives ("monotributistas sociales"), and have incomes below the minimum wage and who meet the school attendance and health check-up conditions. This non-contributory program is complementary to the existing contributory family allowances for formal employees that as of 2016 incorporates some categories of self-employed workers ("monotributistas") (Arza, 2018; Poder Ejecutivo Nacional, 2016).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the government made a swift effort to reinforce and expand cash assistance (Blofield, Giamb Bruno and Filgueira, 2020). A presidential decree established, in March 2020, the payment of a one-time increase of 10,000 pesos to all families in the AUH program AUH (Poder Ejecutivo, 2020a). On the same date, the government created the Emergency Family Income (IFE for its acronym in Spanish), a one-time emergency transfer of 10,000 pesos (USD 153 at the time)⁴ for a large group of self-identified households. Two additional rounds of the transfer were decreed in May and July 2020, at the same value. In the first round, almost 8.9 million benefits were paid,

reaching almost 19.5% of the total population (ANSES, 2020). AUH families also received the IFE.

In a context of limited fiscal space, the government did not continue the program. In October 2020, a new decree sought to expand access to the AUH, among other measures, reinstating previously suspended program holders and expanding eligibility by eliminating the cap on the number of children per family (there was a cap of five benefits per family) and reducing the residency requirement for foreigners from 3 to 2 years (Poder Ejecutivo Nacional, 2020b). By December 2022, the AUH reached 4.3 million children and adolescents, 34.2% of the total (MTESS, 2023). The adequacy of the benefit remained relatively low compared to the basic food basket. In December 2022, the transfer per child was 9795 pesos (USD 53) per month⁵, equivalent to about 66% of the value of the extreme poverty line per child⁶. In March 2023, it amounted to 11,465 pesos (USD 53) per month⁷, or 60% of the basic food basket for the same month. Given that 80% of the benefit is paid monthly (and the remaining 20% is accumulated to be paid annually, once compliance with the conditionalities is certified), the gap between the benefit received each month and the amount needed to cover a basic food basket is even greater.

The survey conducted corroborates other studies that show that between 2020 and 2022, the majority of the population did not receive cash or food assistance

4 Amount in USD according to the official exchange rate of March 25, 2020 (www.bna.com.ar, 65.25 pesos for 1 USD). As a reference, the AUH per NNA in March 2020 was 2460 pesos (USD 37.7).

5 Amount in USD according to the official exchange rate on December 30, 2022 (www.bna.com.ar, 183.25 pesos per 1 USD).

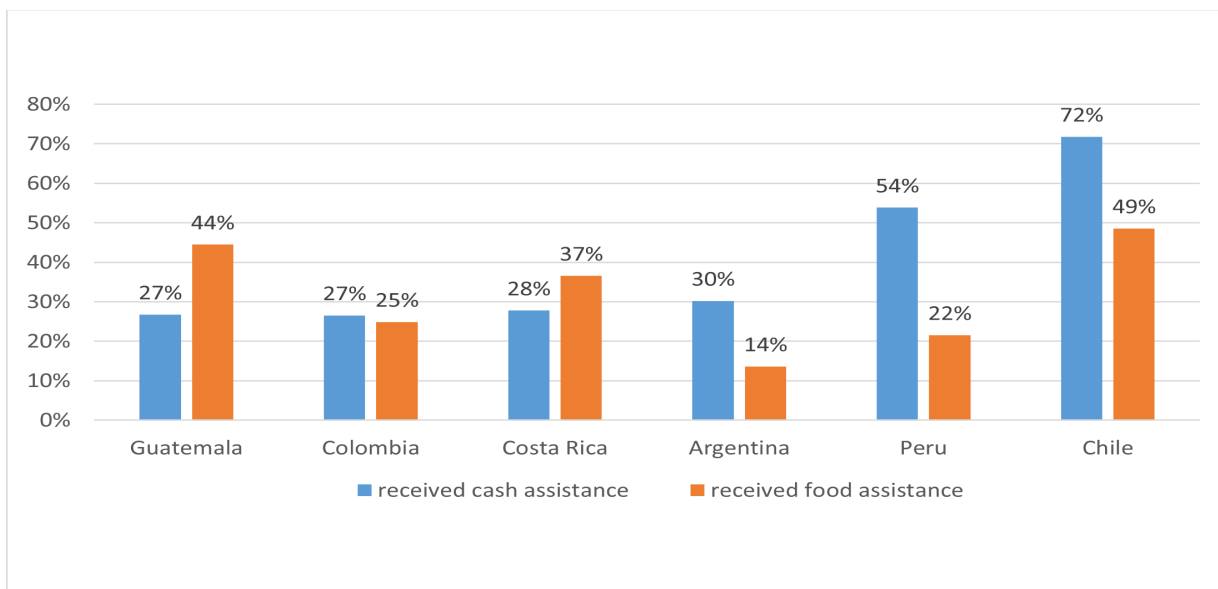
6 Argentina defines the indigence (or extreme poverty) line as the amount necessary "to cover a food basket capable of satisfying a minimum threshold of energy and protein needs". In contrast, the poverty line aims to establish the minimum income necessary to "satisfy-through the purchase of goods and services- a set of food and non-food needs considered essential, including non-food goods and services (clothing, transportation, education, health, etc.)" (Ministry of Economy, 2022). The value of the poverty line varies by sex and age; the estimate presented uses the simple average of the extreme poverty line corresponding to boys and girls between 0 and 17 years of age.

7 Amount in dollars according to the official exchange rate as of March 31, 2022 (www.bna.com.ar, 215.5 pesos for 1 USD).

from the government. This is shown in Figure 1, which compares Argentina with other countries in the region. In Argentina, the percentage of those surveyed who reported having received (themselves or someone in their household) some type of cash assistance from the government during that period was 30%, a significantly lower percentage than in Peru and Chile, and slightly

higher than in Guatemala, Colombia and Costa Rica. As for food assistance, 14% of the surveyed population in Argentina reported having received a benefit of this type, lower than in the other countries surveyed.

Figure 1. In the last two years, did anyone in your household receive cash assistance/food assistance from the government?

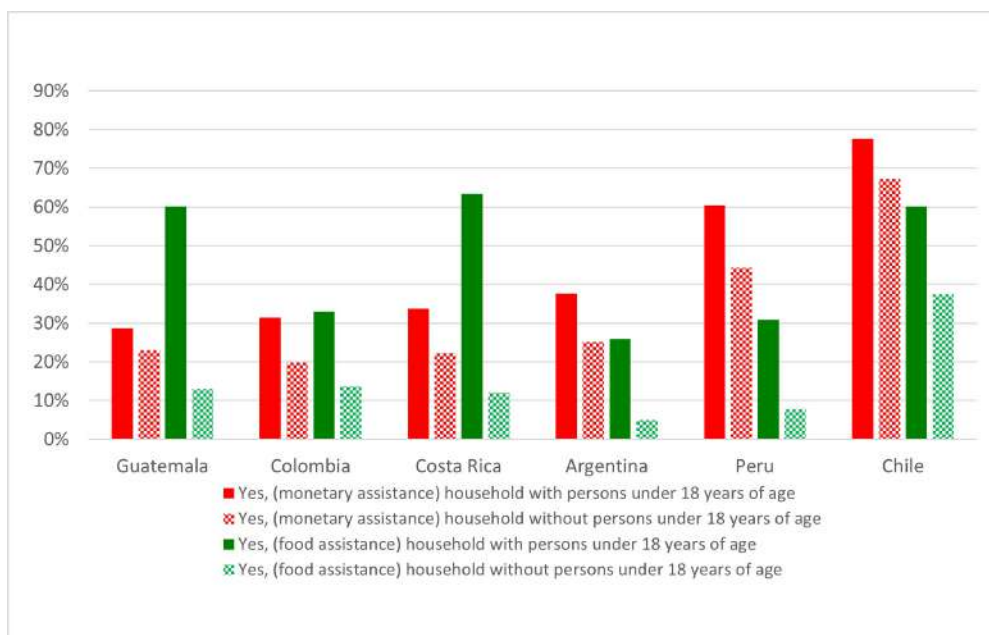


Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Peru, 2022.

Figure 2 disaggregates the extent of government cash and food assistance by presence of children and adolescents. In all six countries, government cash and food assistance went more to households with children (solid bars) than to households without children (dotted bars). Consistent with the higher prevalence of poverty and vulnerability among households with children, and as a result of

Argentina’s system of cash transfers, households with children were more likely to receive assistance than households without children. Of households with children, 38% reported receiving cash and 26% food assistance, while for households without children, the percentages were 25.1% and 5%, respectively.

Figure 2. In the last two years, did you or anyone in your household receive cash assistance/ food assistance from the government?



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Peru, 2022.

In order to facilitate the comparability of data between countries, the survey referred to cash assistance when referring to non-contributory monetary transfers. However, it should be clarified that Argentina has a broad system of family allowances that combines non-contributory cash transfers (mainly the AUH) family allowances (for formal employees, some categories of self-employed “monotributistas”, and social security recipients), social pensions (for mothers of seven or more children, and needy persons with a disability), and income tax deductions per child for higher income workers. The latest UNICEF data on coverage

of children and adolescents for the year 2021 estimates that, including all these components, almost 91% of children and adolescents in Argentina are covered by some of the existing benefits, with a coverage of 33.1% for AUH and 36% for contributory family allowances, the two largest programs (UNICEF, 2022).

3.

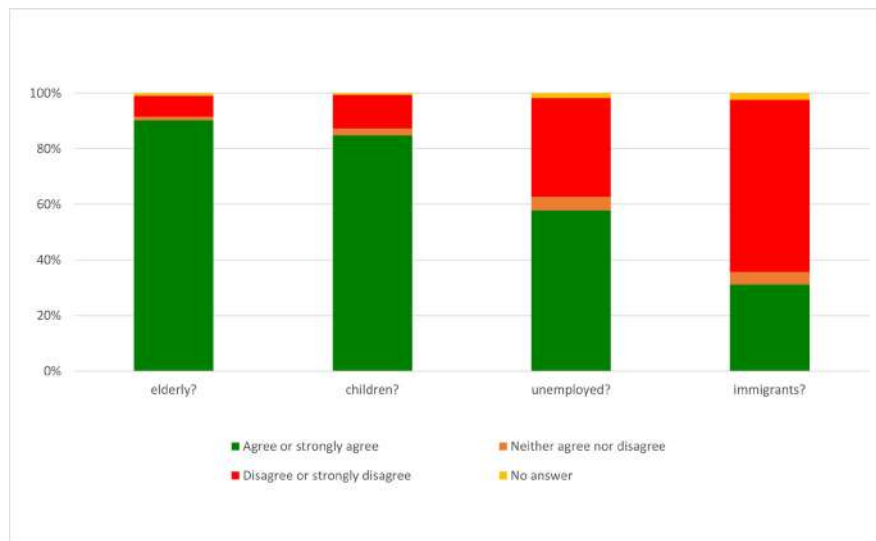
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The survey asked whether cash transfers should be a right. Nearly three quarters (72.4%) of those surveyed agreed with the statement, which indicates strong support for the existence of one or more statutory cash transfer programs.

In addition, the survey probed attitudes toward cash transfers targeted at four different population groups:

the elderly; children and adolescents; the unemployed; and immigrants. Figure 3 shows that respondents overwhelmingly support cash transfer programs for the elderly (90%) and for children and adolescents (85%). More than half (58%) are in favor of cash transfers for unemployed people. In the case of immigrants, support is significantly lower. Sixty-two percent of people disagree with cash transfers for immigrants and only 31% agree.

Figure 3. Would you agree or disagree with the government having a cash transfer program for...?



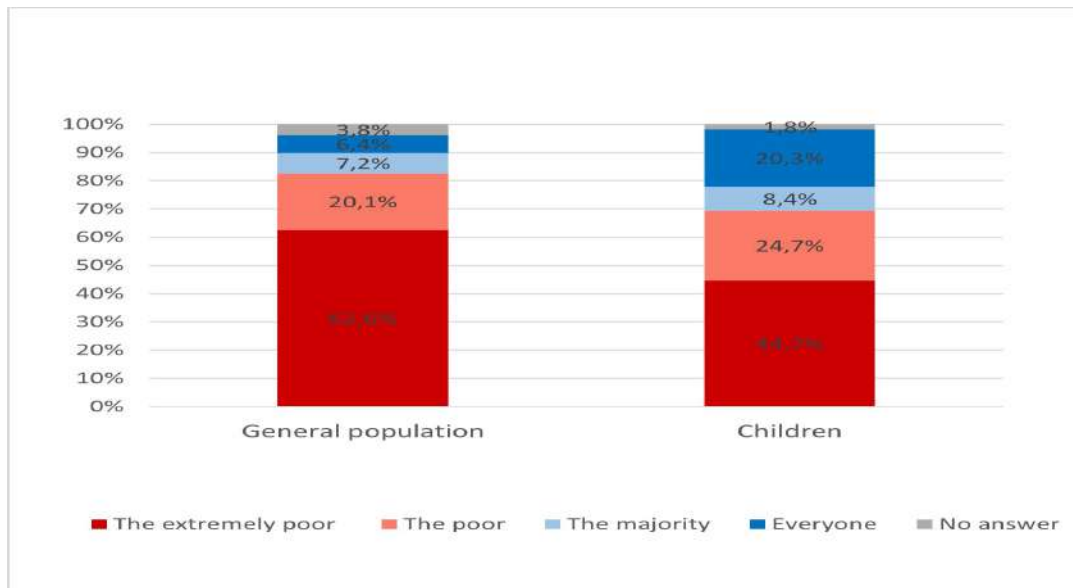
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs, Argentina, 2022.

3.1 COVERAGE OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The survey contains additional questions to elucidate preferences regarding the scope and coverage that transfer programs should have, for the general population and for children and adolescents, respectively. As shown in Figure 4, respondents support broader eligibility criteria for children than for the general population. A majority (53%) support cash transfers targeted to at least all children in poverty. This percentage includes those who support transfers only

for children in poverty (24.7%), and those who support transfers for all (20.3%) or most children (8.4%). In fact, one fifth of the population is in favor of universal cash transfers to children. On the other hand, 44.7% prefer to limit cash transfers to those in extreme poverty. For the general population, public opinion is more restrictive: one third consider that the transfers should reach at least those in poverty and nearly two thirds would limit them only to those in extreme poverty.

Figure 4. When cash transfer programs exist, who should receive them?



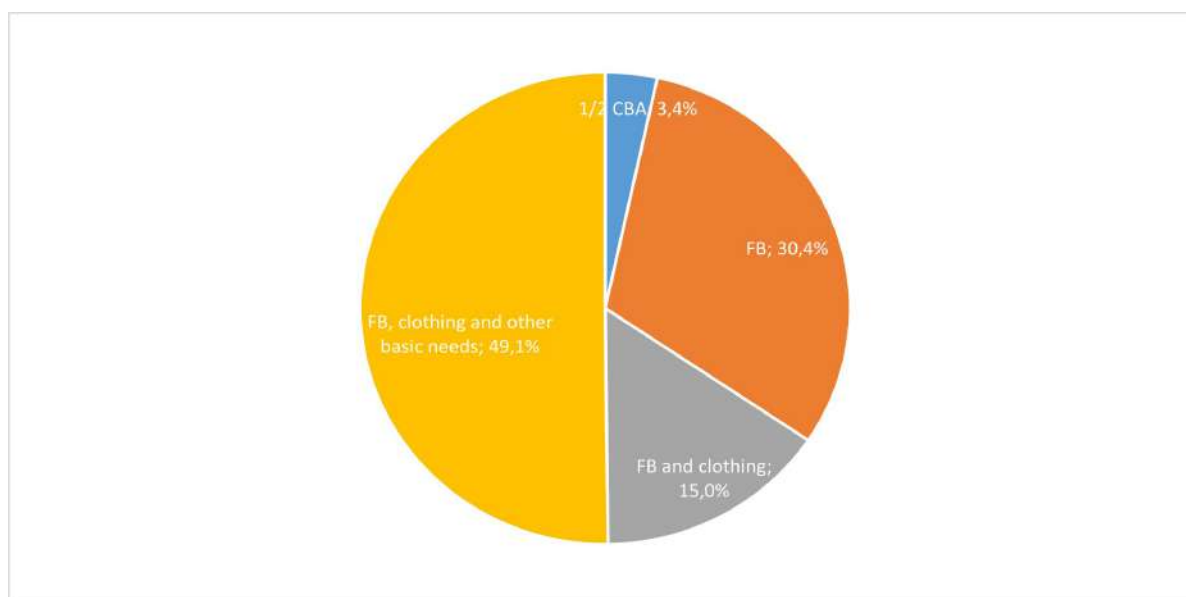
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs, case of Argentina, 2022.

3.2 ADEQUACY OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

To evaluate preferences on the optimal value or generosity of cash transfers, the survey offered four concrete options that form a scale from less to more generous transfer amounts. These options include a transfer that is equivalent to: (i) half of a basic food basket, (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 necessities⁸.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of preferences among the four categories. An overwhelming majority (94%) believe that cash transfers should cover at least the value of a basic food basket. This emerges from aggregating the responses of those who opt for a basic food basket (30%), with those who prefer transfers that cover a food basket plus clothing (15%) or a food basket plus clothing and other basic needs (49%). Only 3% would set the value of transfers at half of a food basket and thus half of the extreme poverty line (2% did not answer the question).

Figure 5. What should cash transfers to children and adolescents cover?



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

⁸ These estimates make it possible to evaluate the population's preferences in relation to the extreme poverty line, which is defined based on a basic food basket.

4.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The public opinion survey carried out shows broad support for a system of transfers to children and adolescents with greater adequacy than the one that currently exists in Argentina. An overwhelming majority (94%) supports a transfer value that covers at least the basic food basket, which would imply a 68% increase in the current value of the AUH transfer. Households that also receive the Tarjeta Alimentaria (a food voucher) can reach, with both benefits, the minimum amount needed to cover the basic food basket, although this also depends on the composition of the household (UNICEF, 2023a, Figure 12).

Public opinion is more divided on the extent of coverage. A slight majority (53%) supports granting cash transfers to at least all children in poverty. Of this majority, 38% support universal transfers (i.e., 20.3% of the total number of people surveyed). Forty-five percent would restrict them to children in extreme poverty.

Based on this public support, the government could have the political space to consider increasing the value of the transfer to cover a basic food basket per child and adolescent, and to guarantee effective coverage of at least all children and adolescents living in poverty, by reinforcing operations to overcome persistent barriers to access. To this end, the importance of these policies to guarantee the exercise

of the human rights of children and adolescents, particularly a decent standard of living and a minimum subsistence income for all, should be emphasized once again. In the face of public opinion that would restrict cash transfers to children in extreme poverty, the government could rely on preventive arguments, i.e., that investing in social protection before children experience severe deprivation, particularly food deprivation, and therefore before investing in the future consequences of lack of protection, would be much more cost-effective than later interventions.

These changes would be consistent with the evidence regarding the effectiveness of these programs in improving the wellbeing and development of children and adolescents.

APPENDIX

Characteristics of the sample in Argentina

Number of people interviewed between June 15 and August 9, 2022: 1102

Gender	
Woman	50%
Men	49%
Non binary	1%
Age	
18 to 24 years	19%
25 to 34 years	22%
35 to 44 years	17%
45 to 54 years	16%
55 to 64 years	12%
65 years and older	12%
Occupation	
Works	49%
Works and studies	10%
Retired	16%
Unemployed	12%
Only studies	5%
Dedicated to unpaid domestic work	8%
Does not study or engage in paid or unpaid domestic work	1%
Education	
No education or incomplete primary	5%
Completed primary or incomplete secondary	43%
Secondary school complete	29%
Incomplete or complete technical	8%
Incomplete or complete university	15%
Household composition	
Without presence of children under the age of 15 years	76%
With presence of children under the age of 15 years	24%
Without the presence of older adults	57%
With presence of older adults	43%
<p>Source: National telephone survey, GIGA-UCR with the support of the German Research Foundation; by Datavoz.</p>	

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