

POLICY NOTE

PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN COLOMBIA

NINE OUT OF TEN SUPPORT EXPANDING AMOUNTS



UNIVERSIDAD DE
COSTA RICA



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

NINE OUT OF TEN SUPPORT EXPANDING AMOUNTS

Merike Blofield, Juliana Martínez Franzoni and Silvia Otero Bahamon¹

1 Merike Blofield, University of Hamburg (merike.blofield@uni-hamburg.de); Juliana Martínez Franzoni, Universidad de Costa Rica, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales (Juliana.Martinez@ucr.ac.cr), y Silvia Otero Bahamon, Universidad del Rosario (silvia.otero@urosario.edu.co).

303.38

P766

Public opinion on cash transfers for children and adolescents in Colombia: Nine out of ten support expanding amounts/ Merike Blofield, Juliana Martínez Franzoni and Silvia Otero Bahamon.-1.rst edition.--San José, Costa Rica. UCR, IIS-Ediciones.

Digital file: download.--(Collection: Policy Note)

ISBN: 978-9968-861-23-6

1. Public opinion 2. Cash transfer 3. Children poverty 4. Adolescents poverty 5. Food Asistence 6. Latin America 7. Colombia I. Blofield, Merike II. Martínez Franzoni, Juliana III. Otero Bahamon, Silvia

Design and layout: Lucía González and Gabriela Fonseca A.

Translated from spanish: Merike Blofield.

Editing and revising: Gabriela Fonseca A., Merike Blofield and Juliana Martínez Franzoni.

This study was conducted with research funds from Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), the German Foundation for Scientific Research and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, allocated to Merike Blofield and Juliana Martínez Franzoni, respectively.

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We are grateful for the valuable contributions of Elizabeth Zechmeister for the organization of the field work. We also thank Jorge Rincón (German Institute for Global and Area Studies-GIGA), the administrative staff of the GIGA and the University of Costa Rica, as well as the regional technical counterpart of UNICEF for their substantive contributions to the preparation of this Note.

MESSAGE

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon and decades of evidence demonstrate that periodic cash transfer programs can provide simple and effective protection against poverty, especially extreme poverty. A nationally representative telephone survey conducted in Colombia between June and July 2022 indicates broad support among the population (92.5%) for the existence of a cash transfer program for children and adolescents. In addition, 96% support fixing the value of the transfers to at least the basic food basket. Finally, public opinion is more divided on the eligibility criteria. Slightly more than half (54%) support restricting transfers to those in extreme poverty, while 45% support broader criteria, at least for all children and adolescents in poverty.

1.

WHY DO CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS MATTER?

In Colombia, poverty is disproportionately high among children and adolescents: more than half (55.8%) of children under 18 years of age live in poverty, twice as many as among people over 65 years of age (DANE, 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 that this material deprivation so early in life leads to a lack of later opportunities in this population, along with a huge waste of human capital for society as a whole (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, especially against extreme poverty. Such transfers, by helping families meet basic needs, especially food, have been shown to improve child health, education

and development, as well as overall well-being, representing an immensely beneficial investment for them, their families and society (UNICEF, 2017; Bastagli et al., 2016; Save the Children, 2018; Cecchini, Villatoro and Mancero, 2021). Therefore, although there is debate as to what the most appropriate scope and sufficiency should be, analysts and multilateral agencies agree on the importance of these transfers as an instrument of social protection.

In this context, it is surprising how little is known about how public opinion perceives them, both in Colombia and in Latin America in general. Does the population support cash transfers? Based on a nationally representative telephone survey conducted between June and July 2022, this policy brief contributes to fill this gap.²

2 The survey was conducted by the Democracy Observatory of the Universidad de los Andes between June 28 and July 22, 2022. The appendix summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the national sample.

2.

CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Since 2000, Colombia has had a conditional cash transfer program called Familias en Acción, aimed at children and adolescents under 18 years of age, whose main objective was human capital formation. In 2019 it received legal status (Congress of Colombia, 2019). Just before the pandemic broke out, a little more than a quarter (27.4%) of people under 18 years of age were covered by the program. The value of the transfers they received was, however, very low at 12% of the national urban extreme poverty line (Blofield, Pribble and Giambruno, 2023).³

Once the pandemic hit the region, the Colombian government acted quickly to strengthen the value of cash transfers to vulnerable households. As a result, the value of CCTs increased to 17% of the per capita urban extreme poverty line for a beneficiary household with four people between July and September. However, by October 2021 the value had decreased, and stood at 12% of that line. At the same time, one year after the start of the pandemic, in March 2021, coverage decreased to 25.6% of persons under 18 years of age (Blofield, Pribble and Giambruno, 2023).

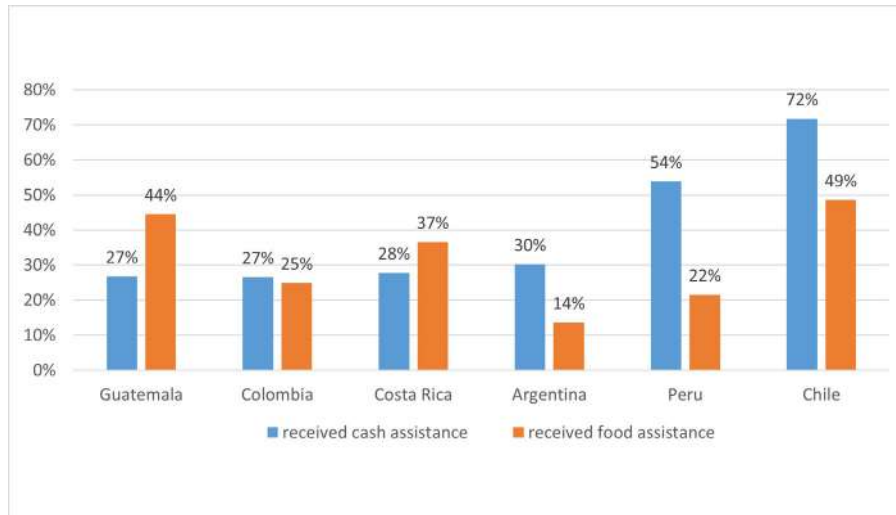
During 2020 and until the end of 2022, the government also established an emergency cash transfer program,

Ingreso Solidario, targeting registered low-income households outside existing cash transfer systems. At its peak coverage, this program reached 23% of the informally employed population (a much smaller reach than in many other countries in the region, according to a comparative study of ten countries) (Blofield, Pribble and Giambruno, 2023). The value of the monthly cash transfer was 180,000 thousand pesos (USD 44.31 in 2020) per household, equivalent to 28% of the EPL for a four-person household (DANE, 2022).

Figure 1 shows the response to the question of whether respondents or anyone else in their household received monetary or food transfers from the government at any time during the last two pandemic years (between June 2020 and July 2022, when the survey was conducted). Comparison between Colombia and the other countries surveyed shows that the extent of Colombian assistance was small. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said that they or someone in their household received some type of government cash assistance in the last two years, and a quarter (25%) said that they or someone in their household received food assistance.

3 Estimated per primary school age student.

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



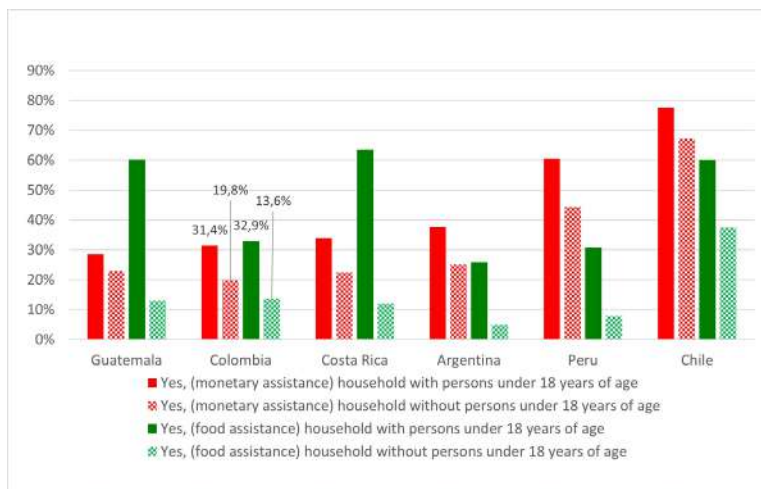
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Covid survey, families and social programs in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Peru, 2022.

Figure 2 shows the extent of government monetary and food aid to households, depending on whether or not children and adolescents live in them, knowing that in all countries the latter report a comparatively higher prevalence of poverty. The data show that state monetary and food transfers were more

effectively targeted to households with children and adolescents (solid bars) than to those without children and adolescents (dotted bars). This is also the case in Colombia, where cash transfers reached 31.4% of the households surveyed, and food assistance 32.9% .

Nine out of ten support expanding amounts

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 in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Peru, 2022.

At the end of 2022, the Solidarity Income came to an end, as planned. In addition, the coverage of Familias en Acción continued to decline for two reasons. First, the number of people exiting the program (due to dropout or reaching the age of majority) was greater than the new enrollments. Second, the transition to the new targeting instrument (Sisben IV) led to a decrease in enrollments. This implied that potential beneficiaries requested a new survey, a process that was hindered by the pandemic.

In January 2023, only 21% of children under 18 (less than two million households) were under Familias en Acción, and only 35% of those in poverty. The program's sufficiency remains low, at 37% of the extreme poverty line for one person. A transfer for a family of two adults and two children averaging 195,000 pesos (USD 40.2 in January 2023⁴) represented 30% of the extreme poverty line for the household and, therefore, of the basic food basket (DANE, 2022).

4 https://www.exchangerates.org.uk/USD-COP-01_01_2023-exchange-rate-history.html

3.

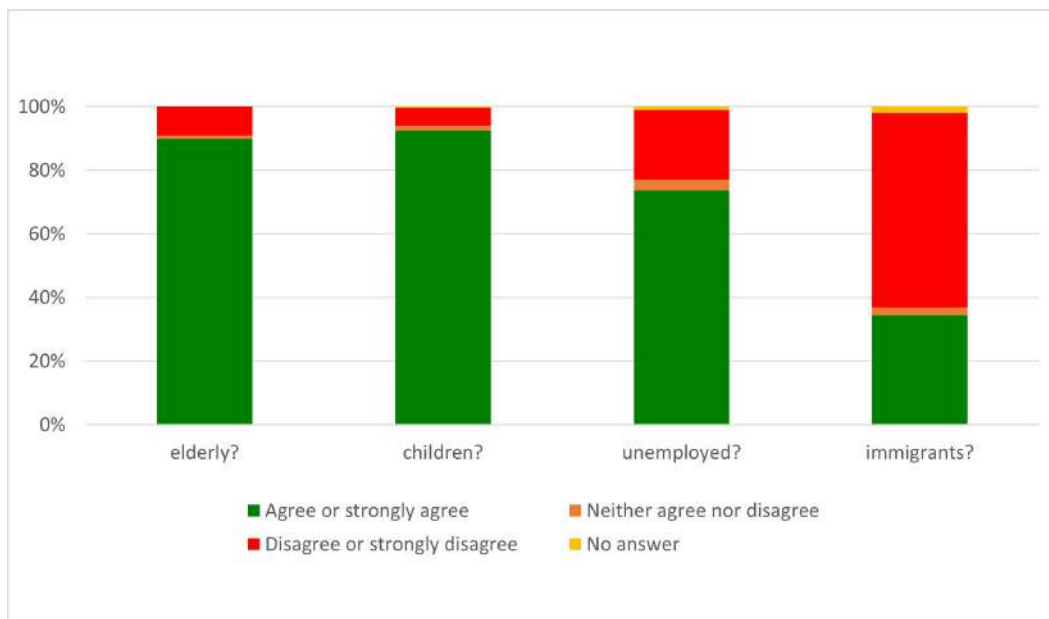
PUBLIC OPINION ON CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The survey asked whether cash transfers should be a right. Three quarters (76.7%) of the people surveyed agreed with the statement, which may indicate that there is a strong base of social support for the existence of a permanent cash transfer program.

Second, the survey contains a series of questions on attitudes towards cash transfers directed at four

different population groups: the elderly, children, the unemployed and immigrants. Figure 3 shows majority support for cash transfer programs aimed at the elderly (90%) and children (92.5%). As for the unemployed, almost three quarters are in favor of the transfers (73.6%), while in the case of immigrants, support is only 34.5%, slightly more than half the percentage of those who disagree, 61.2%.

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 in Colombia case, 2022.

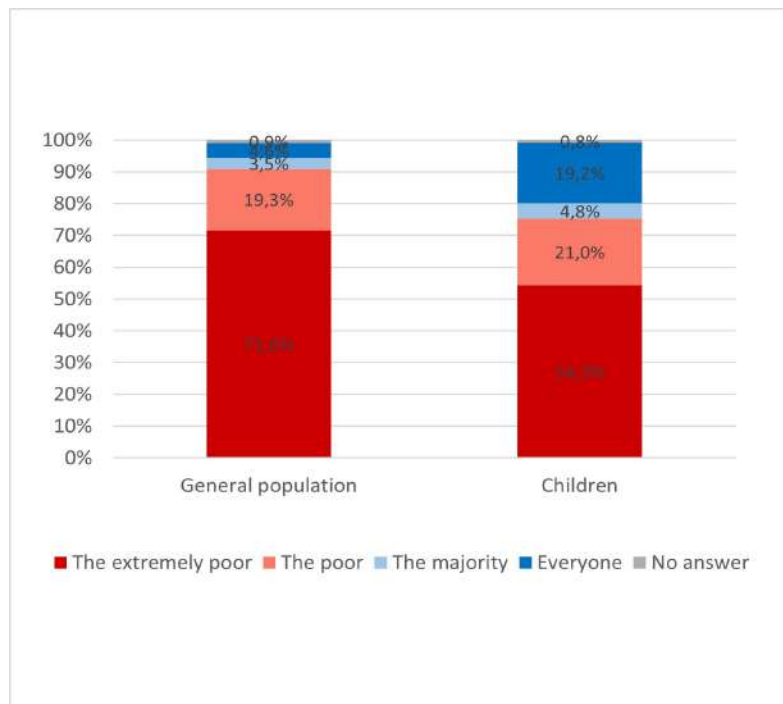
3.1 COVERAGE OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The survey contains additional questions to elucidate the population’s preferences regarding the scope that transfer programs should have, both for the general population and for children and adolescents. As shown in Figure 4, respondents support broader eligibility criteria for cash transfers to children than to the general population.

would give them only if they are in poverty (21%) with those who would also give them to all (19.2%) or most children (4.8%). In contrast, a slight majority (54%) supports limiting cash transfers to people in extreme poverty. Support for universal cash transfers is lower, with less than 5%, and 71.6% support only those in extreme poverty.

Almost half (45%) support cash transfers targeted at least to children in poverty, combining those who

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



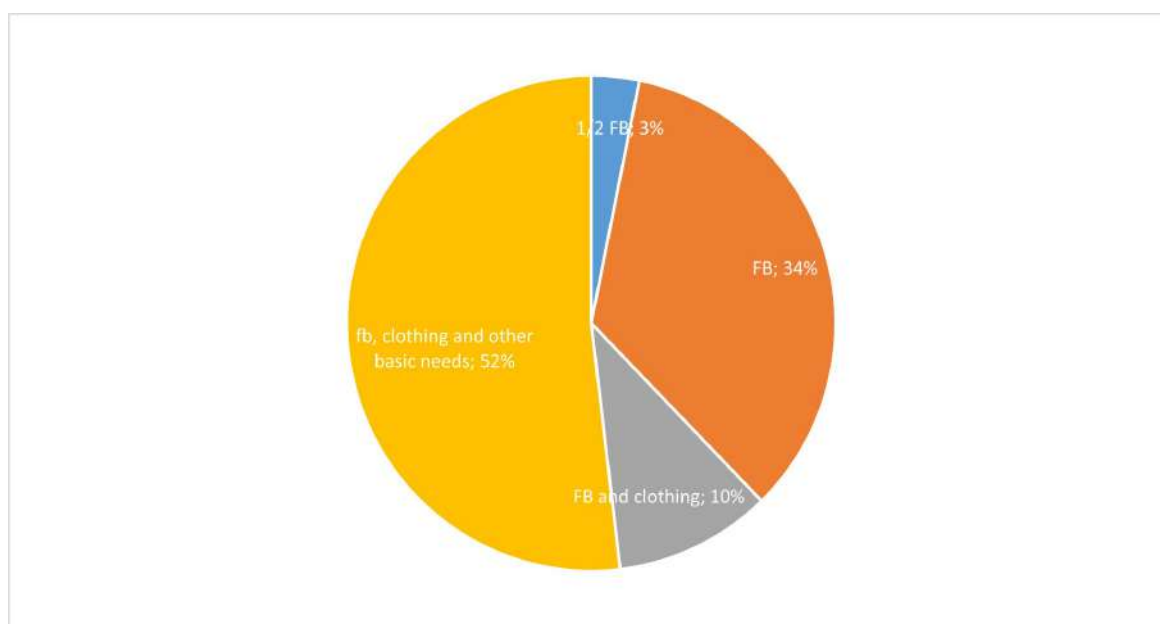
Source: Own elaboration based on data from the COVID survey, families and social programs, case of Colombia, 2022.

3.2 ADEQUACY OF CASH TRANSFERS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

To evaluate the population's opinion on the optimal value, or generosity, of monetary transfers, the survey presented respondents with four very concrete options that form a scale from the least to the most adequate transfer amounts. These options include a transfer that is equivalent to: (i) half of a basic food basket⁵, (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 5 shows the distribution of preferences among the four categories. When adding the three that include at least one basic food basket (CBA, 34%; a CBA and clothing, 10 %; and a CBA, 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 3% would set the value at half the value of a food basket and half the extreme poverty line.

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, case of Colombia, 2022.

5 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

The public opinion survey carried out shows broad support for a transfer program for children and adolescents with greater sufficiency than the one that currently exists in Colombia. An overwhelming majority (96%) supports a significant increase in the value of the transfers, to cover at least the basic food basket, which would mean almost doubling the current value. Public opinion is divided on the extent of coverage. Slightly more than half support restricting transfers to children in extreme poverty, while almost half favor broader eligibility criteria, at least for children in poverty. Furthermore, according to an estimate based on the extreme poverty line (EPL), the annual cost of monetary transfers worth the EPL per capita to children living in poverty would be, in total, 1% of ⁶.

Based on this public support, the government could have the political space to consider, first, increasing the value of the transfer to cover a basic food basket per child and adolescent. Second, it could consider expanding coverage to reach children and adolescents living in poverty, based on preventive arguments, i.e., investing in social protection before they experience severe deprivation, particularly food deprivation, and therefore before investing in the future consequences of lack of protection. Governments could present this simple precautionary argument to convince the segment of the population that would currently restrict transfers to those in extreme poverty.

This expansion of the scope of social protection would be consistent with the evidence regarding the overwhelming effectiveness of these programs in improving the welfare and human capital of children and adolescents, while being supported by public opinion.

The new government announced in February 2023 the creation of a new program (Renta Ciudadana), with greater sufficiency than Familias en Acción. According to official sources, the program would have started in April 2023 through a transition program. The announced coverage was 3.3 million households in conditions of extreme poverty through a monthly cash transfer of up to 500,000 pesos (USD 107)⁷. The maximum value would be equivalent to 78% of the EPL for a four-member household (based on 2021 values) (Government of Colombia, 2023). This would lead to a significant increase in sufficiency. However, it would still be necessary to expand coverage to include children and adolescents living in poverty.

Although details of the new program are only now becoming known, its launch provides an opportunity to discuss the current state of public opinion on cash transfers for children and adolescents.

⁶ An annual cost of USD 477 (161,099 pesos per month as the 2021 extreme poverty line, and multiplied 12 times, to reach one year) towards the population of children under 18 years of age in poverty; a total of 6.77 million children and adolescents in poverty (DANE, 2022; UN, 2022, ECLAC, 2022).

⁷ Based on the exchange rate on May 1, 2023, of 4,669 pesos per USD 1. <https://www.banrep.gov.co/es/estadisticas/trm>

APPENDIX

Characteristics of the sample in Colombia

Number of people interviewed between June 28 and July 22, 2002: 1032

Gender	
Woman	52%
Men	48%
Age	
18 to 24 years	11%
25 to 34 years	26%
35 to 44 years	19%
45 to 54 years	22%
55 to 64 years	13%
65 years and older	9%
Occupation	
Works	45%
Works and studies	5%
Retired	2%
Unemployed	17%
Only studies	3%
Dedicated to unpaid work	25%
Does not study or engage un paid or unpaid wrk	2%
Education	
No education or incomplete primary	16%
Complete primary or incomplete secondary	24%
Secondary school complete	34%
Incomplete or complete technical	10%
Incomplete or complete university	16%
Household composition	
Without presence of children under the age of 15 years	48%
With presence of minors under the age of 15 years	52%
Without the presence of older adults	63%
With presence of older adults	37%
Source: National telephone survey, GIGA-UCR with the support of the German Research Foundation; by Datavoz.	

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With the support of

