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Article

Exploring Children's Views and Experiences in the Frontline of Poverty in Catalonia: A Qualitative and Participatory Approach

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Abstract

One in three children and adolescents is currently living in poverty in Catalonia. Most specialised research has been concerned with assessing and questioning current legal frameworks and policies to combat child poverty mainly through quantitative approaches. However, these approaches neglect the specific experiences, perspectives, and visions of children and their potential to provide important clues for the design and evaluation of policies to eradicate poverty. It is also uncommon to include the experiences and views of social intervention staff who often work in situations of extreme budgetary reductions with remedial—not transformative—models. The article presents some findings from a qualitative study commissioned by UNICEF to explore this double experience from the point of view of its protagonists on the front line, drawing on fieldwork carried out before the Covid-19 pandemic that aggravated the living conditions of the most vulnerable sectors of society. The results show a shared perception of the impact of material deprivation in all spheres of life, but also diversity in coping perspectives and understanding of the structural factors that cause inequality and poverty, as well as the possible responses to overcome them. They also reveal the need to further explore child poverty as a gendered experience.

Issue

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1. Introduction

According to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (IDESCAT), one in three children and adolescents under the age of 18 (31%) was already at risk of poverty in Catalonia before the Covid pandemic in 2019 (Figure 1). Moreover, households with average available income below the poverty line were 60% in Catalonia, threefold as much as the 2017 EU average of 22.4% (Eurostat, 2019) in the year regarded as the beginning of the economic recovery after de 2008 crisis in Europe.

The development model and the unequal power structures of late-modern society (see, among others, Castel, 2002; Young, 2007) are at the root of poverty.

The transformations inherent to the post-industrial economic model, with the polarization and deregulation of the labour market (see, among others, Flaquer et al., 2006; Marí-Klose & Marí-Klose, 2012), have led to the loss of weight of wages in the face of the capital, to the detriment of families with dependent children who obtain their income from work (Flaquer & Villà, 2008). The crisis of the welfare state has further aggravated this in Spain due to the lack of policies to support families in comparison to other European countries (León & Pavolini, 2014; Mendoza & Vernis, 2008; Moreno & Acebes, 2008; Rodriguez Cabrero, 2014) and the austerity policies applied during the recession (León & Pavolini, 2015) and their impact on child well-being also in rich
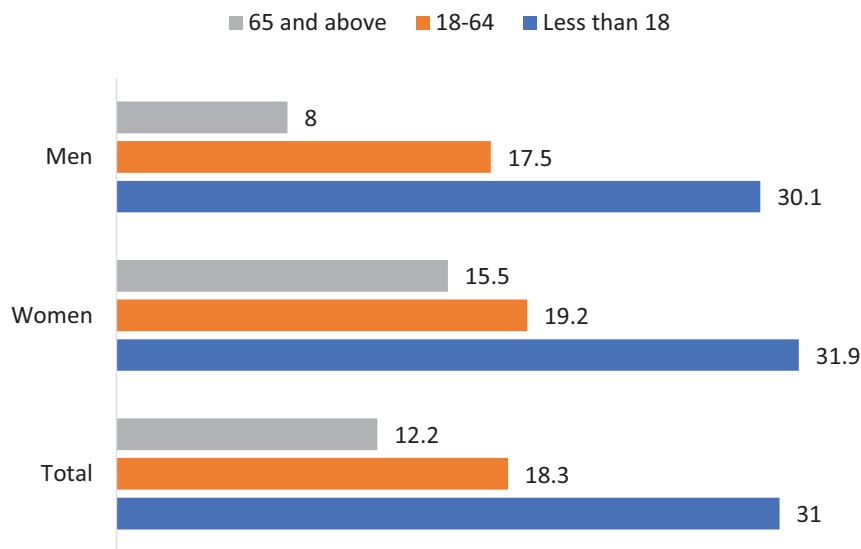
Figure 1. Risk of poverty rate (%) by age and sex (Catalonia 2019). Source: Own elaboration with data from IDESCAT (2019).

countries (UNICEF, 2014). Finally, changes in the social structure, especially in family models and their functions (Carrasco et al., 2005; Gómez-Granell, 2004) are undermining the pillar of a family-centred welfare state (Ayllón, 2017; Cantó, 2014).

The perspective used in the definition of poverty has a direct impact on the methods used to measure it as well as on the production and analysis of data that support interpretations. This is crucial because some data are treated as evidence while other data are ignored, hindering a better understanding of poverty (Jones, 2012). Beyond a static conception that describes the situation of low income at a given moment, poverty and exclusion must be understood as a process of accumulated disadvantage. The concept of "space of exclusion" reflects the degree of alienation of the individual in multiple dimensions in a continuum of social inclusion/exclusion (Subirats, 2004, 2006). However, focusing on the individual and the recovery of "normalised" social positions, without questioning the factors that cause the expulsion itself is highly problematic (Laparra et al., 2007). Being poor is not an individual condition, but rather an outcome of multiple dimensions (structural, institutional, and of individual and collective response) that have an impact on the living conditions experienced (Subirats et al., 2005) and simultaneously produce the accumulation of barriers or risks in different areas (labour market, education, social relations, health, housing, etc.), and limit the opportunities to access protection mechanisms.

In general, but even more in the case of children, poverty and well-being are multidimensional phenomena that must be approached from the perspective of rights, which considers, following the definition of Lamela de Castro (2017), that resources not only have a material dimension but also a relational one (available resources, but also access or discrimination to them, participation or exclusion, and having or not decision-making power over the issues that affect them) and a

subjective one (perceptions, evaluations, expectations, and meanings). Since 2013, the reports of the UNICEF Innocenti Study Centre have applied a rights-based perspective and a methodology based on calculating the satisfaction of children's basic needs (multidimensional and relative poverty), including subjective measures of children's well-being and gender analysis. This also requires a complex approach that includes qualitative and participatory methods.

The importance of qualitative approaches to child poverty has been highlighted (Jones, 2012) to account for relational and subjective dimensions of children's well-being related to material dimensions of poverty (Andresen & Meiland, 2019; Quint et al., 2018), and to capture children's views on what should be done about it (Monks et al., 2022). However, qualitative research continues to be scarce, usually aiming to complement quantitative data and often limiting the repertoire of methods to interviews, despite efforts made to counterbalance the top-down production of evidence. In their thorough literature review, Barbosa et al. (2020) concluded that qualitative research often has not used exact definitions of poverty and that children's perceptions that could provide clues to improve policies and their practical applications have received almost no attention. This largely describes the case of research on child poverty in Spain.

UNICEF has been promoting the Child-Friendly City seal among municipalities since 2001. To obtain it, it is necessary to demonstrate networking between administrations and social organisations, the participation of children and adolescents in local politics to find solutions to the problems that affect them, as well as plans to increase equity and attention to the most vulnerable groups. This is part of the 2030 agenda and the SDGs (UNICEF, 2017). The UNICEF Child-Friendly City seal allows, among other advantages, the possibility of offering a diagnosis of the local reality with a participatory approach. The authors carried out a study commissioned

by UNICEF to explore, from a qualitative approach, the local conditions to combat child poverty including a focus on the experiences and visions of poverty among children themselves. In this article, we will describe the methods applied and present some of the findings from the study with children, complemented with data from intervention staff on the frontline of child poverty.

2. Methods and Context

The target population were children and youth aged 0–18 from three Catalan cities with different risk profiles identified by research literature and also in previous phases of the study and the primary care local staff. The purposive sample (see Table 1) included children and adolescents that belonged to households with unemployed adults and diverse family compositions (single-parent households, two-parent households, large families, etc.), both nationals and with migrant and minority status backgrounds. Municipalities were chosen to include diverse population sizes, levels of residential segregation, main economic sectors, education offer available, and different capacity to design interventions and budgeting. Finally, we selected one of the five large cities in Catalonia (medium-sized cities) devoted to the service sector (local area B), one city in the north, with a higher percentage of migrant population (local area C), and one city in the province of Barcelona, far from the dynamics and resources of the metropolitan area (local area A).

Fieldwork with children and intervention staff was carried out in the winter of 2019. Participants were selected by purposive sampling. With the help of technical staff from the local councils, prospective groups were identified and the first contacts were made. In the case of children and adolescents, we organised two groups in each town. We worked with already-established groups of between six to twenty participants in familiar settings. Participant boys and girls were all around 11–12. In each city, one group was at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (e.g., from council open centres or after-school pro-

grammes; group 1) and the other one was selected from after-school leisure time activities (e.g., sports clubs or cultural associations; group 2). In the case of practitioners, we identified and contacted key agents in the local areas, mainly technical staff from the council services of childhood, education, and social services, creating ad hoc groups in each city.

Data collection included projective and elicitation group techniques. Six playful-participative sessions were carried out with 32 participant children and adolescents to capture their specific perspectives within their daily experiences and the way they talk about them. This participatory approach is based on the idea that an essential right of children is to be heard and to actively participate in the issues that affect them (Castro et al., 2016). The so-called child-friendly or participatory techniques are connected to children's daily lives, which are presented in an attractive and simple way, have a playful ingredient, and are applied to avoid situations that make children uncomfortable or singled out (Ames et al., 2010; Clark et al., 2003). To collect multiple forms of children's expression, it is recommended that data-gathering techniques are diverse, which some authors have called the mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001). The application has been adapted to the context by following colloquial forms of communication that avoid the feeling of being evaluated and promote a climate of respect and non-judgement. In line with this, a guide for the group sessions with the children was designed and implemented in three phases and modalities, from more projective to more reflective, after having explained the objectives of the project and the session in a colloquial way:

1. Game of cards created ad hoc, with images that the participants had to comment on and sort first according to their wishes and then according to their needs.
2. Role-play imagining a situation and a scene, after having listened to a vignette provided by the person who conducted the activity explaining one actual measure applied to reduce child poverty

Table 1. Key characteristics of the local areas~.

	Local area A	Local area B	Local area C
Inhabitants	35.000 hab.	200.000 hab.	50.000 hab.
Population under 18	8.000–10.000	35.000–45.000	8.000–10.000
% migrant population	≈11%	≈11%	≈25%
Unemployment (2019)	10–12%	10–12%	12–14%
One-parent households (2011)	1.500–2.000	7.000–9.000	1.500–2.000
Children at risk of poverty	20–30	20–30	40–50
Poverty rate	15–20	15–20	25–30

Source: Own elaboration with data from IDESCAT (2018), Observatori del treball i model productiu (2019), and Alto Comisionado para la lucha contra la pobreza infantil (2019).

that could be uncomfortable or inadequate from their perception.

3. Proposals to reduce poverty in Catalonia with post-it sheets that could be attached to cards indicating different areas of social life.

In the case of intervention staff, three in-depth interviews were carried out with six local technical staff responsible for coordinating the basic areas of social services in child care (interviews A, B, C); four focus group practitioners of social intervention staff with a total number of 26 participants (focus group practitioners A, B, C).

Data analysis was carried out using Nvivo11 applying an inductive and deductive iterative scheme. All the material was transcribed and organised selectively, inferring the main ideas from the content and discourse analysis and the emotional tone of research situations, following an analysis strategy based on grounded theory starting only from the broad dimensions indicated by the state of the art previously elaborated (see Figure 2). Similarities and differences were searched according to children's diverse levels of poverty risk and by resources devoted to coping with it at a local level.

This way of interpreting data is especially relevant in research with children and young people as a strategy to avoid the bias of the adult perspective. Finally, the recommendations for responsible research and innovation were followed, specifically the principles of freedom, honesty, and responsibility in social and child research, adapting informed consent to the research context (UAB, 2020). The instruments were administered in a familiar and trusting setting in all groups. We avoided talking directly about personal experiences with children. Finally, special attention was paid to keeping the anonymity of participants and local areas to avoid negative impacts of the research. Access to the information

and photographs taken and the rest of the material is restricted to the research team in which the participants placed their trust. The information collected during the focus group with professionals and the play-participatory groups with children will be stored for a limited period and subsequently destroyed.

3. Results

Mapping the comparative impact of poverty by age group and sex is essential. We did so by drawing on secondary data available at IDESCAT. As can be observed, children live in more impoverished households than the rest of the age groups; or, from another perspective, one could say that the number of dependent children in the household has an impact on the unit of consumption.

In this section, we present some results related to the experiences and impacts of poverty from the point of view of the participants. Secondly, we move to their imaginaries and visions of poverty and how to deal with it. Results will be presented in reference to all groups as one, except when there are distinct views or experiences connected to one specific group according to the risk of poverty rate or other characteristics, or to one specific local area (see Table 1).

3.1. Experiences and Impacts of Poverty

Although none of the children participating in the research personally identified as "poor" or in a situation of poverty, their discourse and reflections revealed their clear experiences in some of the areas that define what is meant by poverty. They display a multidimensional perspective, and many prove to be aware of poverty as an actual experience undergone by some of their peers at school or in their immediate circle. From the data

Household income

- Labour inclusion
- Work-family conciliation
- Fiscal policy
- Family minimum income guarantee (benefits)

Social participation

- Social and cultural activities
- Sports
- Leisure

Children access to quality services

- ECEC and equal education
- Health
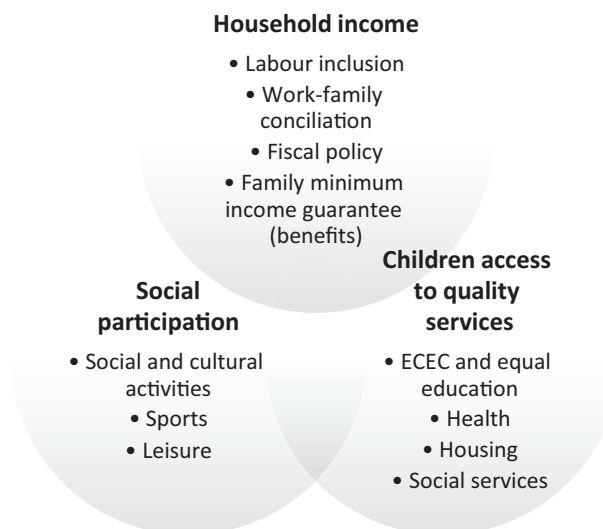- Housing
- Social services

Figure 2. Model of analysis: Main dimensions. Source: Own elaboration based on TÁRKI (2010), the European Commission (2013), and Ikuspegiak—Observatorio Infancia País Vasco (2013).

collected in the three local areas, it can be concluded that being a child or adolescent affected by poverty in Catalonia today means living in poor housing conditions or even that the family does not have access to housing at all.

This reality emerges from the stories of children and adolescents in the three areas and is evident to the extent that squatting is part of their imaginaries. Although it may not be a personal experience, participants are aware of this phenomenon close to them. They refer to it by talking about the "flats with a kicker" or "flats in shacks," meaning you just get in by kicking the door open (Group C2) or showing concern about evictions. In various groups, they provide hints of their family's moral economy and believe "that no one can be evicted from their homes" (Group B1), "that there should be houses for everyone" (Group B2), or that "everyone has to have a good place to live" (Group A2). They are perfectly aware of the housing contradiction:

> What happens is the other way around. There are many uninhabited houses and then homeless people. Why can't these people occupy the houses? Why are they building a supermarket in one place? There are already supermarkets in this city, they could build apartments, you do not have to have the newest one, but a flat in good condition so that people without a livelihood or people who come from other places at war can go and stay. (Group C2)

Along the same lines, in their conversations, they have naturalised, to a certain extent, the precariousness and poor housing conditions, indirectly explaining energy poverty. Some children at risk of poverty argued that "going to the bottom floor" (Group B1) could be a strategy in the face of the lack of basic resources at home while suggesting that it should not be possible to "cut off neither light nor water" in anyone's house. Other living arrangements are also part of their lived experiences, such as sharing rooms, emerging as a spontaneous remark in the stories of some boys and girls: "Well, the fridge….If there is a tenant living in the house, it is usually fuller" (Group C1).

Similarly, other children and adolescents, although not affected by energy poverty, reported having repeatedly seen people drinking water on their way home from school because the water had been cut off at home (Group A2). Intervention staff confirms these experiences as seen by children.

3.1.1. Material Deprivation Affects the Social Life of Children and Adolescents Daily

Low family income and economic insecurity penetrate the daily lives of children and adolescents in the form of material deprivation, which limits their access to and participation in social life, one of the main areas of social inclusion, in at least four ways. The first one is the limitation in social participation in the educational sphere, both in the schools' academic projects and in out-of-school activities. Children in all groups mentioned that the lack of participation of some children in school outings is not uncommon, due exclusively to their cost, especially in secondary school. Again, the social intervention staff has confirmed this:

> Sometimes, a whole school project is only actually enjoyed by 53 children out of 200. We usually try that the ones who stay here do the same activities as the ones who go to the camps, even special games. We try to make them feel the same experiences, but here. (Focus group practitioners C)

Some municipalities have provisions that ensure free or reduced payment, but families who cannot afford the cost involved opt for their children to stay at school and take part in alternative activities. This fact may imply feelings of stigma, especially in primary school when the shared perception is that attendance is more generalised. A dialogue from Group A1 illustrates this:

> Child 1: I never go on outings and stay overnight.
>
> Researcher: What does the school offer?
>
> Child 1: Well, they do in [at the end of] ESO, it's [part of] the end of term project, it's not so important… In primary school almost everyone goes and if you do not go, it's…
>
> Child 2: I'm in primary school and I don't go, but I don't care, I prefer to stay with my family.

According to the staff views, this is a narrative of concealment: They say "they 'do not want to go on outings' or 'I do not like it! But the truth is they cannot'" (focus group practitioners A).

Along these lines, some children responded: "We should all have scholarships so that we always go to school" (Group B1). Other children also expressed this limit of the provision systems regarding food security and demanded "that they leave the grant free" (Group B1), referring to the partial coverage of the school meal allowance, which keeps the cost of this service and is the reason why some families do not even apply.

Lack of access and participation in extracurricular activities is also a reality. Some participants demanded "that everyone should be able to have some extracurricular activities so that they can do something after school" (Group A2), although this was not a demand that emerged from the stories of the children most affected by poverty. It should be borne in mind, however, that out-of-school activities are complementary education activities that provide access to forms of cultural capital beyond the formal curriculum. At the same time, they are spaces for socialising, both for children and their families.

Intervention and technical staff have highlighted this as a main area of inequality for children.

Moreover, children have unequal access to quality playtime and positive experiences of family leisure time—some of them, for example, do not go away on holidays (as is included in the At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion Indicator), don't go out to the cinema, or visit amusement parks (Group A2). They also don't often participate in summer camp activities and other ordinary services aimed at children and adolescents during school holidays, in cultural or sporting camps, which can be highly beneficial in terms of academic capital, promoting aptitude to learning new languages, new technologies, or highly specialised sports. The reasons why some children have limited access to them vary, from the lack of services (for example, in August, when not all municipalities offer them) to various barriers including the cost of enrolment, the necessary material or equipment, transport and, again, the lack of financial aid to enjoy them, among other factors.

Moreover, the services specifically organised to compensate for these barriers do not always meet the same quality standards as the general offer. Fieldwork has shown that sometimes children enjoy enriching activities of socio-educational value in supportive settings with positive social relations and staff with specific training to work with children in situations of high vulnerability. However, there are also segregated services that work from a deficit view and tend to reproduce a large part of school tasks and rhythms, with demotivating effects: The children themselves do not associate them with cultural practices that resemble those of schools. At the same time, this prevents them from developing other skills and relationships. In this second type of setting, "for the disadvantaged," the staff often has low specialised training or qualifications to work with vulnerable children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Many of these services and activities are carried out in poorly maintained and unsuitable settings, only used for the season, and poorly equipped, which makes it difficult to organise attractive activities of high socio-educational value and, thus, enhancing inequalities among children.

The children talked about the difficult access or lack of it when it comes to certain goods and services popularised among peers and same age groups. Branded clothes and shoes, beyond their value, are symbolic markers of social inclusion in peer groups. Their purpose, therefore, goes beyond the consumerist logic that is sometimes attributed to children of poor families by some technical staff and politicians. The opposite is true and these markers can also promote feelings of belonging and foster bonding:

> You go to school and your friend has something very fashionable and you say, "I want that too!" (Group A1)

> Well, and the issue of whether they spend more or less money on food, but then the child carries

a mobile phone or brand-new clothes….When you enter adolescence, you have to join your peer group and, therefore, if you cannot afford everything they need….[The issue is that] they need it! It is not a priority [but] among them…

> Yes, because it is [a priority] to be part of the group. (Focus group practitioners C)

Children appear to be aware of their image, especially clothes and shoes, which are markers of class, and they have certain prejudices associated with them. From the point of view of children affected by poverty, material deprivation in families can mean not having access to certain popular items and, in some cases, being exposed to ridicule and even insults. This can exacerbate their actual risk of exclusion in relations among peers:

> Having new clothes (Group B1)

> You are judged by the clothes you wear. (Group A1)

> Money is what gives you everything, without money people call you poor! People insult you. (Group C1)

Access to a mobile phone or having internet available at home are ways that make relations with family and peers easier and are not always regarded by young people at risk of poverty as luxury items in a general way. The schools' lockdowns during Covid-19 have proved that to a greater extent.

> Having internet. (Group B1)

> There are poor people who have a mobile phone, a Nokia…most people…it doesn't cost a lot of money. (Group A1)

> I have a mobile phone because both my father and my mother work….I am on my own, well, with my bother. (Group C2)

Having these goods and services means negotiations with the family, which can be part of the education process but can also increase tensions in the household, as these quotes from children affected by poverty (groups A1, B1, C1) show:

> "If you work, you get good marks….I'll buy them for you," they say.

> She tells me to wait until they pay her and that she'll buy it for me then.

> "I'm going to buy it for you, tomorrow, tomorrow…" Then…when a month goes by and it goes out of fashion, he buys it from me!

Some children and adolescents from the groups affected by poverty proposed that some free public services they already go to should include these goods and facilities for those deprived of them:

> There should be PlayStations in the public libraries. (Group B1)

A recurrent reflection made by staff directly working with children shows concern about the time they spend on their own. Working hours and difficulties in reconciling work and family life are the main factors causing this, together with the children's lack of or lesser participation in extracurricular activities. The fact that classes are concentrated in the mornings in compulsory secondary education has been highlighted by some technical staff as a risk factor, not only because it does not include lunch in school and poses a risk to food safety, but also because it means that many adolescents finish the school day much earlier than their parents or guardians finish their working day:

> Every day it's the same, arriving home, they play Fortnite for hours and hours…and of course, you get warm, and toxins come out, all sorts of things come out, friends and companions who may not be the most suitable. And one thing leads to another, but the basis is that they are alone, and no one accompanies them in anything, neither in their studies nor in anything else. (Focus group practitioners C)

Apart from the non-negligible fact that the examples refer to male adolescents by default, this risk pattern seems to be aggravated if the family home is far from services and spaces in which children and young people can be taken care of outside school hours:

> We have three or four families with children in their care for whom it takes almost an hour to get to the urban area, and other cases living in irregular situations with irregular jobs that leave the children on their own; they go to work, the children have to go to school through terrible roads and streets, and then they come back, and their mother arrives in the evening. (Focus group practitioners B)

3.1.2. Poverty Influences Children's and Adolescents' Aspirations and Expectations for the Future

Children's accounts show that they are aware of the high cost of post-compulsory education. While some have already ruled out this possibility, others are concerned about it from the earliest stages. This perception is probably a story heard from the adults in their circle and passed on to children, in a context of lack of institutional protection (as expressed in these quotes from Group C1):

> Studying costs a lot of money.

> I'm already saving to be able to study.

> Studying is the least important thing, studying is important, but what matters…is being good, knowing people…

At the same time, some were aware that education is a way to the labour market and social inclusion, especially to overcome disadvantages:

> I do not like homework, but it is important to study for poor people. (Group A1)

The children in the groups with the lowest risk of being affected by poverty, on the other hand, perceive education from a global perspective as an end in itself:

> It is important for your future to know things. (Group C2)

> The council can help them to buy books or help them make a career for their lives. (Group A2)

Some staff have highlighted the cost of post-compulsory education, both vocational education and training (VET) courses and university, as a factor that leads to educational exclusion already limiting the options available to young people and adolescents. Grants that pay only for the tuition fees are not enough.

3.1.3. Family Poverty Has an Impact on Children in the Form of Discomfort, Stress, and Shame

Being affected by poverty in the family during childhood over time implies an accumulation of daily experiences that generate discomfort, accompanied by feelings of exclusion, difference and inferiority, which can end up having an impact on mental health:

> This is very important for them and therefore all this poverty also implies that, as we are in a consumer society, in my opinion, this stress is associated with mental health problems. We have many adolescents who have lived their lives in poverty as children. And to have the books the day school starts or not to have them, you know….And all of this goes through and creates…because they feel bad. However much we try to do, this is the truth. I mean, how do you feel on the day of the anniversary if all the children are wearing, I don't know, what and you never will wear? All this is adding up, adding up. (Focus group practitioners B)

> Sad, sad, sometimes they start telling you about their lives and burst into tears right there, in the office, and they are…nobody is with them, they are really helpless. It's affecting them at all levels. (Focus group practitioners B)

According to the technical and intervention staff, emotional impact is one of the most worrying impacts of poverty, and one that can lead to situations of social risk, especially considering the context of limited resources in this area. They are also concerned with the fact that poverty in the family can also lead to taking on adults' roles, worries, and responsibilities, especially among adolescent girls, an added barrier during childhood:

> [There are] things they try to hide not to do more harm, taking on situations that are not theirs to take on…

> Not all the families show the vulnerability that they have at home, we have children who are acting as carriers to the services, don't we? Of the situation that is lived at home with the fear that they do not know because at home there is certain…shame.

3.2. Imaginaries and Visions of Poverty

To understand and explain the experience of poverty among children and adolescents (directly or indirectly), it is relevant to know what they understand by poverty and to what social phenomena they relate it to. Evidencing these ideas, their coherence and contradictions allow us to infer where they place themselves and analyse their own situation and the tools they have to face it and respond to it.

Children simultaneously handle different definitions of poverty and exclusion, sometimes reproducing the narratives that commonly circulate among the adults close by or in the media, sometimes reflecting their own experience, but also elaborating on critical discourses that have emerged from the research process itself, as a prompt to reflection. From their stories, stereotypical definitions of poverty emerge, for example locating poverty as an alien phenomenon taking place in other parts of the world:

> At school or in other places, I haven't, but on TV news I have [seen] people who do not have the same as us, who do not live in the same kind of houses we do. (Group A2)

> Children in Africa should have more food so that they don't die. (Group B2)

They also produce traditional one-dimensional definitions that associate poverty with lack of food, but reflect the visibility of social exclusion in cities:

> But we have seen people who do not care and take things from the rubbish. They go with shopping trolleys and take food thrown away by other families who have discarded it. They depend on the people who leave it out so that others can recover it. (Group A2)

As can be seen in the previous excerpts, children produce paternalistic and abstract discourses and proposals, especially in the groups not affected by poverty themselves:

> [There should be] more food collection for the children who cannot buy any. (Group A2)

> [People should] convince people to give what is still edible instead of throwing food away. (Group C2)

> The city council must help the poor. (Group B2)

Other children, on the other hand, acknowledge the invisibility of poverty:

> There are also children who you don't see, but you give them lunch and they are the first to tell you "I give you half my lunch," and then they go to the neighbourhood soup kitchen because they have a grant, otherwise they cannot eat anything….I know that we don't find out, we don't really know about it. (Group A2)

3.2.1. Multidimensional Definitions of Poverty: Complexity, Risk of Perpetuation, and the Triggering Effect of Vulnerability in Other Social Dimensions

"Poverty is like the food chain," said one of the children from Group A2.

Children tell stories that show their awareness of the impact and strategies of adults to cope with poverty. Some of the children in the three municipalities imagined stories in which mobility, eventually involving the separation of children from their families, or other important relationships like those with peers or teachers, emerges as a strategy for coping with poverty:

> A family has lost their job, found a house in France. They are leaving the school. The teacher wants him to stay, but the parents take him to a cheaper school. (Group A1)

The causes they highlight allow us to identify two opposing discursive models—on the one hand, a meritocratic discourse that naturalises poverty and overestimates the capacity of individual action, as underlined in the following quotes:

> She's not poor, she's normal, it's her mother's fault that she doesn't do well….She doesn't want to work. (Group C2)

> Work is the first thing of all, the most important, the most! Or put up with it. (Group C1)

This discourse leads children's reasoning to provide solutions that do little to transform social reality, largely

ignoring citizenship rights. From this point of view, when asked what to do to cope with situations of poverty, the answers (Group A1) are as follows:

> That's what poor people do: look for things in the rubbish.

> Scrap metal.

> Many people steal because [of poverty].

> Work.

> Ask for help from NGOs such as Caritas.

In one of the groups with children not at risk of poverty, a critical discourse emerged that acknowledges the existence of social inequality and calls for citizens' social rights from a children's rights perspective. According to their own account, having worked on the subject at school through the analysis of a novel that deals with the issue of poverty has helped them question other mainstream discourses and discuss it with their friends and families:

> The saying goes that if there are no poor people, there are no rich people!

> One of them goes to school with a three-storey coat and the other with a raincoat and colours.

> All children in Catalonia have the right to go to school…it's a state responsibility. The state should help them. (Group C2)

3.2.2. Promoting Social and Political Participation Among Children: Providing Them with the Means to Respond to Vulnerability

Children in the groups most at risk of being affected by poverty have a stigmatising analysis framework that often holds their own families responsible for their fate. This framework is less protective against feelings of shame. In contrast, children from groups at lower risk of being affected by poverty display more tools for a critical analysis moving away from individual responsibility and enabling them to analyse situations of vulnerability from a position related to social and political participation.

This is clear when dealing with definitions of welfare and identifying needs and the priority areas of action. The link with the family and, in general, with relational networks is the priority for the welfare of children according to their views. The most recurrent idea among all the participant children in the three municipalities and all the groups has been to place the care they receive from their family as a priority and as a pillar that offers them security, well-being, and support:

> Your family understands you more than anyone else.

> Family, family [all in a chorus]. Family is at the top of the list, otherwise…if they do not take care of you, you cannot do anything else.

> The important thing is what is not physical, the family, friends…

> Sometimes you'd rather be with your family than having this or that item.

> Water and food…it's necessary to live, but if you don't have someone to help you, to stimulate you, you can't do anything either.

> Family and friends. Then the material things.

> Being happy with your mother, family, and friends.

Thus, they are aware of and value the relational and affective dimension of care work (Brullet & Gómez-Granell, 2008) explicitly prioritising positive ties with peers and family over material well-being. This clear position contradicts assumptions about the implications of growing up in a capitalist consumer culture. Taking this into account, it follows that intervention measures in situations of children and adolescents affected by poverty cannot be separated from the intervention and protection of the whole family, especially of the person in charge of their care. The narrative of the intervention and technical staff has been consistent with this logic: "Protecting children is protecting their families, their natural haven" (interview with local authority B).

As argued in the previous section, this analysis confirms that the priority action should be to ensure the well-being of the family or the carers of minors:

> A family living in a room….These parents will have more stress factors, and when there are stress factors, you do not look after the child that much because the level of stress that you may have as a parent, as a person, sometimes leads to risk situations. And it is here that the commitment to the more preventive part makes sense. (Focus group practitioners B)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Before starting this project, we knew that the group most affected by poverty and social exclusion were the children. We also knew that the local councils were the most appropriate administration to respond to children's poverty despite their limited capacity to combat it with remedial tools and unequal resources.

Our findings show that the most important factors that threaten the living conditions that should ensure children's well-being can be divided into two main areas. On the one hand, the effect of material deprivation on

the social life and protection networks of children is often caused by adults' difficulties in reconciling work and family life or other stressful factors, which generate experiences of loneliness and/or the assumption of adult roles that increase their stress (in the family sphere). This area also includes limits to participation in education and acquisition of cultural capital within and beyond school, which may generate socio-educational exclusion in the educational sphere; lack of access to quality leisure time, which causes experiences in segregated settings and enhances inequality (also in the field of education); and access to goods and services that define mainstream practices of consumption among their age group and have an impact on peer group belonging, which can generate feelings of shame and stress. These findings confirm those of Quint et al. (2018): Children and adolescents highlight material deprivation as a fundamental aspect of children's experiences of poverty as well as the feeling of stigma and concerns about their parents' well-being, placing emotional bonds and social support from the family at the core.

The second area is, to a large extent, the naturalisation of coping strategies in their daily lives, like insecurity or bad housing conditions, evidenced by the fact that the irregular occupation of housing or energy poverty have become part of some children's spontaneous accounts. Moreover, in the imaginaries and perspectives on poverty, both children themselves and some staff on the frontline of intervention combine and mix prejudices about the experience of poverty and critical approaches. It seems that stigmatising assumptions persist to show that traditional conceptions of poverty have not been overcome, although the theoretical corpus and policy recommendations to combat poverty have broadened and become more complex and critical. In this sense, it is very important to highlight that it is precisely the children and adolescents of the groups at risk of poverty who show internalisation of these prejudices that can contribute to worsening their discomfort and stress and leave them without a framework to avoid blaming themselves or their families for the actual condition they live in. On the other hand, children and adolescents who had had the opportunity to reflect on poverty at school and/or who had participated in measures applied in the municipality to promote full social and political citizenship for children elaborated more complex discourses regarding the phenomenon and, therefore, had acquired protective tools.

Social and political awareness of the structural conditions of poverty and the responses that can transform them is, therefore, a highly valuable protective factor in children's perspectives on poverty, whether they are directly affected or not. This is what we mean when we say that we are committed to a rights perspective. In this sense, participatory research helps to provide a framework for reflection on one's own living conditions from a more complex and holistic perspective, which is precisely what we demand from policies to eradicate poverty.

To do so, a rigorous analysis from a gender perspective needs to be undertaken to uncover experiences and views from girls, especially adolescent girls, that were identified by technical and intervention staff as important family members in charge of care. This would further contribute to knowledge-based, better than top-down evidence-based, child poverty reduction policies.

Despite the limitations of this exploratory study, we believe that the data gathered from children's experiences and views have managed to provide valuable insights that cannot be offered by quantitative approaches based, for the most part, on measuring household income. Giving prominence to children's views reveals rich, multiple, even contradictory, conceptions of what it means to be affected by poverty during childhood in Catalonia. At the same time, it provides a realistic account of the limited impact of interventions concerning policies that should guarantee their welfare, that is, the effectiveness of social, civic, and political rights at this key stage of their life cycle.

Current methods for measuring child poverty that ignore the lived experience and multiple dimensions of well-being, including subjective well-being, from children's own accounts are very limited not only for complex diagnoses but also for the design of interventions with them. This is crucial when it comes to identifying profiles and dimensions of greater vulnerability. It becomes clear that the unit of analysis must be the child and not the family within which the child's experience is subsumed to combat children's poverty. Measures need to incorporate multidimensionality from a rights perspective and place emphasis on equity in children's terms, applying a gender perspective and an intersectional analysis of subgroups affected by other factors generating inequality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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