

## Life after forced displacement: Experiences and perceptions of children and their caregivers

### Condiciones de vida después del desplazamiento forzado: Experiencias y percepciones de niños, niñas y sus cuidadores

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#### Background

Children are one of the population groups most affected by the forced displacement that resulted from decades of armed conflict and socio-political violence in Colombia. Studies have shown that children from displaced families have to endure the obstacles and deficiencies of city life, as well as the psychological and economic stress experienced by their parents. Despite the existence of numerous investigations about the effects of forced displacement in Colombia, few studies have focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of children and families with a history of forced displacement living in Barranquilla, one of the host cities of the largest displaced population in the country.

#### Aims

This research aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of children and their caregivers with a history of forced displacement, all beneficiaries of a psycho-affective recovery program in the city of Barranquilla, Colombia.

#### Method & procedures

The investigation is based on a qualitative methodology with a case study design. It is focused on analyzing the experiences collected during the implementation of a psycho-affective recovery program that was developed in a town urbanization of the city of Barranquilla, home to families with a history of forced displacement and urban relocation from marginal areas. The study analyzed twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with the main caregivers, including the documented field notes of the children's experience during their participation in the program. An inductive analysis of these sources of information was developed to understand the reality of children and their caregivers, seeking to understand the emerging categories and subcategories in a reflective and dialogical way, using the Bioecological Model of Bronfenbrenner.

#### Results & discussion

In the interviews carried out with the main caregivers, it was found that the boys and girls who participated in the project had not directly experienced displacement due to the armed conflict; it was their mothers, fathers, or grandparents who endured the relocation directly. However, it was found that displacement, within the family history, was associated with lingering adverse conditions in the urban context. Consistent with other research studies, the subcategories that emerged from the narrative of caregivers when talking about life after displacement were poverty, instability, violence, and precarious living conditions.

On the other hand, it was evidenced that, in terms of family life, the subcategories underscored by both children and their caregivers were the existence of abandonment and abuse. Most of the children had experienced a form of neglect throughout their lives. Some of the boys and girls stated they were separated from their biological parents and their custody given to other family members. This was perceived by some children as a new opportunity. Additionally, boys, girls, and their caregivers reported physical punishment as part of the parenting practices used at home. Some of the girls who participated in the program experienced sexual abuse or harassment by men in their community. These results are coherent with Bronfenbrenner's (1986) proposal regarding the influence of the meso and exosystem on families.

Regarding the mesosystem, the results show that experiences of abuse and abandonment within the home can affect the children's interaction in their school environment.

### Conclusion

It is concluded that the life of children and their caregivers after forced displacement includes undergoing deficiencies associated with poverty and exposure to different contexts of violence and a violation of their rights. For this reason, displacement continues to be a complex social phenomenon, which, seen from the macrosystem of children, can represent a significant interference in their development. The result of this research suggests that the consequences of forced displacement are intergenerational, given that it exposes families to contexts that affect their ability to promote a healthy development in childhood. It further suggests that future investigations should analyze which psychological or personal characteristics may mediate the effect that these risk factors have on development in childhood and that they distinguish whether the intergenerational effect of displacement is direct or related to poverty.

**Keywords:** armed conflict, childhood, development, forced displacement, violence

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