

Child Labour Governance and Institutional Fragmentation: Evidence from a Cross-Border Urban Context in Argentina.

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Abstract: This article presents a qualitative case study on the prevention of child labour in Posadas, Argentina, focusing on structural living conditions and governmental child protection resources. Data were collected through 67 semi-structured interviews with professionals from governmental and non-governmental organizations, field observations, and visits to child protection institutions conducted between 2021 and 2022. The study describes a typology of child labour observed during this period and evaluates three support resources: the day home, non-residential temporary shelters, and the municipal urban patrol program. Drawing on extended case method and grounded in a social work and public management perspective, the findings reveal persistent child labour trajectories and underscore the necessity of a unified, multi-stakeholder child protection system. The article adopts an explicit abolitionist position, arguing that institutional fragmentation between labour and social development sectors constitutes the central difficulty to effective prevention. These insights contribute to broader debates on abolitionism versus regulation, offering practical implications for policy development and social intervention in Argentina.

Keywords: Child Labour; Urban Spaces; Social Intervention; Social Policies; Public Management

1 Introduction

Child labour remains one of the most persistent expressions of social inequality globally. According to a recent joint report, more than 138 million children are involved in labour activities worldwide, of whom 54 million do so under hazardous conditions (ILO & UNICEF, 2025). In Latin America, the problem is deeply intertwined with structural poverty, urban informality, and limited access to quality education and social services (Trujillo-Salazar, 2022; Paladines Coello, Quichimbo Sapatanga & Tapia Segarra, 2023). Child labour significantly impacts children's educational trajectories and bio-psycho-social development, with evidence consistently documenting its detrimental effects across the region (Middel, Kameshwara & Sandoval-Hernandez, 2020; Liñan Cuello, Eneth Vidal & Solano Brito, 2024; Thévenon & Edmonds, 2019; Silva, 2019). The scientific knowledge base on child labour in Latin America also highlights the persistent challenges faced by institutional and governmental responses to the problem (Sousa Santana, Kiss & Andermann, 2019).

In Argentina, the institutional management of child labour has historically been shaped by its origins within the labour regulatory framework. As early as 1907, Argentina became a pioneer in the region by enacting legislation that set a minimum working age of ten years for urban child labour (Macri et al., 2004; Scheinkman, 2022). From this foundational moment, child labour was conceived primarily as a labour market problem — governed by conditions of work,

minimum age standards, and labour informality — and consequently fell under the institutional responsibility of Labour Ministries. This original framing has persisted over time, structuring the administrative logic through which child labour is monitored and regulated in the country, including through provincial bodies such as the *Comisiones Provinciales para la Prevención y Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil (COPRETI)*, which operate within the Ministry of Labour (Miño & Gómez, 2022).

However, field research conducted in the cross-border region of Posadas–Encarnación reveals a significant institutional gap: the preventive resources that most directly reach children in situations of vulnerability — such as day homes, non-residential shelters, and urban patrol programmes — do not belong to the labour sector, but rather to the Ministry of Social Development. This disconnect suggests that while child labour is legislated and monitored as a labour phenomenon, its prevention is operationalised through social welfare institutions that rarely coordinate with labour authorities (Miño, 2023; Miño & Gómez, 2022).

This article argues that such institutional fragmentation reflects a structural tension in how child labour is defined and governed in Argentina: a framework built around labour regulation and informality struggles to capture the full range of situations that place children at risk, including street vending, begging, extended unsupervised time in public spaces, and involvement in informal family labour strategies. From an abolitionist perspective, all these situations represent forms of deprivation of childhood that require state intervention, since in practice it is nearly impossible to distinguish between harmful and non-harmful child labour under conditions of poverty and institutional absence.

The objective of this article is to analyse the persistence of child labour in the city of Posadas, capital of the province of Misiones, and to evaluate the institutional resources that function as preventive mechanisms, examining the challenges they face within a fragmented governance structure. The following research questions guide the study: What forms of child labour persist in the urban context of Posadas? What institutional resources exist to prevent child labour trajectories, and how do they operate? And what structural factors limit their effectiveness?

The study is grounded in a qualitative case study conducted in the cross-border region of Posadas (Argentina) – Encarnación (Paraguay) from 2021 to the present. Drawing on political science, and specifically anchored in a social work perspective and the improvement of public management, it employs Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method, which allows findings from a situated local context to be connected to broader structural processes. The research forms part of a project funded by the *Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) of Argentina*, with additional support from the *Programa Inrefro de Investigaciones de Frontera* and research projects affiliated with the *Secretaría de Investigación y Posgrado of the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional de Misiones (FHyCS/UNaM)*.

The article is structured as follows. First, a theoretical framework situates the abolitionist and regulationist debates on child labour in the Latin American context. Second, the socio-economic conditions of Posadas are described to contextualise the persistence of child labour. Third, the methodology is presented. Fourth, findings are reported in two parts: the typology of child labour situations observed, and the analysis of three institutional prevention resources. The article concludes with a discussion connecting the empirical findings to the theoretical framework and offering implications for social policy and future research.

2 Theoretical Framework: Child Labour Between Abolitionism and Regulation

The debate on child labour in Latin America has been historically structured around two opposing perspectives: abolitionism and regulationism. Understanding this tension is essential to situating the institutional responses analysed in this article and to interpreting the gap between formal governance frameworks and territorial realities.

The abolitionist perspective, dominant in international law and national legislation across the region, holds that child labour in all its forms constitutes a deprivation of childhood, undermining children's right to education, health, and full development. This position is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and reinforced by ILO Conventions No. 138 (1973) and No. 182 (1999), which establish minimum working ages and define the worst forms of child labour as internationally prohibited. In Argentina, this framework is reflected in Law No. 26.390, which sets the minimum employment age at 16, and in Article 148 bis of the Penal Code, which criminalises the economic exploitation of children (Redondo, 2015).

The regulationist perspective, by contrast, argues that not all forms of child participation in economic activities are inherently harmful, and that abolitionist frameworks fail to account for the social realities of Latin American families living in poverty. Drawing on ethnographic research and participatory movements of working children, regulationist scholars contend that certain forms of child labour are embedded in processes of socialisation and the intergenerational reproduction of social life, and should therefore be regulated rather than prohibited (Liebel, 2006; Padawer, 2014; Rausky & Frasco Zucker, 2022). Bolivia's 2014 decision to legalise child labour from the age of 10 represents the most radical institutional expression of this approach in the region (Willman, 2020).

Between these two positions, various theoretical perspectives broaden the definition of child labour to encompass informal education and the social dimensions that shape its configuration (Liebel, 2006; Liebel, Budde, Markowska-Manista & Meade, 2023; Padawer, 2014; Labrunée, 2024). These perspectives frame child labour within processes of socialisation and the reproduction of social life (Mastrangelo, 2015; Padawer, 2018; Rausky & Frasco Zucker, 2022). Research on specific sectors, such as yerba mate harvesting, further illustrates how child labour intersects with family economies and educational trajectories in the region (Re & Nessi, 2017). The global scale of the problem is also documented by the ILO (2022), which estimates that millions of children remain engaged in labour worldwide despite decades of normative and programmatic efforts. These conditions particularly affect children living in poverty, whose trajectories are shaped from an early age by the material needs of their families (Tuñón & González, 2022).

Figure 1. Key Characteristics of the Normative and Regulationist Approaches to Child Labour in Latin América.

Aspects	Abolitionist Perspective	Regulationist Perspective
Agents	International agencies, Government agencies, NGOs, Researchers	Worker unions, Child worker movements or organisations, Researchers, NGOs
Foundations	Children have the right to education and state protection. Advocates for improving living and working conditions. Opposes all activities disrupting educational opportunities and harming children's health and integrity.	Children have participatory rights. The normative perspective does not account for the realities of Latin American children. Not all work is harmful for children. Opposes the worst forms of child labour as per ILO (1999).
Objectives	Promote education as a means of future social mobility. Encourage structural changes with strong state intervention, including greater labour market regulations.	Regulate the child labour market. Establish a new framework for understanding child labour situations, challenging cultural relativism. Increase children's participation in public policies.
Sources	United Nations (1989). ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182. National and provincial child protection laws.	Ethnographic research funded by national science and technology agencies. Associative and participatory movements of child and adolescent workers.
Practices	Provincial programmes like 'Zero Child Labour in Misiones'. Recreational and educational activities. Data collection on activities and time use.	Ethnographic engagement with families and working children. Publications in scientific journals. Associative/participatory movements advocating for child workers' social recognition.
Main Criticism	A restrictive perspective that does not align with the social reality of Latin America. Proposes a childhood model derived from stable economies focused on consumption.	A lax perspective that allows the state to avoid its protective role regarding childhood.

Source: Author's Elaboration.

This article adopts an explicit abolitionist position. While the regulationist perspective raises legitimate questions about cultural relativism and the limitations of frameworks derived from stable, consumption-oriented economies, the empirical reality observed in Posadas does not support a regulationist approach. The children identified in field work are engaged in street vending, begging, and informal labour under conditions of precarity and without any form of institutional protection or labour oversight. Under current structural conditions — marked by urban poverty, institutional fragmentation, and the near-total absence of effective labour inspection mechanisms for informal settings — it is not possible to distinguish between harmful and non-harmful child labour in practice. Any form of child labour observed in this context

occurs outside the existing normative framework and beyond the reach of state regulation. Furthermore, the evidence gathered suggests that children who work in these conditions do so not as an expression of cultural agency, but as a consequence of their families' structural vulnerability, which shapes their trajectories from an early age and limits their future opportunities.

For these reasons, this article argues that child labour must be understood as a form of social unprotection that demands abolition in all its forms, while simultaneously recognising that abolition cannot be achieved through legal prohibition alone. The persistence of child labour despite decades of normative frameworks reveals the need to examine the institutional resources through which prevention is — or is not — operationalised in practice. It is precisely this gap between formal legislation and territorial intervention that the following sections seek to address.

3 Study Context: Social and Economic Inequalities in the City of Posadas

The city of Posadas, located in the northeast of Argentina, is the administrative and political capital of the province of Misiones. It is the province's most populous city and serves as its primary administrative centre. Posadas houses key provincial institutions, including government ministries and the Legislative Assembly of Misiones, as well as commercial districts with restaurants, wholesale supermarket chains, and a diverse array of services. The city's current administrative boundaries are defined by the *San Roque González de Santa Cruz International Bridge*, connecting it to Paraguay, the Municipality of Garupá, and the province of Corrientes. Historically, Posadas was part of a significant trade route linking Paraguay and Brazil, functioning as a transboundary hub for the circulation of goods, the operation of yerba mate enterprises, and the activities of trade associations (Urquiza, Álvarez & Pyke, 2015; Zang & Oviedo, 2024).

In the present, Posadas maintains a strong connection with the border city of Encarnación, particularly in terms of commerce and the movement of its residents (Abínzano, Arellano & Oviedo, 2015; Abínzano, 2017). Reciprocal exchanges between the two border cities are notable, including the shared use of mechanical services, tourism, student exchanges, and family reunions among residents of both cities.

In the city of Posadas, urban settlements gradually expanded, prompting a restructuring of the passenger transport system to reach areas that were once forested landscapes with only a few houses. The city grew horizontally along the *Paraná River*, and new social and recreational spaces were added to the extension of the *Costanera Avenue promenade*, including the recent inauguration of *Costa Sur Beach in Garupá* and the *Costanera in the Villa Cabello neighbourhood*. On the other side of the San Roque González de Santa Cruz International Bridge, the city of Encarnación (Paraguay) became a hub for purchasing clothing, technology, and food — a dynamic that was interrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Arellano & Cossi, 2024).

The new neighbourhoods of Posadas face various challenges, primarily inequalities in access to essential services such as potable water, electricity, and sewage systems. Most of these neighbours are popular settlements characterised by significant disparities among the houses, resulting in a lack of uniformity in the urban landscape. Newly established neighbours on the city's periphery exhibit the highest levels of unmet basic needs, often requiring state intervention through administrative offices such as the Office of the Public Defender. Posadas encompasses several settlements of popular neighbours, including families relocated due to

infrastructure developments affected by the environmental impact of the *Yacyretá Hydroelectric Plant*, and others formed through land demand and the occupation of public lands in the southern part of the municipality. Residents of these neighbours face significant difficulties, including limited access to employment, food insecurity, no healthcare and environmental sanitation (Brites & Ávalos, 2020).

These structural conditions of urban poverty are not incidental to the problem of child labour — they constitute its primary breeding ground. Argentina’s last *Encuesta de Actividades de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes (EANNA, 2018)*, documented the close relationship between unmet basic needs, household poverty, and the early entry of children into labour activities. At the national level, the survey revealed that children from households with the greatest socioeconomic vulnerability are disproportionately represented among those engaged in labour, particularly in urban informal economies. While provincial-level disaggregated data for Misiones are not publicly available from this survey, the structural conditions documented in Posadas — precarious housing, limited access to formal employment, and reliance on informal economic strategies — align closely with the national risk profile identified by the EANNA (Miño & Gómez, 2022; Miño, Gómez & Jiménez García, 2022).

This description highlights the effects of impoverishment on marginalised sectors in Latin American cities (Sassen, 2014), a situation exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened pre-existing inequalities and expanded the conditions under which child labour emerges (Habib et al., 2024). This context encouraged the work of community-based neighbourhood organisations, such as community kitchens, libraries, and other community services (Spina, Madrid & Rébora, 2022; Bulloni & Pinto, 2024).

In Posadas, social asymmetries shape households’ opportunities for active participation and the development of potential future trajectories. Popular neighbours are defined as territorial spaces affected by processes of marginalisation and precarisation, with limited access to basic services that enable families and children to meet their needs and sustain a dignified life (Wacquant, 2023). These conditions generate the structural vulnerability within which child labour trajectories emerge — not as individual or cultural choices, but as responses to the pressing material needs of families operating outside the reach of formal labour markets and social protection systems. It is precisely within this context that the institutional resources analysed in this article operate, and against which their preventive capacity must be evaluated.

4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in political science, with a perspective anchored in social work and the improvement of public management. It employs Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method, which enables findings from a situated local context to be connected to broader structural processes — in this case, the institutional fragmentation in child labour governance in Argentina. Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, this approach uses Posadas as a theoretical case through which to examine how national and provincial normative frameworks translate — or fail to translate — into effective territorial prevention practices.

The research forms part of a project that began in 2021, funded by the *Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) of Argentina*, with additional support from the *Programa Inrefro de Investigaciones de Frontera* and projects affiliated with the *Secretaría de Investigación y Posgrado of the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Nacional de Misiones (FHycS/UNaM)*, which is the researcher’s current institutional

affiliation. The study continues to the present day, and the findings reported here correspond to the field work conducted between 2021 and 2022.

Systematic field visits were conducted throughout 2022 across selected neighbours of Posadas and to the three institutional resources analysed in this article. Neighbours selection was guided by socioeconomic vulnerability criteria and the identification of areas with a higher suspected prevalence of child labour, ensuring broad geographic coverage and capturing patterns across different urban contexts. Field notes were recorded during these visits, documenting the conditions, contexts, and characteristics of children observed in labour situations. Institutional visits were conducted during the same period, allowing for direct observation of the physical spaces, daily routines, and operational dynamics of each resource. These visits complemented the interview data and provided the researcher with first-hand knowledge of the material and institutional conditions under which prevention work is carried out. Access to the institutional resources was facilitated through the presentation of the researcher's institutional credentials from her workplace — the Secretaría de Investigación y Posgrado of FHyCS/UNaM — along with documentation of the CONICET-funded research project. Field work was conducted independently by the researcher, though with the ongoing support of the broader research team to which she belongs.

Data collection included 67 semi-structured interviews with public officials and representatives of non-governmental organisations, primarily social workers engaged in child protection cases at provincial and municipal institutions in Posadas. A specific interview guide was designed for each institution, tailored to its objectives, target population, and operational logic. The interviews served a dual purpose: to gather information about institutional practices and available resources, and to contrast, verify, and deepen the researcher's own observations and hypotheses emerging from field work. In this sense, the interview material did not merely supplement the observational data — it functioned as a systematic tool for testing the study's central argument about institutional fragmentation between labour and social development sectors.

Three institutional resources were selected for in-depth analysis: the Urban Patrol, the Day Home, and the Santa Teresita Non-Residential Home. While the broader field work identified a wider range of institutions operating in the area of child protection in Posadas, these three were selected because they proved most representative of the preventive response to child labour within the sample, each illustrating a distinct dimension of how protection is operationalised in practice. The Urban Patrol was selected because it represents the only resource with a direct and systematic presence on the streets where child labour situations are most visible. The Day Home was selected because it provides structured educational and recreational support during daytime hours, directly occupying the time children might otherwise spend in labour or street situations. The Santa Teresita Non-Residential Home was selected because it addresses the intersection between maternal labour precarity and child vulnerability. Crucially, despite their institutional differences, all three resources share three characteristics: all receive public funding; none are residential; and all function as resources that families use to enable their own participation in the labour market without having to bring their children along to work-related activities.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process, particularly given the involvement of children and adolescents. Drawing on the principles of ethical reflexivity (Baranger, 2018), measures were taken to anonymise the identities of all minors observed, ensuring their confidentiality and protection throughout. The research also involved continuous dialogue with

local communities and institutional stakeholders to validate observations and minimise any potential disruption to their realities.

5 Child Labour Situations that Persist in the City of Posadas

The following section presents the child labour situations identified during field work in the city of Posadas between 2021 and 2022. These observations are not intended to offer a statistically representative account of child labour in the city, but rather to illustrate the forms through which it manifests in urban public spaces and to demonstrate, in concrete terms, the argument developed throughout this article: that child labour in Posadas occurs overwhelmingly within contexts of informality and structural vulnerability, beyond the reach of labour inspection mechanisms, and in conditions that make any form of regulatory protection practically impossible. All situations described involve children operating without institutional oversight, in many cases without adult family supervision, and in all cases outside the existing normative framework that prohibits their participation in economic activities. These observations were systematically contrasted with the accounts of professionals interviewed, whose testimonies confirmed and deepened the patterns identified in the field.

During the course of the fieldwork, observations in the city of Posadas identified boys, seemingly under the age of 12, selling mint candies or garbage bags. These children were often seen in pairs but were never accompanied by an adult family member. These situations occurred in the busiest areas of the city centre during the morning and aligned with the accounts of municipal officials, who noted that *“the children selling in the city centre of Posadas are usually between 7 and 12 years old and are the fourth generation of families engaged in street vending”* (Social Worker, municipal services).

According to the officials, these children belong to families who are already supported by municipal services in Posadas. The interviewed professionals highlighted a differentiated use of children in this type of street vending, explaining that *“families send children of those ages because they recognise, as a sales strategy, that people are more likely to buy from a child than from an adult”* (Social Worker, municipal services).

Other information that emerged during the interviews was that *“children selling on the streets can generate a considerable amount of money, which they often spend on soft drinks, hamburgers, and other products not typically consumed in their households”* (nutricionist, provincial services). The interviewed officials emphasised the difficulty of convincing these children to attend a programme or pursue alternative paths, as the money they earned allowed them to remain on the streets with autonomy, purchasing goods that they could not access through their families.

On several occasions children were observed engaging in street vending, specifically selling bags of lemons. Intervention agents suggested that *“adults distribute the lemons for sale and then take a portion of the earnings”* (nutricionist, provincial services). Officials warned that the lemon vending business appears to be managed by a third party, unrelated to the families of the working children, thereby constituting an informal enterprise involving child labour. In relation to such cases, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, children, presumably under the age of 12, were observed selling lemons at the intersection of Marconi and Trincheras de San José Avenues in the city of Posadas, without the supervision of any adult.

In other parts of the city, children were also observed working in small grocery stores and serving at food stalls during municipal events and fairs. A situation frequently noted involved

a child accompanied by his father in a busy area on the edge of the city, selling oranges. The child, presumably under the age of 10, would approach cars and, with his father's assistance, collect payments from customers. In another instance, a boy under the age of 10 was observed along the city's riverside, near prominent restaurants, where he was guarding cars without the presence of an accompanying adult. The child carried cardboard pieces to place on windshields and waited under the midday sun for cars to arrive. Various instances of adults begging with infants or children under the age of 5 were also observed. In these situations, adults often sent the child to ask for money while they waited seated in a public space. This scenario was further exacerbated by the social and economic circumstances of the pandemic (Habib et al., 2024).

It is important to note that the situations described do not encompass the entirety of child labour cases present in the city. Other forms, such as domestic work primarily performed by girls, also warrant further study. In this regard, the collection of data by organisations with the political responsibility and financial resources to conduct representative measurements could provide valuable contributions for the continuation of this research.

Taken together, these situations share a common set of structural features: they occur in informal settings, involve no contractual or labour protection of any kind, and fall entirely outside the monitoring capacity of labour authorities. In several cases, children are instrumentalised by third parties — whether family members or unrelated adults — as a means of generating income precisely because their presence increases earnings, as professionals interviewed confirmed. These conditions not only expose children to immediate risks but shape their long-term trajectories, naturalising labour as an early and unavoidable dimension of their lives. It is this structural dynamic — and not individual or cultural choice — that the institutional resources analysed in the following section seek, imperfectly and partially, to interrupt.

6 Institutional Resources for Preventing Child Labour Trajectories

The three institutional resources analysed in this section — the Urban Patrol, the Day Home, and the Santa Teresita Non-Residential Home — were not designed specifically as child labour prevention programmes. They belong to the municipal and provincial social development sector, operate with public funding, and share a common characteristic that is analytically central to the argument of this article: they function as protected spaces that families use to enable their own participation in the labour market without having to bring their children along to work-related activities. In doing so, they operate *de facto* as preventive mechanisms against child labour, interrupting — partially and imperfectly — the trajectories through which structural vulnerability translates into early labour insertion. Similar preventive resources have been documented in the urban informal economy of the border region (Zsögön, 2022), and provincial public policies such as the Zamba care spaces in Misiones represent comparable institutional responses to child labour risk (Flores Pérez, 2026). Their existence within the social development sector, rather than the labour sector, is not incidental: it reflects the institutional fragmentation described throughout this article, in which child labour is legislated and monitored as a labour phenomenon but prevented through social welfare resources that rarely coordinate with labour authorities.

The Urban Patrol

The Urban Patrol is a programme under the Directorate for Children and Adolescents (DNNyA) of the Municipality of Posadas. This institution also oversees the Early Childhood Spaces Programme and the Adolescent Participation Programme. The DNNyA, led by social workers,

plays a key role in child protection as an implementing body of National Law 26.061 and Provincial Law II-No. 16 on the Comprehensive Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

The Urban Patrol is a programme that continues the work initiated in 2010 by the Day Home of Posadas, focusing primarily on children in street situations. It consists of a team that patrols the city of Posadas, particularly the city centre, the Costanera, and the neighbourhoods of A4, San Isidro, and Belén. During the pandemic, their work shifted to providing supplies to families in these neighbours, delivering food and visiting the families they regularly assist.

From an analytical perspective, the Urban Patrol represents the resource most directly confronted with the forms of child labour described in the previous section. Its street-level presence places it in daily contact with children engaged in street vending, begging, and unsupervised circulation in public spaces — precisely the situations that fall outside the reach of labour inspection mechanisms. However, the programme operates under the municipal social development structure and maintains no formal coordination with provincial labour authorities or the COPRETI. This means that while it identifies and intervenes in child labour situations on the ground, its actions do not feed into the labour monitoring system that formally governs child labour prevention in Argentina. This disconnect illustrates, at the most concrete operational level, the institutional fragmentation that this article argues is the central obstacle to effective child labour prevention in Posadas.

The Day Home

The Day Home is an institution that currently functions under the Ministry of Addiction Prevention of the province of Misiones and has centres located in the cities of Posadas, Oberá, and Puerto Iguazú. The institution operates from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and attends children until 18 years old.

During a visit to this institution, it was observed that the facility includes a play area, several spacious classrooms, a sports space, and kitchen and dining spaces. While the spaces are suitable for the activities conducted, they show signs of insufficient maintenance, particularly in the roofing, with the potential for water leaks during rainy days. The centre is staffed by professionals from various disciplines, including educators, social workers, and a nutritionist. Teachers provide academic support and computer classes, and children attend the centre outside their school hours. The intervention focuses on addressing situations involving mistreatment, family addiction issues, conflictive environments, or unmet basic needs. The Day Home also welcomes children from various parts of Posadas who take the initiative to participate in the institution's activities, such as sport. Children are often brought to the centre either by their families or through referrals from administrative or judicial institutions. The Day Home coordinates its child protection activities primarily with the Children's Rights Advocacy Office and the Secretariat for Childhood. In 2009–2010, it was the first institution to initiate urban patrol work, promoting community assistance, which has significantly contributed to a decrease in the proportion of children in street situations in the city of Posadas.

Analytically, the Day Home embodies the preventive logic that this article identifies as characteristic of social development resources: by occupying children's time during daytime hours with educational and recreational activities, it reduces their exposure to street situations and informal labour contexts without explicitly targeting child labour as such. Its location within the Ministry of Addiction Prevention — rather than the Ministry of Labour — further

illustrates how prevention in practice is organised around social vulnerability broadly conceived, rather than around child labour specifically. From an abolitionist perspective, this is both a strength and a limitation: a strength because it reaches children through a non-stigmatising, needs-based approach; a limitation because it operates in institutional isolation from the normative framework that formally governs child labour prevention, reducing the systemic impact of its work.

The Non-Residential Home: Santa Teresita

A visit was made to the Santa Teresita Home, located at Santiago del Estero Street 1601, in the city of Posadas. This institution provides a space where girls under the age of 18 in situations of social vulnerability can pursue their education while returning to their homes of origin on weekends. The detection and referral of cases typically come from the Judicial Family Court and the Department of Social Development. However, in an interview, it was noted that almost 90% of the cases are brought to the home by mothers acting on their own initiative. These mothers, part of single-parent families, work as street vendors or domestic workers in the city of Posadas. According to the professionals at the home, these women often report a lack of support resources to continue working without having to bring their daughters along.

The girls attending the home come from neighbours such as popular settlements next to the Fátima hospital, Villa Lanús and new settlements near the airport. The women who bring their daughters to this institution often tell the staff that they want something better for their daughters, as they themselves lack formal education and struggle to support and monitor their children's school activities. According to the interviewees, there were two cases of young women who, upon turning 18 and reaching the age limit for staying at the Home, received financial assistance from UNICEF and continued their studies at university.

The Home provides mothers who work and require childcare support with the option for their daughters to arrive before breakfast — very early in the morning — and leave after dinner, past 7:00 p.m. The girls arrive at the Home in the morning, have breakfast there, go to school, return for lunch, engage in activities such as schoolwork with academic support, have dinner, and then go back to their homes. The Home employs a psychologist who focuses on personal development, autonomy, and the life trajectories of the girls, while maintaining a connection with their families of origin. At the Home, it was noted that girls who return to their families over the weekend often come back on Monday expressing significant hunger. For this reason, the Home provides food packages, as the girls report that during the weekends they usually only eat *reviro* — a traditional rural local dish made from flour, eggs and water — and *mate cocido*, a beverage made from yerba mate prepared like tea.

The Santa Teresita Home is analytically significant for two reasons. First, it addresses the most indirect but structurally important pathway through which child labour emerges: maternal labour precarity. By providing girls with a protected space during their mothers' working hours, it prevents the situation — documented repeatedly in the field work — in which mothers engaged in street vending or domestic work bring their daughters along, exposing them to labour and street environments from an early age. Second, the fact that most cases arrive through mothers' own initiative, rather than through institutional referral, reveals both the genuine demand for this type of resource and the weakness of formal detection and referral systems. From the abolitionist perspective adopted in this article, the Home represents a concrete example of how effective prevention requires not only prohibiting child labour normatively, but actively supporting the structural conditions — particularly maternal

employment and childcare — that make it possible for families to keep children out of labour situations.

7 Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm the central hypothesis from which this research departs: that the historical consolidation of child labour governance within the labour sector has produced an institutional framework that is structurally disconnected from the territorial realities of prevention. Since Argentina's first child labour legislation in 1907, the problem has been conceived and managed primarily as a labour market issue, governed by conditions of work, minimum age standards, and labour informality. This original framing has persisted over time, structuring the administrative logic through which child labour is monitored and regulated — including through the COPRETI system — while leaving the most effective preventive resources operating at the margins of the system that formally governs the problem they address.

The three institutional resources analysed — the Urban Patrol, the Day Home, and the Santa Teresita Non-Residential Home — were not designed specifically as child labour prevention programmes. They belong to the social development sector, operate with public funding, and share a defining characteristic: they function as protected spaces that families use to enable their own participation in the labour market without having to bring their children along to work-related activities. Their preventive impact is real but structurally limited. They reach the children and families they serve, but their work does not feed into a unified child protection system capable of addressing child labour at a systemic level. Furthermore, none of them maintain formal channels of coordination with labour authorities, meaning that the situations they identify and address on the ground remain invisible to the normative framework that formally governs child labour prevention in Argentina.

This institutional fragmentation has direct implications for the abolitionism versus regulation debate that frames this article. The empirical evidence gathered in Posadas does not support a regulationist approach. The children observed working in the streets of Posadas do so in conditions of informality, precarity, and structural vulnerability, without any form of institutional protection or labour oversight. Under these conditions, it is not possible to distinguish between harmful and non-harmful child labour in practice, nor is there any realistic mechanism through which regulation could be enforced. What the field work reveals is not cultural agency but structural compulsion: children work because their families' material conditions leave no other option, and they do so in environments that limit their development, restrict their educational trajectories, and expose them to exploitation by third parties.

It is undeniable that forms of vulnerability and social asymmetries in access to services such as healthcare, education, and decent work are intrinsically linked to precarious labour conditions and the risk of the worst forms of child labour. This implies that without significant improvements in the structural determinants of quality of life, it will be exceedingly difficult to eradicate the informality in work that generates and perpetuates child labour in urban areas. Abolition cannot be achieved through legal prohibition alone. The persistence of child labour in Posadas despite decades of normative frameworks at the national, provincial, and regional level reveals the need for a unified, multi-stakeholder child protection system in which social development resources, labour authorities, judicial institutions, and community organisations operate in a coordinated and systematic way.

Finally, this study underscores the value of situated, case-based research as a critical tool in social work and public management. By examining a specific urban context in depth, it becomes possible to identify the gap between formal governance frameworks and territorial realities that aggregate data and normative analyses cannot capture. *The romanticisation of child labour — present in regulationist perspectives — is particularly problematic in environments where adults mediate labour relationships without state protection and within informal employment settings.* Situated research challenges these romanticised narratives by documenting the adverse circumstances and lived experiences of children in environments that are ill-suited to fostering their holistic development. It is from this situated knowledge that more effective, context-sensitive, and structurally informed social policies must be built.

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