Social Work & Society ▪▪▪ G. de Castro Lamela, C. Giamello & M. Céspedes Quintanilla:
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Globalization as seen through a locked door. The impact of the Great Recession on the wellbeing of "latchkey children" in Spain (2008-2018)[1]

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1   Background and Methods

The publication of *The Relational Impact of Poverty on Children and Adolescents. Lessons from the Analysis of Children's Wellbeing and Child Rights in Spain 2007-2015* (De Castro: 2017) was a starting point for constructing the theoretical design for both Educo's research and reports about Latchkey Children in Spain (Educo: 2017 and 2018). These publications also emerge from the joint publication *Social Change and International Cooperation in the XXI century,* by Educo Foundation, Universitat de Barcelona and Icaria Editorial (Educo: 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015). Educo is an international NGO which works with children and their communities to promote just and equitable societies that guarantee their rights and wellbeing.

The aim of the ongoing Latchkey Children research process was to get to know and describe the daily lives of children and adolescents in Spain who, due to specifics circumstances related to context and era, live their daily lives in conditions of material deprivation and involuntary social isolation, as well as dealing with the causes and consequences of these conditions on their development on an individual, relational and social basis.

Loneliness and isolation are no longer a problem. They are a niche market. Renting hugs for a nap, for example, costs 50 euros today or 100, if you want twice as many hugs. You can also rent companions to go to the cinema or for dinner. Or rent grandmothers. You can even rent mothers so that the imbalance between your working hours and those of your children are not so problematic (Moruno: 2017). The market society, that matrix in which we live, cares about us. Of course. We are its **precious consumers**.

Latchkey children (Educo: 2017) live on the margins of this ideal world where you can buy 'something' to combat loneliness and isolation, without having your way of life questioned. These children belong to the **precarious consumers**. They spend their afternoons alone at home. They may also eat dinner alone. Often, they eat breakfast alone, or simply decide not to. They have keys to their homes, but not because the 'time has come' in their development.

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In the case of these children, the key has ceased to be a rite of passage to greater autonomy and responsibility, to become a resource available to the labor market. Thus, mothers and fathers are faced with the dilemma of choosing between survival or caring for their children.

This is a childhood at risk of social exclusion due to a **lack of economic resources, their caregivers' lack of time**, or a **lack of social networks**. Or due to a scarcity of all three, which translates into social isolation with dimensions of poverty behind closed doors. This is, in short, **the relational impact of poverty in childhood and adolescence** (De Castro: 2017).

But even beyond the Latchkey Children, we find children who experience singular forms of isolation in the midst of the crowd. They are not alone in the house, but they are not protected either. There is someone in the house, but he or she is not there for them. They are isolated, invisible. Their world is lived in one room. The *Other Latchkey Children* have entered into the most apocalyptic versions of the 21st century before all of us. They are inhabitants of an increasingly urban world, densely populated and full of inequalities that corner them, with their backpacks of precariousness and poverty, in a minute, private world. The *Other Latchkey Children* perceive these presences, listen to their noises, their complaints, their signs and even their silences. And at times, the *Other Latchkey Children* perceive their own disturbing reality.

> "Then we'll ask her (that girl) to be autonomous, innovative, curious. To care about others and manage her emotions. To have initiative, to integrate and not to isolate herself. To make herself respected. But she will have to do it alone. No one will pick her up after school. They will not applaud her at the end of the school year, not because they do not want to, but because of the conditions of modern life in Spain, which is recovering from the Great Recession. There is no time to love, to care, to be, to care for them. And if time is not your family's scarce resource, money or the scarcity of close and social relationships will be. Or all three forms of scarcity at once."
> Extract from: *Latchkey Children in Spain* (Educo, 2017)

1.1 A Methodological Note

In relation to methodology, the technical design has first of all involved the use of methods of a descriptive and inductive nature for compiling and interpreting the information collected and to enable a description of the phenomenon, the subjects and their context, in order to then move on to analytical methods to get to know the essential elements and the types of relationship they have with each other.

Thus, the methodological approach has been qualitative and quantitative, which has required collecting information from various secondary sources *ex ante* and *ex post* fieldwork, the use of two surveys in March-April 2017 and 2018, and open interviews with parents, educators, professionals and researchers.

The first Educo survey was carried out by Salvetti & Llombart in April 2017, based on 600 surveys of families with at least one employed adult, with children between 3 and 16 years of age. It use net income per household based on the composition of adults/children, according to the formula for calculating the poverty threshold used by the Spanish Statistical National Institute (INE) on a state basis. For a family of two adults and two children under 14 years of age, the risk of poverty threshold is 16,823 euros per year. Margin of error +/- 4/5%. The second Educo 2018 survey was carried out in April/May by the company Salvetti & Llombart, using a sample of 400 households living in poverty with at least one child between

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the ages of 6 and 13, and 200 households without risk of poverty, in cities in Spain with more than 50,000 inhabitants.

The research process will need to continue to collect, construct and interpret more detailed information from children and adolescents, as well as carry out an in-depth study of the emerging social phenomena accumulated from the previous research process. This was first-stage research to describe and explore a population of disperse and hidden children. To do this, we use mixed methods to describe, explore and understand latchkey children and the daily lives of their families and the consequences on children's wellbeing. As mentioned earlier, Educo is an NGO that works to fulfil children's rights in pursuit of their wellbeing. We have had the opportunity to carry out a survey and we use open data from Eurostat and INE (Spain). But mainly we prepared open interviews with youth workers, facilitators and social workers that work directly with vulnerable populations, and parents. As we also mentioned, it was first-stage research, and we have not, until now, carried out interviews or focus groups with children or adolescents. We are currently assessing the appropriateness and suitability of this decision. We are considering whether or not it is necessary and how we would do it in terms of the ethical and methodological approaches. The II Interdisciplinary International Conference: Child Maltreatment and Well-Being (CMW II- Berlin, 2019) conference was an ideal place to exchange these considerations.

We released a publication about latchkey children in Spain in two parts, in 2017 and 2018, and they have resonated in the public and social agenda. For an NGO like Educo, it was important to have this kind of public space to highlight the situation of vulnerable children and families, to support advocacy actions and to know more about the impact of our partners – small, local, social organizations - to improve children's wellbeing. Indeed, the aim of this first-stage research was to make the situation of scarcity visible (in terms of income, time and relationships, in relation to the wellbeing approach) and explore its consequences.

In addition to the interviews with social workers and youth workers with expertise in social work, childhood and social exclusion, we reviewed available literature and data about the social conditions of families (household characteristics, parental employment situation) during the Great Recession in Spain.

2   Results and Conclusions

2.1 When Precariousness Becomes the Norm

Latchkey children in Spain have crossed the darkest doors of the 21st century and show a disturbing trend. They live amid the deafening noise of talk about the importance of being independent, integrated, builders of positive relationships, active citizens and entrepreneurs with initiative. But their daily lives take place in unstable situations of isolation and at risk from social exclusion. They may be virtually connected to others, if they can, but they are alone.

In this Results and Conclusions chapter, in order to present this exploratory inquiry, we noted that the interviews with social workers were the most fruitful technique for understanding their lives, culture, and context. However, the interviews with parents revealed narratives that improve our understanding of the daily lives of latchkey children. We show examples of both of them in the following quotes and stories from our field work.

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Next, we follow with a brief reflection on the opportunities for these children and adolescents, in this stage of the research, from the point of view of social workers. This information shows us next steps for improving this research, in relation to the importance of adults as social references for children at this time and in this social context. Moreover, this first step of exploratory research suggests that we need to have a deep and broad understanding of this social phenomenon. Our concern is that of improving children's wellbeing and fulfilling children's rights, as members of a research action organization, and attempting to explore and understand the relationship between precariousness and the narrowing of horizons for constructing and improving children and adolescents' social expectations. This is what the literature on children's wellbeing acknowledges as the relational impact of poverty in children and adolescents (De Castro, 2017).

> *What are your children lacking?*
>
> *Stability. Even if they feel OK, I know I'm not living in a place we will be able to stay in. I want to feel calm. If I feel emotionally stable, they will feel better too. Because they feel everything. My son draws pictures of himself alone on the street. (Marta, a single mother of three children.)*

The deep cut on Ariadne's cheek (9 years old) can be seen from afar. So can her smile. "But where are you going with that cut? - asks Anna, the social worker - what happened to you?" Now her smile widens, surprised by the greeting and the question. "Oh, this? - says Ariadne, touching her face. - Dad scratched me with his toenail. To sleep, I put my head where my feet go, just like my brother. That way we are more comfortable in bed."

Ariadne shares a room and a mattress with her brother and her father. They rent a room in a flat in La Florida neighbourhood, in the most populated city in the Barcelona metropolitan area: L'Hospitalet. Like other cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants in Spain, such as Barcelona, Badalona, A Coruña, Madrid or Móstoles, it has areas with a very high population density, as explained in Educo's 2018 Report: *The Other Latchkey Children*.

Only three years ago, for the first time in human history, most people lived in cities. This makes up 54% of the world's population and will reach 66% in 2050 (UN: 2014). In Europe, 75% already live in cities. Humanity has become urban and even what is left of rural life is directly influenced by the large cities nearby. The urban world and high-density areas are growing. The wealth of the 500 richest people on the planet is also growing, increasing by 750 billion euros in 2017 alone (Educo: 2018; Gnutti:2017). At the same time, the population at risk from poverty and social exclusion is growing in Spain, especially in single-parent households. It is worth noting that, in 2017, of every 100 single-parent households in Spain, 45 are employed, 43 are unemployed and 12 find themselves outside the employment market (INE, 2018; Educo, 2018).

As we said, this first-stage research process will need to continue with the collection and analysis of more detailed information directly from children and adolescents about their daily lives, as well as an in-depth study of the emerging social phenomena accumulated from previous research processes.

The Neighborhood: The Final Frontier

Poverty makes the world smaller. The neighborhood, or even just a room, is these children's world. The impossibility of accessing activities, especially in the summer, conditions the lives

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of these children, creating invisible borders. They do not leave their neighborhood. Or rather, they do not leave the area they live in. More than 60% of children from households at risk from poverty had not attended organized activities the previous summer (Educo: 2017), a situation that is aggravated in the case of adolescents. Moreover, 60% of these children do not even go on vacation for at least one week a year. So, if they do not go on vacation or attend organized activities, what do they do?

On the way to the woods, on the bus, they're all glued to the windows. "I've seen the world!" shouts a boy without looking away from the horizon. Social worker Ana Cardona tells us: "If they don't come to our camps in the summer, at noon you find them in the street with a bag of chips. That's all their food. Outings provide more diverse experiences, meaning that they have more elements to put in their 'suitcase', more realities to compare their own ones with. We value the enrichment of their range of experiences. That is the educational impact of any outing".

Out of the 11 teenagers in the group, ten of them are spending the night away from home for the first time. For one of them, it will be the first time he swims in a pool. It is quite an experience for these 14-year-olds who have spent every summer of their lives on the same streets of the neighborhood they live in.

Being natives of the crisis and growing up at risk from poverty and social exclusion, given the Spanish social dynamics of today, also makes up these children's personalities.

> You realize that you are normalizing precariousness. Even families do it. They don't have much hope, and they are very anchored in this, and that's how it is. They accept unfair contracts, or often they don't even have a contract. I am a reference person for a group of teenagers from a secondary school, and I notice this 'normalization of precariousness' which manifests itself in low aspirations, even though they have skills. And they don't need to go to university, but many of them have good skills. But they observe their role models; their parents don't work, and that makes a mark. They are undervalued, the education system discourages them. They are children with 'baggage', they lose motivation, their inner light goes out. (Alexia Cañamares, youth worker, Fundació Pare Manel in Nou Barris, Barcelona.)

This first section of the Results and Conclusions for this exploratory inquiry shows us the importance of considering not only the precariousness but also the relational impact of poverty on children and adolescents, especially in relation to the construction of expectations, that is, the space for emerging aspirations and opportunities. That space is vital for expanding the freedom to be or do what they have reason to value, the basis of paradigms like Development as Freedom (Otano, 2015).

The scarcity of social interaction and its effect on situations of forced social isolation reveal the relational impact of poverty on childhood and adolescence. Recent research using a children's wellbeing approach has found evidence of children perceiving subtle labels of poverty, which confirms that what concerns children is not a lack of resources per se, but exclusion from activities that other children appear to take for granted, and embarrassment and shame at not being able to participate on equal terms with other children (Redmond: 2008). At this point, we can confirm that stigma and shame emerge as important themes in child poverty research with children and adolescents (Camfield:2010; De Castro: 2017).

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2.2 Impossible Work-Life Balance

Only seven countries in Europe do not offer a universal allowance for dependent children, and Spain is one of them. The consequence of this policy is a violation of children's rights for at least one in every three children, bearing in mind that the percentage of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion is as high as 32.9%.

This situation of regression in children's rights is aggravated by two central factors: employment and housing. Economic recoveries without employment and the deterioration of the home ownership situation for thousands of families, especially those with dependent children, demonstrate how precariousness has become the norm in Spanish society.

First, in relation to *employment*, a decade after the Great Recession, 13.4% of working people cannot escape poverty. The number of poor workers has increased during the economic recession, and this figure has stagnated in a growth phase. Employment as a tool for social integration has been weakened. The recession and changes in employment laws have led to, as well as temporary work and the black economy, less employment protection, part-time jobs, flexible working hours or sporadic jobs on an hourly basis, as well as low and stagnant wages. Ten percent of employees are poor, while self-employed workers account for 30 percent. Precariousness as the norm turns employment into a means for survival rather than a mechanism for social mobility and wellbeing.

Table 1: In-work poverty

Age	Status	Year 2016
18 to 64 years	Workers in poverty	13,4%
18 to 64 years	Employees	10,1%
18 to 64 years	Self -employment	27,8%

Source: Eurostat 2017.

Balancing employment and having a family is a challenge for 50% of households, regardless of their income, but it is an impossible situation for those who live with a lack of resources, time and support networks. It is from this social gap that the 580,000 *latchkey children* in Spain emerge (Educo: 2017).

A second factor of this regression of rights and wellbeing is the precariousness of the *housing* situation. This research highlights the lives of families with dependent children, single parents, at risk of poverty and social exclusion and living in urban contexts. A growing group, and one which is left out of the statistics spotlight, the only alternative for these families is to settle for family life in a single room.

According to the Educo 2018 survey, only 8% of families made up of couples with children share housing with other adults (grandparents, relatives or others). In contrast, single-parent families double this percentage, as 17% share their place of residence. There are references to a surge in rented rooms in densely populated urban areas, where children are at risk from isolation and a lack of protection, and who are not just left alone at home, but are also living with people who are not necessarily looking out for them. They are the ***other* latchkey children.**

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- Are families living in one room?

Yes, it started to happen with the economic crisis, people can't access a rent, and here, rent is going up... 850, 900 euros! Then, if the flat is a little bit big, they increase the price and they are forced to put someone else in it. This is becoming quite common.

- Are these children in their house with strangers? Or with people...

...who don't look after them. Maybe physically the child isn't alone, but for all intents and purposes it's as if he is, because there's no relationship. They may spend six hours playing video games that aren't age-appropriate, that are violent. These children no longer expect anything from others either. I think it's worse than being alone, it's a situation of invisibility. (Ana Cardona, social worker, Asociación Esplai La Florida (L'Hospitalet- Barcelona)).

- What is the experience of these children who are left alone, but with strangers in their homes?

They are children of single mothers who, when they can find a job, leave their children alone in flats shared with other people, with strangers, or paying a pittance to a neighbour to look after them, but without any emotional attachment to them. They live in tension and on an emotional level they generate blockages, hyperactivity, taking out what they are living through with aggression or exaggerated energy. There are insecurities, fears and dangers, and the most serious consequence is mental health problems.

- Might they also be in the care of an older sibling?

There are cases of older sisters and brothers who have never been able to be children. In our foundation, we have children who do not want to leave after being here for three hours every afternoon. You realize then that for them this is a safe space. When they leave and go back to a cold, damp place, they will not have a space to play in, to do homework and they will all have to sleep in the same bed. (Maria Nadeu, social worker, Fundació Salut Alta, Barcelona).

Loneliness in Crowded Cities

The *other latchkey children* also appear in other densely populated cities, alongside the conflicts and consequences of these vulnerable lives.

- Do you have cases of children and adolescents who, because of the family housing situation, share their home with people from outside their families?

Yes, there are, although I can't give you numbers because we haven't collected them, and we usually observe that the situation is quite conflictive. Maybe the other people he or she lives with is a man or a woman without children, so the children bother them. There are conflicts. And mothers come here worried and tell us: "they can't leave the room", "they complain because the children are bothering them". This makes these children's spaces even smaller. They have to live inside a single room, they even have to eat there. I don't want to be thrown out of here, I can't go anywhere else right now, so I'm going to make as little noise as possible. To disturb as little as possible.

- How do they get into this situation of living in one room?

We have two types of families in this situation. On the one hand, there are families who have had to leave the flat because they have been evicted or thrown out, mainly because of financial issues. They have to find a place for themselves and find a room. And it's not 'their' territory, it's foreign to them. They must comply with the rules because it's not 'their' house. These situations occur. On the other hand, there are also situations where they have their own apartment, but because as they can't make ends meet, they have to

> rent a room to be able to keep it. In the end it is out of necessity. (Alexia Cañamares, youth worker at the Fundació Pare Manel in Nou Barris, Barcelona.)

This situation of isolation and social exclusion becomes chronic in children from shared homes at risk of poverty when the mother works. And almost one in every two mothers in these conditions works. It is a private, indoor poverty.

Multiple house sharing has effects on the family and on the individual. A specialist in social work, Lucía Martínez Virto (2017), points out that situations of "unwanted multiple house sharing" can cause an increase in stress, a decline in physical and mental health, demotivation or loss of independence, juvenile frustration and low self-esteem. Sharing an apartment with others means that children and adolescents have less personal space for development and living with other adults can lead to an unstable family climate, a loss of references, a confusion of roles or less parental accompaniment. Situations of conflict, violence and a lack of protection may also increase. "The impact of these consequences on the personal and educational development of children is truly dramatic," says Martínez Virto.

In this second part of the Results and Conclusions, the focus was on the information collected and analyzed in two emerging factors that shape work-life balance and the daily life of urban Spanish families at risk of poverty and social exclusion: employment and housing. But following our theoretical framework (Mullainathan et al:2013; Moruno:2018), we can conclude that time is the factor we need to explore further in order to have a clear understanding about how it conditions families, their caregivers' opportunities and their children's expectations (having it, the capacity to use it, or its scarcity). **"Scarcity captures the mind"** says new research on poverty and the scarcity trap, that shows how living in precarious conditions seizes our attention, our "mental bandwidth", as well as our way of thinking and our ability to weigh up information in order to make good decisions (Mullaintathan and Shafir: 2013).

Poverty is a burden on capacity, these studies assert, while dismantling a myth: failure does not cause poverty, but it is poverty that perpetuates failure. A myth, a prejudice, that results in a way of thinking about the lives of poor people. "Being a good parent usually requires bandwidth – argue Mullainathan and Shafir (2013)-. It requires complex decisions and sacrifices. Children should be encouraged to do things they don't like, appointments should be kept, activities should be planned, teachers should be met and what they say should be taken into account, private teachers or extra help should be hired, and then supervised. This is difficult for anyone, no matter what resources are available. It is much more difficult when mental bandwidth is reduced. At that time there is not the clarity of mind necessary for being patient, or for doing the right thing (...) Being a good parent requires many things. But first of all, it requires a free mind. This is a luxury that the poor cannot afford".

This approach opens up a number of other possible explanations about the decision- making process for people that live in scarcity or poverty, and also provides opportunities to improve policies, considering trade-offs between abundance or scarcity of time, resources, and close and social relationships (Educo:2017; White; 2017). "Time orders life in society and society is ordered by how time is lived. (...) Without time you cannot decide, without making a decision you cannot have time" said Moruno (2018:13)

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2.3 Slipping through the system

Time is the new resource that all powers crave, a finite resource like water or oil. Therefore, any loophole for hijacking the consumer's gaze is worth it. Capture their attention in the street or on the internet, by telephone or when they open the mailbox. Time is scarce, it runs out, it breaks down. It is not enough to be a citizen, to participate in social and political life, to have time to ourselves, to feel satisfied with the care and quality that our human relationships require.

> We are emotional beings. When precariousness becomes chronic, emotions are crushed. And so, you numb them. (Esther Bonal, social worker, Assocació Xamfrà, Barcelona.)

The 21st century does not resemble the wonderful expectations that were placed on it in the 20th century in terms of wellbeing, quality of life and the fulfilment of rights, given the amazing scientific and technological advances of the recent past. After a decade of recession in Spain, which deepened and widened precariousness, it seems that it is now becoming normal, natural.

> "There are so many risk cases that often when a mother reports 'I earn 500 euros a month', you know she hardly has any access to benefits. It's not normal. I surprise myself when they come to tell me that they have a job and are earning 1000 euros. I celebrate with them and say: 'What a lot of money!' and then I think to myself: 'Excuse me?'. I now think 500 or 650 euros for a full-time job is normal. No, it's not normal, I don't want to get used to it." (Ana Cardona, social worker, Associació La Florida, Barcelona.)

The care crisis that manifests itself today, intertwined with the employment crisis, is a crisis of the capitalist model of accumulation which dictates that in order to continue to accumulate, it must be sustained by reproductive labor. But at the same time, as Moruno states (2018:58), that process of accumulation destabilizes the terrain on which social reproduction can develop.

We will have to understand the interrelated and cyclical crisis better in order to follow up this exploratory inquiry with better questions and analysis, and think about the consequences of this "erosion of the social in the late capitalist modernity" (White:2017). Additionally, this exploratory research on certain children's lives and their immediate and social relational context, latchkey children in densely populated urban areas in Spain, allows us to support the importance of a Wellbeing approach (Deneulin:2014; White:2009 & 2015; Tisdall:2015). A Wellbeing approach focuses on the material, relational and subjective dimensions – a 3D approach (IDS:2009)-, and spans Development Studies, Social Anthropology, Human Geography, Sociology and Social Work and Political Science, and allows for the identification of people as relational subjects within a specific social and cultural context. And in addition, in a specific period, at a certain time, taking into consideration the Scarcity Trap (Mullainathan et al:2013) in the link between time, economic resources and close and social relationships.

At this point, taking into account that this exploratory inquiry is a Research for Action initiative, supported by a social organization that has social action programs and policy advocacy initiatives, we think that it could be interesting to analyze and compare the empirical phenomena collected with new information taken from participatory methods which contemplate children's and adolescents' direct perceptions of their lives, context and

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expectations. Furthermore, it could be interesting to explore the effects of new scenarios, like the coronavirus crisis and the social and economic situation that will follow, public actions and responses, and the focus on improving wellbeing and fulfilling children's rights.

The decade of the Great Recession has left its mark on the daily life of Spanish society. Precariousness is conquering spaces and has now installed itself in our perceptions and expectations, inundating the foundations of politics and culture. The challenge is to build a fairer society. Resistance begins by defending the last bastion: preventing precariousness from prevailing over common sense.

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