

Child development trajectories in welfare institutions in Colombia

Trayectorias del desarrollo infantil en instituciones de protección en Colombia

Esteban Galvis Serna, Carolina Maldonado Carreño, Andrés Molano

Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

* e.galvis911@uniandes.edu.co

Received: June 16, 2020

Accepted: December 11, 2020

Background

Studies on the development of institutionalized children are scarce, but the results point to a negative relationship between living in an institutional environment and child development indicators. Evidence indicates that institutionalization poses a risk for the manifestation of problems in physical development and neurobiological markers of development, for the establishment of secure attachment relationships, and for delayed cognitive development. Consequently, the consensus regarding welfare institutions is to consider them as contexts of risk for child development, which is supported by the idea of the institution as an environment of low quality, whose characteristics generate a generalized deprivation for the different areas of child development. For the case of Colombia, little research exists on this topic, although there are some descriptive studies that characterize children in the welfare system and document institutional characteristics similar to those of other countries.

Aims

The present study has two objectives. The first is to describe the quality of welfare institutions and the developmental trajectories of children in them. The second is to explore whether these trajectories of child development are associated with the quality of the institutions.

Method & procedures

For this research, a short-term longitudinal design was implemented, which sought to follow up the variables of interest over a period of 10 months (three data collection points). When studying some domains of early childhood development, it is possible to consider this type of design, since it is expected to observe relatively pronounced changes in the cognitive and socioemotional areas due to the critical periods of development at this stage.

For the study, each participant contributed up to three measurement points and the chronological age of the child was used as a time metric, which allowed us to integrate the average developmental process of children with different ages at the different measurement points and to model their trajectories as a single average trajectory. The data were collected from a sample of 127 children between 2 and 6 years of age at the time of the first assessment, distributed among four private institutions in Bogotá, Colombia. The child's developmental condition was considered as a criterion for exclusion from the sample. Thus, children with disability conditions recorded in the report of admission to the institution were not included.

The measures of the dependent variables were the Battelle Developmental Inventory, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale - Revised (ECERS - R) and the Caregiver-Child Social and Emotional Relationship Rating Scale (CCSERRS).

To answer the research questions, descriptive analyses were conducted on the characteristics of the institutions and child development. Subsequently, a multilevel model of change was used to explore cognitive and socioemotional developmental trajectories. This model accounted for the nesting of data at three levels: within-individual, between-subjects, and between-institutions, and represented within-subject variation in child development as a function of change in chronological age (Singer & Willet, 2003) over the duration of the study.

Results & discussion

In general, the results in the total scores of both scales reflect a low quality of the institutions, which follow a similar pattern for all the subscales that make up each instrument, except for the one that evaluates the staff's perception of the conditions of the institution in the ECERS. Specifically, the results point to a tendency to a delay in development, as they point to an age for the assessed domains below the average age of the children (49.04 months, $SD = 14.07$), which places their cognitive and socioemotional development at a low level.

Regarding the children's developmental trajectories, the initial results reveal that children vary significantly in their initial state in each of the domains assessed and in the trajectories of the cognitive and socioemotional areas. The positive and significant coefficients in the intercept show a relatively low intercept, which suggests the existence of manifest problems in the children's development. The positive and significant slope in the cognitive and socioemotional domains indicates that, for each additional month of age of the child, there is an increase in the average score of the cognitive and socioemotional domain.

Conclusion

The results of the present study advance the understanding of the development of children in welfare institutions in Colombia, and are perhaps the first to offer a longitudinal characterization for the Latin American context. The general conclusion of different studies (Wade et al., 2019) points to an association between the existence of problems in child development and the institutional life experience, with difficulties for children to achieve improvements even after institutionalization. However, the results of this study allow us to observe a different pattern in child development in welfare institutions. The findings from the developmental trajectories models provide information alluding to an overall positive change over time. The longer the child stays in the institution, the better the cognitive and socioemotional development.

Keywords: child development, developmental trajectories, institutional quality, longitudinal designs, welfare institutions

References:

- Almas, A. N., Woodbury, M. R., Zeanah, Ch. H., Papp, L. J., Nelson, Ch. A. & Fox, N. A. (2020). The impact of caregiving disruptions of previously institutionalized children in multiple outcomes in the late childhood. *Child Development, 91*(1), 96-109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13169>
- Bakermas-Kranenburg, M. J., Steele, H., Zeanah, C. H., Muhamedrahimov, R. J., Vorria, P., Dobrova-Krol, N. A., Steele, M., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Juffer, F., & Gunnar, M. R. (2011). Attachment and emotional development in institutional care: Characteristics and catch up. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 76*, 62-91.
- Cardona, J. F., Manes, F. Escobar, J., López, J., & Ibáñez, A. (2012). Potential consequences of abandonment in preschool-age: Neuropsychological findings in institutionalized children. *Behavioural Neurology, 25*, 291-301. <http://doi.org/10.3233/BEN-2012-110205>
- Singer, J., & Willett, J. (2003). *Applied longitudinal data analysis. Modeling change and event occurrence*. Oxford University Press
- The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team. (2008). The effects of early social-emotional and relationship experience on the development of Young orphanage children. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 73*, 1-296.

Financial support: Departamento Administrativo de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación (COLCIENCIAS), Colombia; Vicerrectoría de Investigación y Creación, Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia.

How to cite: Galvis Serna, E., Maldonado Carreño, C., & Molano, A. (2021). Trayectorias del desarrollo infantil en instituciones de protección en Colombia. *Psicoperspectivas, 20*(1). <https://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol20-issue1-fulltext-2012>



Published under [Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)