



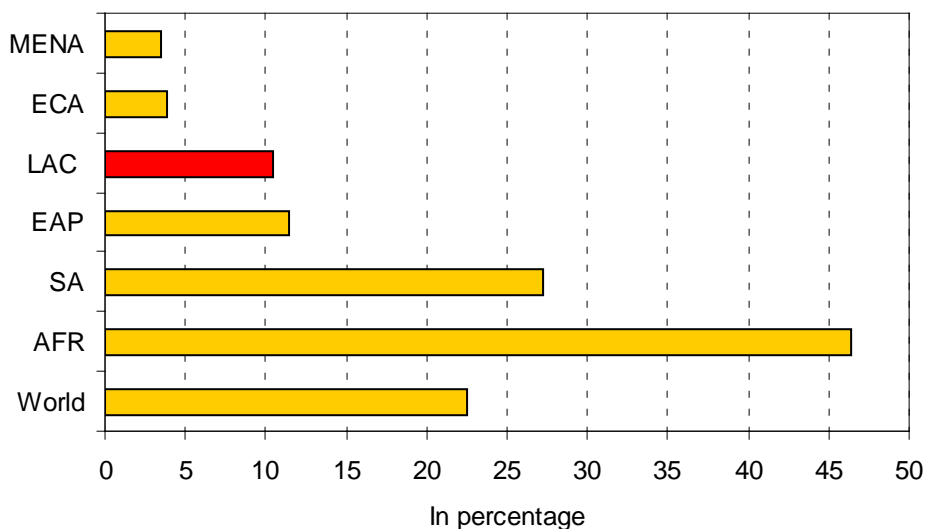
World Bank

Latin America and the Caribbean Region

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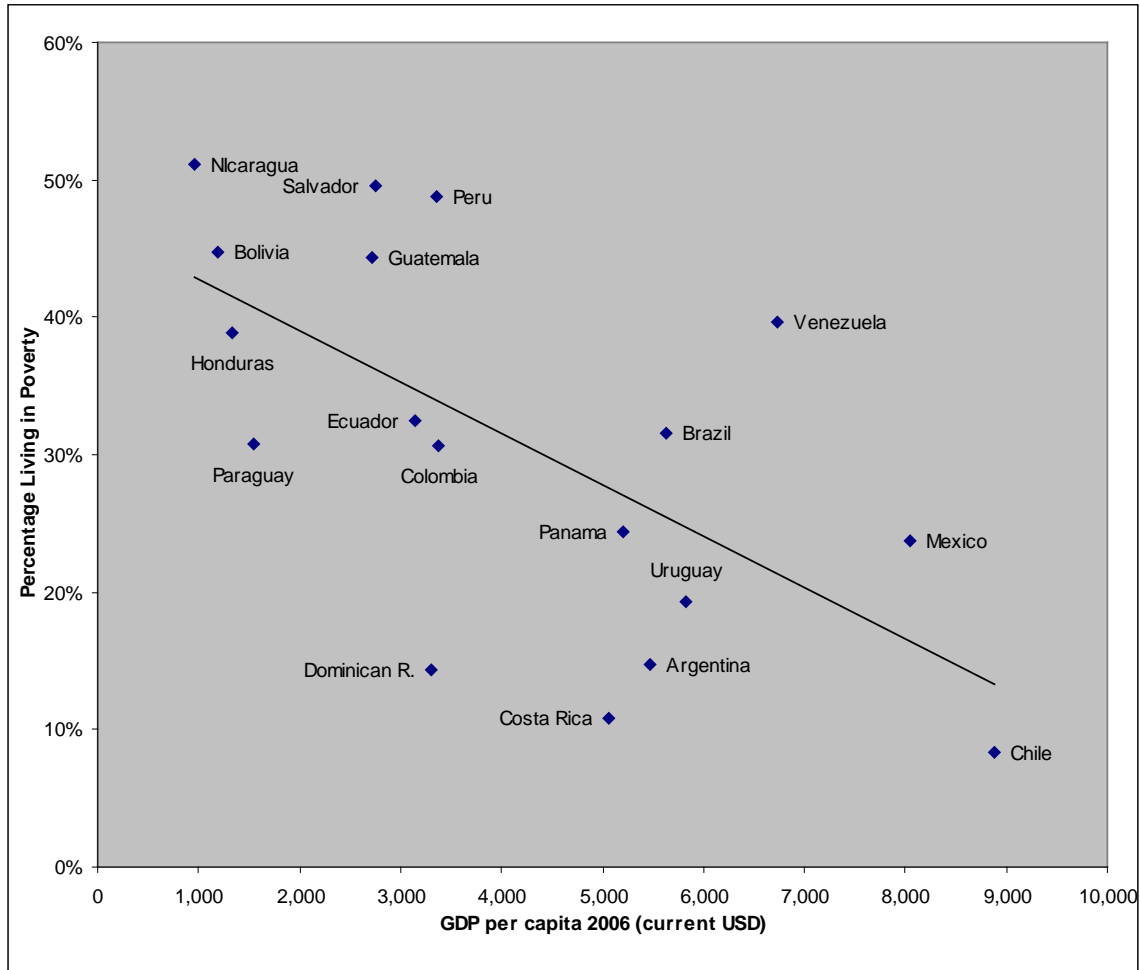
FACT SHEET: Early Childhood Development Latin America and the Caribbean

- Until recently, it was believed that the human brain was fully developed at birth. Recent research has demonstrated that the brain continues to develop and form connections during the early childhood years. Adequate nutrition, cognitive stimulation, and nurturing care during this critical period, helps children develop to their fullest potential.
- Children who are stunted are more likely to develop weak cognitive skills and poorer overall development. Caregivers of young children living in poverty are physically and mentally stressed and most often unable to engage in meaningful, enriching and stimulating interactions with their children. These children are more likely to receive ill care, which affects a child’s cognitive and socio-emotional development. Thus, the “accident of birth” plays an important role in determining adult success
- Because early childhood development interventions have been shown to be so effective in reducing gaps in cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical well-being indicators, they also can contribute to equalize opportunities.
- Access to early childhood development (ECD) services as well as early childhood indicators vary widely across the region. Children in some countries appear to be receiving adequate ECD services and their ECD indicators are very positive. In other countries, children face greater challenges and their development seems severely compromised.



- Averages, however, mask wide disparities in the percentage of poor children and youth in the region. Countries such as Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay have fewer than 25 percent of children and youth below the age of 18 living below the relative poverty line. A relative poverty line is drawn, unlike absolute poverty rates, relative to the typical income/consumption level of a household or individual in a given country. In the context of Latin America region, characterized by increasing inequality, the use of a relative poverty line is important.
- In the UNICEF-ECLAC report children living below the relative poverty, where children living in households with median income below 50 percent of the national median. In Brazil and Panama this figure is closer to 35 percent.
- Country disparities persist when we observe the distribution of stunted children in Latin America. Countries such as Chile, Jamaica, and Cuba have fewer than five percent of stunted children. Other countries like Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Honduras have more than 25 percent. In the extreme is Guatemala, where more than 45 percent of children are stunted (ECLAC, 2005).
- Intervening early in childhood is economically efficient and produces higher returns than investments later on life on disadvantaged youth in the U.S.
- ECD policies may be one of the most promising levers available to Latin American policy makers working to break the cycle of inequality.
- In Latin America, the probability that children of poor parents will remain poor is high. Children living with caregivers who are economically deprived are at higher risk of experiencing nutritional deficiencies that lead to stunting and malnourishment as well as childhood diseases, mortality and morbidity.
- In 2004, the poverty rate in Latin America was 22 percent. A much smaller percentage (8.6) lived in extreme poverty. Unfortunately, while the rates of poverty have declined in Latin America in the past 20 years, the rates of extreme poverty have declined at a much slower pace.
- Some countries, such as Brazil have relatively low poverty rates for the population as a whole (16 percent), but the proportion of children ages 0-6 living in poverty is much higher (31 percent). In Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Peru, close to half or, in some cases, more than half of the children ages 0-6 live in poverty. When graphed against GDP per capita and using a trend line, we see that in these three countries, along with Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela, more children live in poverty than what their GDP per capita would predict.

Poverty Rates by Country, by GDP per capita



Source: World Bank calculations using SEDLAC household survey data (CEDLAS and The World Bank, 2007)

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