



What have we learned from the Young Lives study in Peru?

Introduction

The Young Lives Peru Country Report presents a summary of the main findings that emerge from analysing the Young Lives data from Peru across a longitudinal study following two cohorts of children in various situations from remote rural areas to urban communities, as a component of a larger multi-country project. The study relates conditions early in the lives of children to later outcomes, and so improves understanding of the effects of poverty on children's life trajectories. It also provides information on changes taking place in the lives of children, and offers evidence-based guidance for policies to improve children's chances of developing their full potential as individuals and members of their communities.

This document is a summary of the Young Lives Peru Country Report *¿Qué hemos aprendido del estudio longitudinal Niños del Milenio? Síntesis de hallazgos (What have we learned from the Young Lives study in Peru? Summary of Findings)*, highlighting the context in which this research was conducted, key findings, and implications for policy and practice. In Peru, Young Lives is known as *Niños del Milenio*, and the full country report in Spanish is available at www.ninosdelmilenio.org detailing acknowledgements, photo credits and references.

Context

Young Lives is a longitudinal study of childhood poverty, aiming to shed light on the drivers and impacts of child poverty by tracking 12,000 children in four countries: Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years. In so doing, Young Lives has sought to generate evidence to help policymakers design programmes that make a real difference to children and their families in participating countries and internationally.

The study followed two cohorts of participants during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. In Peru, the sample was chosen randomly, excluding the wealthiest 5 per cent of districts in the country given the study's emphasis on poverty. The children in the Older Cohort, born in or around 1994, were first interviewed when they were about 8 years old. The children in the Younger Cohort, born in or around 2001, first participated when they were about 1 year old. The original sample size was approximately 750 children for the Older Cohort and just over 2,000 for the Younger Cohort. Researchers conducted five rounds of household surveys to obtain data on these children and their families in 2002, 2006, 2009, 2013 and 2016. The study design and timing of data collection enabled the comparison of developmental levels of the children in the two cohorts at the same ages, seven years apart.

Four qualitative studies were also carried out, following a subsample of 51 children and young people from both cohorts by country. These took place in 2007, 2008-09, 2011 and 2014. These data allowed researchers to further explore key aspects of childhood, the transition to primary and secondary school, and to adulthood and parenting.

Finally, two surveys were conducted in 2011 and 2017 with a subsample of children from the Younger Cohort and their peers in primary and secondary schools. These surveys focused on the educational opportunities of different groups of students, analysing the associations between individual and family characteristics, and the quality of the educational institutions the students attended.

Overall, two particularly interesting results emerged from the hundreds of studies completed with this data set. The first is that many children and families have migrated between rounds. The second is that the Younger Cohort had better education and health indicators compared with the Older Cohort.

Over the past 15 years of Young Lives, the team of researchers has observed that the children and young people who grew up poor, lived in rural areas, had a mother with little education, or who were members of an indigenous family, had fewer opportunities and poorer outcomes.

Findings

Changes in living standards and the role of social policies

Between 2002 and 2012, Peru experienced a period of strong economic growth and a substantial reduction in monetary poverty. Several social programmes were implemented during those years. Evidence from Young Lives confirms that household living standards improved significantly during that period – although progress slowed between 2013 and 2016. Gaps by family background characteristics decreased significantly for several indicators, especially access to services (such as to electric power and wastewater services); however, some gaps remained substantial, and in a few cases increased (notably in access to household water connections).

Various studies have used Young Lives data to explore the role of public spending and specific anti-poverty programmes on household living standards as well as on child outcomes. The evidence demonstrates that the impact of public spending is not necessarily beneficial for child outcomes unless it is well-targeted. A number of studies show that the *Juntos* programme – a large-scale Conditional Cash Transfer programme implemented in Peru since 2005 and which specifically targets the population living in poverty – increased household income and reduced paid child labour. Moreover, the programme led to improvements in nutritional status (reduction in severe stunting), especially for participants who entered the programme at a very young age; and to improvements in cognitive function only for those participating from an early age. This highlights the relevance of investments in human capital during early childhood. The programme also had unexpected negative effects, including an increase in unpaid child labour. While *Juntos* and other social programmes no doubt contributed to improving the lives of vulnerable families, the positive results observed in household and child outcomes during this period were largely produced by a combination of factors, including sustained economic growth, improvements in the quantity and quality of public spending, enhanced social policy design, and migration from rural to urban areas.

Education

This section presents key findings organised by the stages of child development. For early childhood, the evidence showed that, by the age of five, there were already large gaps among children with different socioeconomic characteristics. However, it is difficult to improve the quality of early childhood and pre-school programmes. For example, researchers found no differences in gross and fine motor skills or language development between children aged 6 to 36 months who participated in the 'Cuna Más' (formerly known as *Wawa Wasi*) programme, and those who did not. Surprisingly, however, for children aged 3 to 5, after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics, it was found that children who had attended PRONOEI (informal, community-based pre-school programmes) and were in



primary school, performed similarly to their peers who did not attend pre-school and performed significantly worse than those who had attended a formal pre-school. For many children, the transition from pre-school to primary school is a challenge because it involves changes in how the institution operates and teaching practices.

Young Lives research reveals that children's skills at five years of age predict their skills at eight and 12 years. A comparison of cohorts demonstrated that the Younger Cohort had lower rates of dropout and overage (being above the expected age for their grade) from school than the Older Cohort. However, gaps in education persist, which are linked to a variety of socioeconomic characteristics. The most important are the mother's education level, household wealth level, ethnic background of the child, and the area of residence. Young Lives found that inequality in education is more pronounced in Peru as compared with the other study countries. Additionally, urban schools offer better infrastructure and education quality than rural schools. The evidence also demonstrated that indigenous children perform better in bilingual schools.

Teacher attendance was associated with absenteeism of the school principal and predicted student performance in mathematics. The principal's leadership role also had a significant impact on students' reading comprehension levels.

Within the classroom, an analysis of class notebooks found that students of lower socioeconomic status completed fewer mathematical exercises. Completing more exercises was positively associated with academic performance. Young Lives also found that the most skilled teachers were assigned to classrooms attended by students of higher socioeconomic status.

Other studies have analysed school interactions. One found that physical punishment was common in some schools, even though it is prohibited by law and has negative effects on academic performance. Young Lives researchers found that socioeconomic segregation is common in Peruvian schools and has a negative impact on students' mathematics performance and their sense of belonging to the school.

In terms of access to higher education, Young Lives found that students from urban areas were more likely to attend university, while those from rural areas who pursued higher education were more often enrolled in technical institutes. For the most part, secondary schools do not seem to play a role in providing students with vocational nor educational guidance for their lives post-graduation.

Overall, Young Lives underscores the need for the Peruvian education system to both increase overall quality (e.g. improve performance on standardised tests, and reduce grade repetition and dropout rates) and to reduce inequality.

Nutrition

Children's growth in terms of height and weight reflects the extent to which their environment, including their nutrition and health, enables them to reach their full potential for growth. Inadequate conditions, particularly during the

first years of life, compromise brain development and lead to chronic malnutrition, reduced weight or height-for-age (stunting). During the period of the Young Lives study, Peru experienced sustained economic growth, as reflected in household wealth level and investment in social programmes. While chronic malnutrition declined in the country, the overweight and obese population increased.

Young Lives tracked the growth of two cohorts of children. The study demonstrated that the Younger Cohort, born in 2002, had a lower prevalence of stunting compared with the Older Cohort. By age 15, 31 per cent of children in the Older Cohort were stunted, compared to only 16 per cent in the Younger Cohort. Significant gaps were identified, which were attributable to poverty, rural residence and limited education level of the mother. These gaps highlight the need for Peru to continue to focus efforts on reducing inequality. Dietary diversity and families' different access to foods also played an important role. Additionally, the study demonstrated that some one-year-old children classified as chronically malnourished, a condition previously considered irreversible, experienced recovery during later childhood and in adolescence. Crucially, this was also manifested in improved cognitive function and socioemotional skills. This improvement was associated with better access to health, education and social services, which suggests that while early-life conditions are decisive in children's development, promoting the best possible conditions for growth and development should continue to be prioritised throughout childhood and adolescence.

The increase in the overweight and obese population identified in the study is troublesome because of the risk of subsequent chronic disease and the consequences for public health. By age 15, almost 25 per cent of children in the Younger Cohort were overweight compared to 17 per cent of those in the Older Cohort at this age. Taller children and those who gained weight rapidly in infancy were more likely to be overweight. The main modifiable predictors of overweight and obesity are associated with a lack of physical activity and poor diet. Efforts to change those practices should be addressed through education, public policies and programmes.

Risky behaviours and exposure to violence throughout the lifecycle

Beyond standard child outcomes (associated with nutrition and education), two aspects that are key for understanding the lives of Peruvian children and adolescents are their exposure to violence and victimisation in different spheres of life (at home, at school and/or in the community) and their risk behaviours, which may be associated with poverty. One of the methodological contributions of Young Lives has been to measure the prevalence of health risk and unlawful behaviours in Peru using a self-administered questionnaire – which by design reduces the possibility of underreporting. Results show that the prevalence of these behaviours is relatively high among youth in Peru, and not just in Lima (as official statistics show), for which reason they represent a public policy challenge.



Studies have used Young Lives data to analyse the determinants of health risk behaviours (cigarette, alcohol and illegal drug consumption; and unprotected sex) in Peru. This research demonstrated that the determinants of this conduct vary depending on the type of behaviour. The prevalence of unprotected sex is higher among adolescents from households where one parent is absent and/or where the relationship with the parents is poor. These factors do not predict other health risk behaviours, however. Conversely, self-esteem and school attendance are negatively associated with cigarette and alcohol consumption. Similarly, school attendance is associated with a lower likelihood of consuming illegal drugs such as marijuana. However, neither of these factors predict risky sexual practices. Notably, poverty does not seem to play a role once these factors are considered.

Young Lives research has also contributed to a better understanding of exposure to violence and its implications. Qualitative evidence shows that violence forms part of children's everyday life in Peru. Episodes of violence occur at home, associated with household chores, and at school, where children are exposed to corporal punishment from teachers. Since these practices are strongly linked to social norms, children have little capacity to report them and end up tolerating them. These practices have negative consequences, however. Young Lives evidence from Peru (and from Ethiopia, India and Vietnam) shows that corporal punishment is associated with lower cognitive function. Although corporal punishment is more prevalent among boys, its impact is greater for girls. In addition, findings from Peru demonstrate that children whose mothers were abused by their partners have a lower cognitive function, and girls have lower self-efficacy. These results are not only worrying per se, but also because they may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. When children see violence as something normal, they are more likely to reproduce that behaviour as adults.

Fertility, teenage pregnancy and the new generation

Despite important gains in key social indicators, Peru has made little progress in reducing teenage pregnancy. Over the past two decades, although pregnancy in early adolescence (ages 12-15) was unusual, about 1 in 5 women aged 18 to 19 had had at least one child. Reducing teenage pregnancy is relevant from a public policy perspective. International evidence shows that teenage mothers are less likely to access higher education and participate in the labour market. Correlational evidence from Young Lives confirms these findings. Controlling for other factors, studies show that teenage mothers in Peru are less likely to pursue higher education and are more likely to be NEET (neither in education, employment or training) at the age of 22. Qualitative findings lead to similar conclusions and indicate that family support may lessen the negative consequences of teenage pregnancy.

How can teenage pregnancy be reduced? Evidence from Young Lives shows that household poverty, parental

absence, poor school performance and attendance are among the main predictors of teenage pregnancy. The age of sexual initiation also appears to be a relevant factor. Moreover, the findings indicate that children who perform better at school are less likely to engage in sexual relations at an early age, thereby reducing the risk of teenage pregnancy. Increased feelings of self-worth (self-efficacy) and motivation during the transition from childhood to adolescence are associated with a reduction in teenage pregnancy. Based on this evidence, a major policy implication of this study is that education policies designed to improve school attendance and performance may also contribute to reducing the rate of teenage pregnancy.

Aspirations, psychosocial competencies and subjective wellbeing

International evidence shows that socioemotional dimensions influence future earnings and other life outcomes. A child's psychosocial development is a key dimension in its own right. Young Lives researchers measured and tracked the development of several psychosocial (socioemotional) dimensions of children over time, including: educational aspirations, psychosocial competencies (self-esteem and self-efficacy) and subjective wellbeing. Although the Young Lives Younger Cohort is still transitioning to adulthood and therefore the importance of psychosocial aspects in explaining life outcomes remains to be seen, existing evidence indicates that a child's self-efficacy and aspirations are (negatively) associated with teenage pregnancy in Peru. Similarly, a child's self-esteem is (negatively) associated with the prevalence of health risk behaviours at age 19 in Peru.

An important legacy of the Young Lives study has been to explore the determinants of socioemotional skills (in Peru, Ethiopia, India and Vietnam). Results demonstrate that childhood poverty is an important correlate. Early nutritional status also predicts socioemotional skills –over and above the impact of monetary poverty– however, this effect is negligible. These results point to a seldom-explored channel through which poverty can lead to worse outcomes later in life. Other stress factors, such as being exposed to violence perpetrated by the mother's intimate partner during early childhood, are also relevant. In addition, qualitative evidence has shed light on the different dimensions influencing a child's subjective wellbeing. One of the most important is access to basic education and the transition to higher education – an aspect valued by both children and their families.

Given that poorer children acquire fewer socioemotional skills, which may lead to a higher prevalence of teenage pregnancy and health risk behaviours in Peru, policies are needed to promote socioemotional skills to reduce inequality associated with poverty. Since school enrolment is high in Peru, socioemotional skills should be included in the school curriculum to contribute to reducing unequal access to opportunities (recent changes in the school curriculum have addressed this issue). To be effective, these changes in the curriculum should be accompanied by increased access to educational opportunities.



Poverty dynamics



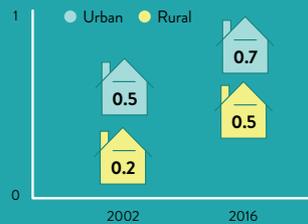
Since 2002 the standard of living has improved considerably, with the household wealth index rising by an average of 3% annually.

“Poverty is when people don’t have anything to eat, they don’t have farmland, or they don’t have a house to live in”.

Marta, age 12, from a rural area.



Household Wealth Index



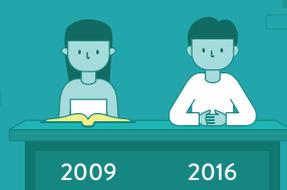
However, inequality persists with the most vulnerable children living in the poorest households, in rural areas and those with a mother tongue other than Spanish.

Education and Learning

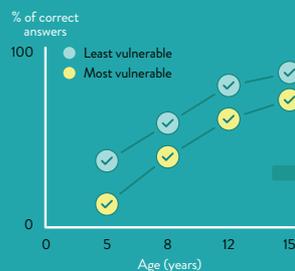
Children are progressing through schooling more uniformly over time...

...but the most disadvantaged children are being left behind (marked by ethnicity, location and poverty status).

Overage for grade at age 15

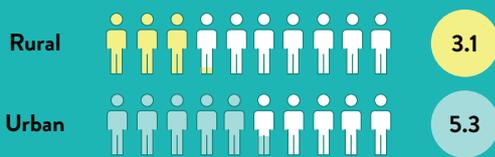


Vocabulary score by vulnerability



Location plays a big role in whether young people are still in, or have completed, higher education.

Of every 10 22-year-olds...



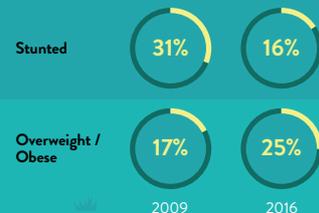
...had completed or were in higher education.

Growth and Nutrition



Stunting has decreased over time, but rising obesity (and overweight), particularly among urban children, is posing another burden.

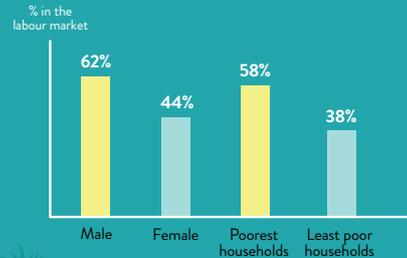
Nutritional status of 15-year-olds over time



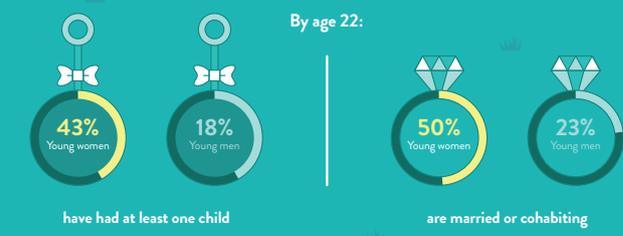
Youth Transitions: Skills, Work and Family Formation

Far more 22-year-old men are engaged in the labour market than women, with substantial differences across socio-economic backgrounds in terms of the nature and quality of jobs.

Labour market participation at age 22



Compared with young men, young women were more than twice as likely to have had at least one child by age 22.



Priorities for investment:

- To give children the best chance of reaching their potential, high quality programmes must target the first years of life, integrated through preschool systems.
- Continue efforts to promote the conditions that favour linear growth and also reduce obesity: a varied and healthy diet and a safe environment that protects against illness and encourages physical activity.
- Focus on reaching the most vulnerable children (those living in the poorest households, in rural locations, from ethnic minorities) to ensure that they are not left behind in terms of persistent poverty and barriers to access.





Core-funded by



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Photo credit: © Young Lives. The images throughout our publications are of children living in circumstances and communities similar to the children within our study sample.

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