

## Editorial

# Social determinants shaping mental health in children and young people: Insights from CHANCES-6 project and future initiatives

Dear readers,

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization declared the end of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, after a period of over two years that impacted all of our lives.

Among its numerous consequences, the pandemic revealed mental health issues that had previously often been hidden or ignored. There was a significant increase in rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide, which was being discussed in households, schools, and the media as never before.

This editorial looks at this crucial point, focusing especially on the child and adolescent population and its impact on young people at the start of their professional careers.

In 2018, the project “Poverty Reduction, Mental Health, and the Chances of Young People: Understanding Mechanisms through Analyses from 6 Low- and Middle-Income Countries” (CHANCES-6) was initiated. It was led by Prof. Sara Evans-Lacko from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and funded by a United Kingdom agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)<sup>1</sup>

CHANCES-6, in which I had the opportunity to participate as a co-investigator, concluded in 2023. Its primary objective was to assess the impact of cash transfer programs on the mental health of children and young people from six developing countries, three in Latin America (Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico) and three in Africa (South Africa, Liberia, and Malawi) (Bauer, Garman, et al., 2021; Bauer, Paula, et al., 2021). Numerous products resulted from CHANCES-6, primarily several scientific articles in various formats listed below.

One of them was a conceptual article, which aimed to explain the connections between exposure to poverty and mental health impairment and how cash transfer programs could potentially break this vicious cycle by improving opportunities for young people. Additionally, economic and cognitive psychology paradigms were explored to help to understand the complexity of the mechanisms involved, with a view to future actions (Evans-Lacko et al., 2023).

Two literature review articles, one systematic review, and a scoping study were conducted during the international multicenter project. The main systematic literature review, led by a task force of researchers from the CHANCES-6 project, identified 4,773 potential articles. After applying rigorous inclusion criteria, the review comprised 12 articles that met the necessary methodological criteria, half of which involved conditional cash transfers. These studies

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1 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/cpec/chances-6>

included 43,861 participants from Latin America and Africa. Eight studies focused on adolescents and young adults (aged 11 to 22 years), while four studies involved children under five. The follow-up periods varied from one to ten years. In summary, this review showed that 85% of cash transfer programs demonstrated some significant positive impact on the mental health of children and young people, with no negative effects; however, none of them demonstrated consistently positive effects on all examined outcomes. Additionally, ten of these 12 studies investigated the potential effects of different cash transfer programs on depression among young individuals, allowing for a meta-analysis to be conducted. The results indicated a positive, but not significant, effect of the interventions on depressive symptoms (Cohen's  $d$  pooled 0.02, 95% confidence interval [CI]: -0.19 to 0.23;  $p = 0.85$ ). Heterogeneity among the studies, including a lack of randomization and blinding in some, contributed to this variation, compromising the validity of the pooled estimate. Interestingly, this review also revealed a lack of studies comparing the effects of programs with and without conditionality (Zimmerman et al., 2021).

Led by researchers from our Brazilian arm of CHANCES-6, a scoping review identified and described studies on the impact of the *Bolsa Família* program (BFP) on any aspect of the beneficiaries' lives, which covered quantitative articles (only experimental or quasi-experimental), qualitative, and mixed studies published in the seven main databases. Overall, the results indicated a consistent positive impact of the BFP on reducing food insecurity and poverty, as well as with respect to the search for employment. Regarding health, there were positive impacts in reducing mortality rates for children and adults, although it did not improve immunization rates or child growth. The BFP also contributed to reducing school dropout rates and improved school attendance among children and adolescents. However, a multinational study showed a negative impact on school performance in Portuguese and Mathematics. In addition, the BFP helped to reduce hospitalization due to violence, homicides, suicides, and crime but seemed to reinforce domestic violence and gender stereotypes among women (failing to reduce gender inequality). Thus, the review concluded that the BFP has numerous benefits across different age groups, but data on its impact on mental health remain scarce<sup>2</sup>

Seeking to fill this gap, Ziebold, in collaboration with other members of CHANCES-6 conducted a pioneering study to evaluate whether exposure to BFP during childhood (at six years old) reduced the risk of developing mental health problems in early adolescence (at 11 years old) using a sample of over two thousand participants from the Pelotas birth cohort. The results indicated that program participation did not work as a protective factor with respect to mental health, that is, it did not contribute to reducing externalizing problems or violent behaviors, nor did it increase pro-social behavior, social skills, positive attributes, or locus of control (positive aspects of mental health) in adolescents. This study concluded that the BFP itself seemed to be insufficient to promote mental health in young people (Ziebold et al., 2021).

In an effort to try to understand these ambiguous results, we examined the available literature, seeking hypotheses about the mechanisms involved in this complex relationship between cash transfer and certain healthy behaviors, as well as its potential direct impact on

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2 Article in preparation. Title: Perceptions of Brazil's Bolsa Família cash transfer program, life opportunities and mental health in the lives of young people from the outskirts of São Paulo: a qualitative study. Authors: Paulo Malvasi P, Sara Evans-Lacko, Eva Cyhlarova, Alicia Matijasevich, David McDaid, Cristiane Silvestre de Paula.

the mental health of children, young people, and adults. One of the most robust studies in this field was conducted in Liberia and shed light on these contradictory results. Researchers offered a therapy based on cognitive-behavioral approaches with the objective of reducing self-destructive beliefs and behaviors and promoting positive ones, using two main strategies: (1) awareness of negative/inaccurate automatic thoughts about oneself or others and (2) making changes in everyday situations through simple tasks, repetition, and positive reinforcement, with a gradual increase in task difficulty/complexity, changing both behavior and thinking. A sample of 999 young men (aged 18 to 35) with severe externalizing problems was then randomly divided into four groups in order to assess the potential positive impact of cash transfer compared to the impact of therapy. The results confirmed that receiving financial aid itself helped mental health temporarily, while receiving this aid combined with cognitive-behavioral therapy reduced mental health problems and violent behaviors in the short and long term (one and ten years after the end of therapy), compared to the other groups – one only getting therapy and the other with no support (Blattman et al., 2017). The results of our qualitative Brazilian study (CHANCES-6) point in a similar direction, indicating that the funds received in the BFP are of great importance in the survival of families and meet urgent needs but do not promote the mental health of young people. Through in-depth individual interviews with 12 young people aged 18 to 24 from two neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo, the study revealed that young people do not see BFP as a policy that benefits them, neither as a program that would contribute to their mental health – these data have been compiled in a manuscript for future publication<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, articles have been published with samples of thousands of children and young people from Liberia (Carpena et al., 2023) and South Africa (Garman et al., 2022) in Africa, and Colombia (Díaz et al., 2022) and Mexico (Zimmerman et al., 2022) in Latin America.

In summary, current data indicates that the ongoing cash transfer programs around the world help to improve the health and financial situation of beneficiaries. They also seem to contribute secondarily to mitigating mental health problems in childhood and youth, but inconsistently, and with a variable impact from low to moderate (Zimmerman et al., 2021), proving themselves insufficient to sustainably promote mental health in young people when not linked to specific actions (Ridley et al., 2020). This is probably because they were not designed for the direct protection of mental health. Finally, research reveals that the impact of financial support is promising for the mental health of beneficiaries when including a therapeutic component.

Based on these findings, part of this team, under the leadership of Prof. Evans-Lacko, is starting a new four-year project in November 2023. The objectives are to test whether engagement in an online group intervention, which has been proven to be effective in other countries for promoting mental health in youth, would be greater among Brazilian university students when coupled with two other components: direct cash transfer to young people, peer support, or both. After different stages of adaptation and implementation, we hope to engage two thousand low-income university students from different Brazilian regions, respecting the racial and ethnic diversity of our population, in a randomized clinical trial with four arms. The desired result of the study is to better understand the interrelationships between poverty and

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3 Article in preparation. Title: Perceptions of Brazil's Bolsa Família cash transfer program, life opportunities and mental health in the lives of young people from the outskirts of São Paulo: a qualitative study. Authors: Paulo Malvasi P, Sara Evans-Lacko, Eva Cyhlarova, Alicia Matijasevich, David McDaid, Cristiane Silvestre de Paula.

mental health and how to effectively combine interventions to improve well-being, minimize stress, and promote the mental health of low-income university students.

Finally, I hope that the 12 articles in this issue are appreciated by everyone.

Have a good reading!

Sincerely,

**Profa. Dra. Cristiane Silvestre de Paula**

Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Psicologia: Teoria e Prática*

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