

Multidimensional poverty among adolescents in Brazil (2017-2023): Challenges and a research agenda

Pobreza multidimensional na adolescência no Brasil (2017-2023): desafios e agenda de pesquisa

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ABSTRACT This article analyzes the profile and recent evolution of multidimensional poverty among adolescents in Brazil, based on the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study Multidimensional Child Poverty. Using the MODA (Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis) methodology, adapted to the Brazilian context, the study considers deprivations across dimensions such as education, housing, sanitation, income, access to information, and protection against child labor. The analysis covers data from 2017 to 2023, focusing on adolescents aged 10 to 17 and comparing them with the general group of children and adolescents aged 0 to 17. The results show that adolescents face higher deprivation rates, particularly in sanitation and child labor, while there was a significant improvement in access to information and a reduction in income deprivation. The analysis highlights methodological limitations, including the exclusion of unpaid domestic work from child labor statistics, which obscures the gendered burden faced by adolescent girls. The article argues for a dedicated research agenda for adolescence, rooted in a life-cycle approach, human rights perspective, and disaggregation by gender and race. It concludes that such an approach can strengthen the visibility of youth in official statistics and inform more effective, integrated public policies to combat the intergenerational reproduction of poverty and inequality.

KEYWORDS Adolescent. Poverty. Human rights. Public policy.

RESUMO Este artigo analisa o perfil e a evolução recente da pobreza multidimensional entre adolescentes no Brasil com base nos estudos da Pobreza Infantil Multidimensional do Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância (Unicef). Utilizando a metodologia Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (Moda), adaptada ao contexto brasileiro, o estudo considera privações em dimensões como educação, moradia, saneamento, renda, informação e trabalho infantil. A análise abrange dados de 2017 a 2023, enfocando adolescentes de 10 a 17 anos e comparando-os ao grupo geral de crianças e adolescentes de 0 a 17 anos. Os resultados mostram que adolescentes enfrentam maiores privações, especialmente em saneamento e trabalho infantil, enquanto houve avanços no acesso à informação e redução da privação por renda no período. O estudo destaca limitações metodológicas, como a ausência de dados sobre trabalho doméstico não remunerado, o que invisibiliza desigualdades de gênero enfrentadas por meninas. Argumenta-se pela construção de uma agenda de pesquisa específica para a adolescência, com abordagens baseadas em ciclo de vida, perspectiva de direitos e desagregações por sexo e raça. Conclui-se que essa abordagem pode fortalecer a visibilidade das juventudes nas estatísticas oficiais e informar políticas públicas integradas e mais eficazes no combate à reprodução intergeracional da pobreza e desigualdades.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Adolescente. Pobreza. Direitos humanos. Política pública.

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Introduction

Several studies show the importance of the first years of life and the advantages, including economic ones, of investing in early childhood. However, what happens next? What is the life trajectory of these girls and boys? What challenges do they face in their 'second decade'? Will it also be necessary to consider public policies and investments for this age group, adopting a life cycle perspective?

Aiming to contribute to this reflection, this article presents data on the multidimensional poverty situation of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years, highlighting the deprivations they face beyond income, as well as suggesting the need for a research agenda to guide public policies and investment in this 'second window of opportunity'.

From a rights perspective, poverty among children and adolescents is not limited to the lack of income. It emerges from the interrelationship between multiple deprivations that girls and boys are exposed to. This analysis includes the dimensions of education, adequate food, decent housing, access to information, sanitation, and protection against child labor, which, combined, compromise comprehensive development and reproduce intergenerational inequality cycles.

The concept of child poverty has expanded in recent decades. In addition to expanding its scope beyond the monetary aspect, it has incorporated the analysis of simultaneous deprivations that cumulatively affect the well-being and full development of children and adolescents. This approach is sustained by international literature, which associates multidimensional poverty with the systematic denial of rights¹ and the limitation of basic human capabilities². The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has progressively consolidated this perspective in the field of measurement in its global reports and in national experiences^{1,3}.

In Brazil, this agenda gained momentum starting in 2018 with the launch of the first

national report⁴ on multidimensional poverty in childhood and adolescence, updated in 2023⁵ and later in 2025⁶. In the country, despite gradual progress in recent years, multidimensional poverty in childhood and adolescence remains at high levels: in 2023, approximately 55.9% of the population aged 0-17 – equivalent to 28.8 million boys and girls – lived deprived of at least one essential right⁶.

Specifically, regarding adolescence, this situation takes on factors that require greater public attention and a stronger focus on specific public policies. Based on recent data from the research 'Multidimensional poverty in childhood and adolescence in Brazil – 2017-2023'⁶, this article seeks to highlight the dimensions and indicators that most affect adolescents.

It is important to emphasize that the data presented in this document do not stem from a multidimensional poverty typology designed to measure the event specifically in adolescents. The classification between deprived and non-deprived is based on a methodology designed for the entire group of children and adolescents (0-17 years). This means that dimensions that are especially relevant to adolescents, such as employability, positive transition between school and work, mental health, exposure to violence, time use, care, among many others⁷⁻⁹, are not included in this evidence.

Based on the data produced, age groups were compared to understand the extent to which, considering the dimensions analyzed, adolescents are more affected by deprivation compared to all children and adolescents aged 0-17 years. This is, therefore, a first intend towards a research agenda focused more specifically on multidimensional poverty in adolescents.

It is also worth mentioning that this study starts from a perspective aligned with the rights-based approach of the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁰ and the framework of comprehensive protection^{11,12}, which recognize the indivisibility and interdependence of

human rights and demand their full realization throughout the life cycle. The analysis adopts its own multidimensional poverty concept anchored in these normative frameworks, which simultaneously considers several constitutive poverty dimensions and allows us to estimate the prevalence and the intensity and overlap of the deprivations each adolescent experiences¹.

Advancing knowledge about multidimensional poverty in adolescence is essential because targeted and integrated public policies for this age group are critical to disrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In a post-pandemic context where setbacks in literacy, food security, and inequalities are evident¹³, this article underscores the urgent need for evidence-based strategies that specifically support adolescents. Thus, this article aims to analyze the profile and recent evolution of multidimensional poverty among Brazilian adolescents, exploring its possible determinants and implications using recent UNICEF⁶ analyzed data.

Material and methods

This study was conducted based on UNICEF studies on multidimensional poverty in childhood and adolescence in Brazil⁴⁻⁶. The Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) methodology³, adapted to the Brazilian context, was employed to estimate the prevalence, intensity, and overlap of deprivations in fundamental dimensions of child well-being, such as education, information, protection against child labor, housing, access to water, sanitation, and income. The dimensions were selected based on the intersection of normative relevance, data availability, and methodological consistency, which resulted from several consultations with government experts, academics, sectoral institutions, and those linked to the rights of children and adolescents.

As detailed in the UNICEF study⁶, the indicators were operationalized as follows: in

the education dimension, school attendance at the appropriate age and literacy from the age of 7 were considered. In information, the criteria were access to the internet at home and the existence of a television. For the housing dimension, the quality of the wall materials and the excessive household overcrowding were assessed. In sanitation, the analysis considered the availability of a private bathroom and the appropriate disposal of sewage. The water dimension considered safe access to water, and income was based on per capita household income below the World Bank's international poverty and extreme poverty lines – BRL 355 and BRL 209 per person per month, at average 2023 prices, respectively. In the child labor dimension, which, as will be shown later, is important for adolescents, the working hours determined by Brazilian legislation are considered, including household services. It is important to mention that questions regarding household services were not part of the 2023 Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADC) for the 14-to-17-year age group¹⁴.

The primary data source was the PNADC¹⁵, conducted annually by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), considering the population of children and adolescents aged 0-17 years residing in permanent private households. Data collected from 2017-2019 and 2023 were analyzed – data from 2020-2022 were not made available by IBGE due to data collection difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each child and adolescent was defined as a unit of analysis and classified as deprived or not in each dimension as per the criteria mentioned above. To determine the intensity, deprivations in each dimension were categorized as 'intermediate' – when the child/adolescent had limited or poor-quality access to the right – and 'extreme' – in the case of no access to the right.

The criterion for classifying multidimensional poverty was the identification of at least one deprivation in any dimension, with the

additional calculation of multiple deprivations for situations in which three or more dimensions were simultaneously compromised.

The research data considers the same dimensions calculated for the group of children and adolescents aged 0-17 years, but observed for the group in the second decade of life, that is, 10-17 years. The main reference and comparison parameter is the overall group of children and adolescents. Notably, it would not be methodologically responsible to use children in their first decade as a comparative parameter for multidimensional poverty in adolescence, since some dimensions are not calculated for younger groups of children, specifically those in early childhood, especially child labor and education (measured for children aged 4-17 years), and access to information (measured only for children aged 9-17 years). This fact is because the methodology assumes that there is no deprivation when an individual has not had one of the variables considered measured.

This same methodological responsibility will also govern how this broad analytical parameter is adopted, since the reason for the potentially greater deprivation of the adolescent population may be precisely the fact that some dimensions of poverty in the first decade of life were not measured.

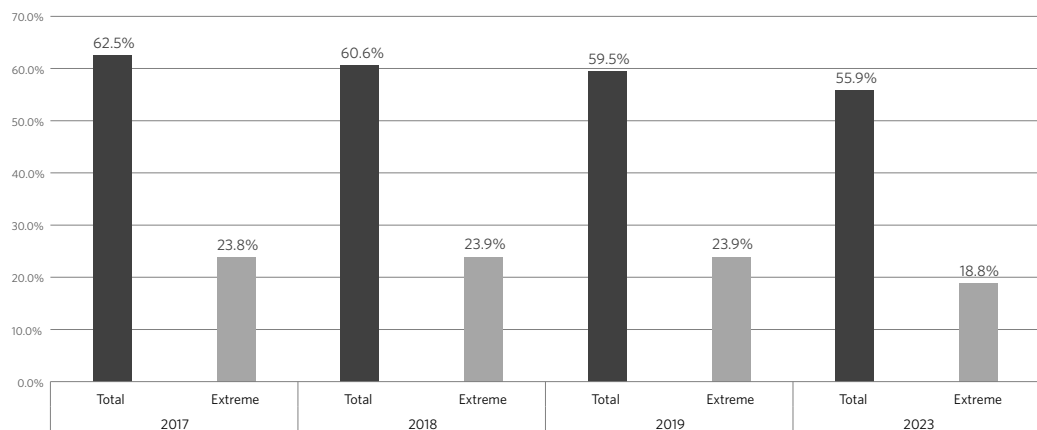
Considering that assessments of deprivation are age-dependent, this article will present results for both groups: i) for all children and adolescents aged 0-17 years, where those outside the age range for measuring a specific deprivation will be considered 'not deprived'; and ii) for those aged 10-17 years, the range for which all dimensions are applicable.

Results

The study enabled a longitudinal analysis of the evolution of multidimensional poverty from 2017 to 2023, identifying trends and comparing the degree of multidimensional child poverty between the age groups of 10-17 years and 0-17 years.

Graph 1 shows the percentage of children and adolescents experiencing some deprivation in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2023. These data are shown in two categories: total and extreme. The 'total' category represents the proportion of children and adolescents experiencing at least one deprivation, regardless of its size and intensity, while the 'extreme' category includes those facing extreme deprivation in at least one area.

Graph 1. Children and adolescents aged 0 to 17 years experiencing some form of deprivation, Brazil, 2017-2023

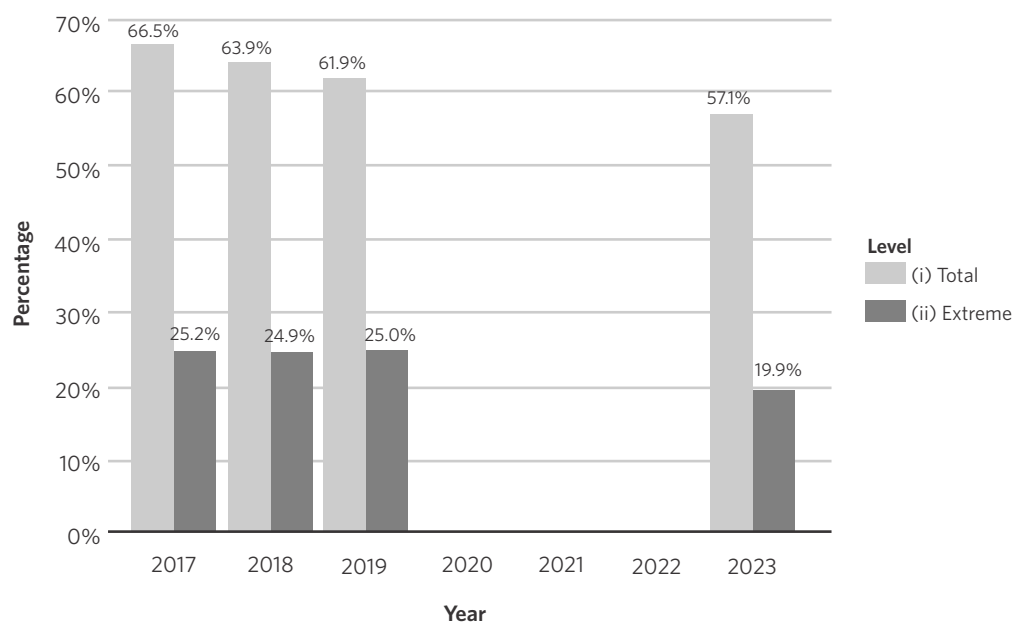


Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Annual PNADC¹⁵, 1st and 5th Interviews.

Graph 2 presents the same categories of multidimensional poverty – total and extreme – but with the age range of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years. During the analyzed period, the percentage of children and adolescents experiencing some form of deprivation

fell continuously, from 66.5% in 2017 to 57.1% in 2023, while the percentage did not show significant changes for extreme deprivation, in the 2017-2019 period, with a subsequent drop of 5 percentage points from 2019 to 2023.

Graph 2. Children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 years experiencing some form of deprivation, Brazil, 2017-2023



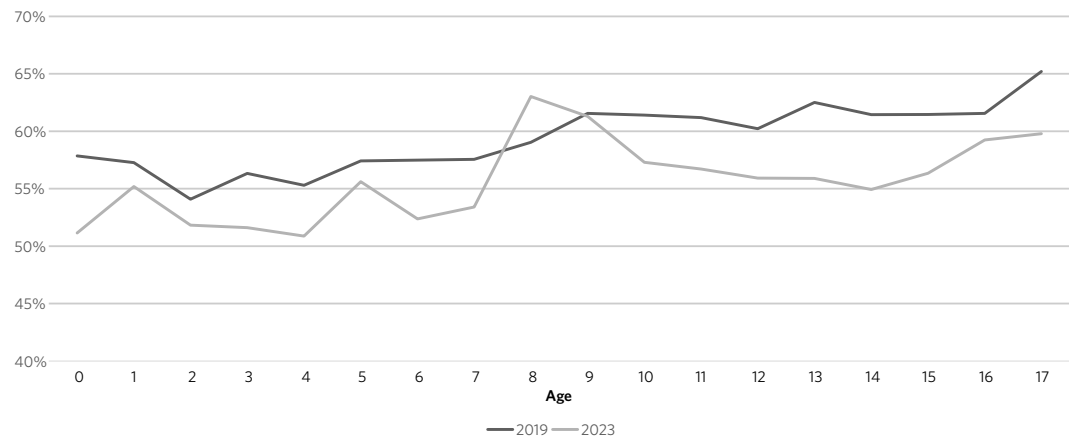
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Annual PNADC¹⁵, 1st and 5th Interviews.

Using the 0-to-17-year age group as a parameter for analysis, we can observe that multidimensional poverty in the second decade (10-17 years) is greater than that of all children and adolescents. The difference, however, decreases slightly from 2017 to 2023, and is merely one percentage point in extreme poverty.

Deprivation can affect children and adolescents of different age groups distinctly, as shown in graph 3. Although it is not the most appropriate to compare the two decades of

life of children and adolescents, due to the methodological considerations already described, the graph is particularly noteworthy because, in 2023, 8-year-old children were the most affected by deprivation (63%). It was the only age group that experienced an increased deprivation in 2023 compared to 2019. This fact will be explored further later, but this difference between age groups can be explained mainly by deprivation in education.

Graph 3. Children and adolescents experiencing some form of deprivation, by age, Brazil, 2019-2023

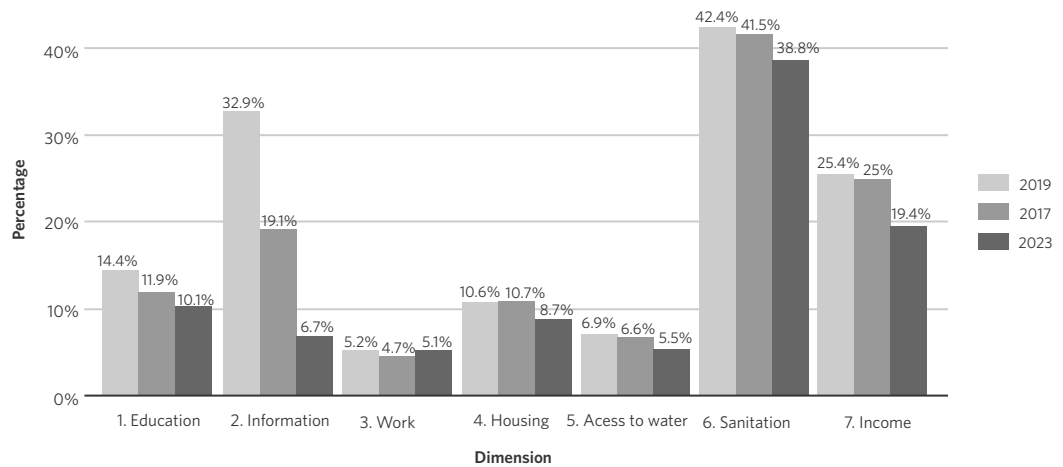


Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Annual PNADC¹⁵, 1st and 5th Interviews.

To better understand how each dimension impacts children and adolescents in this 10-to-17-year age group, the data in *graph 4* can be

observed. It shows the percentage of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years who suffer from some deprivation by dimension.

Graph 4. Children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 years experiencing some form of deprivation (%), Brazil, 2017-2023



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Annual PNADC¹⁵, 1st and 5th Interviews.

We can notice that sanitation is the dimension with the most significant impact on deprivation for this age group, with a percentage of 42.4% in 2017. Although deprivation in this dimension decreased during the analyzed period, the percentages remain high, standing at 38.8% in 2023.

Another dimension highlighted in the analyzed period is information. This represents the largest decrease between 2017 and 2023. While in 2017 the percentage of children and adolescents with some deprivation of access to information was 32.9%, in 2023 this value fell to 6.7%. The income dimension also shows a

significant decrease in the same period, down from 25.4% to 19.4%.

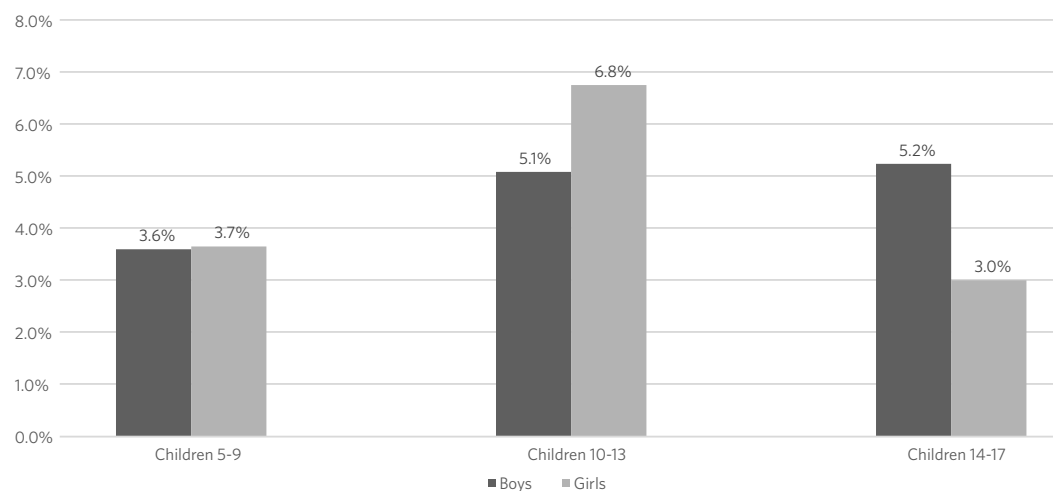
Child labor dimension

In the source research for this article, two forms of deprivation regarding child labor were considered: intermediate and extreme, by age and the number of hours worked for pay and/or dedicated to domestic chores per week. The variable of domestic work among adolescents aged 14-17 years was excluded from the analysis, since it was not collected for this age group in the PNADC in 2023¹⁴. Notably, this exclusion prevents measuring the percentage of adolescents working excessive

hours in household services, which particularly affects girls in this age group^{16,17}.

In *graph 5*, we can observe that, in 2023, in the 5-to-9-year age group, the percentages of boys and girls experiencing child labor-related deprivation are similar. However, towards late childhood and early adolescence, we notice a significant increase in the number of children and adolescents entering child labor, with a particularly large jump for girls. In other words, the 10-to-13-year age group is the most critical for girls to be affected by child labor, something that would most likely be even more severe if household child labor had been captured in the 2023 PNADC.

Graph 5. Children and Adolescents (0-17 years) deprived of protection against child labor (%), Brazil, 2023



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the Annual PNADC¹⁵, 1st and 5th Interviews.

Discussion

The importance of studies focused on adolescence in breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty

Although PNADC data are collected annually by IBGE at the national level, their use

also has some noteworthy limitations. First, the PNADC sample, while broad, does not have sufficient statistical representativeness to robustly disaggregate specific groups, such as Indigenous children, quilombola children, or traditional populations⁵. Furthermore, some dimensions essential to child well-being, such as health and nutrition, are not regularly found in the research questionnaires⁵, restricting the

scope of the indicator and underestimating the complex event. Finally, some of the information is self-reported by caregivers, which can introduce perception biases or underreporting. This element, for example, when addressing adolescents, could be adjusted in research specifically targeted at this population.

This methodology, while subject to improvements, represents an important advance by offering a measure that engages with a rights-based approach and allows public authorities to identify deprivation profiles in a more integrated and territorially focused way. The combination of a statistical perspective and a commitment to monitoring the rights of children and adolescents makes this indicator a strategic tool to guide public policies and social investments capable of breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Sanitation – the dimension with the highest proportion of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years experiencing deprivation

As highlighted in this article, sanitation had the largest proportion of children and adolescents aged 10-17 years suffering deprivation. From 2017 to 2023, this indicator decreased from 42.4% to 38.8%, remaining at high levels. In other words, two out of every five children and adolescents either had no access at all or such access was restricted or of poor quality. According to the Instituto Trata Brasil¹⁸, in 2024, approximately 344,000 hospitalizations were recorded in Brazil caused by diseases related to inadequate environmental sanitation, generating an expenditure of BRL 174.3 million for the public budget.

Understanding the importance of sanitation in guaranteeing health and food security, the need for public policies that ensure sanitation for the entire Brazilian population becomes evident, especially safeguarding the rights of young Brazilians who are strongly impacted by this deprivation. Furthermore, according to the Instituto Trata Brasil¹⁸, improving

sanitation conditions can generate savings of BRL 43.9 million for the health system per year.

Child labor measurement and impact

The dimension of protection against child labor requires careful analysis when addressing adolescents. Child labor is a form of violence in itself and contributes to the deprivation of other rights¹⁹. For example, it can lead to the deprivation of the right to education, which, in turn, limits the opportunities for adolescents to access quality formal employment at the legally permitted age^{20,21}. This same deprivation that can hinder education also places children and adolescents in a more vulnerable situation, exposed to violence, often to recruitment by organized crime, and to increased homicide statistics²². Child labor is also related to care policies – since girls and adolescents also provide care^{23,24} – either because they assume the role of caregivers for younger siblings or older adults, or because they are also mothers.

In the 10-to-17-year age group, education can make a difference in all subsequent stages of girls' lives, whether by expanding their opportunities for access to higher education, skilled and formal jobs, or by preventing early and unwanted pregnancies, or even preventing them from suffering violence, especially domestic violence²⁵. All of this affects girls more, but it can also impact boys.

The exclusion of the child labor dimension in the 2023 PNADC¹⁵ prevents the measurement of the percentage of adolescents working excessive hours in domestic work, which particularly affects the visibility of this problem in its entirety from a gender perspective.

Domestic work also reduces the time available for education, leisure, and rest²⁶. Girls who juggle domestic duties often have less time to study, rest, and participate in cultural and social activities. This situation directly affects their academic performance, emotional well-being, and their chances of completing

their studies or pursuing more qualified career paths²⁶.

Data from other research shows that girls dedicate significantly more weekly hours to household services than boys of the same age²⁷. The overload of domestic work also reproduces gender inequality and poverty cycles. A teenage girl who leaves school to take care of the home is less likely to access formal jobs, obtain a stable income, and achieve economic autonomy in the future. This situation is also linked to risks such as early pregnancy, child marriage, and economic dependence.

What has been described in the preceding lines is just one example of how important it is for statistics to be aligned with public policies. By failing to include unpaid domestic work in the analysis of child labor, the data used to plan public policies do not capture the full complexity of the lives of adolescent girls, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, including making invisible the caregiving tasks that often fall on girls.

This situation can result in poorly calibrated policies that fail to address the real factors preventing girls from staying in school, accessing opportunities, and protecting themselves from violence. It becomes clear how the issue of child labor is one that needs to be included in a research agenda focused on adolescents.

Conclusions and final recommendations

The results analyzed in this article show that adolescents aged 10-17 years have higher multidimensional poverty levels than the population aged 0-17 years as a whole, and are particularly impacted by deprivations in the dimensions of

sanitation, income, and education. Although significant progress has been observed in some areas, such as access to information and income, poverty levels remain high among adolescents, highlighting the need for more targeted responses to this population.

Furthermore, public statistics should crucially begin to include unpaid domestic work among the child labor types to make visible the disproportionate workload, including caregiving, faced by adolescent girls and its impacts on study time, leisure, and mental health.

The analysis of multidimensional child poverty is a powerful tool for advancing a research agenda focused on the rights of adolescents, identifying regional and socioeconomic trends and patterns. To achieve this, it is essential to incorporate specific and relevant dimensions for this life cycle stage, such as mental health, care and care work, positive school-to-work transition, and sexual and reproductive health. These dimensions are fundamental to understanding the multiple factors that limit the full development of adolescents and the possible paths to overcome intergenerational poverty cycles.

It is recommended that public policies aimed at adolescents be designed in an integrated manner, based on evidence disaggregated by age, gender, race, ethnicity, and territory. Overcoming inequalities requires intersectoral approaches and priority investment in this life stage, which is crucial for breaking persistent poverty and exclusion cycles.

Authorship contributions

Chopitea L (0009-0001-7518-7557)* is responsible for the preparation of the manuscript. ■

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