

Poverty, Street Children, and Public Policy:
El Centro de Atención Integral de Niñez y Adolescencia
(CAINA)

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Abstract:

In this paper, I analyze the Center for Integral Attention of Children and Adolescents (CAINA), the Argentine government's only center for street children in the capital of Buenos Aires. First, I describe the current situation facing street children in Buenos Aires. I reveal how recent economic processes have impacted children, and demonstrate that street children derive from families particularly marginalized by the economic policies of the 1990s and the 2001/2002 economic and financial crisis. I discuss the paradigmatic shift child rights theory experienced at the end of the twentieth century, exploring its implications for responsible institutional policies for street children. Within this larger context, I analyze CAINA. I find that the organization has suffered from a systematic lack of funding, which has hampered its ability to fulfill its original mandate. Due to budget constraints, CAINA lacks a fully professional staff, offering only a limited program aimed at alleviating the children's most immediate needs. On a more fundamental level, however, CAINA is hindered by its approach. The organization fails to create a truly inclusive and open environment, maintaining ineffective disciplinary policies that alienate the children. CAINA should disband these policies, initiate discussions with the children about how to better serve their needs, and offer more appropriate classes. As a government budget increase is unlikely, the Center should also expand its private fundraising efforts, in order to cover the costs of hiring dedicated professionals.

Introduction

An important function of political science is to evaluate the competency of governments in addressing the complex social, economic, and political challenges laid before their doors. Of these, none is more important, nor so daunting, as poverty. This essay analyzes one government's responses – those of the Argentine state – to one of modernity's most painful and glaring problems: the increasing numbers of children living and working on city streets. Street children are a barometer not only for the extent to which poverty and inequality have wrenched the fabric of their societies and broken their families, but also for the state's capacity to respond effectively to the problems faced by its people. The government's policy solutions for street children in the capital of Buenos Aires offer important insights into the efficacy of its poverty alleviation programs and its ability to govern in difficult times.

Argentina is currently recovering from a catastrophic recession in 2001-2002 that plunged 75 percent of its youth below the poverty line. Yet, while the economic rebound is widely considered to be pro-poor, thousands of children continue to live and work on the streets of Buenos Aires today. I argue that their continued presence, despite improving economic conditions, is in part due to ineffective and insufficient government responses.

In this paper, I offer a critique of the Center for Integral Attention of Children and Adolescents (CAINA), the only government-run center for street children in the City of Buenos Aires (CABA). I first describe life on the street, exploring the evolution of child poverty in Argentina and investigating the roles of street children's families in their lives. I outline the paradigmatic shift child rights theory experienced at the end of the 20th century, demonstrating its impact on notions of responsible institutional practices for street children. I then draw on interviews I conducted with social workers and children at CAINA, as well as my own

experiences working with street children in Buenos Aires during the fall of 2007 and summer of 2008, to analyze the Center's current policies. I find that budget cuts have severely limited CAINA's original mandate, reducing its efforts to stop-gap measures aimed at alleviating the worst aspects of street life, rather than finding lasting solutions to the systemic problems faced by the children. Yet beyond this, I demonstrate that CAINA's primary flaws lie at the methodological level: the Center has not developed an open and inclusive environment, and maintains ineffective policies that alienate the children and generate resentment. The Center should discontinue its current disciplinary policies, initiate discussions with the children aimed at pinpointing their unaddressed needs, and expand its private fundraising efforts in order to employ more dedicated professional staff.

Life on the Streets of Buenos Aires

Although children have lived and worked on the streets of Argentina since the 1800s, it was during the 1980s that street children became a widely recognized social phenomenon throughout Latin America (Fernández Campos and Sokolovsky, 2006: 69). In Argentina, their appearance was largely due to the combined effects of the Debt Crisis of the 1980s, and the dismantling of the welfare state during the authoritarian *Proceso* government of 1976-83 (Aguirre and Gramajo, 2001: 20; Moran and de Maura Castro, 1997: 1; Scandizzo, 2008: 141).¹ The term "street children" encompasses both children who live on the streets, and those who work on the streets during the day to return to their families at night.² Most are between the ages of 12 and 15, but children as young as a few months may accompany their mothers.³ Although their population grew steadily through the end of the twentieth-century, the 2001/2002 crisis led to unprecedented numbers of increasingly younger children on the streets (INADI, 2005: 89). While estimates vary widely, current censuses assert that between 700-1000 children sleep on the

streets of Buenos Aires each night (Zadcovich, 2008).⁴ Yet, the fact that during 2003 CAINA alone attended an average of 52 children each day – 40 percent of whom visited the institution but a single time – suggests numbers far greater (Pojomovsky, 2008: 40).⁵

Child labor is intimately linked to life on the street. For those children working for their families, the street is fundamentally a place of employment; and children who live on the street must gain income to provide for themselves. Children usually engage in temporary, informal work: the most common sources of income cited by children attending CAINA were opening taxi doors (28 percent); begging (16 percent); and selling small items on the street (13 percent).⁶ In addition, illicit forms of employment – in which children who are living on the streets are more likely to engage than those working on the streets – include prostitution, drug-trafficking, and theft (Observation C, 2008; Pojomovsky, 2008: 174).⁷

Children who actually live on the street usually come to do so through a gradual process. They begin by exploring their neighborhoods, venturing ever farther until they arrive at the microcenter of the city itself (Grima and Le Fur, 1999: 86).⁸ As they become familiarized with the environment and gain a network of acquaintances and friends, they increasingly see the street as a viable solution to problems at home (Conde et al.(b), 2008: 132; Pojomovsky, 2008:). Once living on the street, the children form groups known as *ranchadas*, which provide protection, solidarity, and increased access to resources (Fazzio, 2001: 152). They sleep in parks or on sidewalks using old mattresses and blankets, or lay cardboard down on subway stairs (Observation E, 2008). Children most often stay in zones near large transport stations; those with particularly large street children populations in Buenos Aires are the train and bus stations of Constitución, Retiro, and Once.⁹

Street life inevitably jeopardizes children's health and safety, as they are exposed to drugs, violence, and sexual relations at a time when their developing minds and bodies are particularly vulnerable. Drug use is widespread, and carries serious ramifications for children's psychological and physical well-being. Seventy-seven percent of children interviewed in the *Consejo de Derechos de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes* (CDNNyA) 2008 Census admitted to having consumed some type of substance at one point.¹⁰ The most commonly used drugs are inhalants – with glue (*pegamento*) being the most prevalent, although solvents such as naphtha are also used – and marijuana. Other prominent drugs include cocaine (*merca*) and medications taken with alcohol (CDNNyA, 2008: 18). A particularly troubling development in the wake of the 2001/2002 crisis has been the spread of *pasta base* (or *paco*), a powerfully destructive and addictive drug, among children on the street and in shantytowns (Barrionuevo, 2008; Naddeo, 2008: 318; Pojomovsky, 2008: 129).¹¹ Roughly 28 percent of children admitted to having used *paco* at least once; 11.5 percent smoked it once a day or more (CDNNyA, 2008: 19).¹²

Children abuse drugs frequently, as substances serve as a primary means of escaping from their difficult reality. Around 25 percent of children in the 2008 Census consumed some substance at least once a day. Many develop addictions; 19.4 percent admitted to having previously undergone rehabilitation treatment. In addition to the dependence drugs create – which can inhibit a successful transition from the street – they seriously impact children's development and growth. Inhaling glue destroys bone marrow and brain cells (INADI, 2005: 89). Cocaine use decreases brain mass and increases the risk of heart attack. Smoking *paco* has been shown to produce lesions in the mouth and throat, lead to anorexia and rapid weight loss, and cause irreversible brain damage within six months (Ministerio de Salud, 2007: 41).¹³ These drugs

harm children's developing brains more severely and permanently than they do those of adults, leading to more rapid addiction (Yarúa, 2005: 25).

Police repression is commonplace, particularly at night. Children are verbally harassed, kicked, and beaten with truncheons (Observation F, 2007).¹⁴ In efforts to "clean up" public spaces, police make frequent *razzias* (raids) on *ranchadas*, destroying the children's makeshift shelters and transporting them to police stations (INADI, 2005:88).¹⁵ Once there, children are often kept with adults, increasing their risk of abuse by other prisoners. Torture and other maltreatment by police forces are widespread in these stations, and include beatings, threats, and sexual harassment (Amnesty International, 2002: 11). Over 36 percent of children interviewed in the 2008 Census stated they were mistreated in police stations (CDNNyA, 2008: 29).¹⁶

Street children are also exposed to sex at a very young age, an activity which carries an elevated risk of sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies. Over 57 percent of children interviewed in the 2008 CDNNyA Census between the ages of 13 and 15, and over 90 percent of children between 16 and 18, acknowledged having had sex. At the same time, street children lack knowledge about sexual health and access to reproductive healthcare. Over 31 percent of children between 13 and 15 did not know of any form of contraceptive, and 50 percent stated that they used none. As a result, many street girls become pregnant at an early age, having their first pregnancy between 13 and 15 years (CDNNyA, 2008: 17).

One of the government's primary responses to street children in Buenos Aires has been the Center for Integral Attention of Children and Adolescents (CAINA). Conceived of in 1991, the center officially opened in 1992 under what was then the Department of Integral Attention for Street Children (Pojomovsky, 2008: 26).¹⁷ Currently, CAINA operates Monday through Friday from 9am until 1pm. Located in San Telmo, in a zone with a traditionally high population

of street children, CAINA occupies two levels of a large building.¹⁸ The first floor is comprised of an indoor cement soccer field, a smaller area of tables for meals and art classes, and a kitchen. Additional classrooms and offices are located on the second floor, as are the bathrooms and clothing exchange room (Visits to CAINA, 2008).

Upon arrival, the children can shower and exchange their dirty clothes for clean ones on a first come, first served basis (Zadcovich, 2008). They receive breakfast, lunch, and a snack, and have the opportunity to seek medical assistance (Pojomovsky, 2008: 26). While CAINA does not possess healthcare services within its facilities, the organization maintains relations with the public Hospital Argerich in the neighboring district of *La Boca*, and Centro de Salud #15 (CeSAC N° 15), located nearby in San Telmo (Zadcovich, 2008).¹⁹ In addressing problems of addictions, the organization relies on the support of the National Center for Social Reeducation (CE.NA.RE.SO), which admits individuals 14 years of age and over into its rehabilitation programs (Danielli, Di Paola, Laborde, and Zadcovich, 2001: 3). Various extracurricular classes are offered at CAINA – such as drawing, *murga* (a form of dance), or ceramics– in addition to academic classes with volunteer teachers through *Puentes Escolares*, a program offering educational assistance to street children at a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations (CAINA, 2004: 7; Visits to CAINA, 2008).²⁰ CAINA’s primary methodology revolves around establishing a bond between each child and an educator, from which point of trust they can together begin, in theory, to find an alternative solution to the child’s current circumstances (Pojomovsky, 2008: 26; Zadcovich, 2008).

Yet, as I will show, CAINA remains limited by its budget and approach. It suffers from inadequate funding, and fails to create an inclusive and collaborative environment, alienating the children through ineffective disciplinary policies. Recognizing the role street children’s families

play in their lives, and understanding evolving notions of responsible institutional practices, are central to comprehending both the institution's shortcomings and possible solutions.

Children and Structural Poverty: Neoliberal Reforms of the 1990s and the 2001/2002 Crisis

Children have borne the disproportionate burden of poverty in Argentina in recent decades. A salient feature of the poor is their large family size and high number of dependants. As recent economic events excluded ever greater sectors of the popular classes from participating in the economy, their children suffered the effects. In the aftermath of the 2001/2002 crisis, poverty rates for those fourteen and under climbed from 45 percent in 1998 to 70 percent in 2002 (World Bank, 2003: 8). By October 2002, 42.7 percent of all children were indigent (Pérez, 2007: 52). In Argentina today, there are 2,300,000 more children living below the poverty line than there were in 1992 (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 210).²¹ Child poverty – and the street child phenomenon born of it – cannot be understood without first considering the ways in which the country's economic trajectory has steadily marginalized the poorest elements of society and entrenched socioeconomic divisions.

Current poverty trends in Argentina are rooted in the Debt Crisis of the late 1980s and the economic reorganization launched across Latin America in its aftermath.²² Beginning in 1989 the Menem administration implemented a particularly austere structural adjustment program, designed to “shock” the Argentine economy and adjust fiscal imbalances.²³ Reforms restructured the Argentine economy in ways that excluded large segments of the population from participating in the labor market, and during the 1990s unemployment, informalization of labor, and income inequality increased (See Figures 1-3).²⁴ Average income fell steadily throughout the decade, and periods of economic growth failed to reach the lowest socioeconomic strata (See Figure 4 and Table 1) (Vinocur and Halperín, 2004: 18; Gonzalez-Rozada and Menendez,

2006).²⁵ The economic system that evolved during the 1990s entrenched these sectors of society in positions of poverty and exclusion.

The crisis of 2001/2002 radicalized these processes of marginalization.²⁶ In October 2001, unemployment rates among the indigent and poor ascended to 46.8 and 27.7 percent respectively, compared to 10.9 percent for the non-poor (World Bank, 2003: 55). Fifty-five percent of the unemployed and 55 percent of the underemployed in 2002 came from the lowest two income quintiles (World Bank, 2003: 11).²⁷ The deteriorating status of the formal labor market impelled those not already working informally into precarious labor. By 2002, over half of all employment derived from the informal sector (Galasso and Ravallion, 2004: 370).²⁸ These jobs were characterized by their infrequency, highly unstable and temporary natures, and low remunerations (Beccaria, Esquivel, and Maurizio, 2005: 241, 250).²⁹

Beyond merely intensifying the processes of the 1990s, however, the crisis generated new dynamics that impoverished ever wider sections of the population. Combined with the inflationary effects of devaluation, changes to the labor market reduced real wages (both direct and indirect) and incomes (Teubal, 2000/2001: 466, 475). Although poverty during the 1990s was rooted in unemployment, evidence suggests that reduced real incomes were its primary cause during the crisis (González-Rozada and Menéndez, 2005; World Bank, 2003: 10).³⁰ In 2002, 78 percent of households surveyed in the *Encuesta Permanente de Hogares* (EPH) registered real income reductions, and 63 percent reported declines of 20 percent or more (McKenzie, 2004: 720). Thus, the crisis effectively expanded the bounds of poverty, impoverishing even those employed.³¹

These changes were not equal across all socioeconomic strata. While the wealthy were able to maintain relatively steady incomes during the crisis and its aftermath, the poor faced

increasingly unstable incomes. The value for the coefficient of variation (CV)³² of household income for the poorest bracket was roughly twice that of the upper income quintiles in May 2002 (World Bank, 2003: 8).³³ The poor's inability to use private funds to cope with economic difficulties compounded the severity of their situation (World Bank, 2003: 8).

With the peso's devaluation in 2002, the poor faced not only reduced incomes, but rising prices of basic necessities (World Bank, 2003: 8).³⁴ As food purchases represent a high percentage of the poor's total expenditures, increased poverty and indigence rates during this period were in large part a function of increased costs of living. As a result, those on the brink of poverty fell within its bounds for the first time, and the poorest sectors of society were increasingly marginalized. Between April 2001 and April 2002, the poverty line for Buenos Aires increased by 26 percent and the indigence line by 29 percent (World Bank, 2003: 5).³⁵ National poverty rates climbed to 38 percent in 2001 then soared to a stunning 57.5 percent by October 2002. The national indigence line for the same period of time more than quadrupled, rising from 6 to 28 percent (World Bank, 2003: 4, 54).

By 2003, Argentina's economy had begun to rebound strongly (Fernández Valdovinos, 2005: 1). Since then, the country has recovered rapidly, experiencing annual growth rates as high as 8-9 percent (Grima, Illanes, and Galarza, 2008: 78). In the province of Buenos Aires, child poverty has steadily decreased since 2003 (See Figures 5 and 6). Yet although CAINA reports a reduction in attendance after 2003, the numbers of children currently attending the institution remain double those of the 1990s, suggesting that economic growth is not universal (CAINA, 2005: 1). Indeed, while alleviating the magnitude of poverty, the recovery fails to address the gross socioeconomic inequalities that lie at the heart of poverty in Argentina, and past years have

seen the consolidation of the lowest sectors of society in positions of un- and underemployment (Pérez, 2007: 53).

Profile of Poverty: Inability of Families to Meet Children's Basic Needs

The existence of children on the street cannot be understood without reference to their family environment. The country's recent economic trajectory severely impacted the family unit, which is widely considered to have become increasingly fragmented and isolated (Sokolovsky, 2006: 63). Children have borne the disproportionate burden of the consequences, and changes to family structure have increased the number of children on the streets.

Street children in Buenos Aires come from the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society. Their family situation is characterized by extreme poverty, precarious employment or unemployment on the part of their parents, and a high ratio of dependants. As a result of the crisis, between 2001 and 2002 the number of children attending CAINA increased by 30 percent (CAINA, 2005: 2). Over 43 percent of children attending CAINA in 2001 and over 45 percent in 2002 were on the street due to their families' economic situation (Pojomovsky, 2008: 103).³⁶ The overwhelming majority – around 80 percent - come from the impoverished municipalities surrounding the city of Buenos Aires, while only 9.6 percent come from the city itself (See Figure 8) (Pojomovsky, 2008: 42-3).³⁷ Six out of every ten street children derive from the so-called “second belt” of municipalities, which, in May 2003, registered poverty and indigence rates of 71 percent and 38 percent, respectively (Pojomovsky, 2008: 43).³⁸ Most of these families live in precarious squatter settlements – *villas miseria* or *villas de emergencia* as they are known in Argentina – which lack basic sanitation, access to potable water, and frequently electricity (Visit to Villa 21/Zabaleta, 2008; Stillwaggon, 1998).

Evidence suggests that street children come from families that have been particularly marginalized by recent economic trends. In 2002, 31 percent of children attending CAINA came from households in which no member was employed, and in 2003 – when national unemployment rates were well below 20 percent – 34 percent of fathers/stepfathers and 70 percent of mothers of street children were without employment (Pojomovsky, Cillis, and Gentile, 2008: 157). Those parents who are employed tend to work in the informal sector, in low-quality, unstable occupations³⁹ – and in 56 percent of families with employment, only one parent works (Pojomovsky, 2008: 164-7). In addition, these families appear to have been unable to access government assistance in the wake of the crisis. In 2003, only 31 percent of mothers and 23 percent of fathers/stepfathers of street children who were unemployed were admitted to the government’s cash transfer program *Plan Jefes y Jefas de Hogares Desocupados* (PJJHD), a factor which has contributed to their economic hardships.

At the same time that parents of these families face extreme economic marginalization, they must provide for particularly large families with a high ratio of dependants. Street children who participated in a government study at CAINA between 1991 and 2003 had an average family size of 6.9 members, of which 5 were children or adolescents (Pojomovsky, 2008: 151). This figure is compared to the national average family sizes for the indigent and poor – 4.9 and 4.0 respectively – and 2.7 for the non-poor (World Bank, 2003: 8). The CDNNyA 2008 Census corroborated these findings: 34 percent of children interviewed came from households with 4-6 children and 22 percent from those with 7 or more (CDNNyA, 2008: 8).

As a result, these families have been unable to meet the most basic needs of their members.⁴⁰ In 2002, the average income for precarious labor was \$A 189 (US\$54), while the basic food basket for a family of seven was \$A 452.95 (US\$ 130). Thus, even if both parents

were employed, they could not provide for the basic caloric and nutritional needs of their family members. Although the average income for precarious labor rose to \$A 306 (US\$ 106) by May 2003, the cost of the basic food basket ascended to \$A 590 (US\$203), and employment of both parents only guaranteed an income barely sufficient to exceed the indigence line. For these two years, the poverty line - \$A 1,073.48 (US\$ 307) and \$A 1,286 (US\$443) respectively – remained well out of reach (Pojomovsky, 2008: 167-8).⁴¹ Thus, the inability of their families to meet their survival needs has impelled many children onto the streets. The fact that four out of every ten street children with siblings has at least one sibling on the street as well exposes the difficult circumstances facing certain families (Pojomovsky, 2008: 197).

Coping Techniques and Survival Strategies: Absent Parents and Child Labor

The rapidity and intensity with which families entered economic hardship in many cases altered the composition of the family itself and the roles each member fulfilled. As spouses separated under tensions, or members of the extended family were incorporated into the household, situations of neglect or overcrowding increased. These alterations to the family structure can themselves act as an impetus for children to relocate to the street. While most street children's families are headed by two parents (or a parent and a stepparent), it is important to note that 18 percent of children in the 2008 Census lived with 4-6 adults, while 8 percent lived with 7-10 adults and 7 percent with more than 10 adults (Pojomovsky, 2008: 147; CDNNyA, 2008: 7). The shacks in which these families live are often small – 50 percent of those children living with 7-10 adults inhabit a two-room house, and 20 percent a one-room house (CDNNyA, 2008: 8). This situation leads to extreme crowding and promiscuity (the number of persons per place in a bed) – which can result in higher levels of child sexual abuse and other health problems (Stillwaggon, 1998: 61).

Families have also been forced to modify the traditional roles of their members in order to survive. These practices often put children into frequent contact with the street, increasing the chances that they will see it as a viable alternative to the home. The lack of job opportunities in the informal market has caused entire families to engage together in *cartoneo*, the collection of recyclables from garbage, a dangerous and unhealthy job. In 2005, 48 percent of all *cartoneros* in the CABA were children (Grima, Illanes, and Galarza, 2008: 83; UNICEF and OIM, 2005: 26) Indeed, child labor has constituted one of the most important coping mechanisms of the poor during the crisis and its aftermath, as the income children gain is often vital to the family's very survival (Conde et al, 2008: 133; World Bank, 2003: 15, Facciuto and González, 2006: 31; Grima, Illanes, and Galarza, 2008: 85; Moreyra, 2008: 96).⁴² By 2005, estimates of those fourteen and under participating in the labor force ascended to figures as high as 2 million, with some 1.5 million currently thought to be employed on the streets (INADI, 2005: 86; Pérez, 2007: 54; Moreyra, 2008: 96).⁴³ Currently, some 800,000 children work in the province of Buenos Aires alone (Moreyra, 2008: 96). In Greater Buenos Aires, the most prominent forms of child labor are guarding cars, collecting recyclables, and begging or selling small items on the streets and various modes of public transportation (Facciuto and González, 2006: 29).

Rising levels of domestic violence and family conflict have also accompanied the spread of poverty in the wake of the crisis. In 2005, the third most common cause of attention at the Council on the Rights of Children and Adolescents in Buenos Aires was domestic violence (Naddeo, 2007: 306). In 75 percent of some 300 cases of sexual abuse processed by the Council, the perpetrator was found to be a close family member (Naddeo, 2007: 315). Women and children comprise the primary targets for acts of violence within the family sphere, yet while the principal perpetrators of violence tend to be male (fathers/stepfathers, brothers, uncles), in many

cases mothers are also responsible for child abuse (World Bank, 2003: 17; Pojomovsky, 2008: 87). The prevalence of violence in the household is exacerbated by drug and alcohol abuse and addiction, both of which have increased since the 2001/2002 crisis (World Bank, 2003).

Violence constitutes the primary reason most street children leave their homes. As the following testimonies reveal, abuse is frequent and often brutal:

“We were a lot [of kids], and my father hit us...” (Street Child A, 2008).⁴⁴

“At home, they beat the crap out of me” (Street Child C, 2008).⁴⁵

“I’m on the street because of problems with my father...we always had fights...one time he came at me with a knife” (Street Child D, 2008).⁴⁶

Over 42 percent of children interviewed at CAINA were on the street because they had either directly suffered maltreatment or sexual abuse, or witnessed other forms of violence in their families. Twenty-four percent left their homes due to non-violent conflicts (Pojomovsky, 2008: 103).⁴⁷ These figures are roughly corroborated by data from the 2008 Census, which found that 33 percent of children left their homes due to family conflict, 18 percent maltreatment, and 8 percent sexual abuse (CDNNyA, 2008: 11). Violence appears to affect more girls than boys, as 50 percent of girls – compared to 40 percent of boys – at CAINA identified violence as the impetus for their migration to the street. Seventy-seven percent of those who suffered from sexual abuse were female (Pojomovsky, 2008: 104).

Yet it is important to note that, even in cases of abuse and maltreatment, the majority of children maintain regular contact with their families after years on the street (Pojomovsky, 2008: 197). Fifty-two percent of children interviewed in the 2008 Census and 42 percent of those attending CAINA return to their families at least once a week. Seventy-one percent of those interviewed at CAINA had contact with their families over the period of a month or less

(Pojomovsky, 2008: 107; CDNNyA, 2008: 12). Engaging their families, thus, is a fundamental step to reaching a successful transition from the street.

Old Legacies and a Paradigmatic Shift: Domestic Law and the ICRC

Certain institutional and ideological legacies continue to affect child rights work in Argentina today, and provide an important context for current government policies. Street children have traditionally been viewed and treated as delinquents in Argentina. Outdated legislation established the state's responsibility to intervene when it determined that children were living in an "irregular situation" or were in "moral or material danger," terms which applied to cases of abandonment, begging, vagrancy, living or working on the streets, and delinquency (Conde, 2008: 38-41). Poor children were seen as objects of "judicial protection," which the state had a paternalistic obligation to reeducate and resocialize, primarily through internment in Institutes for Minors (INADI, 2005: 80). Meant to serve as centers of rehabilitation, in reality these institutions more closely paralleled jails, and abuse and maltreatment were widespread. As late as 2003, 15,000 children lived in "poorly run and ill-maintained" Institutes in the province of Buenos Aires alone (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207).⁴⁸

In September 2005, the Argentine state ratified the Law of Integral Protection of the Rights of the Child (Law 26.061), initiating "a sea-change in state-children relations" (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207).⁴⁹ Deriving from the child rights movement of the late 1980s when the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC) ushered in a new, rights-based paradigm, Law 26.061 conceives of children fundamentally as rights-holders, rather than objects of protection.⁵⁰ Instead of stressing street children's vulnerability or viewing them as victims of their circumstances – perspectives which ultimately deny their agency and maturity – child rights theory increasingly emphasizes their resilience and capabilities in the face of adversity (Panter-

Brick, 2002: 155). This new literature recognizes that children who “work to support themselves and their families, or who live away from adult supervision” are independent and responsible, and constantly make important life decisions on their own (Ennew, 2000: 38).

Importantly, this rights-based agenda has specifically impacted notions of appropriate institutional responses to street children. Successful programs provide not only short-term, but long-term assistance. Promoting these children’s best interests now requires not only “protecting and providing for them, but... listening to them and fostering [their] participation” (Panter-Brick, 2002: 156). The children themselves constitute the “best resource” of information about their lives, and consulting their opinions and feedback is seen as a critical aspect of any effective program (Ennew, 2002: 102). Actively involving them in the design and implementation of programs fosters their motivation, creativity, and competence, and constitutes a particularly important experience for children who have been systematically excluded from mainstream society (Ennew, 2000, 38). Engaging them in active learning through participation – whether it be assisting with food preparation, learning about nutrition and personal hygiene, or acquiring basic medical knowledge that they can implement independently – empowers them to become self-reliant and take control of their lives (Ennew, 2000: 130).

Centro de Atención Integral a la Niñez y Adolescencia (CAINA)

CAINA faces a number of challenges and limitations to its effectiveness, both financial and methodological. Since its inception, the organization has been continually limited by inadequate funding from the government. Originally, the center was meant to be part of a larger project, which would encompass 40 day centers for the children and 10 nighttime shelters, complemented by 67 street operators working directly with the children on the streets. Yet ultimately, CAINA was the only center that opened – with a reduced staff of 10 street operators –

and completion of the shelters was delayed, with one opening in 1998 and another in 2001 (Pojomovsky, 2008: 26). Within a few years, however, both were out of operation.⁵¹ CAINA soon faced the early restriction of funds, never receiving its original budget allocations and experiencing severe limitations on those resources initially assigned to its on-the-street program component. As a result, the institution has been unable to realize its original purpose – that of getting children off the street – as operators have “found themselves in the unforeseen dilemma of having to offer the day center as the only possible resource” for the children (Pojomovsky, 2008: 27). While its preliminary objective was to offer “attention, protection, assessment, and accompaniment for children and adolescents...who live, wander, and/or work in the street of Buenos Aires,” the program currently seeks to fulfill a much more limited agenda (CAINA, in Pojomovsky, 2008: 27).⁵² CAINA today offers an “institutional space where children can stay and receive integral attention, from which point they have the possibility of developing personal strategies for their gradual transition from the street” (Pojomovsky, 2008: 28).⁵³

As a result, the organization has had to severely pull back from attempting to provide solutions to the children’s situation.⁵⁴ CAINA’s current budget constraints have forced the organization to limit its services and impeded the expansion of its programs. As its director Emilio Zadcovich notes:

“We lack money for daily things...The government doesn’t revise our budget every year, despite the rising numbers of children. The money depends upon who runs the government” (Zadcovich, 2008).⁵⁵

Attempts at expanding the curriculum and creating programs more applicable to the children’s lives – including a course on parenting for young mothers – have been delayed by lack of

funding, as the organization's budget is not sufficient to cover additional courses. As a result, CAINA has had to rely on private funding to finance such endeavors (Zadcovich, 2008).

Most importantly, CAINA's fiscal limitations have impacted the staff it is able to hire. CAINA currently employs many volunteers, who do not necessarily have the professional training necessary to effectively respond to the children and their needs.⁵⁶ As these volunteers frequently work periods of only months at a time, there is a high turn around rate among the staff directly working with the children (Zadcovich, 2008). This constant rotation makes it difficult for the children to develop relationships with the workers, an experience which CAINA maintains is an essential element of its methodology.

The limited size of its professional staff has also impacted the organization's ability to establish contact with the children's families, and monitor those children who have returned home or entered into permanent residences (*hogares permanentes*). CAINA is unable to realize family visits, let alone establish working relationships with children's families, because such involvement would require a team of dedicated professionals – which is well beyond CAINA's current financial means. Mr. Zadcovich admits that:

“We don't have the resources to make family visits – we don't even have access to a vehicle in which to make them” (Zadcovich, 2008).

Yet, interaction with the children's families is critical to CAINA's ability to establish the true stories behind each child's life on the street, particularly as the children (at least initially) often provide false information, either due to distrust or the highly personal and painful nature of their backgrounds (Visits to CAINA, 2008; Zadcovich, 2008). Cases of severe and chronic abuse must be weeded out from situations of neglect or extreme poverty, which are more likely to allow for the child's successful reintegration into the family when accompanied by institutional support.

Without meeting the family, seeing their living conditions, and hearing their side of the story, CAINA cannot possess the full knowledge necessary to help the children reach appropriate decisions about their futures.

The limitations CAINA faces in adequately addressing the needs of children are not solely a product of its budget constraints, however. Rather, the most pervasive problem the institution faces is one of approach. A widespread opinion held by the children is that the people at CAINA are not “comprometido” – dedicated to, or truly invested in, their well-being. This sentiment is the product of a variety of policies that the organization maintains. To the children, CAINA’s limited schedule is an inadequate response to their circumstances. The problems they face occur at all hours of the day, and for them, CAINA’s restricted schedule demonstrates that the workers are not willing to take more than a few hours to assist them. Children cite police repression and random violence as most frequent during the night, and many wish the organization would extend its hours to include nighttime accommodation. This view is held among those children who, in other respects, think well of the organization:

“CAINA is a good place...it’s just a shame that it isn’t open during the night” (Street Child B, 2008).⁵⁷

The temporary nature of the services provided causes the children to believe that workers at CAINA aren’t devoted to finding solutions to their problems. Many of the children have assisted the institution for years, never obtaining the support necessary to make a successful transition from the street. The activities offered – which are recreational, and do not confer useful skills or knowledge onto the children that might help them find work or realistically advance their reintegration into the educational system – have gained “singular importance” in the institution’s design (Pojomovsky, 2008: 28). Rather than prioritize the creation of more applicable and

engaging classes, the organization maintains its current curriculum – despite the fact that it is not well attended (Visits to CAINA, 2007, 2008). The majority of children do not participate in the infrequent classes offered by *Puentes Escolares*. Many have been disconnected from the educational system for years, and they see neither the utility of the information gained, nor are accustomed to the concentration and focus required for academic studies (Observation B, 2007; Visits to CAINA, 2008). Yet the organization has responded to this declining participation not by asking the children what types of classes they *would* be interested in, but rather by filling these times with movie showings and other recreational activities that do not bring the children closer to a solution (Visits to CAINA, 2008).

Most importantly, CAINA maintains ineffective disciplinary policies that alienate the children. They create an atmosphere of authority and hierarchy, to which many of the children respond negatively (Visits to CAINA, 2008). If a child arrives at the organization high, he or she is not permitted entrance. CAINA claims to uphold this practice in order to discourage drug use, and asserts that by forcing the children to choose between drugs and assistance, it compels them to establish important life priorities (Zadcovich, 2008). Yet, a child who abuses drugs is fundamentally crying for attention and assistance, and once experiencing their effects, is extremely vulnerable. Children who are high are at a heightened risk of violence, crime, and accidents. Overdoses, if not fatal, can be severely damaging if they are unable to obtain medical help quickly.⁵⁸ A study encompassing ten pediatric institutions in Buenos Aires found that 57.6 percent of the visits street children made to pediatric departments were for problems related to drug abuse, and 50.5 percent were due to street accidents (Akman et al., 1999: 243). Children are frequently hit by cars as they attempt to cross the street while high. CAINA's policy therefore has the potential to cause significant harm, and the rigidity with which it is universally applied

estranges the children from the Center's workers. In addition, it fails to inhibit the children from using drugs; rather, it teaches them to modify the timing of their consumption (the data collected on drug use by the organization itself reveals that most children who attend the Center consume substances on a regular basis). It is no surprise that children abuse drugs most frequently in the afternoons, evenings, and weekends, when the organization is closed.

A second, similar policy that the organization upholds is to ban particularly difficult children from entering. Once a child has infringed upon the Center's rules enough times (often these incidences involve disrespect to the workers), he or she is forbidden admittance to the Center until the punishment is deemed sufficient. This practice generates immense resentment on the part of the children, who do not feel respected and question the extent to which the workers are truly committed to helping them. As one child noted,

“That's not helping kids; it's the reverse...when they don't open the door, the kids get mad, they go do drugs” (Street Child A, 2008).⁵⁹

Policies such as these distance the children and impair the ability of the workers to reach out and bond with them – an interaction that the organization claims to be its methodological foundation.

Choices of Policy Correctives

1. On the most fundamental level, CAINA needs to engage in a critical self-analysis. The organization must reassess its approach to the children and their concerns, and the type of environment it creates, in order to address the widespread belief among children that it is not truly committed to solving their problems. In order to do this effectively, CAINA should initiate an ongoing dialogue with the children through discussions encouraging their feedback, both on successful aspects of the organization, and areas needing improvement. Involving the children in

important decision-making processes, and making them feel they are important and respected, encourages an environment of mutual respect and participation. As part of this discussion, the organization should raise the issue of expanding its schedule and curriculum, in order to determine whether changes in these areas would meet any unaddressed needs.⁶⁰

A central concern is current disciplinary policies. A center that truly seeks to uplift children from their current situation is “not [a] place[] for regimentation, hierarchy, and authority” (Ennew, 2000: 110). The success of *Hogar la Casita*, a shelter for street boys located outside of the CABA in the district of Moreno, demonstrates the impact that establishing a collaborative and respectful environment can have on children’s behavior. Father Elvio Mettone, the shelter’s founder and director, is respected profoundly by the boys, who perceive that he cares for and is genuinely committed to helping them. The organization fosters a sense of community,⁶¹ and as a result, the children do not exhibit confrontational behavior, and in general, do not infringe upon the organization’s policies (Visits to *Hogar la Casita*, 2007, 2008).⁶²

Obviously, regulations and rules are warranted to maintain order and create a safe and inclusive environment, but current policies do not advance the abilities of the Center’s workers to bond with the children, or make them feel wanted and respected. When children abuse drugs, they need attention and care more than they do at any other time. The Center should disband its policies of denying admittance to children who have consumed drugs. CAINA should allow children who are high to enter, verify that they are in stable condition and be ready to attend to them should their condition deteriorate, and separate them from the other children. These measures must be done in a way that is not punitive or accusatory, but rather respectful, encouraging the child to respond with maturity and understanding. In this way, CAINA can ensure the well-being of the child, while simultaneously guaranteeing a safe environment for

others. An important component of this new approach is addressing drug consumption openly and directly, engaging the children in discussions and providing information about the physical and psychological effects of substance abuse. In this way, CAINA will improve their capacity to make informed decisions. In addition, all staff members should be trained in detoxification routines; contacting a nearby youth “rehab community” (*comunidad terapéutica*) and conducting training workshops with their staff offers one possible solution.

2. As budget constraints have significantly limited the programs and services CAINA is able to offer, the Center should expand its efforts at private fundraising, as a means of supplementing its governmental funding. While the organization currently receives donations, it has not engaged in any wide-scale fundraising campaign. Increased revenues would allow CAINA to hire more professional staff, reducing their dependence upon volunteers who do not necessarily have the backgrounds to most effectively address the children’s needs.

3. Given that the roots of the children’s problems lie at home, and that the vast majority of children maintain regular contact with their families, even years after leaving the house, including them in all processes is fundamental to finding a lasting solution to the children’s current circumstances. Situations in which it is dangerous for children to return home – such as severe and chronic cases of abuse or neglect – must be weeded out from those in which treatment is a possibility. There is wide consensus within the field on this point (Facciuto and González, 2006; Pincever, 2008; Fazzio, Sokolovsky, and Múseres, 2006; Sokolovsky, 2006; Naddeo, 2008; Conde et al, 2008). Even cases of chronic abuse have been successfully navigated by including the families in professional and personalized treatment programs. The program run by Ieledeinu – a non-profit organization working within the Argentine Jewish community to help

children and their families who are experiencing maltreatment and abuse – has been highly successful in resolving cases of domestic violence by implementing this model (Pincever, 2008). CAINA should increase its professional staff, particularly social workers and psychologists, to form a team responsible for making family visits and monitoring the progress of children who have returned home or who have entered into permanent shelters.

4. A large percentage of children, particularly in the aftermath of the 2001/2002 crisis, have left their homes because of their families' economic situation. Yet only 31 percent of mothers and 23 percent of fathers of street children who are unemployed have been admitted to PJJHD. CAINA should inform the municipal offices responsible for granting admission to the program of families that currently have children on the street, so that an investigation can be undertaken to determine whether they qualify for the program.

Policy Prescription

Ultimately, the most effective policy solution will be multidimensional. The single most important step CAINA can take to increase its efficacy is to create a more open and inclusive environment. To this end, the organization should foster children's active participation by listening to their opinions and providing the institutional space for ongoing dialogue between them and workers about the institution's policies. Abolishing disciplinary procedures that alienate the children and generate resentment and distrust is central to creating a more positive atmosphere. Rather than denying admittance to children who are high, the organization should let them enter, keep them apart, and monitor their condition, thus ensuring their well-being and privacy and the ability of other children to enjoy a safe, drug-free environment. If done in a respectful manner, these actions offer an opportunity to initiate conversation with the child about drug abuse and advance mutual understanding and respect. Treating the children as the mature

individuals they are – who are capable of making important decisions once given access to information – will lay the groundwork for developing shared trust. Establishing an environment of equal respect and understanding will encourage children not to transgress the Center’s rules.

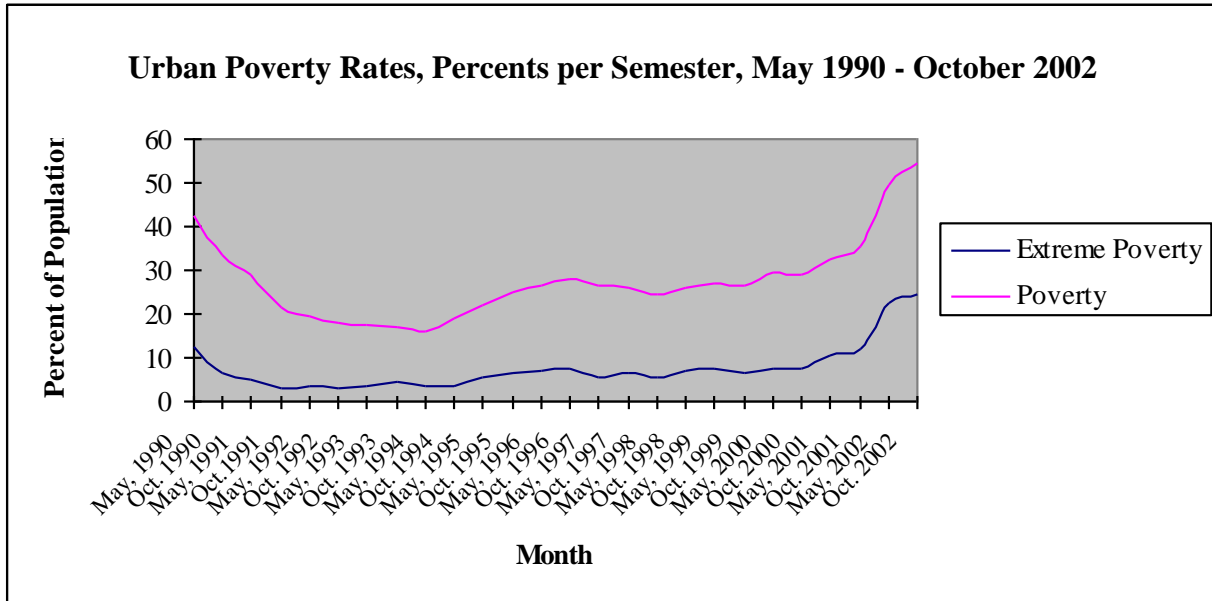
In addition, while recreation is an important part of the services offered by drop-in centers, it cannot be the only component. CAINA must encourage skill and confidence building through appropriate, practical classes – where teachers act as facilitators rather than educators, and curriculum is driven by the children’s interests and concerns. Possible class topics include sexual education and parenting skills (in which case ensuring a comfortable and inclusive environment is essential); nutrition and cooking; and basic medical knowledge. Combining an inclusive, supportive atmosphere with the provision of skills the children can employ in everyday life, CAINA will ensure that the Center becomes a place of empowerment, strength, and growth.

As the minimal budget granted by the federal government constitutes a second important limitation facing the institution, CAINA should also expand its private fundraising efforts. Since it is unlikely that the state will significantly augment its finances, raising revenues independently would allow CAINA to increase the number of qualified social workers and psychologists it employs. Most importantly, the institution could develop a team of professionals responsible for realizing family visits and monitoring the progress of children transitioning from the street in their families or in permanent residences. The experiences of other organizations, such as Ieledeinu, demonstrate that close contact with the family and a more personalized system of care are frequently the decisive factors to ensuring a lasting solution to domestic problems. These professionals should also inform families facing unemployment of state cash transfer programs such as PJJHD and newer *Plan Familias* into which it has been incorporated.

By combining a supportive, open environment with practical education and a personalized care system, CAINA would avoid falling into the trap of providing charity that merely fosters dependence, and denies children their agency and dignity. Rather, it would offer both the short-term assistance necessary to ensure their health and safety, and the long-term accompaniment that yields lasting solutions. Yet, without the government's full commitment to actively address poverty and its consequences, CAINA is engaged in an uphill battle. Street children, like the grinding poverty they represent, present a complex and challenging problem. Ensuring that the next generation does not suffer on the streets as Argentina's youth do currently will require a prolonged and dedicated struggle. Now, a full six years after the crisis, the economy is stalling once more. Indicators predict that the commodity boom, and the export revenues that have fueled Argentina's miraculous recovery, will decrease by as much as 25 percent for 2009 (Latin American Newsletters, 2009: 10).⁶³ It is, therefore, all the more essential that centers such as CAINA – and the governments upon which they depend – engage in active self-analysis and employ creative solutions in the face of the enormous challenges that confront them today, and still await them tomorrow.

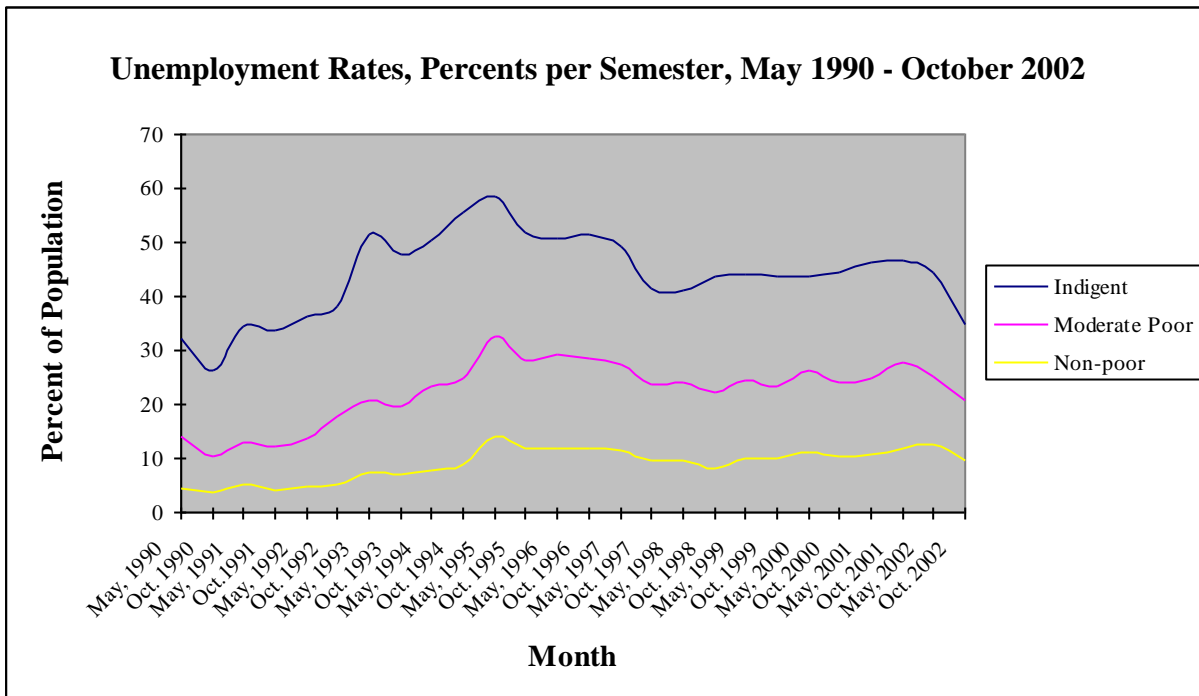
APPENDIX A: TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1:



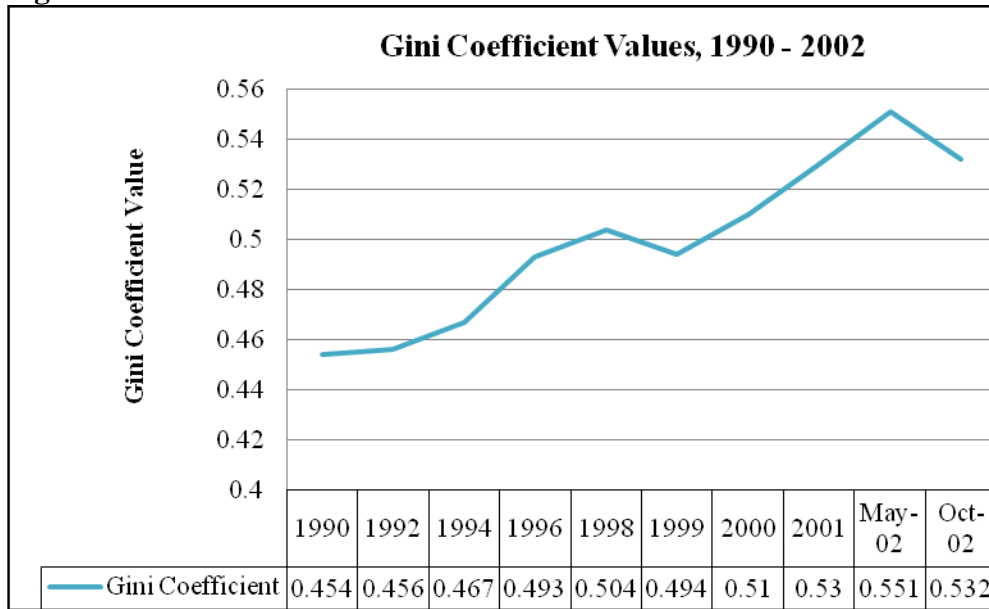
Data source: World Bank. 2003. "Argentina: Crisis and Poverty 2004, A Poverty Assessment," Volume 1: Main Report (July 24). Poverty Reduction and Economic Management, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, 54.

Figure 2:



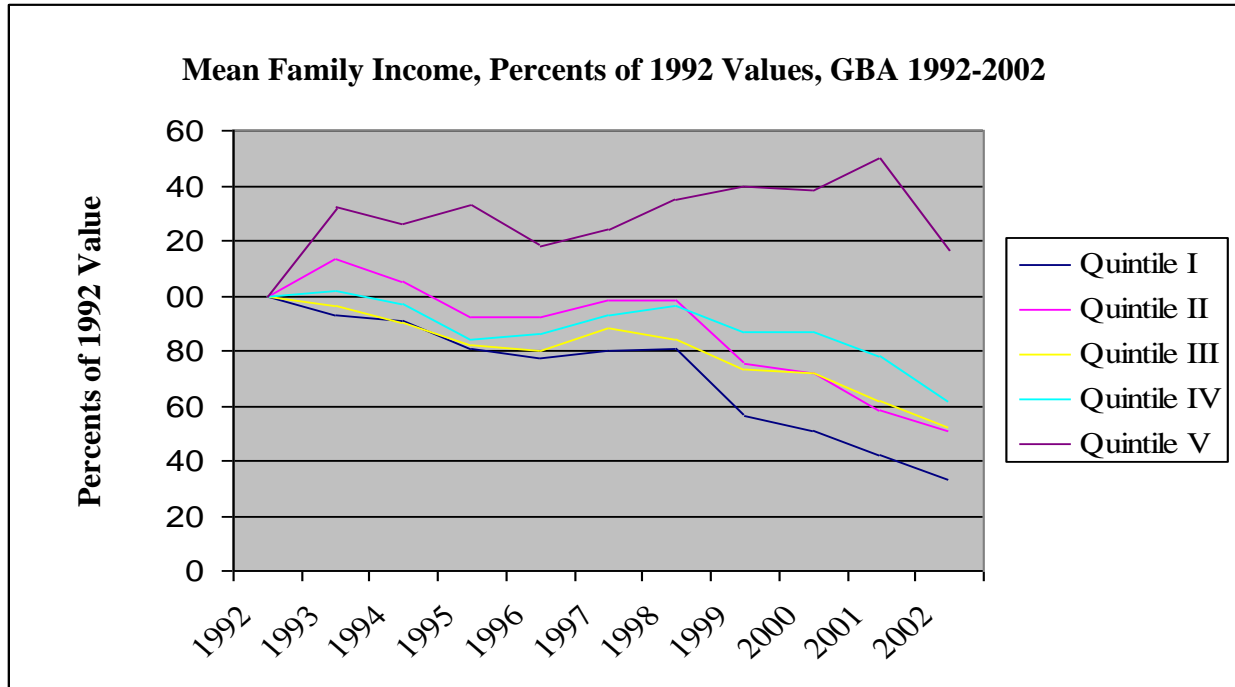
Data source: World Bank. 2003. "Argentina: Crisis and Poverty 2004, A Poverty Assessment," Volume 1: Main Report (July 24). Poverty Reduction and Economic Management, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, 55.

Figure 3:



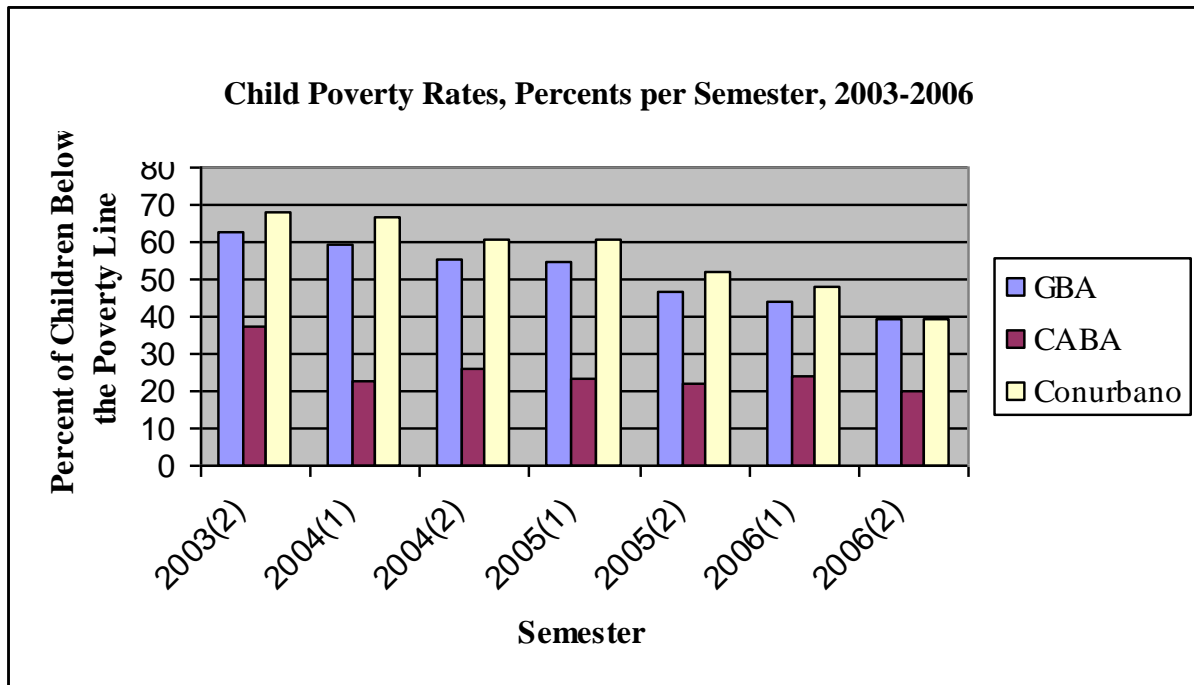
Data source: World Bank. 2003. "Argentina: Crisis and Poverty 2004, A Poverty Assessment," Volume 1: Main Report (July 24). Poverty Reduction and Economic Management, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, **PAGE NUMBER???**

Figure 4:



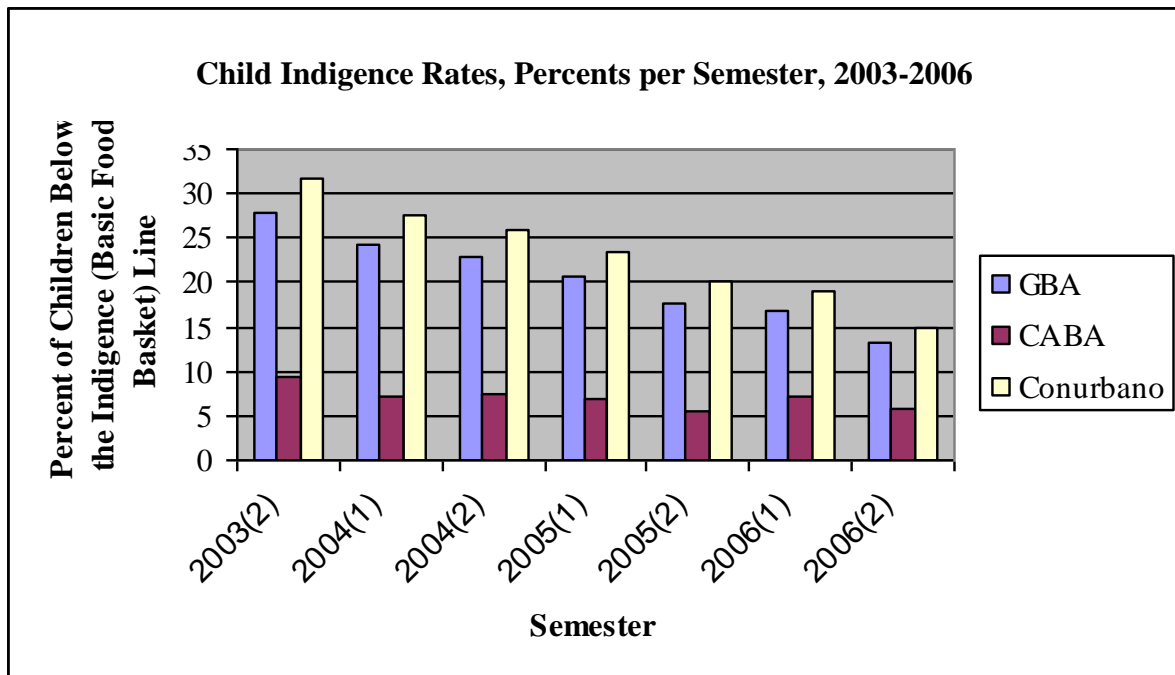
Data source: Vinocur, Pablo, and Leopoldo Halperin. 2004. *Pobreza y políticas sociales en Argentina de los años noventa*. Santiago: United Nations Press.

Figure 5:



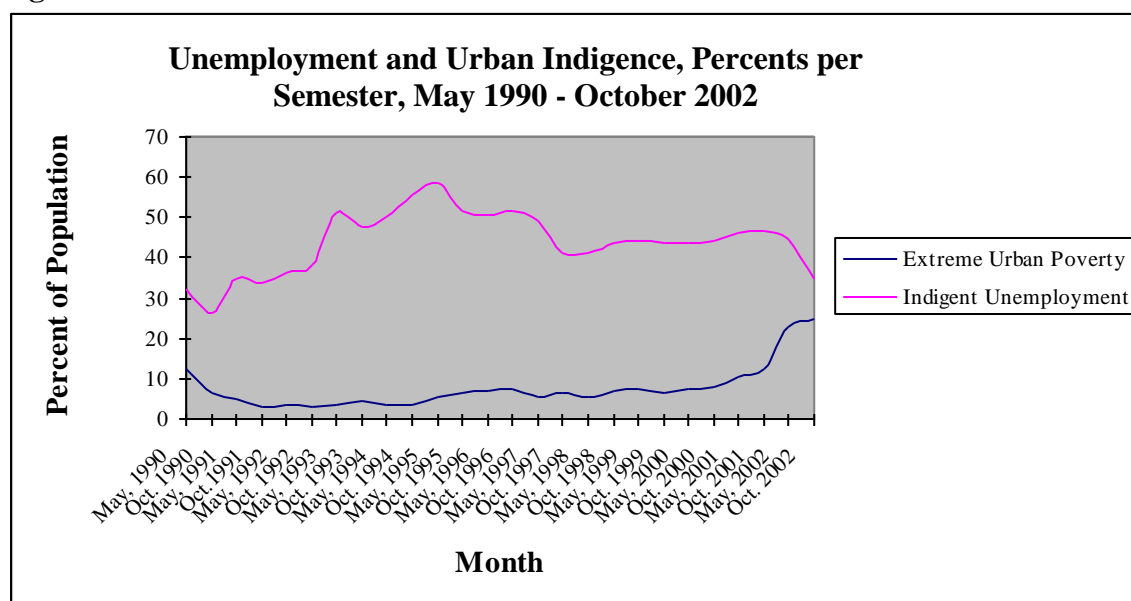
Data source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo (INDEC), “Población de menores de 14 años según incidencia de la pobreza y la indigencia. Total 28 aglomerados urbanos, regiones estadísticas y agrupamientos por tamaño. Segundo semestre 2003 al segundo semestre 2006.” www.indec.gov.ar

Figure 6:



Data source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo (INDEC), “Población de menores de 14 años según incidencia de la pobreza y la indigencia. Total 28 aglomerados urbanos, regiones estadísticas y agrupamientos por tamaño. Segundo semestre 2003 al segundo semestre 2006.” www.indec.gov.ar. *Note that indigence levels in the Conurbano remain well above the greater region’s average levels, even into 2006.*

Figure 7:



Data source: World Bank. 2003. “Argentina: Crisis and Poverty 2004, A Poverty Assessment,” Volume 1: Main Report (July 24). Poverty Reduction and Economic Management, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, 55. *Indigent rates peak just as unemployment among these sectors begins to decrease in 2002. This is due to the effects of devaluation – as the Argentine state abandoned the Convertibility Plan in 2002 – and reduced real wages, which were the primary causes of poverty during the 2001/2002 crisis.*

Table 1:

	Percentage Change in Real Labor Income			
	1991-96	1996-1998	1998-2001	1991-2001
Mean:	16	5	-9	11
Percentile:				
5	-26	-14	-3	-38
10	-7	-1	-24	-30
20	11	-1	-16	-7
30	18	-1	-24	-11
40	11	-1	-10	-1
50	6	5	-5	6
60	11	-1	1	11
70	11	6	-11	4
80	23	-1	-4	18
90	39	-1	1	39
95	23	5	0	30

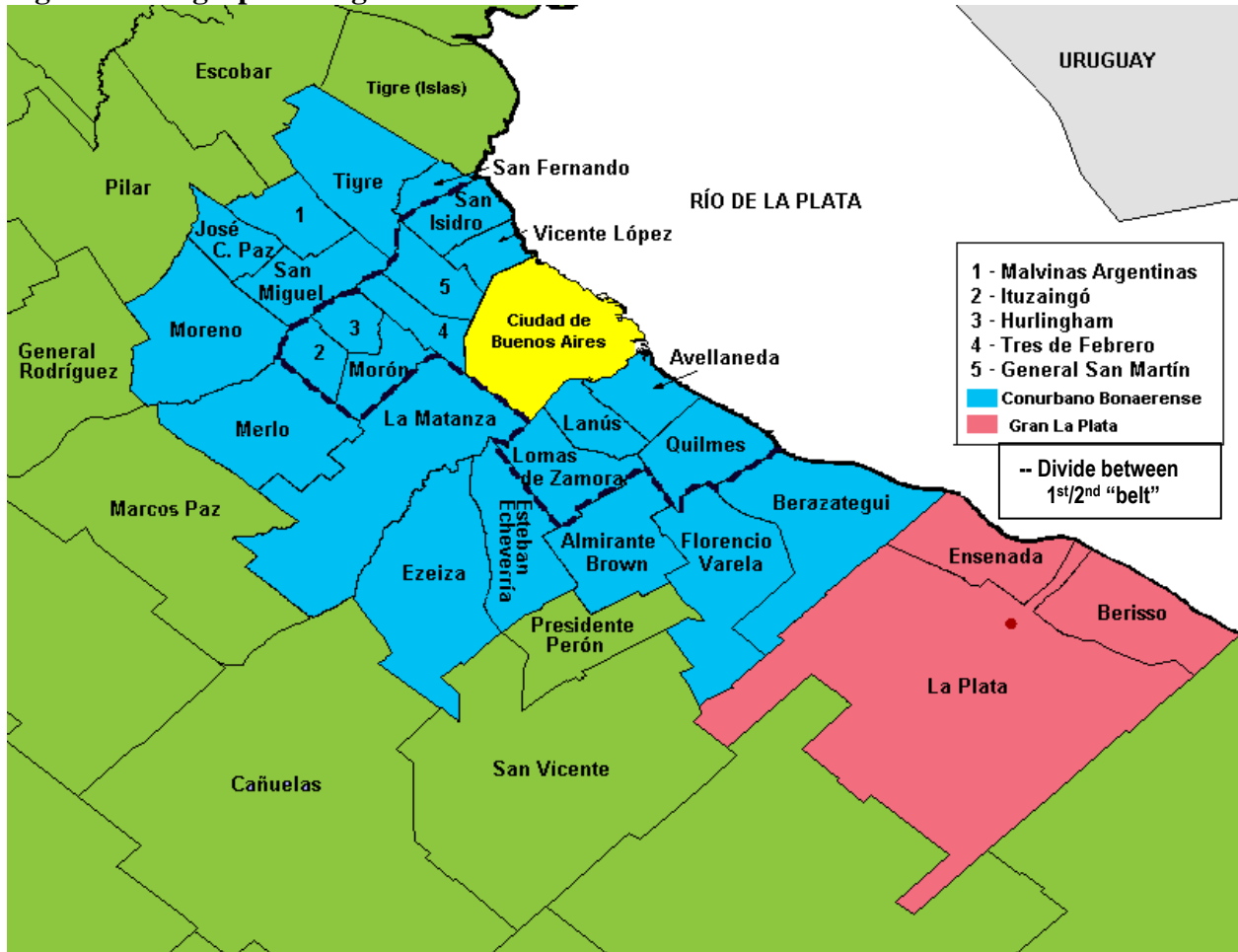
Data source: González-Rozada, Martín and Alicia Menéndez. 2006. “Why Have Urban Poverty and Income Inequality Increased So Much? Argentina, 1991-2001.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*. 55 (Oct.): 109-138.

Table 2: Percentage of Children with Unsatisfied Basic Needs, Argentina and Buenos Aires

Region	Severe Overcrowding	Insufficient Sanitary Conditions	Unsuitable Housing	Inability to Meet Subsistence Needs	Education
Province of Buenos Aires	70.6	19.2	19.6	10.0	9.6
Argentina	70.0	28.8	20.1	10.3	7.9

Data source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo (INDEC), “Porcentaje de niños y adolescentes NBI según indicadores que componen el índice por región,” Oct. 2001. www.indec.gov.ar

Figure 8: Geographic Origins of Street Children



Data source: Pojomovsky, Julieta. 2008. *Cruzar la calle: ninez y adolescencia en las calles de la ciudad. Tomo 1.* Buenos Aires: Espacio Editorial. *Original graph taken from: www.es.wikipedia.org.*

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS, OBSERVATIONS, AND VISITS

Interviews:

The opinions and perspectives articulated in this text are strongly influenced by the testimonies of numerous street children, who shared their experiences and stories with me during the fall of 2007 and summer of 2008, largely through informal interviews and discussions.

Eighteen structured interviews with street children and former street children were conducted during the summer of 2008. They will remain anonymous for the sake of their privacy, and I have included those interviews directly cited in the text in this section.

My views were similarly informed by interviews I conducted with a variety of professionals, as well as visits I made to different institutions involved with street children, which are also not cited in the text. These experiences shaped my understanding of the situation facing the children and the responsible role of institutions in addressing their concerns:

Facciuto, Alejandra (Professor at the Department of Social Work, University of Buenos Aires). Discussion. 2008 (July 6). UBA Department of Social Work, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Lomh, Eduardo (Operator at Santa Catalina, and co-founder of *Centro de rehabilitación el Güenzo Maritano*, a drug rehabilitation center for children in Villa Palito). 2008 (**July 29**). Interviewed by author and David McCavit. Santa Catalina, Constitución: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Mettone, Elvio (Director and founder of permanent shelter for street boys *Hogar la Casita*). Interviewed by author, Eleonora Marranzini, Melissa Hite, and David McCavit. 2008 (**June 30**). Villa Zapiola, Partido de Moreno: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Relation to Street Child. (Unemployed aunt of a former street child, mother of ten, and *villa* resident). Interviewed by author, Eleonora Marranzini, and David McCavit. 2008 (July 20). Monte Grande: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Street Child B. Interviewed by author, David McCavit and Eleonora Marranzini. 2008 (July 7). Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Street Child C. Interviewed by author, David McCavit, Melissa Hite, and Eleonora Marranzini. 2008 (July 2). Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Street Child D. Interviewed by author, Eleonora Marranzini, Melissa Hite, and David McCavitt 2008 (July 30). Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Street Child E. Interviewed by author, Eleonora Marranzini, and David McCavitt. 2008 (July 19). Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observations:

Observation A. 2007 (November 3). “Children’s comments about police brutality in the provinces.” Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observation B. 2007 (October 15). “Puentes Escolares in Santa Catalina.” *Santa Catalina*. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observation C. 2008 (July 19). “Prostitution of Street Children.” *Constitución*. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observation D. 2008 (August 14). “Children explaining how to smoke paco.” *Ranchada in San Telmo*. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observation E. 2008. (July – August). “La ranchada de Paseo Colón.” *San Telmo*. Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Observation F. 2007. (November 10). “Child shows bruises on back, after being beaten by police.” *Pedro de Elizalde Hospital for Children*. Barracas: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Visits:

Visit to Hogar la Casita. 2007 (November 20). Villa Zapiola (Paso del Rey), Partido de Moreno: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Visits to Hogar la Casita. 2008 (July 12, July 27) Villa Zapiola, Partido de Moreno: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Visits to CAINA. 2007 (November 10-15). CAINA, San Telmo: Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Visit to Villa 21/ Zabaleta. 2008 (July 20). Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Notes

¹ Argentina was ruled by a series of military *juntas* from 1976-1983, which embarked upon a “process” of national reorganization. During this time, thousands of citizens were arrested, tortured, and killed – estimates range from 10,000 – 30,000 individuals – in a war against “subversive” elements within Argentine society. Many shantytowns within the boundaries of the capital of Buenos Aires were evicted, their inhabitants forced to move to slums in the Conurbano Bonaerense.

² Over the course of the years, a growing body of literature has developed seeking to understand the roots of children’s migration to the streets. There is an increasing consensus among scholars of the inadequacy of the term “street children” itself to encompass the full range of experiences children have on the streets (Panter-Brick, 2002: 149-51; Ferguson, 2003). UNICEF defines street children as “any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults” (UNICEF, 2001: 89). Original typologies developed of children “of” and “on” the street (*de la calle* vs. *en la calle*) – those who lived primarily on the street with infrequent or no contact with their families, versus those who spent most of their days working on the street but lived with their families – have proven inadequate descriptors of children’s lives (Panter-Brick, 2002: 150). Increasingly, scholars have recognized a continuum of experiences, as children often sleep both at home and on the streets, and spend “significant periods of time in residential institutions like orphanages, refuges, or correctional establishments” (Panter-Brick, 2002: 150).

³ Gender distribution of street children tends to be roughly 75 percent male and 25 female, although the percentage of girls on the street has risen over the past years (CAINA, 2005: 5).

⁴ Some studies suggest that in 2003, 3,300 children lived on the street, while others maintain that in 2004, 300 children lived on the street and 3,500 worked on the streets during the day to return to their families at night (Naddeo, 2008: 308; Moreyra, 2008: 96-7). It is important to note that these censuses are merely of children currently on the streets; they do not take into account those children in Institutes or jails, and therefore even if correct, would not convey the scope of the problem.

⁵ For example, if we were to assume that only those 40% of children who constitute once-a-year-visitors (roughly 21 children per day) were new, while the other 31 children stayed the same every day of the year, the number of children attending CAINA during a 365 day period would be as high as 7,592. CAINA asserts that for 2003, the Center attended 11,727 children; by 2004, attendance had decreased to 9,708 children, but these numbers remain twice those of the 1990s (CAINA, 2005: 2).

⁶ Children also engage in odd jobs (*changas variadas*), and sell stamps (Pojomovsky, 2008: 175-6).

⁷ However, it is important to note that less is known about these forms of work, as children tend to be less vocal about them.

⁸ The transition to the street “almost never occurs compulsively; but is a process that begins, in general, with irregular school attendance, continues in a perpetual wandering through neighborhood streets that progressively extends to larger streets and train stations, and finally ends, through this mode of transportation, at the terminals of the City of Buenos Aires” (Scandizzo, 2008: 149).

⁹ The term *ranchada* signifies the group of children as much as the habitual place where they sleep together. The *ranchada* in Buenos Aires has modified over time, as ties between children have weakened and become more unstable, and group loyalty and size have diminished (Pojomovsky, 2008: 119). Earlier, larger *ranchadas* that encompassed all the children living in a particular geographic zone – such as the *ranchada* of Constitución or Retiro – have fragmented, and increasingly children form smaller groups or pairs (Scandizzo, 2008: 151; Pojomovsky, 2008: 119). Nevertheless, the bonds that children develop with their friends are deep, strengthened by the shared experience of marginalization (Scandizzo, 2008: 152; Pojomovsky, 2008: 119). These relationships frequently pose obstacles for children when they attempt to leave the street, as they do not want to be separated from their friends.

¹⁰ These figures ascend with age, as 80 percent of children between 13 and 15 years had consumed a substance at least once, compared to 87 percent of those older than 16 (CDNNyA, 2008: 19-20).

¹¹ *Paco* is derived from cocaine byproducts mixed with solvents (such as paraffin, benzene, or ether), to which a variety of fillers is added, ranging from kerosene, flour, and talcum powder to ground glass from fluorescent light bulbs (Barrionuevo, 2008; La Fogata, in Pojomovsky, 2008). *Pasta base* is extremely addictive, as 3-4 doses produce addiction. Its addictive properties lie in the intense, ephemeral high it produces, which usually lasts between 5-10 minutes, and which, if not followed immediately by consumption once more, leads to an even more intense “fall,” leaving the consumer frantic to obtain more of the drug. As a result, although it is sold in small quantities for very little money - a few doses can be bought for around one or two pesos (although prices have risen in recent

years) – an addiction is quite expensive to maintain (Ministerio de Salud, 2007: 41). Street children smoke *paco* with homemade pipes, using the body of a pen for the pipe, and poking holes in plastic lids or gum wrappers for filters (Observation C, 2008). Oftentimes the children will smoke marijuana cut with *paco*, and in this form it does not exert such an addictive force. This drug is prevalent in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

¹² In many cases, the children are aware of and open about how addicted they are to *paco*: “I’m hooked on *la base...*” (“Estoy colgado con la base”) (Street Child B, 2008). Author’s translation.

¹³ *Paco* addicts can lose as much as 30-45 pounds in the first three months of consumption. Delirium, paranoia, convulsions, and even brain hemorrhage are also possible consequences, along with nausea and vomiting. *Paco* has also been shown to produce arterial hypertension, arrhythmia, and heart attack, and pneumonia, emphysema, and other infections in the lungs. (Ministerio de Salud, 2007: 41).

¹⁴ While mistreatment is widespread within the city, it is also important to note that police in the rural municipalities are regarded by the children to be much more repressive and abusive (Observation A, 2007).

¹⁵ A particularly extensive *razzia* occurred in January of 2002, when police rounded up children throughout the city in an effort to “clean” for tourism reasons.

¹⁶ Between November 2000 and July of 2001, 800 complaints of torture and maltreatment in police stations and rehabilitation institutions were filed in the Province of Buenos Aires alone. Amnesty believes, however, that real numbers are far greater, due to fear of reprisals. Indeed, police violence is almost entirely reserved for *poor* youth, who are also the targets of extrajudicial killings (*gatillo fácil*) (Amnesty International, 2002: 6, 12).

¹⁷ The Department of Integral Attention for Street Children was dependent upon the Ministry of the Family and Minor and the Secretariat of Social Promotion of Buenos Aires during this time period.

¹⁸ San Telmo borders the district of Constitución and Barracas; it is located in the southern part of Buenos Aires.

¹⁹ However, for cases of infections, the Center relies on Hospital Muñiz (Zadcovich, 2008: 1).

²⁰ Puentes Escolares is dependent upon the Secretary of Education for the City of Buenos Aires (Danieli, Di Paola, Laborde, and Zadcovich, 2001: 2).

²¹ Of a national population of 33 million, four million children in Argentina between the ages of six and eighteen lived below the poverty line at the turn of the millennium – or 12 percent of the entire population (Stillwaggon, 1998: 16). In the wake of the 2001/2002 crisis, poverty rates ascended to 72.5 percent for all individuals 19 years and under, yet children between the ages of five and fourteen years comprised the single most severely impacted population, suffering from poverty rates of over 74 percent (World Bank, 2003: 63).

²² In the mid-1980s, many Latin American countries failed to pay international debts they had accumulated. Continued financial assistance in the form of short term loans (SALS and SECALS) from a variety of monetary institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank) were made contingent upon the reorganization of these countries’ economic structures along neoliberal principles.

²³ Carlos Menem held the presidency of Argentina from 1989 until 1999, during which time he was able to pass much of his legislation through presidential decrees, thus bypassing the legislature. Reforms included trade liberalization and the “opening” of the Argentine economy to global markets; the flexibilization of labor market relations through the *Ley Nacional de Empleo*; the privatization of public firms; and the pegging of the peso to the dollar in 1991 under the Convertibility Plan (Giraudy, 2007: 34). In the early 1990s, reforms proved effective in curbing inflation, mitigating poverty, and improving general welfare (World Bank, 2003: 3).

²⁴ Trade liberalization radicalized a shift in the national economy from the manufacturing to the service sector, resulting in significant job loss, deteriorating working conditions, and an increase in low paying jobs (Teubal, 2000/2001: 462; Auyero, 2001: 31).²⁴ The subsequent process of deindustrialization that occurred in major urban areas led to hyper-unemployment. Home to the largest industrial park in the country, the Conurbano Bonaerense (a region comprised of thirty municipalities surrounding the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, or CABA) was the single region most impacted by these economic trends. Over the course of the 1990s, 5,508 industrial plants closed, resulting in the elimination of some 200,000 jobs between 1991 and 1995 alone (Auyero, 2001: 31). As this region represented 75 percent of all employment in the province of Buenos Aires, the consequences to the working classes were severe (Auyero, 2001: 31-2). The magnitude of these losses is perhaps best understood on a national scale, as during the 1990s the Conurbano Bonaerense contained 24.4 percent of Argentina’s total population (Auyero, 2001: 31). In addition, the fact that while the poorest 40 percent of the population experienced income reductions during the period 1991-2001, the top 10 percent profited from significant income growth indicates the increasing concentration of income in the hands of a few (González-Rozada and Menéndez, 2006). In the highly volatile job market that emerged, workers’ bargaining power – and thus, their wages – eroded (Auyero, 2001: 35).

²⁵ Unskilled laborers, informal sector workers, women, youth, and those with little education bore the overwhelming burden of unemployment (Auyero, 2001: 33; González-Rozada and Menéndez, 2006: 113; Teubal, 2000/2001: 483).

²⁶ By 1998, the country slid into recession. In 2001 the economic and financial crisis deepened as the government struggled to improve its public finances and debt profile (World Bank, 2003: 1). Facing massive capital flight and a decline in GDP by 10.9 percent for 2001 alone, the government defaulted on public sector borrowings. In 2002, the state abandoned the Convertibility Plan and floated the peso, resulting in devaluation and significant inflation for the first time since 1991 (Beccaria, Esquivel, and Maurizio, 2005:236, World Bank, 2003: 1).

²⁷ With the crisis, unemployment experienced a structural shift. While unemployment in the 1990s resulted primarily from losses in the informal sector, during the crisis it fundamentally reflected job cuts in the formal sector (González-Rozada and Menéndez, 2006; World Bank, 2003: 14). In 2002, only 5 million out of a total workforce of 14.3 million possessed stable employment (World Bank, 2003: 11). As a result, the pauperization of the middle class constituted one of the defining characteristics of the crisis: some 7 million Argentines are thought to have fallen from the middle class to become the “new poor” within the last decade (Kliksberg, 2008: 16). The loss of formal occupation has a particular significance in Argentina, where the social security system is engineered to serve those working full time and in the formal sector (Auyero, 2001: 40). The crisis therefore left greater sections of the population without social protection, dependent upon the decaying public health sector for their healthcare needs. Rising unemployment was accompanied by increasing underemployment. While just over 68 percent of the urban population worked above 30 hours a week in 1998, by May 2002 only 54 percent of the work force was able to maintain those hours (World Bank, 2003: 61). In October 2002, over 24 percent of those employed in all urban areas were working under 30 hours a week.

²⁸ Evidence suggests that these trends have held - in 2006, 25 percent of all families in Greater Buenos Aires (GBA) were headed by individuals working solely in the informal economy (Petetta, 2007: 69).

²⁹ Thus, although the informal economy acted as a “cushion” for formal sector cutbacks, precarious employment effectively obscured the gravity of the crisis (World Bank, 2003: i).

³⁰ It is important to note that poverty in the 1990s was rooted in unemployment, and while reduced real wages were a contributing element to poverty levels, they did not significantly impact them.

³¹ These trends continued into the aftermath of the recession, as the employed experienced an average real wage decrease of 9.5 percent during the period 2002-2004 (Beccaria, Esquivel, and Maurizio, 2005: 241).

³² The coefficient of variation (CV) for household income is the standard deviation divided by the mean.

³³ The poor’s incomes are more volatile and uncertain than those of wealthier social strata, but data reveal a clear increase in this instability in the wake of the crisis.

³⁴ This trend had especially serious ramifications for the price of the basic food basket: unlike most economies, in Argentina foods are traded commodities, and devaluation therefore directly impacted the prices of foodstuffs. Agricultural products, largely foodstuffs, comprise one of the country’s most important exports. Kritz estimates that during the crisis, every point rise in the price index for the basic food basket increased the number of indigent by 50,000. He furthermore estimates that rising prices account for 50 percent of the decline in real income between May 2001 and May 2002 (Kritz, 2002).

³⁵ “Indigence” status is determined by failing to satisfy one of three categories of basic necessities: housing, food, and clothing.

³⁶ It is important to note that due to the importance of real wage decreases in the recent crisis, some 25 percent of children who leave their homes for economic reasons maintain that at least one of their parents or stepparents are employed (Pojomovsky, 2008: 159).

³⁷ The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) is surrounded by three “belts” or “chains” (cordones) of 30 municipalities which together comprise the Conurbano Bonaerense. Within this region, known as Greater Buenos Aires, reside just over 40 percent of the country’s population (González-Rozada and Menendez, 2006: 112). Poverty in the area is overwhelmingly based in the provincial municipalities. Between 2002 and 2003, 51.7 percent of the Conurbano population lived below the poverty line and 15.2 percent below the indigence line, compared to only 14.6 and 3.6 percent respectively of those living in the city (Grima, Illanes, and Galarza, 2008: 77). While these proportions are relatively low compared to other regions of the country – such as the Northeast, where poverty rates superseded 70 percent - the magnitude of these figures lies in absolute terms. Effectively half of the country’s poor reside in this area: in 2003, 1,042,000 houses and 4,365,000 individuals were identified as structurally poor in the CABA and Conurbano Bonaerense region alone (Petetta, 2007: 68). Of the 7,600,000 people nationwide without access to potable water, 4,000,000 are located in the Conurbano, and of the 20 million without access to sewage, 6 million reside in the Conurbano (Calamante, 2007: 94). Fifty-two percent of the Conurbano Bonaerense, or 4,512,000 individuals, currently lack social security and rely solely on the decaying public health system (Petetta,

2007: 69). Six out of every ten street children come from the semi-urban/rural so-called “second belt” of surrounding provinces, which are more removed from the city limits (Pojomovsky, 2008: 43).

³⁸ This figure is compared to the “first belt” (those provinces directly bordering the CABA), which suffered from poverty and indigence rates of 48 and 30 percent, and the city itself, which reported poverty rates of 21 percent and indigence rates of 9 percent (Pojomovsky, 2008: 43).

³⁹ As a result, these families do not receive the social security or pension benefits that they would receive did parents work in the formal sector.

⁴⁰ (For national statistics of children with basic needs unsatisfied, see Table 2).

⁴¹ All currency conversions were approximated by using the International Monetary Fund’s Exchange Rate Archives (by month) for 2002 and 2003.

⁴² Children of the structurally poor have been forced to reduce school attendance – if not to desert their education entirely – because their families cannot afford the school implements, shoes, clothes, and transportation costs necessary for participation, or because they need to work to support their families (World Bank, 2003: 16). UNICEF estimates that currently in Argentina 1 million children between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are excluded from the educational system, and 1 million of those attending school are behind their age group (Villalobos, 2008: 55). Roughly one half of all adolescents do not attend high school (Villalobos, 2008: 54).

⁴³ In 1993, UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported that some 200,000 children between the ages of ten and fourteen – 6 percent of the population that age – worked in farms or on the streets.

⁴⁴ Author’s translation: “Éramos una banda y mi viejo nos pegaba...”

⁴⁵ Author’s translation: “En mi casa, me pegan... a palos, me pegan.”

⁴⁶ Author’s translation.

⁴⁷ However, here it is important to note that this category does not exclude the presence of some violence within the home; rather, conflicts were not consistently *characterized* by violence.

⁴⁸ Argentina signed the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (ICRC) in 1990, and in 1994, constitutional reform granted the convention constitutional status under Article 75, subsection 22. In legal terms, the Convention took precedence over domestic legislation (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 206; Grima, Illanes, and Galarza, 2008: 81). Yet the Argentine government failed to modify existing domestic laws that “openly contradicted the philosophy and the spirit of the CRC” (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207). Most infamous of these was Law 10.903, or *Ley del Patronato de Menores* (also known as *Ley Agote*), which had been in effect since its introduction in 1919 (Conde, 2008: 38). Law 10,903 conferred upon the state “comprehensive jurisdiction over children and young people,” and established the responsibility of the state to intervene when it determined that children were living in an “irregular situation” (*la doctrina de la situación irregular*), or were in “moral or material danger” (*la doctrina de peligro material o moral*) (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207; Conde, 2008: 39-41).⁴⁸ The law allowed the state to “take into its indefinite care the children of the poor, while providing no protection or assistance” for those parents who wished to keep their children (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207). It gave unprecedented power to *Jueces de Menores*, or Judges of Minors, who were singularly responsible for determining whether or not children would be separated from their families. Thus, Law 10.903 “effectively criminalized poverty,” resulting in the “bifurcation” of childhoods in Argentina: that of middle and upper-class children, who were subjects of regulation primarily within the family sphere; and that of poor youth or “minors,” who came under the direct responsibility and control of the state apparatus, and were considered in danger of delinquent behavior if not already in conflict with the law (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207; Conde, 2008: 35).

⁴⁹ Law 26.061 “implies an acceptance on the part of the state that all policies that affect children must...be made on rights-based foundations, and it establishes the state as the guarantor of those rights” (Grugel and Peruzzotti, 2007: 207). Indeed, the law explicitly states that a parent’s economic circumstances cannot be used to justify a child’s separation and institutionalization. Yet, despite these new advances within the legal realm, in practice poor youth continue to be discriminated against, particularly by the police force. While setting up strong normative and legal prerogatives for the state, the law has yet to come into even partial implementation, as older institutional and ideological legacies persist.

⁵⁰ Movements for children’s rights have historically been articulated through the lens of traditional family values in Latin America. Children are seen as objects to be protected within the paternalistic family sphere. Throughout recent decades, notions of the importance of family ties and unity are often used to galvanize action on issues of children’s rights (Kuznesof, 2005: 859).

⁵¹ The first burnt down in 2002 (causing the death of two children), and the second closed in 2004 due to structural problems found in the building.

⁵² Author's translation.

⁵³ Author's translation.

⁵⁴ In 2003, while the Center served 10,823 breakfasts to children, it only succeeded in helping 12 children return to their families (CAINA, 2004: 8).

⁵⁵ Paraphrased quotes based on author's interview notes. Author's translation. This remains true despite the fact that between 1997 and 2004, the number of children attending CAINA increased by 178 percent (CAINA, 2005:2). Indeed, the Center does "not count on a clear annual budget; the government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires pays for our salaries, the building...but does not tell us how much we can count on for expenditures" (Zadcovich, 2008: 1).

⁵⁶ Most volunteers tend to be university students (Visits to CAINA, 2008).

⁵⁷ Translation by author: "El CAINA es bueno...lástima que no sea centro de noche."

⁵⁸ Some children describe extremely serious episodes. One child mentioned having seizures and vomiting blood from inhaling glue too much (Street Child E, 2008).

⁵⁹ Translation by author: "No te abran la puerta...eso no es ayudar a los chicos; es a revés. Los chicos se enojan, van a drogarse."

⁶⁰ Expanding the hours and activities offered may also help to combat drug use, as some children who are merely substance abusers and not addicts use drugs primarily because they have nothing else to do. One child stated that "if I had something to do, to keep me entertained, then I wouldn't do drugs (Street Child C, 2008).

⁶¹ Particularly notable is the attention given to the youngest children, who live on a nearby farm in a house with a couple who work with the shelter to provide a family environment for the children.

⁶² Children who are living at an institution, and who have made the decision to leave the street, are at different points in their lives and will not behave exactly as do those children currently on the street. However, the differences in the environments created in these institutions, and the children's reactions to those environments, could not be more markedly different, and merit notation.

⁶³ Rising export revenues have sustained Argentina's economic recovery during the past six years. The *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* (INDEC) reported that in November 2008, industrial production fell for the second month in a row, and imports and exports both decreased for the same month – by 5.4 and 5.8 percent year-on-year, respectively – signaling that the economy is slowing down. Some predictions forecast "virtually nonexistent" GDP growth for 2009 (Latin American Newsletters, 2009: 10).