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## Childhoods of inequality and poverty in Barcelona

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**The post-crisis in the City of Barcelona is consolidating a high rate of child poverty and has rapidly increased the social polarisation between childhoods, in plural. It is a stratification pattern that is contrary to that of the city as a whole, which saw income inequality fall between 2011 and 2017. Barcelona has a child poverty rate comparable with Madrid and Berlin, with a poverty gap or intensity of poverty similar to the average for Catalonia. This article focuses on severe material deprivation in households with children attended by social services. The capacity for reducing child poverty through social transfers is lower than the figure recorded for 2011. Despite not having the regulatory responsibility for housing prices and the job market, the local authority reduces the extreme poverty rate by 17% through its social emergency subsidies. Applying an active policy to combat child poverty in a pre-distributive way requires a multi-level governance that focuses on children's rights, as well as a range of policies to reactivate the social ladder.**

### Introduction

Children's living conditions are a direct indicator of how a society is, or is not, achieving equal opportunities and social justice. In other words, it shows us to what degree a good start for all children and adolescents is guaranteed, to what degree it stimulates their potential while also neutralising the inequality-generating effects of their social origins and their income. Child poverty is the main obstacle to this objective and it is the result of how socio-economic inequality affects the most sensitive stage of people's lives. In childhood there are more social risks, which have subsequent after-effects and consequences in youth transitions and in adult life, in terms of health, level of education, employment and income.

Big cities suffer even more from the consequences of child poverty, given that their own income stratification is being polarised by the flows of neo-liberal globalisation. The arrival of high-income professionals as well as poor immigrants and refugees adds to an ever more complex and segregated social inequality, while cities do not have the competencies and social-policy resources that are of vital importance for reinforcing social cohesion.

In this article, we first present the social polarisation of childhoods (in plural) in the City of Barcelona. Despite sharing an age group, childhoods are spent in families that belong to social classes with very unequal socialisations and opportunities, which get worse in a situation of poverty and deprivation. Secondly, we describe the scale and the evolution of child poverty in

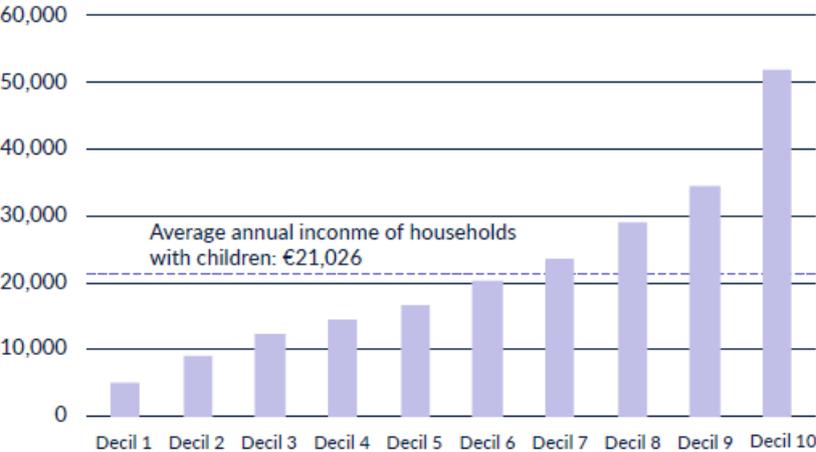
the City of Barcelona, compared to other cities and territories. Thirdly, we present the intensity of child poverty in the city, focusing on the extreme poverty attended by social services. Finally, we analyse to what extent social transfers and the redistributive policy of the state, the autonomous community and the city are able or unable to reduce child poverty, especially extreme poverty, at a local level.

**1. The social polarisation of childhoods in Barcelona.**

The population of children and adolescents in the City of Barcelona represents just 15.1% of all city residents (one percent more than in 2007), while the segment of people over the age of 65 is already 21.5% of the population as a whole. Although the city is ageing, one out of four households includes children and adolescents aged 17 or under. In 2018, 245,573 children and adolescents between the ages of 0 and 17 lived in the city, 67% of whom were children aged 0 to 11, while the remaining 33% were adolescents aged 12 to 17 (IIAB, 2019).

The average income per consumer unit for the 0-17 population in Barcelona is €21,026 a year, which is 6% lower than the average disposable income level for residents between the ages of 18 and 64. Having dependent children is an extra cost that takes away disposable income and may lead to poverty in households that experience unexpected situations or massive shocks, like the Great Recession. However, we cannot speak of a single, homogeneous and uniform childhood, but rather of different childhoods where growth and development are highly conditioned by the inequality of resources, incomes and cultural and social capitals of their families. In fact, the decile of the highest-income households with children (decile 10) has 10.3 times as much disposable income as the poorest households with children (decile 1), according to Metropolitan Statistics data on living conditions (EMCV 2016-2017).

**Graph 1. Average annual income of households with children (aged 0-17). Barcelona, 2016-2017**



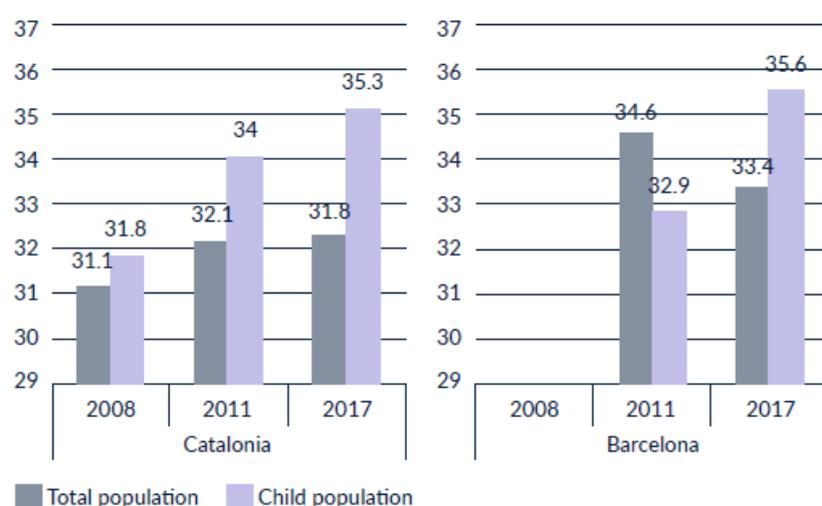
Source: Metropolitan statistics concerning living conditions 2016-2017 (provisional data) (IERMB), from Idescat, Survey of Living Conditions, 2016 and 2017.

The most worrying aspect is that there is more socio-economic polarisation among children in the city due to the disproportional increase in the income of the upper decile compared to the others, without the income of the lower deciles having decreased, which is what happened during the Great Recession (IERMB, 2018). The children and adolescents of the 10% with the highest income have improved their privileged position with 60% more disposable income than the average income for households with children. This is a worrying tendency —if it is confirmed in subsequent surveys on living conditions— for three reasons: a) it is contrary to the stratification pattern for the city as a whole, where income inequality fell between 2011 and 2017; b) the inequality among the city's children is greater in 2017 than the inequality among the rest of the resident population aged 18 and above, and c) the inequality among

Barcelona's children and adolescents is higher than for Catalonia as a whole, which was not the case in 2011.

Firstly, in 2011, the Gini Inequality Coefficient<sup>1</sup> among Barcelona's children was 32.9, but by 2017 it had reached 35.6. While inequality for the city's population as a whole decreased by 3.4%, during the same period, inequality among Barcelona's children increased by 8.2%. As we shall see, this rise does not result in a higher child-poverty rate in the city, which fell by 4% between 2011 and 2017. It is good news halfway, given that the city does not increase poverty below but increases inequality above with a higher decile that takes a sidereal advantage over the previous decile and the average.

**Graph 2. Gini coefficient for disposable income inequality Children (aged 0-17) and total population. Catalonia and Barcelona, 2008-2011-2017**



Source: Idescat and the Barcelona Institute for Children and Adolescents (2019).

Secondly, in 2011, inequality among children in the city was lower (32.9) than for other households with residents over the age of 18 (34.6). But by 2017, the situation had become inverted. Child inequality (35.6) was greater than the inequality among all other residents (33.4). While the rest of the city's population benefited to a greater degree from a more fairly distributed economic recovery, in the post-crisis period, households with children and adolescents became even more unequal and polarised.

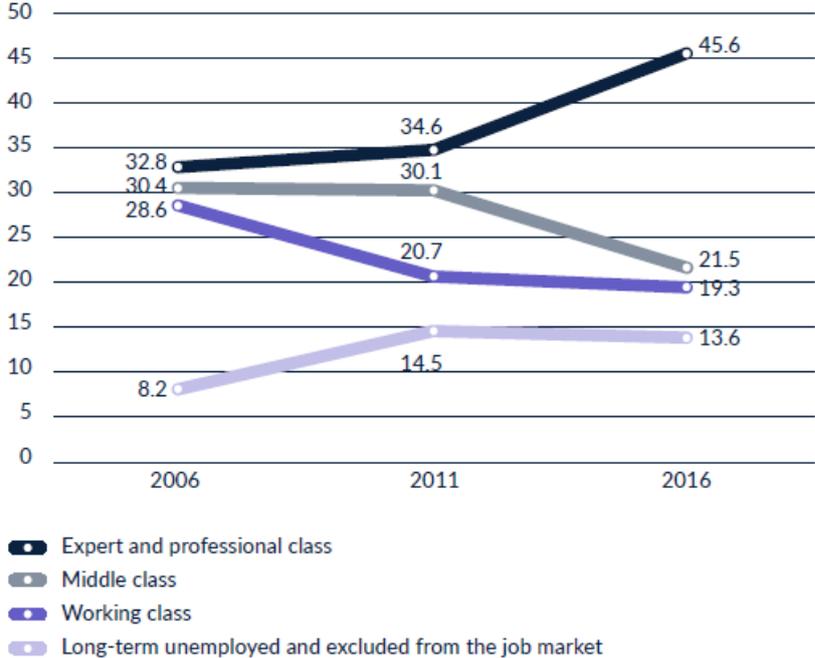
Thirdly, in 2011, child inequality was higher for Catalonia as a whole than in the City of Barcelona, but by 2017, the reverse was true, and Barcelona was a little above the average for Catalonia. The apparent paradox is that the City of Barcelona proved to be more resilient during the recession than Catalonia as a whole, and acted as an economic driving force (Sarasa *et al.*, 2013). However, the economic recovery recorded in the city since 2013 has lowered the child-poverty rate but increased the inequality among children and adolescents.

The polarisation among childhoods in the City of Barcelona is detailed in Graph 3, which shows the change in the social stratification of families with dependent children from 2006 to 2016. This is a good representation of social classes, where children and adolescents grow and socialise, and of how their composition has varied in parallel with the city's socio-

1. The Gini Coefficient is a measure of inequality expressed as a coefficient between 0 and 1, where 0 corresponds to absolute equality (all individuals have the same income) and 1 corresponds to absolute inequality (one individual accumulates all of the income and all of the other people have no income at all). It can also be expressed on a scale of 0-100.

demographic change. In 2006, the city's population of children was fairly equally divided into three large social classes, with a small subgroup of families with parents who were long-term unemployed and excluded from the job market (8.2%). Throughout the decade, there was a confirmed polarisation of childhoods due to the weighting of the expert and professional class families (13%) and the parallel reduction in the weighting of families with children in the intermediate classes (-8.9 percent), as well as a decrease in the weighting of working class families (-9.3 percent). Meanwhile, the effects of the crisis meant that the proportion of families in a situation of inactivity, exclusion from the job market or prolonged unemployment rose by 5.4 percent.

**Graph 3. Social class of Barcelona families with children or adolescents. Barcelona, 2006-2011-2016 year**



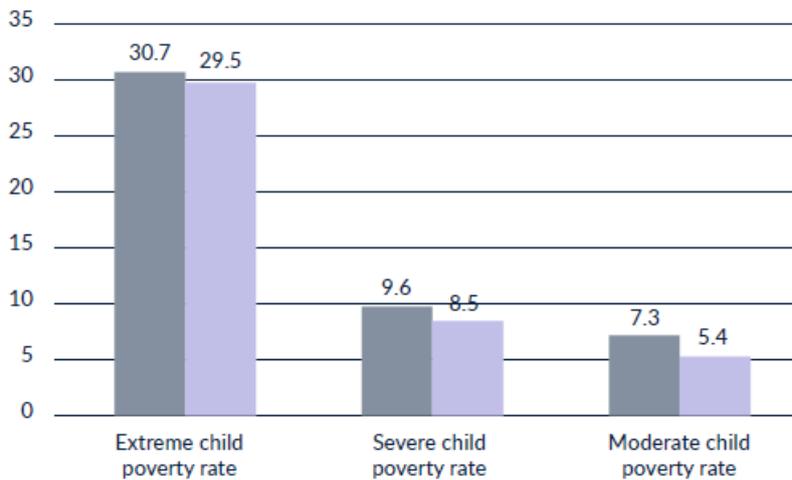
Source: Metropolitan statistics concerning living conditions 2016-2017 (IERMB).

In short, the city's childhoods have been polarised because of a combination of connected gentrifying factors which have pushed young families and couples with children (or before having them) out towards the Metropolitan Area in search of more affordable housing prices and which, at the same time, caused a fall in the birth rate among some of the middle and working classes from 2006 to 2016. The equitable distribution in childhood before the crisis has been transmuted into a polarisation of childhoods and greater inequality in terms of the opportunity to have children in the City of Barcelona, something which leaves people on average or low incomes at a clear disadvantage. Having children in the city is on the way to becoming a privilege.

**2. Evolution of child poverty in Barcelona**

The increased inequality among children contrasts with the slight reduction in the child poverty rate in Barcelona between 2011 and 2017. The latest available data for the moderate poverty rate is 29.5% (nearly 4% less than in 2011). This represents 72,317 children and adolescents who are below the poverty threshold, established at €14,459 a year for a household made up of one adult and one minor, or below the threshold of €20,020 for a two-parent household with a child under the age of 18. Barcelona accounts for 18.7% of the total number of children in Catalonia who are in a situation of moderate poverty.

**Graph 4. Risk of moderate, severe or extreme child poverty. Barcelona, 2011-2017**

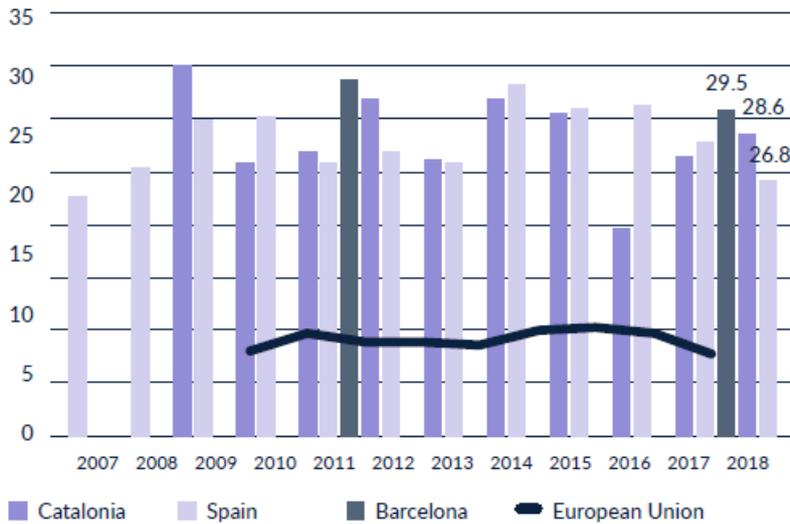


Source: Metropolitan statistics on living conditions, 2016-2017 (IERMB).

Between 2011 and 2017, the severe poverty rate (40% of the average income for the city's households) decreased to 8.5%, accounting for 20,837 minors in the city. This includes households with an income of under €9,639 a year for a single-parent family with one child, or under €13,347 for a two-parent family with one minor or adolescent. The average for severe poverty in Spain and Catalonia is higher (15%) than for Barcelona, which indicates the city's expelling effect, pushing severe poverty out towards the surrounding Metropolitan Area, which has more affordable rental prices and costs for families with children. The most adverse situation of extreme poverty (30% of the average income) was lower in 2017 than in 2011, decreasing by 26%, to a figure of 5.4%. This includes 13,237 children who struggle on under €7,230 a year for a single-parent family with one child, or under €10,010 for a two-parent family with one child.

We could say that between 2011 and 2017, the moderate-poverty rate in Barcelona became entrenched at around 30%. This is ten highest points than the European average (Graph 5) and is also above the average for Catalonia and Spain (2.7% higher). These rates are extremely high and will not decrease even if there is an intense recovery in employment rates, unless new benefits and social transfers are created to alleviate the cost of raising children in the city. Believing that there will be a significant reduction in child poverty by creating jobs is a compassionate fiction which absolves the state's and the autonomous community's redistributive policies from their responsibility for making childhood starting positions more equal. As we will see, the role of local authorities is complementary but effective in reducing extreme child poverty.

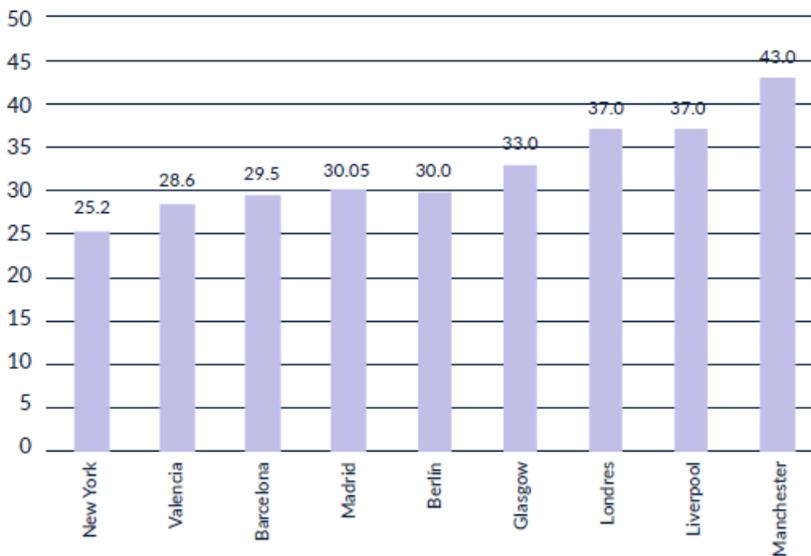
**Graph 5. Evolution of the child poverty rate. European Union, Spain, Catalonia and Barcelona, 2007-2018**



Source: Metropolitan statistics on living conditions, 2016-2017 (IERMB)

The following graph shows how Barcelona has a rate of child poverty comparable to that of Madrid and Berlin, but a long way from the more moderate rate registered in the city of New York (25.2%). However, Barcelona is way below cities such as London (37%) or Manchester (48%), in spite of the range of social benefits permitted by local and national legislation in Britain.

**Graph 6. Comparative child poverty rate for cities (2017)**



Source: IERMB, High Commission Against Child Poverty, Madrid City Council Databank, United States Census Bureau, Hartz IV Data and End Child Poverty.

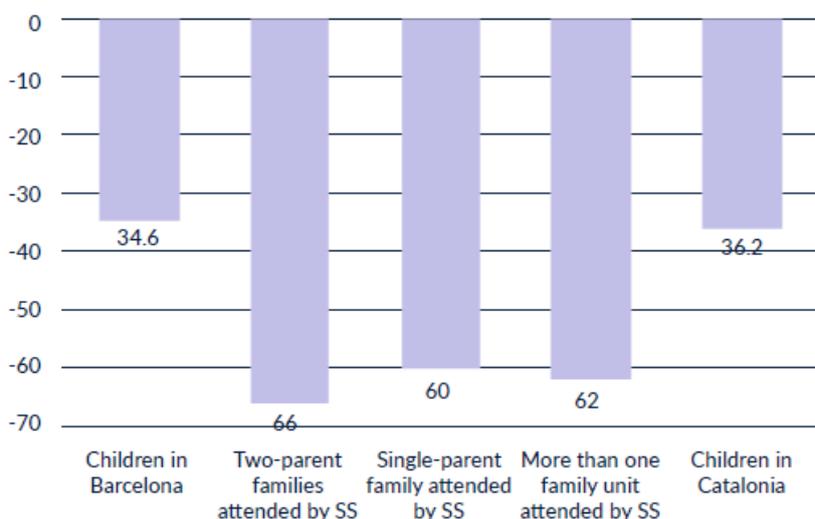
### 3. Intensity of poverty and deprivation suffered by children

The social polarisation among childhoods in Barcelona becomes even clearer if we study poverty as deprivation of well-being and as a disqualifying experience that takes opportunities and rights away from the children and adolescents who experience it. In order to do this, we analyse the gap and intensity of poverty and the material deprivation of the child population,

also adding a more specific focus on households with children attended by the city's social services centres.<sup>2</sup>

As revealed by research in Catalonia, the negative effects of the 2008-2015 crisis have reduced the income of the poorest Catalans (quintile 1) by 31%, making them even poorer (Marcos and Ubrich, 2017). In order to understand the gravity of the poverty experience, we have calculated its intensity, i.e. the degree of poverty of poor people or their relative distance from the poverty threshold, which marks the frontier where they would no longer be classified as poor.<sup>3</sup> The greater the distance from the threshold (expressed in a percentage [%]), the greater the intensity of the poverty and the more entrenched the most serious forms of poverty will be. The income of poor Barcelona households with children is 36.2% away from the threshold for no longer being poor. This gap is very similar to the one for children in Catalonia as a whole (36.2%) and Spain as a whole (36.5%).

**Graph 7. Poverty gap for children in Barcelona and Catalonia (2017) and for families with children attended by social services (SS) (2016) according to type of household**



Source: Idescat and Martínez-Celorio and Marín (2019).

However, if we place the focus on the bottom low-income group, which is not normally captured or interviewed in generic survey samples, we can see how the families with children attended by the City of Barcelona's social services are much more deeply entrenched in poverty than children in a situation of poverty as a whole. Based on data from the 2016 ECVUSS, we know that the poverty gap among two-parent families attended by social services is 66%, for households with more than one family unit it is 62% and for single-parent families assisted by social services it is 60%. We are speaking about extreme situations that leave a total of 4,690 Barcelona children and adolescents in the most intense and extreme poverty trap. We still do not know to what point this constitutes an intense, persistent poverty for the children nor the length of time they experience it, nor what avenues for entering and leaving it are produced, nor why. We are therefore speaking of a very intense poverty, far from the threshold for no longer being poor.

2. Based on the 2016 Survey of Living Conditions given to users of social services (ECVUSS), using a sample made up of 6,623 households, 3,059 of which are households with children under the age of 18. The total number of children in the sample is 5,827 (Martínez-Celorio and Marín, 2019).

3. Various measurement procedures can be applied to poverty intensity. It shows the distance between average equivalent income (or by consumer unit) of the population at risk of poverty and the poverty threshold. It is expressed as a percentage in relation to the threshold.

Regarding the parents of households with children attended by social services (SS), 29% were born in Catalonia, 6% in the rest of Spain, 33% in Latin American countries and 18% in North African countries. Two out of five households go to social services to get information about housing benefits and subsidies. In order to supplement the subsidy requested from social services, 72% of this profile of households with children also go to social organisations. The more intense the poverty, the greater the number of social organisations they go to. 10% of the households in a moderate situation of poverty and attended by social services are regular users of two charitable organisations, but 72% of extreme-poverty households go to three organisations, in search of food, clothing, food coupons or help with paying bills.

Among the households attended by social services, there is a 19% difference in the severe material deprivation index, according to whether they have dependent children (80%) or not (61%). Among the average child population of Barcelona, 5.2% live in a situation of severe material deprivation.<sup>4</sup> The stress of having to pay off debts, tighten budgets and look for survival resources creates family climates that are negatively affected by anxiety, where parents show less affection towards their children and internal conflicts arise between members of the household (Klose, 2012; Evans and English, 2002; Mistry, 2002). 21% of the city's households with children cannot afford even one week's holiday and almost 32% are unable to meet unexpected expenses of €650. The rate of severe material deprivation is even more pronounced among households with children attended by social services, with 37% unable to ensure regular protein in the diet.

High rental prices and the high cost of basic supplies (water, electricity, gas) negatively affect the economy of families with children that are trapped in situations of unemployment, inactivity and salary insecurity. The European Union has defined the indicator of housing cost overburden as being when a family has to spend more than 40% of its income on housing costs. For the 25-39 age group, the average proportion of salary needed to cover housing costs in Barcelona is 50%. Rental prices rose by 28.7% from 2013 to 2017 in the City of Barcelona, according to Idescat data. It should be remembered that the overburden rate for tenants at market prices in the City of Barcelona is 43% (Barcelona Metropolitan Housing Observatory, 2018). In France, the overburden rate for tenants at market prices is 16.5%, in Germany 23% and the European average is 28% (OECD, 2017). Rental price contention and the gradual rise in the minimum wage are two key conditions for undermining and reducing the high rate of child poverty.

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4. Severe material deprivation is measured according to the population and the households that tick four of the nine items listed in Table I.

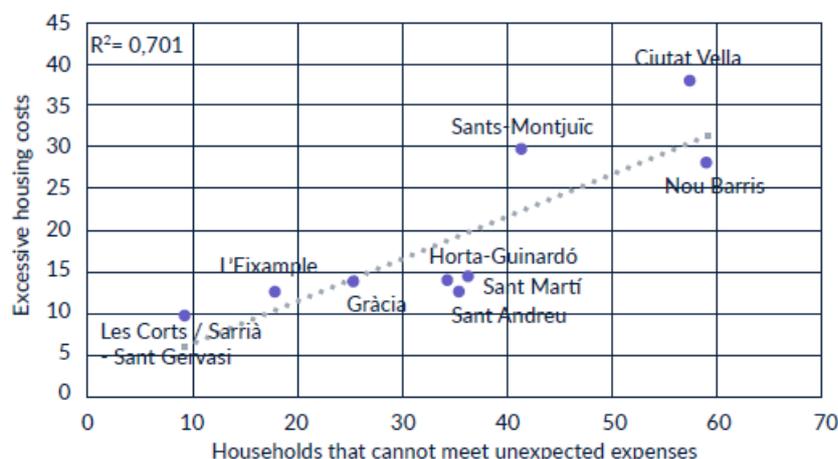
**Table 1. Indicators of severe material deprivation in children. Barcelona, 2016**

	Households with children in Barcelona (%)	Households with children of families attended by SS (%)
1. Cannot meet unexpected expenses (of €650)	31.7	98
2. Cannot go on holiday for one week a year	21	93
3. Do not have or cannot have a car	--	81
4. Cannot pay without falling behind on housing expenses	12.4	67
5. Cannot keep their home at an adequate temperature.	15	59
6. Cannot make a meal that includes meat, chicken or fish every other day	4.4	37
7. Do not have or cannot have a washing machine	--	4
8. Do not have or cannot have a television	--	3
9. Do not have or cannot have a telephone	--	--

Source: Martínez-Celorrío and Marín (2019).

Graph 8 shows the significant correlation between an indicator of severe material deprivation and the excessive cost of housing, according to city district. Housing overburden affects 4 out of 10 children in the district of Ciutat Vella and 30% in the districts of Nou Barris and Sants-Montjuïc. In more specific territorial terms, 72% of the cases attended by social services centres in Franja Besòs and Ciutat Meridiana - Torre Baró correspond to families with children. Apart from Sarrià - Sant Gervasi, there is no district where families with children account for less than 30% of the cases attended to by social services. We are therefore speaking of a phenomenon of “leopardisation” of severe child poverty, which is more disperse and widespread in the city than is popularly thought and perceived.

**Graph 8. Correlation between excessive housing costs and households that cannot meet unexpected expenses. Child population by Barcelona district, 2017**



Source: IERMB (2019).

#### 4. Social transfer policies for solving child poverty

Catalonia and Spain share a Mediterranean welfare regime, with a universalism that is fragmented and incomplete, characterised by the sizeable weighting of families who are caring for young children, have dependants or who are carrying out care work. This is a family-oriented model that combines the universalist model (education, health and pensions) with contributive benefits of a Bismarckian type (social security), which safeguards stable employment and has long contribution periods (Martínez-Celorio, 2015; Moreno, 2014). This type of welfare guarantees cover but with modest amounts for both individual benefits arising from contributions (pensions and unemployment benefit) and care benefits that are independent from prior employment contributions (grants, emergency social subsidies, minimum guaranteed income, etc.).

Based on their exploitation of the 2016 ECV, Marcos and Ubrich (2017) underline that 14% of Catalan children are beneficiaries of some kind of benefit, subsidy or direct grant. This is in addition to 31% of relatives that live in the same household and receive unemployment benefit, pensions and other social transfers that depend on various administrations (state, regional or local). Due to the Mediterranean welfare model and its shortcomings, the capacity of all social benefits to reduce income inequality in households with children is very small throughout Spain and also Catalonia (Marcos and Ubrich, 2017; Fernández, 2015; Martínez-Celorio, 2015).

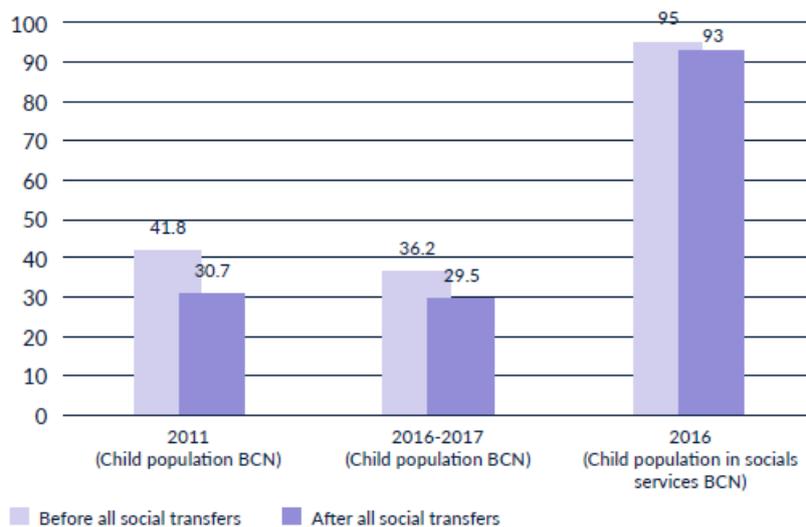
The reduction of the Gini Coefficient for child inequality during the crisis was modest and closely linked to unemployment benefits that gradually ran out. The reduction due to welfare transfers, where local authorities can provide emergency subsidies, was minimal, in spite of the fact that municipal social policies act as a link between state welfare benefits and the most vulnerable city residents. However, the capacity for reducing child poverty is greater, but thanks to the weight of unemployment benefits, given the lack of universal benefits and significant deductions that compensate for the cost of bringing up children (Fernández, 2015).

**Graph 9. Reduction due to social transfer of the Gini Coefficient for child inequality. Catalonia, 2008, 2011 and 2015**



Source: Marcos and Ubrich (2017).

**Graph 10. Capacity for reducing child poverty rates in Barcelona**



Source: Martínez-Celorrio and Marín (2019).

The primary distribution of income generated by the job market meant that the child poverty rate reached 41.8% in 2011 and that with all the social transfers, this was reduced to 30.7% in 2016-2017. This is a reduction in the rate of 26%, which in 2016-2017 reduced to a decrease of 18% due to the above-mentioned depletion and decrease of unemployment benefits. By contrast, the capacity for reducing child poverty among families with children attended by social services is minimal, at only 2 points (2.1%). However, it should be noted that welfare and social-emergency subsidies reduce the extreme poverty rate of this group by 17% (Martínez-Celorrio and Marín, 2019). The municipal programme Extraordinary Fund for Social Emergency Subsidies for children aged 0 to 16 played a direct role in this decrease<sup>5</sup> (Blasco i Todeschini, 2017).

The City Council spends over €50 million a year on combating child poverty, not counting either spending on housing for families or subsidies to organisations for children's programmes (Torrens, 2019). It must be remembered that this is less than half the estimated amount, calculated using Spanish Tax Agency (AEAT) data, that would be needed to cover the relatively extreme poverty of families with minors, which would amount to €121 million.

## Conclusions

Growing up in a family in a situation of intense poverty has long-term effects that will determine a child's career and life opportunities, which leads to the reproduction or intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion (Flores, 2016; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2011; Field, 2010). In Barcelona, 72% of the monetary problem involved in poverty is caused by the cost of housing. This is 8 points more than for Catalonia and 18 points more than the Spanish average (Torrens, 2019). Regulating rental prices, regulating the minimum wage and limiting job insecurity are all the responsibility of the state. They have not yet been fully defined and they put stress on the forced resilience of local administrations for reducing child inequality and poverty. A new, multi-level governmental framework is required, in which the state and autonomic redistributive policy facilitates access to public housing and higher amounts of universal benefits per dependent child, along with free education for children and free services for low-income levels, without forgetting the fostering of high-quality, decent women's jobs (Esping-Andersen and Palier, 2010).

5. Programme initiated in 2015 by the government of Mayor Xavier Trias, later maintained and reinforced by Mayor Ada Colau. It consists of a monthly benefit of €100 for every child between the ages of 0 and 16 who is in a social risk situation.

The cost of child poverty for Spain is estimated to be around 5% of the GDP,<sup>6</sup> in line with what has been calculated for other countries, such as the United States.<sup>7</sup> This is an extremely high cost which debilitates not only economic growth and the productivity of talent in the mid-term, but also erodes social cohesion and even the proper functioning of all democracy. Although a children's right approach has been formulated which protects children from all adversities, neglect and abuse, there is still a persistent perception that the welfare of children is exclusively the responsibility of their families, without realising that it is the responsibility of society as a whole and public policies, as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Since the mid 1990s, we have known that high rates of child poverty have become entrenched in the countries and cities in our immediate area (Flaquer, 2006; Field, 2010). The Great Recession (2008-2013) has increased them to scandalous rates, as a consequence of impoverishment, wage devaluation, the high cost of housing and other costs of bringing up children. The crisis has revealed not so much the deficiencies of people, but the deficits of policies that have not been able to anticipate the great changes that have occurred or prevent exposure to the social vulnerability already foreseen with the advent of the knowledge society at the end of the 1990s. We know more than ever about child poverty, but now it is time to take big redistributive and pre-distributive decisions that will reactivate the social ladder (Martínez-Celorrio, 2017). Public authorities must assume a more effective preventative (*ex ante*) role against inequalities, or they must exercise a redistributive role (*ex post*) that is highly conditioned by the inequality that they have been unable to reduce in the primary distribution of income.

Investment in social and educational policies aimed at children and adolescents is the main instrument for pre-distribution, i.e. for preventing and compensating for original social inequalities. This pre-distribution must be executed from a multi-level, cross-cutting perspective that surpasses the emergency hand-outs that local authorities have had to employ in order to deal with child poverty, which has become a structural problem. Ultimately, it is necessary to apply the European Commission's 2013/112 recommendation entitled "Investing in childhood: breaking the cycle of disadvantage" and focus on the struggle against child poverty and exclusion from the perspective of children's rights established in international agreements. For this reason, it is necessary to undertake the comprehensive implementation of the Childhood Act, approved in 2010, and provide it with a budget, as well as extending the citizens' guaranteed income without further delay and complying with the recommendations set out in the *Children's Rights Report* (2014), produced by the Ombudsman's Office, concerning the shortcomings of public administrations which limit the rights of children.

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