



## **Impact Of The Pandemic On Families From Vulnerable Backgrounds**

**Raúl Prada Núñez<sup>1</sup>, William Avendaño Castro<sup>2</sup>, César Augusto Hernández Suárez<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Master in Mathematics Education. Research professor at the Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail: [raulprada@ufps.edu.co](mailto:raulprada@ufps.edu.co).  
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6145-1786>

<sup>2</sup> Doctor in Social and Human Sciences. Research professor at the Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail: [williamavendano@ufps.edu.co](mailto:williamavendano@ufps.edu.co), Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7510-8222>

<sup>3</sup> Magister in Mathematics Education. Research professor at the Universidad Francisco de Paula Santander. E-mail: [cesaraugusto@ufps.edu.co](mailto:cesaraugusto@ufps.edu.co). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7974-5560>

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the declaration of the pandemic in March 2020 in Colombia, many daily activities were affected, among which are mentioned the development of work, educational, recreational and other activities. This research takes place in a Colombian border city characterized by the predominance of informal employment, a condition that was negatively impacted both by Covid-19 and by the measures taken by the State to mitigate the rates of infection in the population. A group of 359 informal workers was formed who shared their perceptions about what their lives were like before the arrival of the pandemic, what their experiences have been like during the pandemic and what their expectations for the future are. It can be concluded that this population group has been strongly affected in all aspects of their lives mainly due to their economic fragility and that, with the pandemic, the existing gaps between the different social classes have been exacerbated.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, informal employment, social vulnerability, extreme poverty, extreme poverty.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The coronavirus has had a global impact on the lives of the human species in various ways and all aspects of daily life, impacting mainly on the economy of countries and people, accompanied by affectations in the social interaction of people (Gambau, 2020). The educational field has not been the exception, affecting the educational actors and the teaching and learning processes, leaving them on the margins of the traditional way since, in fact, in many countries on the planet, the closure of educational institutions was generated as a mechanism of prevention to the massive contagion of

students. As a result of the crisis caused by the health emergency, a distance and remote education model was adopted abruptly and without sufficient planning, and time to continue with the training processes and curricula (Prada-Núñez et al., 2020). This measure has brought about many inconveniences and severe disruptions for both teachers and students, as the usual and normalized conditions of teaching and learning under the shelter of educational centers and through real interactions (Urbina, 2017) face-to-face, between the actors of the educational scenario, have been seriously altered (Avendaño-Castro et al., 2020; Prada-Núñez et al., 2020). In this sense, Murillo and Duk (2020) state that “distance education is a chimera, an alternative for those who have equipment of a certain quality with internet access at home” (p. 12), but not for “students who do not have the conditions [...] to be able to benefit from this option” (p. 12). As a consequence, Covid-19 has contributed to the widening of the educational gaps between urban and privileged students and those located in rural areas or less favored conditions. The pandemic has made more relevant and evident the differences in opportunity that, as often happens, increase in periods of crisis.

The new social dynamics forced by the pandemic have brought about adverse effects in the labor field, as well as the aggravation of the pre-existing global social and economic crisis. In effect, in the professional context, the pandemic has brought with it effects that have increased underemployment figures in many cases and, in more extreme situations, unemployment, with a greater impact on those identified as informal workers. Such effects have been more devastating in this sector because “informality, in addition to job insecurity and instability, is associated with low income and, therefore, with a low savings capacity” (Álvarez et al., 2020, p. 10). This inability to save, characteristic of workers in the informal economy, makes it more difficult to circumvent the adverse effects of unemployment. Compared to other groups of workers who may eventually be able to resist through cash reserves, even if they only remedy for a certain time the suspension of a salary, the immediacy of the effects of income suppression among the most vulnerable social groups is a direct and unmitigated blow to both the informal work and the people who depend on him/her.

On the other hand, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Office for the Southern Cone of Latin America of the International Labor Organization (ILO), predicted that, as a consequence of the pandemic and the control measures adopted to contain it, the economies of this part of the planet would experience a contraction of at least 5%; a situation that sets off alarm bells in several regions characterized by a high presence of informality due to the insufficiency of stable job offers.

Continuing the ILO (2020) also estimated for the same year the growth of unemployment a range between 5 and 24 million as a response to the pandemic. ECLAC (2020a) also pointed out that Covid-19 would affect “the number of jobs, the quality of work (reduction of salaries and less access to social protection) and the most vulnerable groups, such as workers in the informal sector” (p. 5).

As mentioned, these effects on the economy have an immediate effect on the labor market, producing a greater effect on those whose labor activity fits the characteristics of informality, which exposes them to being the first to see their income reduced or, in a worse scenario, the loss of their labor options. On the other hand, following what was stated by Álvarez et al. (2020), among this “group of independent workers, a distinction should be made between independent professionals”. “Only 14%

of self-employed workers have studied in higher education institutions, while about 56% achieve a secondary education” (Alvarez et al., 2020, p. 10). The same authors point out the conditional relationship that exists between the individual's academic training and his or her income level: those subjects who finish high school has an average income calculated for 2019 at 634,589 pesos per month. This figure constitutes a labor income located 14% below the minimum wage. In contrast, those with higher education had an average monthly labor income of 1,164,886 pesos, which is 40% above the legal minimum wage.

More than a year after the beginning of the pandemic and the application of radical measures to control it, it is clear that the health crisis triggered by the appearance of Covid has had a powerful impact on people's daily lives in different areas, first and foremost in the workplace, because it is the most visible, but simultaneously or after all the others, including education. Indeed, the social and emotional implications caused by confinement have not only had an impact on national and domestic economies, but the crisis has also reached households in additional dimensions to the loss of income or the loss of employment of those responsible for the family. One of the most visible alterations of confinement has been the one suffered by children and young people in terms of the new dynamics imposed to continue with their education (Amaya-Mancilla et al., 2020). Perceptive and more sensitive than generally thought of these realities, they have faced, in addition, serious restrictions to executing their academic duties from home. The negative effects of the alteration of schooling habits and routines have had an even more severe impact on members of the working classes, especially among those who work in the informal sector, since they have had fewer possibilities to cope with these new situations.

By definition, informal workers do not have the security of a labor contract, which is why they do not have access to the labor guarantees enjoyed by other workers, including official social protections, which makes them even more sensitive to the economic, social and educational impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

About home-based education, it is in principle a formula that can be framed within the processes of curricular flexibilization of the school curriculum (Chaparro et al., 2018). In fact, as an alternative model, it has been tested and allowed in many countries when for various reasons (illness, remoteness from schools, continuous travel for work reasons of parents) face-to-face education is difficult. In this sense, education from home could be considered a quite positive alternative, and even in certain situations (such as the accompaniment of properly trained parents or tutors), it has proven to be quite effective. In the Colombian context, however, this modality has generally been considered as a complement to the contributions of the school.

However, because of the crisis unleashed by Covid and seeing that this was a circumstance that would extend over time, it became necessary to adopt alternative mechanisms to traditional face-to-face education, which is why distance education mediated by computer technologies developed to date, such as videoconferencing, digital educational platforms, etc., was chosen almost everywhere in the world. Indeed, interrupting indefinitely the educational processes of millions of students until the virus was controlled was immediately seen as an inconvenient option from every perspective. In the opinion of many experts, the possibility of “abruptly stopping classes could eventually have a

negative and detrimental result due to the wear and tear, both for the student, parents and teachers” (Britez, 2020, p. 13). Consequently, a series of measures were adopted to continue classes with students in their own homes, through the technologies that the development of information technology has made available to administrations, teachers and students in the educational field (Ortíz-Arimendi et al., 2019; Díaz-Padilla, 2017; Adoumieh, 2021). However, in the opinion of Razeto (2016) “initiatives and programs to strengthen the educational role of the family, have been insufficient. Family involvement is one of the most powerful predictors of school success” (p. 6). However, for the development of remote educational activity during the pandemic, the resources they have been offered to support the education of their children have been few, weak, and inconsistent.

In the economic sphere, the consequences of the pandemic have been very disparate depending on the stratum to which individuals belong. The most economically advantaged groups have had less difficulty than the less prosperous in weathering the onslaught of an economy in a crisis caused by the global slowdown in productivity. As a palliative to the situation suffered by many vulnerable families as a result of the pandemic and social isolation, including the loss of work and/or reduced income, which have even limited the access of vulnerable social groups to essential goods and services, many governments have decided to grant economic benefits or exemptions, such as direct aid in the form of cash vouchers or cash in trade, or the temporary suspension or postponement of the payment of certain taxes and other fiscal obligations. Regarding the educational issue, the consequences of the pandemic have also been more severe for the popular sectors, which have faced fewer resources (not only economic but also cultural) the assumption of the new educational reality whose main scenario has been in their own homes (Contreras et al., 2019).

In this sense, the “impact of school closures and other social restrictions has caused in the most disadvantaged groups, is raising great interest and concern globally” (Murillo & Duk, 2020, p. 13). On the other hand, the transition of education due to the health emergency to family homes has joined others of no less important impact, although possibly less perceptible and documented, such as the problems derived from the increase in time spent together by family members, in spaces that are often very limited, or even the deterioration to varying degrees of the sense of well-being and mental health.

Another aspect that has affected people differently according to their socioeconomic status has to do with their possibility of access to digital technology, both in terms of possession of devices and the possibility of connecting to networks of sufficient quality. To this gap in access to digital media must be added the notable differences that exist in the different territories (urban and rural) in the knowledge of the operation of and access to devices and networks, especially among the adults in the family who are in principle responsible for accompanying the processes.

According to data from the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2019) published in the 2018 Technical Bulletin of Basic Indicators of Ownership and Use of Information and Communication Technologies, approximately 78% of households in Colombia have a smartphone; the remaining percentage, do not have access to this technology. This is followed by 29% who have desktop computers, while 21% have a laptop and 10.9% have a tablet. Regarding internet connection, 52.7% of households have access to a fixed connection and 29.2% can establish it through a mobile connection, mainly through smartphones.

These realities have meant the inappropriateness or serious difficulty for many families to abruptly transition from a face-to-face education model for their children to a virtual one through digital technologies.

The Central Government has generated a series of measures aimed at containing the spread of Covid-19 that have led to the declaration of a sanitary emergency such as Decree 417 of 2020 and Decree 637 of 2020 and that in theory “the official education system on the occasion of the measures adopted to prevent the spread of Covid-19, shall be attended through flexible pedagogical strategies coordinated with the 96 certified Secretariats of Education” (Decree 470, 2020). The reality is that the so-called “flexible strategies” imply access to equipment and internet connections that not all homes have. In addition, in Colombia, according to García and Kairuz (2020), of the total number of students in official institutions, approximately 69% receive the benefits of the School Feeding Program (PAE). The authors state that, according to statements made by State representatives, these benefits and others will be guaranteed in these times of social crisis.

Likewise, other measures were issued, including Circular 021 (2020), which attempted to protect employment through the adoption of various measures; or Decree 488 (2020), by which labor measures are issued within the State of Economic, Social and Ecological Emergency because “unemployment in Colombia generates a serious and extraordinary disturbance in the economic and social order, as well as in its Gross Domestic Product” (Decree 639, 2020). At that time, it was estimated that the impact of the crisis on the country's economy could be focused on the following effects: the reduction of the percentage of employed people, which influences the increase of unemployment due to the closing of businesses, triggering the increase of informal jobs as a reaction measure. Therefore, the Ministry of Labor, through Decree 801 (2020) “creates the economic assistance to the unemployed population” as a containment measure to prevent the deterioration in the welfare of former workers and ensure the active participation of people in the different areas of society, especially in the educational sphere.

For legislation concerning the education service and informality in times of pandemic, the Presidency of the Republic recognized in Decree 417 (2020) that “42.4% of workers in Colombia are self-employed and 56.4% are not salaried; the income of this type of workers and their dependents depends on their daily work and this activity has been restricted by the pandemic measures” (p. 4). Additionally, the national government recognizes that many households benefiting from this type of assistance will find themselves in a vulnerable situation because they do not have the tools to guarantee the income lost due to the restrictive measures. On the other hand, and again for recent legislation linked to the pandemic, the Colombian state states that there are currently “6,928,742 children and adolescents in preschool, elementary and high school education” (Decree 470, 2020).

Continuing with the reports offered by DANE (2020), it is highlighted that for May 2020, a reduction was evidenced in terms of the employment rate concerning the same period of 2019. Indeed, “the informally employed population in the 13 cities and metropolitan areas was 3,870 thousand people” (p. 5) for the month of May 2020, being lower by almost 1.2 million people less than those reported for 2019. Following, “for the total of the 23 cities and metropolitan areas it was 4,300 thousand

people” (p.5), with a reduction of slightly more than five and a half million concerning the same month of 2019 of the informally employed. Then, our country's labor outlook reports the expected variations in unemployment and informality as expected collateral effects of the pandemic. As mentioned by Alvarez et al. (2020), informality has skyrocketed in domestic service activities, retail commercial activity and the construction field. The authors add that the construction sector was one of the sectors that suffered the least disruption, while the rest of the activities were blocked.

The informal context has been socially affected. In addition, this population (often with academic studies limited to the most elementary), must face the disruptive situation of school closures during long periods in the educational system and assume, at least in part, the responsibility for the education of their children during the pandemic period. In addition to unemployment and the decrease in income and limited access to technological resources and powerful Internet connections, there is a lack of pedagogical and training resources for the families themselves to accompany the educational processes of their children at home. As is to be expected, the combination of these factors will inevitably have a negative impact on children's learning, most severely among the most vulnerable groups.

The situation in the border city of Cúcuta is no different from the general reality of the country. Moreover, in the opinion of Peralta and Bayona (2016), socioeconomic growth in Cúcuta is hindered by business informality. However, other authors also specify that “informality does not depend only on companies but also on individuals who, upon completing their working life cycle, seek ways to increase their income and expand their labor status through the creation of businesses” (Montañez, 2016, p. 61). This author also states that such enterprises and businesses, as well as the legal status of their workers, do not generally conform to Colombia's official legal regulatory framework, which also seeks to protect informal workers in order to guarantee their access to the necessary mechanisms for the administration of justice based on legally established labor rights.

In this regard, the Chamber of Commerce of Cúcuta (2019a) mentions that in the city the average level of informal work “ranges between 68% and 71%, being the city with the largest informal population in the country” (p. 5). According to this same institution (Cámara de Comercio de Cúcuta, 2019b), in the Municipality there are 60 official and 210 non-official educational establishments, in which 153,798 students are enrolled in urban areas and 7,022 in rural areas. The general statistics of the Higher Education Sector Development Subdirectoriate through the National Higher Education Information System (SNIES, 2018) mention, meanwhile, that in the city of Cúcuta there were 42,108 university students enrolled for the year 2018.

Informality is widespread in many sectors, which makes the situation of these workers, who represent almost half of the total workforce, difficult, mainly due to their situation of official invisibility. This sector, as expected, is home to most of the poorest workers, who are often employed on a seasonal or temporary basis. The economic impact derived from the pandemic situation exacerbates in these people their pre-existing condition of vulnerability, including poverty, unemployment, and social and educational exclusion, the latter aggravated by the adoption of the measure of remote or distance schooling in one's own homes through technology. This confirms that epidemics and economic crises have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable segments of the population, a case that is clearly illustrated by the current situation in the city of Cúcuta, since these workers normally earn

barely enough to feed themselves and their families in ordinary conditions, in these exceptional conditions they generate greater social inequality, mainly in terms of access to employment and education and food security itself.

In the context described above, the present research is proposed as a mechanism of knowledge about the perception that people in the informal labor context in the city of Cúcuta have regarding the socio-economic and educational impacts caused by the pandemic and the state of a health emergency. It is expected that the results generated can contribute not only as a contribution to the scientific literature in the field of informality and education but, above all, provide a basis for the institutions responsible for the design and implementation of measures for the protection and protection of vulnerable populations in situations of a health crisis or even other types of crises. The specific objective of the study was, therefore, to determine the perception that people working in the context of informality have of the socioeconomic and educational impacts of Covid-19 in the city of Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, Colombia.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research has the following characteristics according to Hernández et al. (2014), it adopts a quantitative approach at a descriptive level following a field design, because the data were collected from the primary source without any intervention of the researchers to be subsequently processed using SPSS software in its version 25 resorting to the use of frequency tables and the calculation of percentages of the various response options associated with each topic of observation.

For the identification of the population, a neighborhood in the urban area of the city of San José de Cúcuta is located, which has been identified in the city's mayor's office as the place of residence for independent workers performing informal economic activities such as the sale of products at traffic lights, in the central supply center doing various trades, in family homes or the central commercial area selling food, beverages or different objects. Through the community leader, a population size of 527 people of legal age was identified, who live in the neighborhood with their family nucleus composed of their partner and children (mainly). They were invited to voluntarily share their experiences one year after the declaration of social isolation due to Covid-19. Therefore, voluntary sampling was applied as a non-probabilistic sampling technique, achieving a sample size of 359 people, equivalent to approximately 68%.

Paraphrasing Arias (2012), any means independent of the format that allows data collection could be used, following a systematic process in its elaboration guarantees its validity (Gamboa, 2019; Vanegas et al., 2022). In this case, a questionnaire was designed by the researchers that were subsequently validated through expert judgment given the nature of the response options. Twenty-six items were incorporated, all with closed response options, which were self-completed by each of the participants. Subsequently, the data were digitized for processing.

## **RESULTS**

The information derived from the processing of the data collected has been organized according to the topics defined in the questionnaire and is presented below.

**Demographic profile of informants.** Through the information shown in Table 1, it was possible to determine among the group of participants, that there is a predominance of the female gender, where 78% are located in the age range between 18 and 39 years, most of them being natives of the city or the department, but without ignoring that approximately four out of ten respondents are migrants from Venezuela. In addition, 89% have had or have a partner, but among those who currently have a partner, it should be noted that they are mainly in a common-law relationship. Eighty-seven percent must generate income to support between one and six other people, which is complex given that 69% of them have not even graduated from high school, making it difficult for them to perform specialized and well-paid activities. Nine out of ten participants surveyed had children in school. It should be noted that those who are professionals are all migrant citizens, but since they have not been able to validate their professional training in Colombia, they have not been able to practice their professions

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of participants

| Characteristic   | Response options                     | Percentage |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------|
| Gender   | Female                               | 58.2       |
|  | Male                                 | 41.8       |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |
| Age range  | Between 18 and 25 years old          | 24.0       |
|  | Between 26 and 32 years old          | 31.0       |
|  | Between 33 and 39 years old          | 22.6       |
|  | Between 40 and 47 years old          | 13.6       |
|  | 48 or more years old                 | 8.8        |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |
| Geographic origin  | Native to the city or the region     | 62.7       |
|  | Migrants from Venezuela              | 37.3       |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |
| Current marital status   | Single                               | 10.9       |
|  | With partner (married or free union) | 57.4       |
|  | Separated                            | 28.4       |
|  | Widowed                              | 3.3        |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |
| Number of people who are economically dependent on the informant | None                                 | 8.4        |
|  | Between one and three                | 31.8       |
|  | Between four and six                 | 55.4       |
|  | More than six                        | 4.5        |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |
| Do you have children in schooling status?                        | Yes                                  | 90.3       |
|  | No                                   | 9.7        |
|  | Total                                | 100.0      |



|   |                       |       |
|---|-----------------------|-------|
| The highest level of schooling attained | Elementary School     | 34.8  |
|   | Basic Secondary       | 34.5  |
|   | Technical High School | 7.8   |
|   | Technological         | 14.2  |
|   | Professional          | 8.6   |
|   | Total                 | 100.0 |

These data coincide with those of Álvarez et al. (2020), who points out that 14% of informal workers have studied in higher education institutions. Most of the sample, however, have medium or low levels of schooling, which is related to the difficulty they have in obtaining a better income and becoming employed or self-employed in low-paying informal activities. The circumstance of their limited income also has a negative impact on the people who depend on these workers, mainly, and in the case, that concerns us, on the education of their children, even more so in this time of pandemic in which institutional education has been transferred to homes with remote access through ICT resources in many cases or with the assignment of directed work in contexts where technological limitations exceed 75% of the cases. The difficulty of access to goods and services associated with technology, such as the internet or digital devices, is unfailingly reflected in the quality of learning of their children (Osorio & Hernández, 2020).

In addition to demographic aspects, the survey inquired about the economic, social, educational and labor situation of the informants. The results obtained are presented and discussed below.

### **Labor aspect**

To address the analysis of this section of the instrument, at the time of designing the questionnaire, the topics defined by DANE (2019) were considered in what their work activity was before the declaration of social isolation and what it has been, during this process of social limitations. The comparative results can be observed through Table 2, from which it could be affirmed that the situation of poverty in which these people lived before the Covid-19 epidemic, added to the preventive measures declared by the Government, aggravated the precariousness of life of this segment of the population until taking them to the level of extreme poverty. This situation is described in the research by Álvarez et al. (2022), where it is stated that

The health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the entire world population globally and its consequences have been different in each country. As expected, the most vulnerable population has suffered the most devastating consequences in terms of health, unemployment or increased inequality. In some countries, the informal economy has become superior to the formal economy (p. 203).

In Velásquez (2021), the following is reported:

Measures to control the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 have had severe effects on economic activities, employment and the income of workers and their households. The Latin American and Caribbean region will experience a historic drop in GDP accompanied by massive job destruction, and significant increases in poverty and extreme poverty are

expected. One of the most affected sectors will be informal workers, which indicates that the greatest impacts of the crisis will fall on the most vulnerable and low-income workers (p. 5).

It is evident that the economic effects on the population, in general, have been strong, but on informal workers, they have been devastating, since both the pandemic and the preventive measures implemented have resulted in a dramatic increase in unemployment rates that exacerbate the differences between social classes (DANE, 2020; CEPAL, 2020b; CEPAL-OIT, 2020).

**Table 2.** Comparison of work activities performed by participants before and during the declaration of social isolation due to Covid-19.

| <b>Before the pandemic</b>  | <b>During the pandemic</b>  |
|---|---|
| <p>In the six months before March 2020, the persons surveyed were engaged daily in various informal activities distributed as follows: 24% sold products at traffic lights or street corners in the city, 19% worked in the city's Central de Abastos, selling coffee, drinks or food, and 13% worked as domestic employees hired as needed with daily pay. The remaining 45% carried out their work activities in the downtown area of the city in activities such as the sale of soft drinks, intoxicants or natural juices (27%), the sale of Venezuelan food (11%) and 7% were engaged in the resale of a wide range of products which varied according to the price at which they were bought each new day. All Colombian citizens are affiliated with the Identification System of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programs (Sisbén); while only 9.5% of Venezuelan migrants have regulated their stay in the country and have been able to access some of the benefits offered, such as access to health care and public education. Of the children attending school, 72% of them were attending public institutions located near their homes, while the remaining 28% were not attending school due to a lack of documents to be admitted or due to parents' disinterest.</p> | <p>The first 40 days of the declaration of social isolation was the most complex period for 90% of those surveyed since the mobility restrictions that were generated limited their ability to go out in search of income, so they had to use the little food they had at home, in many cases consuming the raw materials or the little working capital they had to guarantee at least one meal a day. After this time, they began to leave their homes with the risk of exposing themselves to Covid-19 infection. Those who sold products at traffic lights saw their sales affected due to people's fear of contagion, so they were forced to change their activity. A similar situation occurred with street food sales. This led at least 89% of those surveyed to be unemployed and without hope for at least another month. Then somehow they began to mitigate their needs with time by doing all kinds of activities and accessing some benefits granted by the State and that were channeled by the community leader, help that consisted from the market, support from some neighbors or some unknown donors who supported them. Regarding the educational process of the children in school, as soon as they were invited to alternate, they sent their children since in this way they guaranteed access to State benefits such as food and subsidies. Currently 63% are unemployed.</p> |

The situation described above implies an even greater disarticulation in the labor scenario between

unemployment and informality (García, 2008). Among the consequences of this mismatch in the labor sector, individuals belonging to the most vulnerable groups face devastating social and economic consequences of the health crisis. Among these consequences, as might be expected, are those related to the decline in the quality of education and even the possibility of accessing it.

### **Economic aspect**

Among the elements considered within this aspect are the reality experienced during the pandemic and the economic expectations they have in the family and personal spheres. Table 3 presents the analysis corresponding to the respondents' appreciation of their situation in these two contexts, which shows that this segment of the population is characterized by its economic fragility, with particularly serious repercussions associated with low income and, therefore, low savings capacity (Álvarez et al., 2020), which generates in their feelings of uneasiness and dissatisfaction (Álvarez et al., 2020).

**Table 3.** Comparison of the economic aspect during and in the future after Covid-19.

| <b>During the pandemic</b>  | <b>After the pandemic</b>   |
|---|---|
| As expected, during the pandemic approximately 91% of those surveyed stated that their income has been negatively affected, a situation that has had an impact on the household and on the satisfaction of basic needs such as housing, services, health, food and education. | About the economic expectations of the surveyed families, only 12% consider that better times will come, in contrast with the remaining percentage, who assure that the situation could not get worse than what they have experienced at present, due to the great economic impact experienced. |

When considering the responses given to the expectations for the future, it can be deduced that people living informally feel that their original situation of vulnerability has worsened due to the economic and labor difficulties caused by the pandemic, since many of them have lost their sources of income, which has led them to face a situation of extreme poverty and intensified insecurity as a result of the controls imposed to mitigate Covid-19. This perception is based on the awareness that these subjects have of being subjugated (Vanegas et al., 2022a, Vanegas et al., 2022b) already in the time before the pandemic, to an unpredictable and irregular relationship between employers and workers or, in the case of self-employed persons, to the unpredictability of their income.

In the context of the pandemic, people working informally could face an increase in number and a detriment in quality of life, which would imply the elevation of negative indexes for the country and the city of Cúcuta as far as the rate of informality in the department is concerned (Cúcuta Chamber of Commerce, 2019a). This deepening of poverty and the consequent decrease in the quality of life are manifested in the first instance in restrictions and limitations in access to food, essential goods and services and, as a consequence, the denial or difficulty for reliable access to education, even worse in the current conditions, in which school activities, due to the closure of schools, have been transferred to homes with the use of technology to which the vulnerable sectors of the population will have less and less access.

### **Educational aspect**

The perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of Covid-19 in the socio-educational sphere are shown in Table 4. These results allow verifying the support offered by the Colombian State through different social protection programs to a certain number of subjects who are part of vulnerable populations. This support, however, only reaches four out of every ten subjects surveyed, all belonging to the informal sector of the population. Regarding the benefits received by some people living in poverty, García and Kairuz (2020) point out that students enrolled in official schools are beneficiaries of the PAE and the program Familias en Acción; however, the reality is that part of the vulnerable population are not beneficiaries of these programs. The ECLAC report (2020b) states that

In addition to interrupting educational trajectories, school closures affect the food and nutrition of the student population, especially in the most vulnerable sectors. At the time of writing (early July), 21 of the 33 countries have maintained school feeding programs in various forms. The most widely used modality (13 countries) is the delivery of food kits to be prepared at home, followed by the provision of lunches (3 countries) and, to a lesser extent, cash transfers and food vouchers (p. 2).

It should be noted here that, according to the measures adopted to face the pandemic, it was foreseen that within the official educational system, students should be attended through the 96 certified Secretariats of Education (Decree 470, 2020). Regarding the measures adopted in the educational sphere during the pandemic for the development of the educational process, in the same ECLAC report (2020b), it is mentioned that

In the field of education, most of the measures adopted by the countries of the region in response to the crisis are related to the suspension of face-to-face classes at all levels, which has given rise to three main fields of action: the deployment of distance learning modalities, using a variety of formats and platforms (with or without the use of technology); the support and mobilization of educational personnel and communities; and attention to the health and wellbeing of students (p.1)

As it is deduced that in the context of informality, the crisis can become a catalyst that exacerbates among the less favored strata the feeling of grievance (Urbina & Pérez, 2022), distrust and the perception of injustice regarding access to education services through distance or remote technology; this, because this modality of distance education mediated by ICT presents a context of apprehension before the Covid-19 that has deepened the pre-existing educational gaps (Murillo & Duk, 2020).

Additionally, the lengthening in time of this circumstance can cause serious harm to students due to the weakening, wear and tear and fatigue of both teachers and parents (Britez, 2020). The latter, in addition, have had to assume the teaching from home without the necessary pedagogical preparation. And if they have the support of other family members, such as uncles, aunts, grandparents or older siblings, their academic and pedagogical knowledge may be equally weak and inconsistent or even null (Razeto, 2016).

To this is added the improvisation of educational institutions and the State (inevitable, it must be said, since the scenario of a global pandemic was completely unpredictable) due to the lack of general

guidelines and specific strategies to support students in their process of acquiring meaningful and effective learning.

**Table 4.** Effects of Covid-19 on the socio-educational environment of the participants and their family members.

| Aspect  | Affectation  |
|---|--|
| Benefits derived from the educational process                   | In the opinion of 72% of those surveyed, there are children in their households who are linked to the educational system. Of these, approximately 95% are beneficiaries of the School Feeding Program, which corresponds to a food benefit provided free of charge at the educational institution. Regarding whether they as parents or any other member of the family are beneficiaries of any other type of benefits that the State has promoted, it was determined that 40% are distributed approximately equally in the Familias en Acción and Jóvenes en Acción programs, in contrast with the remaining 60% who have not benefited from any program. |
| Difficulties of access in pandemic                              | Approximately 68% of those surveyed state that their children in the educational process have been affected in the fulfillment of their academic duties during the Covid-19 pandemic, a situation that has led them to seek support from other people to solve their technological shortcomings. In a complementary manner, it was determined that 95% of those surveyed are concerned about the academic training process of their children or schooled family members, within the challenges and new realities that the presence of Covid-19 demands in our society.   |
| Quality of the educational process received during the pandemic | 90% of those surveyed assure that the development of the formative process from home has been very complex since it demands greater commitments from them and in many cases they do not have the training to efficiently advise the concerns that arise from the process of carrying out the activities. For this reason, they consider that this non-presential formative process is detrimental to the quality of the educational process of their children.   |

On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the use and possession of ICT devices and quality internet connections are not homogeneous in the country, as outlined in Rincón et al. (2021) with the closure of face-to-face activities in educational institutions, new forms of interaction among educational actors were adopted, which in turn impacted pedagogical processes with a high burden of ICT resource use, which in case of not having access, ceased to be a benefit to becoming an obstacle. Indeed, according to information provided by the DANE (2019), 60% of households in the country have computer equipment for the development of educational activities, which surely require the use of the internet, the coverage is around 53% of households with a fixed wired connection at home. Hence the generally negative opinions expressed by the respondents regarding home-based education and the problems particularly experienced by workers in the context of informality.

## CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic crisis forced social isolation and the educational emergency has aggravated a pre-existing problem of already complex characteristics: the precarious situation in which workers in the informal sector of the economy and their families find themselves. The Covid-19 pandemic and the measures adopted to contain it have mainly affected vulnerable sectors of the population, such as the one mentioned in this study, since the number of unemployed has increased, the working conditions of those who managed to keep their jobs have worsened and, in general, the income of the informal economy sectors has decreased. Access to goods and services, including quality education, has been further limited for these people over the past two years.

The pandemic situation, in effect, has generally tested the strength of education systems around the world, and Colombia has been no different. Although all students (of all educational levels, socio-cultural strata and geographical origin) have suffered the adaptation to the new conditions of an educational practice transferred to the home and mediated by digital technology, not all have had the same means and resources to face distance education with equal guarantees.

In the case of Colombia, several vulnerable social groups have had difficulties in adapting to digital education at home. One of them is that of families whose livelihood is in the informal economy, a situation that is particularly visible in the city of Cúcuta, given its geographical location in proximity to the neighboring country of Venezuela, which is currently facing a process of a massive migration of its inhabitants in search of better life opportunities.

For this reason, this research has been devoted to exploring the effects of the pandemic on the education of children coming from this environment, since the consequences suffered by their parents or representatives are also transferred to them.

In this sense, it has been proven that the sector of informal workers has been one of the hardest hit by the crisis aggravated by Covid, mainly due to the loss of work, the reduction of working hours, the decrease in income and consequently the increased difficulty in accessing basic goods and services (including children's education) and, in general, a growing deterioration in the quality of life.

In the case of schooling, the system that has replaced face-to-face classes due to the closure of schools has been based primarily on the use of digital technological resources and activities conducted by connecting students to platforms and meetings via the Internet. However, a large number of students in vulnerable situations do not have smart devices or quality internet connection. In addition to this, the decline in the income of family providers prevents them from investing in these aspects to best alleviate the impossibility for children to attend school.

Another obstacle frequently encountered by families from disadvantaged sectors has to do with the lack of academic and pedagogical training of the other members of the family, to whom the schools have delegated to some extent the guidance and supervision of the tasks and activities that correspond to the teachers. The people who have collaborated as informants in the research feel frustrated by

their incompetence in these tasks and by the difficulties involved in educating children from home with limited material and general cultural resources.

In addition, many children and adolescents from low-income families in the context of informality depend on free school programs, specifically the PAE, to feed themselves healthily and at least once a day. In this sense, school closures have also been detrimental to schoolchildren's nutrition, which affects their ability to learn.

But the medium-term consequences of these pandemic-related circumstances may be even more serious if they result, as is quite possible, in school dropout. Indeed, when the pandemic passes or when children are allowed to attend school again, it is likely that many will not return: because their parents have not recovered their jobs, because they have fallen behind the progress of their peers or because they have been forced by circumstances to join the labor market, again in a situation of informality, like their parents, in activities that involve being obviously outside the social benefits of law, but also being exploited as child labor, with all the present and future prejudices that this implies.

From all the above, it is concluded that social, economic and educational inequalities in this context of pandemic have created new barriers and deepened previous limitations for the successful implementation of distance education systems mediated by digital technologies. In this sense, State and educational institutions are urged to design and implement educational policies and programs aimed at serving people from vulnerable populations whose successful and guaranteed access to quality education has been further limited by the pandemic, by the measures taken to prevent its expansion, but also by the distance education alternatives through digital technologies that have ultimately been limiting and even excluding for certain sectors of the population.

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