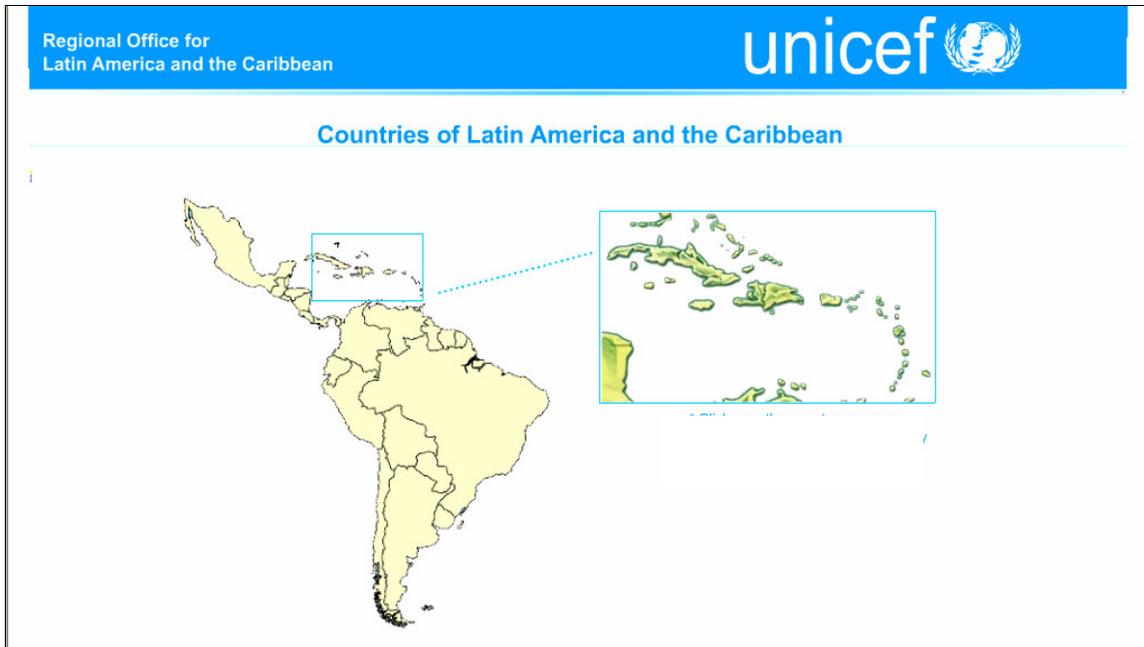


# UNICEF's work in Latin American and the Caribbean



## Overview

As a whole, Latin America and the Caribbean are considered the most unequal region in the world.

While there have been notable leaps in development that have improved the lives of some children, there remain staggering gaps that continue to leave millions of other children and their families at risk.

Since more than 40% of the total population of 510 million people is under 18 years of age and more than half of the region's children and adolescents live in conditions of poverty, UNICEF's mission and mandate are of particular importance here.

## In Latin America and the Caribbean, UNICEF concentrates its programs and actions to counteract six significant threats:

1. **Disparities** – 60% of children under 12 years of age and 50% of adolescents between the ages of 13-19 live in poverty.
2. **Social exclusion** – affects young people living with HIV/AIDS, and those with disabilities, and dramatically affects indigenous and Afro-descendent communities. As one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world, there are 40-50 million indigenous and 150 million Afro-descendants living here, close to half of which are under 18 years of age. Children in these communities have lower levels of nutrition and limited or non-existent access to basic services.
3. **Chronic malnutrition** – if severe malnutrition is equivalent to a death sentence, chronic malnutrition is equivalent to life imprisonment. The high prevalence of chronic malnutrition (one of every five children) affects children's growth through a variety of ways, among them: low birth weight, stunting and frequent illness.
4. **Violence** – each year, nearly 85,000 children die as a result of violence in the home. All told, violence affects over 6 million Latin American children and adolescents.
5. **HIV/AIDS** – after sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean has the second highest prevalence of AIDS in the world. The epidemic has an increasingly adolescent female face.
6. **Emergencies** – each year, natural disasters such as flooding and hurricanes are common and harsh. Invariably these days of havoc create years of distress.

# Uruguay: Health and Education Centers for Street Children

Map Source: Wikipedia, all other sources UNICEF TACRO office



- Uruguay is located in the southern cone of South America with a small population estimated at nearly 3.5 million.
- It is bordered by Brazil, Argentina, the Uruguay River and the Atlantic Ocean.
- Uruguay's land mass is 176,215 km<sup>2</sup> -- making it the third smallest country in South America, larger only than Suriname and the French Guiana.
- In 2007, Gross Domestic Product per capita was an estimated US\$10,800 per year.

## Factors Impacting Children in Uruguay

- Historically, Uruguay has shown less social disparities than other countries in the region. This achievement changed dramatically when the severe economic crisis of 2002 plunged the country into a spiral of increasing social problems that led to the doubling of the number of families living in poverty. The economic crisis hit children under the age of 6 particularly hard.
- Today, 55% to 60% of the population lives in poverty. Given the circumstances, Uruguayan officials can expect that two in three children will be born into poor families and households in the near future. This kind of situation has the potential to directly contribute to the increasing numbers of street children.
- According to surveys, there were 7,200 street children in Uruguay in 2004.
- Related to the rise in poverty, there is also a sharp increase in school drop-out numbers and registered cases of neglect and abuse.
- Most institutions and projects dedicated to assisting street children are concentrated in Montevideo. The smaller cities and lesser developed urban areas do not have the necessary resources and services despite often showing the worst human development indicators.

## Proposal Objective

As the phenomenon of street children has roots in a number of causes, the solution also requires a multidisciplinary approach. Different strategies need to be developed and tailored to the specific conditions facing children, families, schools, and communities over a substantial period of time. The project objectives are to: provide educational support; bring children back to school and keep them there; empower families to help them properly take care of their children; and ensure access to healthcare that includes health education and HIV/AIDS prevention.

## Strategies

The project will use two distinct approaches. In areas or cities with high rates of street children, UNICEF will help establish new centers that will provide a path for the reintegration of street children through activities in nutrition and health, education, life skills training, and sports and recreation.

In cities with a smaller number of street children, the project will be offering financial and technical support to social workers, teachers, and other caretakers to strengthen the capacities of public institutions and local agencies. In these areas the approach to create centers is not financially viable due to the small numbers involved.

For both approaches the adopted strategy will consist of creating a realistic alternative to the streets, which must be economically viable, socially attractive and help ensure basic needs, and providing specific and direct support to assist children in leaving the streets and helping them to reintegrate into schools and families. Specific strategies include:

**1. Educational support.** For most street children, reintegration into the traditional education system is difficult or nearly impossible. The result is that the streets become the primary space of socialization. Since families have often lost the ability to nurture, educate and protect their kids, those in especially severe economic difficulties cannot or will not give adequate attention or understanding to education because it is not considered a valuable enough asset. Consequently, most children cannot read and write and most of their knowledge - acquired during their socialization in the street - does not allow them to succeed in schools where traditional teaching methodologies are used. Therefore, an alternative approach to educate street children is needed. The project will provide an appropriate environment through a close and personal support of each child, allowing them to reach appropriate educational levels to succeed in the traditional system.

**2. School Reintegration.** Helping children return to school - and remain in it - presents many challenges. Children may have developed health, psychological, and behavioral problems that affect interest, concentration, discipline, and school performance. Rather than using traditional pedagogy, UNICEF will support education programs that emphasize the provision of learning and general life skills. At the same time, elements of standard curricula will also be used to enable children to reenter the mainstream of the educational system and eventually access the labor market.

**3. Empowerment of Families.** Reuniting children with their families is a key objective, but a family's interest, capability and determination to protect and care for their child, as well as the child's wish to return home must be taken into consideration. In many cases, families are ready to reunite with their children if services exist to provide social support.

**4. Physical and Mental Health Care.** Due to the special nature of their physical condition, street children tend to require immediate treatment, most often for injuries from accidents or abuse, malnutrition, respiratory infections, skin diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse. UNICEF will pay special attention to physical and mental health, either through the involvement of specialists or by assisting children to obtain existing community services.

**5. Individualized Approach.** Every street child has his or her own needs, skills, medical and family histories. The complex combination of reasons that forced them into the streets is also unique, as is the situation that they would face once they are back with their families. Therefore, UNICEF embraces the use of a multidisciplinary and individualized approach to helping them.

## **Impact**

- UNICEF's efforts will promote social, institutional, legal and cultural changes in attitude and behavior, as well as methodologies in planning for and working with street children.
- UNICEF will assist the Government of Uruguay to make sure that all street children outside the capital will be reintegrated over a period of three years. The result is the elimination of a very visible and serious developmental problem. More importantly, these actions will promote and protect children's rights and their futures.
- This project has double power as it will address the needs of many children now and can also be seen as a "vaccination" against the proliferation of the phenomenon of street children in the future.