



RECENSÃO

*Impacto da Crise nas Crianças Portuguesas:
Indicadores, Políticas, Representações,*
Karin Wall et al.,
por Ana Prata

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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RWALL, Karin *et al.**Impacto da Crise nas Crianças Portuguesas: Indicadores, Políticas, Representações,*

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There is a general acknowledgment that families and children have suffered the effects of the Portuguese economic crisis, but that researchers lack scientific and sociological knowledge about the *real* experience that Portuguese children have faced throughout the crisis. The book “*Impacto da Crise nas Crianças Portuguesas: Indicadores, Políticas, Representações*” fills this gap by giving visibility to how children make sense of their experiences and by “listening to the children themselves” (p. 23), thereby recognizing that children can be discourse producers regarding the economic crisis. The scope/aim of the book goes beyond this, and also focuses on statistical data and public policies that affect children and their families. Although the authors do not specify a time frame for the overall analysis, most of the statistical data span the period from 2005 to 2013. The public policies cover a longer period, from 2000 to 2013 (with an emphasis on the last eight years). The children’s interview data were collected in 2013.

The book is divided into four main sections and employs two distinct approaches. Part 1 addresses the children’s situation in the context of Portuguese society using several social indicators (poverty, education, housing,

etc.), while Part 2 analyzes public policies aimed at children and their families in order to contextualize the safety net available prior to and during the economic crisis and also following the implementation of austerity measures. The approach in this first half of the book is “extensive and institutional” (p. 23), while the second half, Part 3, uses an “intensive and individual” (p. 24) approach that focuses on the representations and experiences of children, and is based on their personal narratives. In particular, it presents the results of a qualitative study based on 77 interviews with children and teenagers from ages 8 to 17 (a representative national sample) regarding their perceptions of the impacts of the economic crisis on their daily lives. Finally, Part 4, the shortest section of the book, summarizes some of the main results presented throughout and also advances some policy recommendations regarding how to better protect children in economic crisis situations.

The first part of the book provides an overview of several social indicators of poverty and social exclusion for children and teenagers. It starts by looking at the “Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion Indicator” (RPES – *Risco de Pobreza e Exclusão Social*) and a number of

statistics are presented on Risk of Income Poverty, Work Intensity, Material Deprivation, and Unexpected Expenses. Most of the data focus on the situation of children and teenagers in Portugal, but there are also some comparative data placing Portugal within the European Union (EU) context. This section is lengthy and thorough and at times some of its most interesting findings seem to be buried within the many figures and tables (more than fifty) presented.

Some interesting data from this section do reinforce the need to give visibility to children and teenagers as an especially vulnerable group affected by the economic crisis. For example, the fact that since the outset of the crisis in 2008, children (0 to 17 years old) are the age group at the highest risk for poverty and highest material deprivation in Portugal; and also the fact that single-parent households with three or more children are the ones at the highest risk of poverty. Furthermore, such risk is also greatly increased by the unemployment status of parents (p. 30-34).

The comparison to EU countries shows that children and teenagers in Portugal are more at risk of poverty and social exclusion than the EU average. But when restricting the comparison to Southern European countries only, Portuguese children and teenagers are less vulnerable to poverty and exclusion than their counterparts in Spain, Italy, and Greece.

At the end of Part 1 the authors focus on Well-Being Indicators such as Health, Safety, Food Insecurity, Education, Risky Behavior, Housing, Leisure, etc. They

assert that child obesity, the increasing domestic violence reported in the last few years, and food insecurity (the inability to provide three meals a day – which is almost twice as high as the EU average) are among the major concerns threatening the well-being of Portuguese children throughout the crisis. At times one is left wondering how this section would have benefited from disaggregating data by region, ethnic minorities, and gender. Overall, the section feels rather descriptive and has too little analysis. Although the authors do cover a wide range of indicators, Part 1 would have also benefited from a conclusion that would better integrate and contextualize all of its rich data findings.

In Part 2 the authors provide an overview of public policies in the context of the economic crisis, and evaluate the impact of the welfare state's retrenchment on Portuguese families and children. The authors cover a vast array of public policies in this section, which will be of interest to researchers concerned with how austerity measures have curtailed the provision of social benefits and family cash allowances. Interestingly, this section also covers Taxation, a topic that is not often included in discussions of the welfare state. It is welcomed here, however, and truly provides a more thorough and nuanced picture of how tax benefits and taxation are connected to both redistribution and the economic strains on different types of families.

At the end of Part 2 the focus turns to Childcare Services and School Enrichment Activities (*Actividades de*

Enriquecimento Escolar). While the coverage of early childcare services places Portugal above the Barcelona target (33% coverage) and pre-school enrollment rates (for 5 year olds) are close to universal coverage (94%) (p. 97), the situation regarding School Enrichment Activities has been more challenging, and compared to other OECD countries, government spending (as a percentage of the GDP) is low and fell during the crisis (from 1.7% in 2009 to 1.4% in 2011). For readers interested in local and national governmental programs for families, there is also a brief section on the topic. On the whole, Part 2 covers a wide range of public policies, but as a section it could benefit from a systematization of its main points.

The longest and most captivating section of the book, Part 3, focuses on children's and teenagers' interview data, and it is entitled "Children's voices in times of crisis". This section is organized in five sub-sections: (1) Getting to know the crisis; (2) Impacts of the crisis; (3) The present and the future; (4) How to overcome the crisis? Strategies and solutions; and (5) Portraits of children and the crisis. There is an abundance and richness in the qualitative data presented in this section, which touch on various interesting topics: how children are aware of and make sense of the crisis; impacts on health; changes in consumption habits; and overall fears and hopes. In my opinion, the most striking contribution of this section is that it succeeds in fulfilling one of the main goals the authors set out to do: to "voice" and to give more visibility

to the children's experiences during the economic crisis. Children are heard and what they say strongly resonates with the reader. As a consequence of that, it will leave most researchers longing for similar studies applied to other populations or groups, or even for follow-up studies or comparative work that would look at the experiences of children in countries like Spain, Italy, Greece, and Ireland. One of the most interesting analytical tools used in this section, and one that could have been applied even more extensively, is the distinction between what most children (across social classes and regions) experienced throughout the crisis, and the particular experiences of those that are socio-economically more vulnerable. Fortunately, some of this systematization is also provided by the authors in the last section of the book.

Part 4 is a very concise conclusion chapter that despite being very descriptive is a welcomed and needed section in the book, since none of the other sections had concluding remarks. Examples of some interesting points highlighted in this section are how social transfers significantly reduce the number of children at risk of poverty (from 35.3% to 24.4%); how the number of unemployed couples registered in employment centers increased 688% from 2010 to 2013; how the government's expenditures directed at families with children are still below the average of most OECD countries; how grandparents are central in the lives of children; and how children believe that its mostly the adults that are impacted by the crisis, especially regarding employment

and consumption, dimensions that gained significance in the children's discourses about the economic crisis. The book ends with policy recommendations designed to promote children's well-being and rights, with special attention to the most economically vulnerable.

Impacto da Crise nas Crianças Portuguesas: Indicadores, Políticas, Representações is a compelling and welcome contribution to our understanding of the economic crisis and its effect on children and families. It succeeds in giving *voice* to a group - children and teenagers, who are often "spoken for", instead of "listened to". It does so not only through the extensive data presented, but especially through the interview data, its most important and

original feature. The book does suffer from a lack of systematization and focus stemming from its report-style and absence of concluding remarks at the end of each section, but that detracts little from the overall contribution it brings to the field.

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