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Families experiencing homelessness and the production of everyday urban space in Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017-2022)

Familles sans domicile et production de l'espace urbain quotidien à Buenos Aires, Argentine (2017-2022)

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Résumés

English Français Español

This article analyzes the production of space from the perspective of families experiencing homelessness who live in the Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. Based on census data and twelve in-depth interviews carried out in 2022, it explores the demographic, the infrastructure they use daily, their reasons for staying in a particular place, their routines, their social networks, and finally, the way they outfit their living area. In terms of housing trajectories, the article shows how those families alternate between boarding houses, shelters, and the street. This vicious circle of poverty is reinforced by public policies that provide only temporary assistance to cover a boarding house room or shelter. The analysis draws on Henri Lefebvre's notion of "the production of space" and his triad of conceived, lived and perceived space as well as Angela Giglia's concept of "inhabiting" [*habitar*].

Cet article analyse la production de l'espace depuis la perspective des familles sans domicile fixe vivant à Buenos Aires, capitale de l'Argentine. À partir de données de recensements et de douze entretiens approfondis réalisés en 2022, il se penche sur les données démographiques, l'infrastructure que ces personnes utilisent au quotidien, leurs raisons de rester dans des lieux spécifiques, leurs routines, leurs réseaux sociaux et, enfin, la manière dont ces groupes aménagent l'espace pour y habiter. Concernant les trajectoires résidentielles, l'article montre comment les familles alternent entre des pensions, des foyers pour sans-abris et la rue. Le cercle vicieux de la pauvreté se voit renforcé par des politiques publiques qui n'apportent que des aides temporaires pour couvrir les coûts d'une chambre en pension ou d'un foyer. L'analyse fait appel à

la notion de « production de l'espace » d'Henri Lefebvre et à la triade de l'espace conçu, vécu et perçu, ainsi qu'au concept d'« habiter » [*habitar*] d'Angela Giglia.

Este artículo analiza la producción del espacio desde la perspectiva de las familias en situación de calle que viven en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, capital de Argentina. A partir de datos censales y doce entrevistas en profundidad realizadas en 2022, explora la infraestructura que utilizan cotidianamente, sus razones para permanecer en un lugar determinado, sus rutinas, sus redes sociales y, finalmente, la forma en que equipan el espacio para habitar. En cuanto a las trayectorias habitacionales, el artículo muestra cómo esas familias alternan entre pensiones, albergues y la calle. Este círculo vicioso de la pobreza se ve reforzado por políticas públicas que sólo proporcionan ayudas temporales para cubrir el costo de una habitación en una pensión o asistir a un refugio. El análisis se basa en la noción de "producción del espacio" de Henri Lefebvre y su tríada de espacio concebido, vivido y percibido, así como en el concepto de "habitar" de Angela Giglia.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : sans abris, pauvreté urbaine, espace public

Keywords: homeless, urban poverty, public space

Palabras claves: situación de calle, pobreza urbana, espacio público

Notes de la rédaction

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Texte intégral

Introduction

- 1 This article analyzes the cases of unsheltered families with children in the city of Buenos Aires. Due to a series of economic crises, the number of people living on the streets in Argentina's capital has swelled and this population has grown more visible, turning this into a phenomenon worthy of research.
- 2 A family here is understood as a group of individuals who share the costs of living and self-identify as members of the same group, regardless of blood relations or legal kinship [Rodríguez Fernández, 2012]. Internationally, the study of families living on the street dates back to the 1980s. In the United States, for example, Bassuk and Rosenberg [1988] analyzed the situation of single women with children living in shelters in the city of Boston; Grant *et al.* [2013] offered a thorough review of the literature that notes how studies on unhoused families emerged in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s due to budget cuts in low-cost housing and social security. In the European Union, comparative research has tackled the approaches to the issue in several countries. According to this qualitative research, most people experiencing homelessness are single women with children, or relegated ethnic minorities, and the countries with stronger social protection laws have lower rates of these families. In these studies, there has been a focus on growing up unsheltered [Baptista *et al.*, 2017]. In the case of England, studies include that of Glastonbury [1971], who examined families staying at shelters; Stuttaford *et al.* [2009], who observed inadequate healthcare access among this population; and Pleace *et al.* [2008], who analyzed the impact of living at shelters for families and young people, among many others.
- 3 Though international literature on the topic dates back at least a century—like the pioneering work *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* [Anderson, 1923]—families experiencing homelessness have been a topic of research since the 1980s. One of the main issues covered in Argentine literature on the topic is ways of referring to the unsheltered (*sin techo*, *deambulantes*, *personas en situación de calle*) and the best possible indicators for it [Calcagno, 1999; Biaggio, 2014; Bufarini, 2010; Pallares & Hidalgo, 2018; Di Iorio & Farías, 2020]. Another is the policies and programs for the physical and mental health of this population as well as housing policies [Boy, 2012;

Pallares, 2004; Biaggio, 2006, Bufarini, 2008; Rosa & Toscani, 2020; Bascialla, 2020; Bachiller, 2021]. A third topic is the particular issues of women experiencing homelessness [Tortosa, 2020; Longo *et al.*, 2020; Ferreiro & Ermocida, 2019].

4 Since the literature on unsheltered people in Argentina has centered mainly on individuals, the focus on this article is families with children. The analysis here includes information on their social and economic background, demographics, whether they are permanent street residents or if they sometimes find temporary housing options, their housing trajectories, their use of urban infrastructure, their daily routines and itineraries, and finally, the way in which they outfit their living area. Another topic is how the family stays organized on the street and how the experience of homelessness differs for families as opposed to individuals.

5 The analysis of homeless families in Argentina will draw on “the production of space” as laid out by Lefebvre. According to this concept, space is social and, as such, it both produces relations and is, at the same time, produced by them. Social space is built over time, and it reflects the dominant social representations and relations of each historic moment. In the context of capitalism, it is the place for social production and reproduction, exchange (of goods and commodities), forms of ownership, and dominant morphologies. In the face of abstract space, i.e., the formal, logical, instrumental, and object-based space coherent with capitalism’s needs, urban space depends on three parallel dimensions: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. Lefebvre then lays out a triad. Spatial practices are tied to lived space, i.e., people’s daily realities as bound by time and space (work, home, etc.); representations of space are associated with conceptualized space, that is, the urban and architectural plans laid out by planners, urbanists, and technocrats; and representational spaces are linked to perceived space, or how inhabitants travel and experience the city based on the ways they visualize or imagine it. Urban space is the articulation of the triad [Lefebvre, 1991 (1974)].

6 Another relevant concept to the analysis is that of “inhabiting,” a concept developed by Angela Giglia in *El habitar y la cultura*. While “inhabiting” is a term associated with being sheltered and protected, Giglia expands on its myriad meanings of “being in a place” and “knowing one is there and not somewhere else.” Inhabiting, according to the author, comprises the “human capacity to acknowledge, interpret and imbue a space with meaning” [2012, p. 9]. Furthermore, inhabiting refers to a “set of practices and representations that allow subjects to situate themselves temporally and spatially, to the same degree that they acknowledge and establish an order. It means acknowledging an order, situating oneself within it, and establishing an order of one’s own” [Giglia, 2012, p. 13].

Methodology and the Scope of the Term “Homelessness”

7 This article relies on mixed methodology, drawing on quantitative research (two single-contact censuses conducted by non-governmental organizations in 2017 and 2019), and twelve qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in 2022. The interviews followed an open script to account for any unexpected issues relevant to the research objectives [Taylor & Bogdán, 1987]. Social organizations that deliver food to homeless people every week aided in the recruitment of interviewees. Later, snowball sampling was used, where existing interviewees recruited others willing to be interviewed. In other words, the sample was built on existing social relations [Hernández Sampieri *et al.*, 2007]. The interpretation of the interviews relied on description, coding, and analysis [Meo & Navarro, 2009].

8 Getting these families to open up was challenging given their deep mistrust of strangers. There are myriad reasons for this mistrust the dangers of living on the streets with children, the authorities’ scrutiny of their emotional and physical wellbeing, and

the fear of being forced to leave the places where they spend the night. In order to gain the trust of those interviewed, civil organizations that work with this population collaborated in the interviews, given that their close relationship enabled access to these families.

9 This article relies on the definition of “homelessness” in the Buenos Aires Municipal Law 3706. According to the law, anyone who spends the night on the streets either temporarily or permanently is experiencing homelessness, regardless of whether or not they use the network of day shelters. However, homelessness in the law also includes those who are “at risk of homelessness” e.g., anyone who lives in precarious housing, is about to be released from jail or correctional institution and has no place to go, or has received a final eviction notice from his/her current home [Boletín Oficial, 2011].¹

10 Over time, the terms used to refer to this population in Argentina have changed. Religious organizations, for example, used to refer to them as *deambulantes* (wanderers). The first terms used by the Buenos Aires government municipal government in efforts to assist this population used the term *sin techo* (unhoused, or literally, without a roof). Other authors [Rosa, 2017] have categorized them as *habitantes de la calle* (street dwellers). Nevertheless, today a consensus has been reached on the terms of the 3706/2010 Law, which are the ones used here.

11 Besides the quantitative information, which provides insight into the quantity of families experiencing homelessness, the interviews shed light on aspects not visible in the census, such as housing trajectories, ways of inhabiting and outfitting their living area, and finally, the connection between social links and the production of everyday territories, which is the central interest of this article.

The Emergence and Sociodemographics of Unsheltered Families in Buenos Aires

12 Though homelessness has been visible in Buenos Aires since the beginning of the twentieth century [Paiva, 2008, p. 64], the issue of poor families with housing difficulties dates back further. In the nineteenth century, immigrants and other urban poor people crowded into the tenements known as *conventillos*, and internal migrants, followed later by immigrants mainly from neighboring countries, populated the city slums during the twentieth century.

13 Late in the twentieth century, the issue of families living temporarily or permanently on the streets coincided with the neoliberal policies under President Carlos Menem. State-owned enterprises were privatized, laws were passed that facilitated the hiring of temporary workers without labor protection, and the social welfare system was gradually dismantled. This caused a spike in poverty, informal work, and housing costs [Boy, 2012; Bachiller, 2021], but also a job crisis: while in 1990, unemployment stood at around 6.3%, it rose to 15.5% in 2000, with an additional 16% of underemployment [Bermudez, 2004]. During the 1990s, the city of Buenos Aires began implementing assistance programs for the unsheltered.

14 In 2001, the country underwent a major social crisis with economic, social, and political effects at every level. In economic terms, besides raising unemployment and poverty, a bank run led the government to severely limit the withdrawal of bank savings. Besides increasing people’s distrust of politicians, all of these factors contributed to a series of popular protests that led to the president's resignation.

15 As poverty, including extreme poverty, spiraled, it became increasingly visible in urban areas. One of its corollaries were families living on the streets, notably in large cities such as Buenos Aires. As noted in the project description of the city’s first “Integration Program for Unhoused Individuals and Families” [*programa integrador para personas solas o familias sin techo*] in 1997:

Today there are an increasing number of poor people. Poverty levels are rising. In this sense, it is possible to see individuals living on the streets (...) but also entire families, and for diverse reasons: eviction, joblessness, and, to a lesser extent, migrant status, as migrants make the street a place to live [Buenos Aires Municipal Government, 1997].

16 Thus, the context of the 1990s led to families living on the streets. In the decades since, poverty levels increased across the country and housing in the city of Buenos Aires grew even more expensive. According to 2022 statistics, renters were spending 47.8% of their income on rent in the city of Buenos Aires [*La Nación*, 2022]². For people who are homeless and often earn little, if anything, the situation is even more dire as the increase in the cost of boarding house rooms has doubled in relation to salaries [Paiva, 2020].

17 As for the characteristics of those families, little information is available, with the exception of the census data, a handful of news articles, and the findings of the fieldwork conducted as part of this study. The statistical information provided herein is taken from two single-contact censuses carried out by civil organizations in 2017 and 2019, and from the 2023 census conducted by the Buenos Aires government.

18 In these censuses, “experiencing homelessness” and being “at risk of homelessness” are defined as in Law 3706. The 2017 single-contact census showed there were 4,413 people experiencing homelessness in the city of Buenos Aires, 4,079 of whom were sleeping on the streets and 334 of whom were at risk of homelessness (staying at shelters or boarding houses, or facing imminent eviction). In terms of ages, 3,789 were adults and 624 children; 903 identified as a member of a family group.

19 In terms of children, 414 answered questions concerning their health and schooling because they were accompanied by an adult legally able to provide such information. Of these children, 308 were currently living on the streets, and 106 were at risk. Of the 308 children living on the street, 90% of them had a personal document, 76.76% had seen a pediatrician within the last year, and nearly 70% were enrolled in school [Observatorio del Derecho a la Ciudad, 2017].³ Meanwhile, according to the 2019 single-contact census, 7,251 people were considered to be experiencing homelessness, including 5,413 living on the street and the rest in boarding houses or at risk of homelessness. Of those spending the night on the streets, 871 people, or 16%, were children. Although no numbers were given on family groups, it is possible to infer that these children were accompanied by an adult family member, taking into account that they responded to the questions [Informe, 2019].⁴

20 As for the 2023 census carried out by the Buenos Aires city government, it estimated 3,511 people were experiencing homelessness, 64.6% of whom were living in a shelter and 35.4% on the streets. In terms of age, 14.4% of the homeless were children and adolescents, with 7.6% of this population sleeping in shelters (6.5% were 14 or younger, and 1.1%, ages 15 to 18). All were accompanied by an adult relative, given the census takers are not permitted to collect information from a minor. The Buenos Aires city census does not account for people at risk of homelessness, namely, those facing imminent eviction or about to be released from prison or a correctional facility [Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos, 2023].⁵

21 As can be seen, the final figures on homelessness vary greatly in the single-contact census versus the city census. The main reason for this difference can be attributed to the technique used to count this population. While the Buenos Aires city government relies on the “Point-in-Time” count, i.e. that which counts sheltered and unsheltered people on a particular day and time, the single-contact census is conducted during a whole week. This count thus includes people and families who are unsheltered on and off, namely, those who do not always sleep on the streets [Pallares & Hidalgo, 2018]. These two sources are the only statistical information available on families spending the night on the streets in Buenos Aires, beyond that obtained in the interviews.

22 In terms of unhoused individuals, this population is more diverse in terms of how long they have experienced homelessness and the reasons for their situation. It includes a range of people, including recently unemployed workers, drug addicts, and people

with mental issues. On the other hand, homeless families have a long trajectory of poverty, violence, unemployment, and insufficient income. They often alternate between shelters and boarding houses and are frequently the children of parents who experienced homelessness, be their situation temporary or permanent. According to the Buenos Aires city census, which focused on individuals and not families, 23.4% had been born in the city of Buenos Aires, 42% in the Buenos Aires province, 17.7% in another province, and 9,6% on another country [Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos, 2023].⁶ These statistics serve to refute a popular theory attributing the homeless phenomenon to immigration from neighboring countries, when it is instead connected to the impoverishment caused by neoliberal economic policies that caused a rise in unemployment and a lower quality of life, especially in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area [Paiva, 2008].

23 The policies introduced to improve the quality of life and job programs for the unsheltered were not able to modify the structural factors of poverty, e.g., the lack of employment or social security. The government responded with a series of welfare plans, including the Universal Child Allowance, a cash stipend from the federal government for vulnerable families that covers up to five children under the age of 18.

24 Besides the Universal Child Allowance, which homeless families with children often receive, the Buenos Aires city government offers a program called Buenos Aires Citizenship, with a charge card that can be used to buy food and hygienic supplies. Additionally, public hospitals provide free care and children can attend public schools.

25 As for public policies on shelter, these fall under the umbrella of welfare services provided by the Buenos Aires city government. The city has a network of day shelters, known as social integration centers, that offer shelter only on an overnight basis. The Buenos Aires city government runs three day shelters where people can bathe, eat, and most importantly, sleep: the Bepo Ghezzi (for men), the Azuzena Villaflor (for women and minors), and the Costanera Sur Center for families. Admission is without a previous appointment every afternoon at 5 pm and everyone must leave by 8 am the next morning. The day shelters also provide physical and psychological health services and workshops on social and professional integration. There are also some privately run homes, especially those of the Catholic Church, that allow for longer stays. The Buenos Aires city government has agreements with civil society organizations like the FRIDA Integration Center (for single women with children), the Monteagudo Center (for men), and others belonging to the Catholic church organization Caritas and the Salvation Army.

26 Beyond the day shelters, there are two other kinds of family assistance offered by the city of Buenos Aires. The first is a housing subsidy for families that lasts for six months but can be renewed to cover the cost of a boarding house room. Families can also go to court and file for a protection order; if granted, the Buenos Aires city government covers the cost of the family's housing indefinitely, but always in boarding houses. These welfare programs, however, have not met the social and housing needs of many families experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The following section will turn to ways of inhabiting the city, the main topic of this paper.

The Habitats of Homeless Families and Housing Trajectories

27 One of the main characteristics of where unsheltered families choose to be is that there is no fixed location. In some cases, they settle in a place largely overlooked by the real estate market, such as outside cemetery walls or under overpasses. According to Sano, Storato, and Della Pupa [2021], the response to homelessness oscillates between tolerance and criminalization. As long as the unsheltered are not established in a spot earmarked for a real estate development or public works, they are generally tolerated. One of the families interviewed for this study was evicted shortly after by the city

government and police due to a real estate development in the place they had occupied. At certain times, homelessness has been criminalized. This was the case in 2008-2009, when the Buenos Aires city government introduced the Public Space Control Unit to violently, or sometimes illegally, evict people from the streets. Their methods included physical removal, arrest, and the destruction of personal belongings.

28 Another kind of habitat, as noted in the previous section, is boarding houses and day shelters. The interviews shed light on what it is like for families staying at these centers:

The Costanera day shelter has two big rooms, one for mothers with their children and another for fathers with their kids. The rooms are lined with beds or bunks. All the women are together and the same goes for the men. There is a common living room. The place also has a big yard and a laundry room. It's hard for people to get along: there is that issue of seeing who is better, who is stronger, who is bigger...Violence creeps up on you and there's no violence allowed, otherwise you get evicted. It's not easy because things get stolen: your shoes, your cell phone (C., age 27, woman).

29 As C.'s account reveals, life in these centers is challenging and families often prefer to stay on the streets instead of accepting the shelter's rules.

30 The housing trajectories of those families, meaning the moves they make between living places and neighborhoods in the city, are characterized by poverty and housing instability. Those trajectories are by no means arbitrary: instead, they depend on socioeconomic status, land availability, public policies on land and housing, and the needs and expectations of each family [Di Virgilio, 2011]. In this vein, an examination of housing trajectories enables us to "analyze the relation between socioeconomic status and the battle for space appropriation" [Di Virgilio & Najman, 2020, p. 390].

31 Returning to the interviews, it is possible to say that the homeless housing trajectories mostly oscillate between boarding houses, day shelters, and the street, though not necessarily in this order. In the middle, there could be a stay at a relative's home, making homelessness intermittent.

32 Excerpts from the interviews describe this type of trajectory:

I came from Tucumán, lived in a slum in José C. Paz for three years, returned to Tucumán for seven months, came back to Buenos Aires to the Palomar area to live at my sister's house for a month, then moved to Jorge Newbery and the railway tracks, next to the Chacarita cemetery. After seven years living there, I went to a boarding house in the Congreso neighborhood with a housing subsidy. In 2017, I could no longer pay for my room there so I went back to Tucumán but returned once again to Buenos Aires when my son was killed in prison. That's when I settled outside the cemetery again, near the corner of Warnes and Punta Arenas, where I now live with my partner and my three sons, who are 19, 15, and 13 (R., woman, age 47).

I used to live in Belgrano, I bought a house, and I got scammed. Then I began squatting at a property that had been expropriated to build a highway. I was moved to a family shelter in the Puerto Madero neighborhood on España Avenue. I fought with a woman there and I was moved to a shelter for women with children and my husband was sent to a men's shelter. I could not play by their rules so we went back to the streets. We stayed in Puerto Madero, close to the Rodrigo Bueno shantytown. We spent seven months on the streets. Today we rent a room in a boarding house thanks to a housing subsidy (M., woman, age 55).

33 Like public assistance programs, family ties or friends often influence the housing trajectories and choice of location:

My house was on Jorge Newbery and the railroad tracks (the corner of the Chacarita cemetery) but I ended up here because everyone living along the tracks was going to be evicted. They demolished the house because they were going to build a bridge. I had a house like this one and I lived there for seven years. One woman let me live in the back of her house and I was there seven years. Then we were all evicted because it was demolished. That's when I moved to the motel. In 2019, just when the pandemic was starting [sic], I came here. I found out about this place thanks to acquaintances. I made friends. I already knew W., because we

have been trash pickers forever, and on the streets you meet a lot of people. I picked trash and so did he. I met C., W., my pal D., and Valeria. They gave us a place, a little place, with three beds, so I stayed here (R., woman, age 47).

34 The movements between one place and the next in these housing trajectories can be attributed to inadequate public policies, which fail to provide long-term solutions and trap families in a vicious circle between boarding houses, the street, and day shelters. However, personal relations here are also critical, as tips from family or friends on available housing options also influence where they end up living.

35 According to the censuses cited above, a great number of the unsheltered stay in city district 1 (Retiro, San Nicolás, Constitución, San Telmo, and Puerto Madero) because there are a good number of low-cost boarding houses in these neighborhoods. Nonetheless, the unsheltered can be found across the city, wherever there are automated teller machines, parks, bridges, or, as in the case noted above, cemeteries.

City District



Source: Buenos Aires City Government

Living Strategies and Daily Routines

36 Living strategies refers to a set of actions to maintain one's social structure and to the ensemble of social networks that make it possible to live on the streets [Bocchicchio *et al.*, 2014]. What monetary and non-monetary strategies do families put in motion to secure their survival? What social networks are activated in this sense? How is the family budget reconfigured accordingly? How do these activities impact the production of a specific space for those same activities?

37 The money strategies of the homeless include trash picking for recyclable waste and/or valuables for resale at informal markets, cleaning car windows, begging, and selling roses to cemetery-goers. In terms of other subsistence strategies not related to money, they may ask for food at restaurants, local shops, or from local residents; get food from food banks; or buy food.

38 These strategies require participation in social networks, namely, sets of groups, people, and other organizations with connections where goods, influence, information, reciprocity, mutual aid, and other forms of support circulate [Dettmer & Reyna, 2014]. Social links with neighbors, social organizations, shopkeepers, other street residents, and the government support families in their everyday needs and prove essential to the daily routines of the unsheltered. The family budget covers food for all members and the needs of any children. If a family member has someone outside the family unit (children from a previous relationship, adolescents living elsewhere), they must find a way to support that person on their own without relying on the family budget.

39 Interviews provide a look at the daily routines:

At 8 or 8:30am, I go out looking for cardboard [to recycle]. I pick up the waste paper and cardboard from a factory between 9 and 11 am. Then I stay here. Then my daughters wake up, have breakfast, take a bath, wait for lunch, and go to school. My son goes to work. My partner trash picks. He cleans the factory on Saturdays and then he walks (R., woman, age 47).

We would wake up inside the bank ATM, change the baby's diaper, go into a McDonalds to clean up, change clothes and have breakfast, then start walking. He'd ask for small change, we'd sit somewhere and eat, we'd take a rest, we'd stay two or three hours until 5 or 6 pm and we'd start again: he would ask for spare change... Then we moved to the boarding house, but the routine was the same (C., woman, age 27).

40 Several testimonies reveal the everyday routines of the homeless: doing activities that generate an income, making the trip back and forth from school, cooking. These routines shape what Ares [2011], following a long research tradition in mobility, refers to as "life spaces," meaning, the ensemble of places a person visits in her everyday life that makes up a specific territory.

41 Social relations play a particular role in the routines a person chooses, and the places, locations, and moves one makes over the course of a lifetime:

We used to come and go from the Recoleta neighborhood, around the mall, in front of the Recoleta [cemetery]. We didn't live there, but we did spend the whole day. We used to sell roses [outside the cemetery], open people's taxi doors [in the hope of receiving a tip], etc. My former partner grew up in Recoleta: he sold roses from the time he was five or six. As I said, we didn't live there but we used to be there two or three hours, until 6, 7 or 8 am when the train leaves. We used to wake up and go to Constitución station to take the train. Back then, the mall was still under construction. We were all from Wilde and we traveled in groups. The mothers used to go with their children and ask for money and all the neighbors went too. We used to sleep there until it was time to catch the train.

Shortly after I had a daughter with him and the three of us left. First, we moved to the corner of Independencia and 9 de Julio. We arrived to the neighborhood of Constitución and we started walking. I got tired at Independencia and we sat down. I thought the government might help us so we called the welfare hotline. We were moved to the Costanera shelter but I couldn't stay there long because I was a minor. Shortly after, he got violent with me and we got evicted, we were moved to a boarding house in Barracas. In the meantime, we spent four days on the streets, at the intersection of Corrientes and Uruguay. He went out asking for coins while I stayed at the Obelisco, where I met some people (C., woman, age 27).

42 In an article on daily life in a poor Mexican family, Lindon [2002] notes how, during the 1950s, research on work and daily life clearly distinguished between family time and work time, presenting work as always need-based. The author then analyzes how there is no social division between family time and work time for family members in the poor Mexican family that is the subject of her study. Domestic spaces and lived spaces are one and the same, as is time, whether it is spent on leisure or work. Along this vein, it is possible to conclude that the increase in informal work and urban poverty-related subsistence activities blurs the traditional separation between the workplace, home, and spots for recreation, producing new spaces that can serve all three purposes.

43 Besides social relations, the social imaginary also figures strongly in the production of spaces. In this sense, the city of Buenos Aires is the place for wealth and economic wellbeing *par excellence*: “The capital is the capital. It’s where the money is. It’s like a gold mine”, said M. (age 29). Though the economic data indeed reveals the city to be wealthier than the Argentine provinces, part of the richness is also built in the social imaginary, which in turn generates social practices [Lindon, 2007].

44 Though they take place on the streets, the activities of homeless families point to social reproduction—eating, sleeping, doing laundry, and socializing. Social researchers refer to this realm as domestic space. McChesney *et al.* [1990] define it as the place where social reproduction and everyday routines take place. In the same vein, Ana Cravino [2022] refers to the domestic space as the place where private, home activities take place, as opposed to the community and/or public practices.

45 From the material point of view, the homes of those living on the streets are built against the outer wall of a cemetery or abandoned building. In terms of their construction, they are usually made of wood, tin sheets, or other materials found on the street. Though not always, gender and age are taken into account in their interiors:

I have three children. The two girls sleep together and the boy alone. Inside, they have a queen size bed, one TV each, and a closet. People give us furniture, and if I ask them for it, they always bring us something (R., woman, age 47).

We have a small bathroom in the back with a bucket, which all five of us use. It is a special room covered on all sides where we can shower with a hose, because you used to be able to see in. Now we have a special room and a bucket. And we use the bucket as a toilet and then toss the bag into the garbage container. We get our water from public taps. For cooking and heat, we use firewood. And regarding electricity, we are tapped into the public grid. As long as we don’t make any trouble, no one says anything. Same goes for the police. The point is, we’re quiet, we don’t start trouble (R., woman, age 47).

46 The domestic space is not always made of solid materials like wood or tin. In other cases, blankets or fabrics are used to set up “doorways.”

In terms of sleeping, we’ve got a small tent in the park with blankets. We get leftovers from the butcher and greengrocer. We cook it up over firewood. The neighbors help, because they know the story. They take the kids to bathe or to feed them. We all sleep together (R., woman, age 23).

47 Besides the indoor spaces, the public space outside the home is treated like a yard. There they leave things that do not fit inside, like the wagon they use for trash picking, a grill, or children’s toys. That same space is also where family members socialize around dinner time.

Conclusions

48 A succession of economic crises in Argentina has left many families living on the streets and in shelters, boarding houses, and squats. Their housing trajectories are oriented by the existing social relations of family members, but also by the options offered by the government, such as shelters or housing subsidies, which do not cover more than a room in a boarding house. The neighborhoods and locations they choose also depend on social relations and government options, while daily routines depend on the needs and obligations of family members. Obtaining an income and the staples a family needs to live are among the priorities, as is schooling for the children.

49 Drawing on Lefebvre, the production of space is the outcome of many factors, which include the lived and perceived spaces laid out by planners, urbanists, and technocrats, the spatial practices determined by daily practices and what the city can provide in terms of streets and infrastructure, and the lived space, that is, the representations and mindsets that take shape around places and imbue them with meaning.

50 In this sense, public space is the result of many parallel social practices—what actors conceive, live, and perceive as they vie to make use of city spaces and infrastructure. At this crossroad are homeless families who use the city’s infrastructure (perceived space) to produce a place where they can spend the night and do all necessary activities. In the social imaginary, Buenos Aires is seen as a wealthy city with available resources, which also plays a significant role in the decision to spend the night there.

51 As pointed out by Ángela Giglia (CITA), “inhabiting” is to place oneself in a place, acknowledging and establishing a specific order. Inhabiting also means “kneading the space,” or “domesticating it,” e.g. using the available infrastructure to create a place of one’s own, arranged according to one’s needs and housing culture. Their presence at this place, however, will always be precarious, given the pressure exerted by other actors.

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Notes

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