

# Well-being and quality of life in Latin American and Caribbean cities: Progress and challenges

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## ABSTRACT:

This article presents a special issue of research papers devoted to the study of well-being and quality of life, considering both progress and challenges, in Latin American and Caribbean cities.

**KEYWORDS:** Well-being; quality of life; Latin America; Caribbean.

**JEL CLASIFICATION:** I31; R11.

## Bienestar y calidad de vida en ciudades de América Latina y el Caribe: progreso y desafíos

## RESUMEN:

Este artículo presenta un número especial de investigaciones relacionadas con el estudio del bienestar y calidad de vida, considerando tanto el progreso como las oportunidades, en ciudades de América Latina y el Caribe.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Bienestar; calidad de vida; América Latina; Caribe.

**CLASIFICACIÓN JEL:** I31; R11.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Most studies to date assume that there are several relationships between ecosystems or environments and human well-being (WB); nevertheless, few studies quantify these relationships in regions such as Latin America or Africa (Cruz-García et al., 2017). Specifically, the urbanization process in Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) cities has resulted in both opportunities and challenges (Arboleda, 2016; Nathaniel et al., 2021). This special issue focuses on the multidimensional nature of well-being and quality of life (QoL), aiming to address various socio-economic (Rainer, 2019), environmental (De Castro et al., 2016), and labor-related issues (Rodríguez- Castelán et al., 2016), which are highly relevant for urban populations in LAC.

Urbanization is a key driver of both economic growth and inequality. For instance, Royuela et al. (2008) highlight the importance of measuring quality of life (QoL) to better understand urban population dynamics. This is particularly relevant for LAC, where rapid urbanization often intensifies socio-spatial

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inequalities and presents challenges in maintaining QoL, such as unequal access to housing and public services. Additionally, the role of regional competitiveness in shaping urban QoL and well-being is relevant. In that line, González (2020) provides a comparative analysis of regional competitiveness in LAC, showing that higher input competitiveness significantly improves population well-being.

The challenges faced by LAC cities must be studied not only from academic perspectives, but also through the lens of policy. In this context, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a framework to address urban well-being and QoL in a more comprehensive and integrated manner. For instance, SDG 11 emphasizes the need for "Sustainable Cities and Communities," focusing on inclusivity, safety, resilience, and sustainability. Achieving this goal in LAC cities is relevant, given the rapid urban growth in the region and its direct impact on housing, environmental sustainability, and service provision.

The evolution of cities in this highly urbanized region (Obaco & Díaz-Sánchez, 2018) will play a pivotal role in shaping the quality of life for its citizens and global environmental outcomes. For instance, given the significance of regional environmental services (e.g., the Amazon's production of oxygen) and migratory flows both within the region (Díaz-Sánchez et al., 2020; Díaz-Sánchez & Correa, 2024) and across other regions (Kaenzig & Piguet, 2014). These issues are intertwined with multiple SDGs, including SDG 13 on climate action, which directly addresses the vulnerability of LAC cities to environmental risks.

Urban policies, therefore, must account for a wide array of factors, including the distribution of public services, environmental quality, and the integration of migrants, while addressing disparities in housing and labor market access. For example, the rapid urbanization in LAC has often exacerbated socio-spatial inequalities, leading to concentrated pockets of poverty and slum formation, as highlighted in SDG 11's target to improve housing and reduce slums.

From migration and acculturative stress to disparities in housing and the effects of climate change on tourism, the papers in this issue explore these pressing concerns through both theoretical and empirical lenses. These studies not only expand our understanding of the diverse dimensions of well-being and QoL in LAC cities but also align with key global policy frameworks, such as the SDGs, offering important insights for future research and policymaking aimed at fostering more equitable and sustainable urban development.

## 2. STUDIES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

### MIGRATION, ACCULTURATIVE STRESS, AND WELL-BEING

Migration has become a defining characteristic of many LAC cities, with millions moving both within and across national borders. One of the key papers in this issue by **Baeza-Rivera et al. (2024)** develops a new instrument for assessing acculturative stress in South American migrants. This tool is critical for understanding how migrants' well-being is affected when their personal resources are overwhelmed by the process of acculturation. By focusing on Chile, the study demonstrates the cultural relevance of this measure for intraregional migrant populations, a group often neglected in the literature.

### MIGRATION, AMENITIES, AND LIFE SATISFACTION

Internal migration also plays a critical role in shaping life satisfaction in LAC cities. **Guevara-Rosero et al. (2024)** investigates how disparities in health, education, and local government capacity between origin and destination cities affect the life satisfaction of migrants in Ecuador. This study finds that income and amenities are not competing but complementary factors in determining life satisfaction, a result that provides valuable insights for policymakers seeking to improve urban living conditions.

## URBAN PRIMACY AND SLUM PREVALENCE

**Obaco et al. (2024)** explores the relationship between urban primacy and slum prevalence in LAC countries, finding a significant correlation between the two. However, the study also shows considerable heterogeneity within countries, suggesting that national-level urban policies may not adequately capture the local variations in slum formation and growth.

## HOUSING AND SPATIAL INEQUALITY

Urbanization has exacerbated spatial inequality, particularly in peripheral areas of cities where access to services is often limited. **Marcial Ramírez et al. (2024)** examines the housing market in Tijuana, Mexico, using a hedonic pricing model. Her findings highlight the increasing costs of urbanization in peripheral zones, showing that even in these areas, housing prices rise significantly, deepening social inequalities. This study offers a critical perspective on how the geography of urban development influences economic disparities.

## PUBLIC GREEN SPACES AND QUALITY OF LIFE

The importance of public green spaces in enhancing quality of life in urban areas cannot be overstated. In her study of an intermediate city in Argentina, **Karis & Zulaica (2024)** explores how these spaces contribute to both the physical and emotional well-being of urban residents. The research underscores the differences between objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life, particularly in the urban-rural gradient, revealing the complex ways in which green spaces are used and valued by different population segments.

## MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY AND REGIONAL DISPARITIES

The Colombian Pacific is one of the most economically disadvantaged regions in the country. **Sánchez-Torres (2024)** uses a multidimensional approach to examine poverty in this region, finding that despite some improvements between 2010 and 2018, poverty reduction has been slower and more inconsistent compared to the rest of the country. His analysis points to severe deficiencies in education and health access, highlighting the need for targeted policies to address these inequalities.

## TOURISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE VULNERABILITY

Another key theme in this special issue is the vulnerability of nature-based tourism to climate change. **Flórez Calderón et al. (2024)** presents an innovative framework to assess how tourism in the Risaralda region of Colombia is affected by environmental changes. His findings reveal that the most vulnerable ecosystems are often those that are most competitive in terms of tourism sustainability. This paradox underscores the urgent need for adaptive management strategies in the tourism sector.

## EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Education is often seen as a pathway out of poverty, but **Orellana & Segovia (2024)** shows that the economic returns to education vary significantly depending on family social capital and territorial factors in Ecuador. Children from families where indigenous languages are spoken face substantial disadvantages, and these disparities are exacerbated by regional inequalities, highlighting the complex interplay between education, social capital, and economic outcomes.

## GENDER, CARE WORK, AND URBAN LABOR MARKETS

The provision of care services plays a crucial role in reducing gender disparities in the labor market. **Herrera Idarraga et al. (2024)** analyzes how the care sector in Colombia influences women's labor force participation and gender segregation. Her findings suggest that while care services increase women's

employment, they also reinforce sectoral segregation. The study emphasizes the importance of regional and urban contexts in determining how care services impact gender equality.

The articles in this special issue offer a comprehensive look at the challenges and opportunities of human well-being in LAC cities. From migration and housing inequality to education and climate change, these papers provide valuable insights for both academics and policymakers. We hope this collection will inspire further research and action aimed at improving the well-being and quality of life in the region.

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