



Investigaciones de Historia Económica - Economic History Research

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Introducción

Living standards from a historical perspective

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Our understanding of the course of history is incomplete if we do not include how people fared over time. The study of living standards is then key to unveil the evolution of human wellbeing. The pursuit to study living standards is not new. A large body of research already exists in this area; however, most historical studies have focused on Europe. In recent years, an increasing interest emerged to study other regions. Evaluating living standards in history is challenging as no single estimate can capture wellbeing. Different type of sources allows us to unveil different aspects of wellbeing. The most popular route is the use of real wages –based on wages and prices. Another fruitful avenue of research studies consumption patterns and habits to estimate consumption baskets. A complementary approach using evidence on heights, weights, and mortality explores biological wellbeing.

In the last decade, *Investigaciones de Historia Económica-Economic History Research (IHE-EHR)* has published a number of studies on living standards. Considering the growing interest on this topic, the Editorial Committee decided to publish a special issue on living standards. This issue includes eight articles about living standards in several regions and in different periods. Two articles refer to Spain and six to Latin America. The articles use a variety of primary and secondary sources to estimate living standards. The resulting issue reflects the plurality of prevailing approaches to study this subject.

The first article of the special issue is “Male Wages, Household Budgets and Living Standards of Barcelona’s Working Class (1856–1917)”, by Cristina Borderías and Xavier Cussó. In this article, the authors provide new evidence on the evolution of living standards in Barcelona in 1856–1917. The main sources for wages and prices are the municipal statistical yearbooks (1902–1917). To estimate the consumption baskets of working-class families, the authors used several standard budgets in Barcelona published between 1856 and 1919. Their analysis reveals that the prevailing consumption basket did not provide enough nutrients for most of this period. Despite an improvement in living standards in the early 20th century, most male laborers did not earn enough to meet the basic needs of their families.

In “The tails of two cities: living conditions in Burgos and Bilbao in the first half of the 20th century”, Stefan Houtp analyzes the standards of living in agrarian-based Burgos and industrial Bilbao, two important cities of Spain. By using information from monthly statistics in both cities, the author finds that welfare ratios followed very different trends in both cities, despite that both cities were well-connected by a railway. Other welfare indicators, such as the distribution of wealth, pawning, and mortality, also indicate divergence in living conditions, highlighting a duality in transition to a more modern economy.

In the third article, “The Evolution of Income and Inequality among Mexico City’s Construction Workers during the ‘Independence Era’: 1783–1853”, Israel García Solares, Aurora Gómez-Galvarriato and Amílcar Challú study inequality within the construction sector in Mexico City between the 1780s and the 1850s. The authors examine information on wages for different skill levels and estimate a Theil inequality index. According to their estimations, inequality in Mexico was not high for Western standards. In addition, inequality declined from the late colonial period to the early post-independence era, but increased since the late 1830s.

The fourth article by Luz Marina Arias and Alexander Dentler, “Price Sensitivity as a Measure of Living Standards in Late Colonial Mexico”, analyzes the relative consumption response of Mexican families to changes in relative prices between maize and wheat in late colonial times. To do so, the authors exploit agricultural productivity and prices. The elasticity of substitution between maize and wheat provides a demand-based approximation to living standards. According to their elasticity-based estimates, the proportion of household income allocated to crops increased from around 25% in 1740–70 to more than 35% in 1810, which suggests a decrease in living standards toward the end of the colonial era.

A fifth article, “Prices and Living Standards during the Age of Revolutions: The Rio de la Plata between 1772 and 1830”, by Julio Djenderedjian, María Inés Moraes and Juan Luis Martirén, studies the evolution of food prices and real wages in two South American cities (Buenos Aires and Montevideo). The article is based on an array of primary and secondary sources

about food prices and wages of low-skilled masons. The evidence shows that the two cities experienced a similar evolution of food prices and living standards between 1772 and 1830. In particular, the welfare ratios showed an upward trend in the late 18th century to decline in the 1810s and 1820s.

The sixth article of this issue is “The popular consumption basket in Buenos Aires at the end of the 19th century”, by Daniel Santilli. In this article, the author analyzes several sources of information about income and consumption habits. Among the sources, the author relies on reports of national and provincial authorities, the report of a diplomat and a doctoral thesis. The results show that living standards in Buenos Aires deteriorated in the late 19th century, in spite of the economic bonanza in Argentina during this period. In the middle of the century, a family could meet its basic needs with the salary of the main breadwinner. By 1900, however, a supplementary source of income was necessary to afford basic needs.

The seventh article also focuses on Argentina. In “Women’s wages and subsistence family income in Mendoza (Argentina) at the beginning of the 20th century”, Patricia Olgún and Beatriz Bragoni estimate the wages of women and their con-

tribution to the family income in Mendoza between the late 19th century and 1914. The authors collected information on wages of laundresses, seamstresses, cooks and ironers and population counts from a variety of sources, such as censuses, hospitals’ accounts, among others. In families in which an adult man was a skilled worker, his wage was high enough to afford a subsistence basket. However, if the adult man was an unskilled worker, his salary was not enough and women’s paid work was key to meet the basic needs of the household.

The final article of the special issue refers to Colombia. In “Gender height dimorphism: An approximation of the living standards in Colombia, 1920-1990”, Adolfo Meisel-Roca, María Teresa Ramírez-Giraldo and Daniel Lasso-Jaramillo analyze gender height dimorphism in Colombia in the 20th century. The authors employ data on stature and socio-economic variables from judicial certificates to find that the absolute value of height dimorphism increased in the 20th century across quantiles of height. However, the impact of economic growth on living standards was unequally distributed. Taller men were more affected by a decline in economic growth, whereas taller women were benefited more from economic growth.