

Male Wages, Household Budgets and Living Standards of Barcelona's Working Class (1856-1917)

Salarios masculinos, presupuestos familiares y niveles de vida de las clases obreras de Barcelona (1856-1917)

Cristina Borderías (cborderiasm@ub.edu)* 

University of Barcelona

Xavier Cussó Segura (Xavier.Cusso@uab.cat) 

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

ANALYTICAL SUMMARY

Household budget surveys, such as those collected by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (INE) since 1958, are considered as one of the best methods for analysing living standards. Unlike real wage series, this approach focuses on the household as the unit of consumption, thus allowing for a closer look at the intra-household distribution of resources, such as time use and subsistence strategies (Deaton, 1997; Grosh and Glewye, 2000). In recent decades, the debate on the effects of industrialisation on the living standards of the working classes has been renewed through the household budget methodology (Horrell and Humphries, 1995; Vecchi, 1994; Boter, 2020). This article contributes to this debate with the study of living standards in a southern European city, Barcelona, that at the mid-19th century was the only industrialised city in Spain. It does so by analysing household budgets, with the aim of shedding light on the capacity of male labour wages to cover family subsistence.

Based on Ildefons Cerdà's *Monografía estadística de la clase obrera de Barcelona en 1856* (1867); the workers' budgets produced by the Barcelona Municipal Statistical Office and further evidence from workers' and employers' associations, among others (1860-1919), this article reconstructs four standard budgets taking into account the consumption of food, housing, gas and lighting and other expenses, as well as children education, health care and "social expenses" of male workers in 1856, 1905, 1912 and 1917. Historical analyses of family budgets tend to use the diet considered by the *coetaneos*, the "usual" diet, without previously analysing their nutritional capacity, or the different needs that men, women, and children had, thereby underestimating the working-class living expenses.

In this article we analyse the purchasing power of male wages according to the "usual" as well as the "optimal" diets, understood as those that include the nutrients necessary for the correct functioning of our organism, satisfactory physical and intellectual development, and a level of physical activity appropriate to the work and life of all the members of the household. On this basis, an assessment is made of the relationship between family expenses and income from the wages of male workers in all the male trades recorded in the aforementioned sources. It would be naïve to consider wages as the only means of subsistence, even in a city like Barcelona. But our analysis allows us to quantify which wages —by trades, categories, and sectors— could cover the family's subsistence and how representative they were of the working classes. Similarly, the analysis sheds light on those whose families needed other resources to cover budget deficits. In Barcelona, these resources often came from women's and children's work, whose "official" activity rates, even if under-registered, were higher than in any other Spanish cities; they also came from credit, pawning, and even self-consumption, although this was not so widespread in urban contexts. Even so, mortality rates, even in the first two decades of the 20th century, and anthropometric indicators confirm the precariousness of working-class living-standards.

This article offers novel evidence on male wages and family budgets and shows how at the end of the period under consideration, the salary of the male workforce had not yet reached the level of the so-called family wage, as denounced by the municipal statistical office, social reformers and the workers' associations.