

STATE OF THE CHILD PROTECTION WORKFORCE IN ANDEAN COUNTRIES: BOLIVIA, COLOMBIA, ECUADOR AND PERU RESULTS OF A RAPID REGIONAL ANALYSIS



**Review of the State of the Child Protection Workforce in Andean Countries:
Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.**

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data collection
tools used for this
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GSSWA	Global Social Service Workforce Alliance
HR	Human resources
HRIS	Human resources information system
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
IFSW	International Federation of Social Work
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LACRO	Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PAHO	Pan-American Health Organisation
SSW	Social service workforce
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

BOLIVIA	
DNA	<i>Defensoría de la Niñez y Adolescencia</i> Child and Adolescent Defenders
FECV	<i>Fuerza Especial de Lucha Contra la Violencia</i> Special Force to Combat Violence
SEDEGES	<i>Servicio Departamental de Gestión Social</i> Departmental Service of Social Management (Social Services)
SEDEPOS	<i>Servicio Departamental de Políticas Sociales</i> Departmental Social Policy Service
SIPPROINA	<i>Sistema Plurinacional de Protección Integral de la Niña, Niño y Adolescente</i> Plurinational System for the Integral Protection of Girls, Boys, and Adolescents
COLOMBIA	
ICBF	<i>Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar</i> Colombian Institute for Family Welfare
ECUADOR	
DECE	<i>Departamentos de Consejería Estudiantil</i> Student Counselling Departments
DINAPEN	<i>La Dirección Nacional de Policía Especializada para Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes</i> National Directorate of Specialised Police for Children and Adolescents
PERU	
CTSP	<i>Colegio de Trabajadores Sociales del Perú</i> College of Social Workers of Peru
MIMP	<i>Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables</i> Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations
UPE	<i>Unidades de Protección Especial</i> Special Protection Units



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and purpose

This rapid regional analysis provides a strategic overview of the child protection workforce in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. It was carried out in response to the absence of clear evidence for workforce planning and development. Although there is increasing political and institutional interest in advancing reforms to strengthen the child protection system, and the workforce responsible for supporting children and families, gaps in clear and comparable data persist across the four countries. This review offers an initial baseline to guide future planning and decision-making.

The analysis examines each country's current workforce composition and capacity, the institutional systems and practices in place to plan for, train, and support these staff, and opportunities for targeted investment and innovative practice. It highlights recent progress in legislation, policy development, and skills building while also identifying critical gaps that may undermine the effective delivery of child protection services.

Child protection systems in the Andean region are at different stages of maturity, but all share a common challenge: a heavy reliance on frontline workers operating with limited resources, high caseloads and insufficient institutional backing. Although countries have enacted important laws recognizing children's rights, these frameworks frequently lack clear definitions of workforce roles, minimum standards, staffing requirements and mechanisms for professional accountability. As a result, governments continue to struggle with translating legal commitments into practice, and with planning for, recruiting and retaining the personnel needed to do so. Strengthening the

workforce is therefore essential to improving prevention and response efforts, closing persistent service gaps and ensuring better outcomes for children and families.

Methodology and limitations

The review was conducted using a combination of targeted document review and structured questionnaires completed by UNICEF country offices, followed by qualitative research involving 14 key informant interviews and seven focus group discussions with government and non-government workers. In addition, an attempt was made to capture the lived experience of children and young people of the child protection workforce through secondary analysis of participatory consultations with children and youth, and through an online U-Report survey targeting young people in Bolivia. Data collection occurred between September and November 2025 and greatly benefited from intensive support and input from UNICEF country offices and their consultants. These efforts were constrained to some extent by staff turnover. One of the countries faced specific political and social challenges, including changes in the structure of its governmental institutions.

Findings

Across the four countries, the review found that normative frameworks, while recently improved through certain new laws and policies focusing on the child protection system itself, remain fragmented, and do not yet constitute a coherent foundation for workforce development.

Bolivia and Ecuador lack comprehensive legislation governing the social service workforce, leaving key functions, qualifications and supervision systems undefined. Colombia has strong technical norms under its Family Welfare Institute, *Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* (ICBF), yet the overall workforce is spread across multiple institutions with no unifying statutory framework.

Peru has the clearest professional regulation for social workers, including mandatory registration, but the focus on requiring private sector companies to hire social workers has resulted in an unbalanced workforce, with social workers in companies occupying de facto human resources (HR) officer roles, and a lack of professional social workers for critical child protection roles in the public and NGO sectors and at the community level. Furthermore, it lacks a national strategic workforce plan to translate these standards into practice. As has been shown to be the case in many countries, the absence of integrated human resources information systems (HRIS) makes it difficult for the relevant authorities to map and assess staffing levels, skills, training needs or deployment patterns across the public, NGO and private sectors, limiting governments' ability to make evidence-based decisions and investments.¹

These gaps and weaknesses in normative frameworks in turn impact on workforce capacity and distribution. This review found significant staffing shortages across all four countries. Peru has an extremely low ratio of public-sector child protection workers to child population, indicating heavy caseloads and limited service coverage. Colombia has stronger numbers of workforce under ICBF but still faces high caseloads owing to the limited coverage. It also lacks data for other essential institutions, suggesting unknown gaps in coverage. Bolivia reports comparatively higher ratios, of workforce to population, but faces uneven distribution of the workforce across areas

and services, and significant disparities between urban and rural municipalities. Ecuador shows promising workforce growth and development, especially within the education sector, where substantial investments have expanded psychosocial support services in schools through its Student Counselling Service (DECE)² workforce. Despite these successes, all four countries require expanded staffing, clearer organizational structures and long-term recruitment strategies aligned with population needs.

Meanwhile, the non-governmental workforce plays a critical role in filling gaps left by the public sector, but the reliance on NGOs and informal actors at community level introduces additional complexity. In many contexts, these organizations provide the bulk of community-based services, residential care and specialized interventions, often operating through short-term projects shaped by donor cycles rather than national plans. While many NGOs employ highly trained professionals and maintain strong technical standards, others rely on paraprofessionals with inconsistent qualifications, contributing to variability in service quality. Coordination between state and non-state actors is often informal or ad hoc, rather than systematized, increasing the risk of duplication or fragmentation. A clear opportunity exists to strengthen governance mechanisms so NGOs and informal community-based forms of support can contribute effectively within a coordinated national framework.

Education and training systems across the region reveal another major constraint. With 480 university degree programmes identified across the four countries, the region offers a substantial academic foundation; however, only a small share of these programmes is dedicated specifically to social work – 42 bachelor's and 16 master's courses across all four countries. Practical field education is uneven, which means that many graduates enter the

1 Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *State of the Social Service Workforce Report 2018: Trends and Recommendations for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce*, 2018, Washington, D.C., <https://socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/state-of-the-social-service-workforce-report-2018-trends-and-recommendations-for-strengthening-the-social-service-workforce/> accessed 17 December 2025.

2 Departamentos de Consejería Estudiantil (DECE)

workforce without adequate preparation, through supervised and assessed practice, for the realities of frontline child protection. Post-graduate development is similarly limited. Workers repeatedly reported that they must fund their own training or rely on sporadic learning and development opportunities from external partners. This lack of structured, continuous professional development, combined with variable supportive supervision and high emotional demands, has contributed to burnout, turnover and declining morale. The need for standardized in-service training, professional supervision and support for workers' mental health and well-being emerged as a consistent theme across all interviews and focus groups.

Despite these systemic challenges, there are promising developments that can support transformational change. Bolivia's decentralized system, while uneven, provides a foundation for local ownership and innovation, particularly where municipalities have prioritized child protection. Colombia's ICBF provides an example of how centralized oversight and coordination of child protection efforts, including the issuance of detailed technical guidelines can professionalize service delivery and create clear expectations for interdisciplinary practice. Ecuador's reform of the workforce in its Student Counselling Departments demonstrates what is possible when a government articulates a clear vision, aligns regulatory norms, strengthens career pathways and invests meaningfully in recruitment and training. However, despite the positive effects of this reform, this workforce still faces an overwhelming caseload, with a current ratio of only one counsellor to 350 students. Peru's legal framework for social work shows how mandatory registration and ethical codes alone cannot strengthen professional identity but represent an essential stepping stone to professionalization and quality improvement.

Conclusion

Across the region, there is strong political recognition of the need to improve coverage and quality of child protection services, for which workforce planning, development and support is essential. Governments, donors and civil society actors increasingly acknowledge that investment in human resources is fundamental to reducing violence, preventing unnecessary family separation and achieving measurable child protection outcomes.

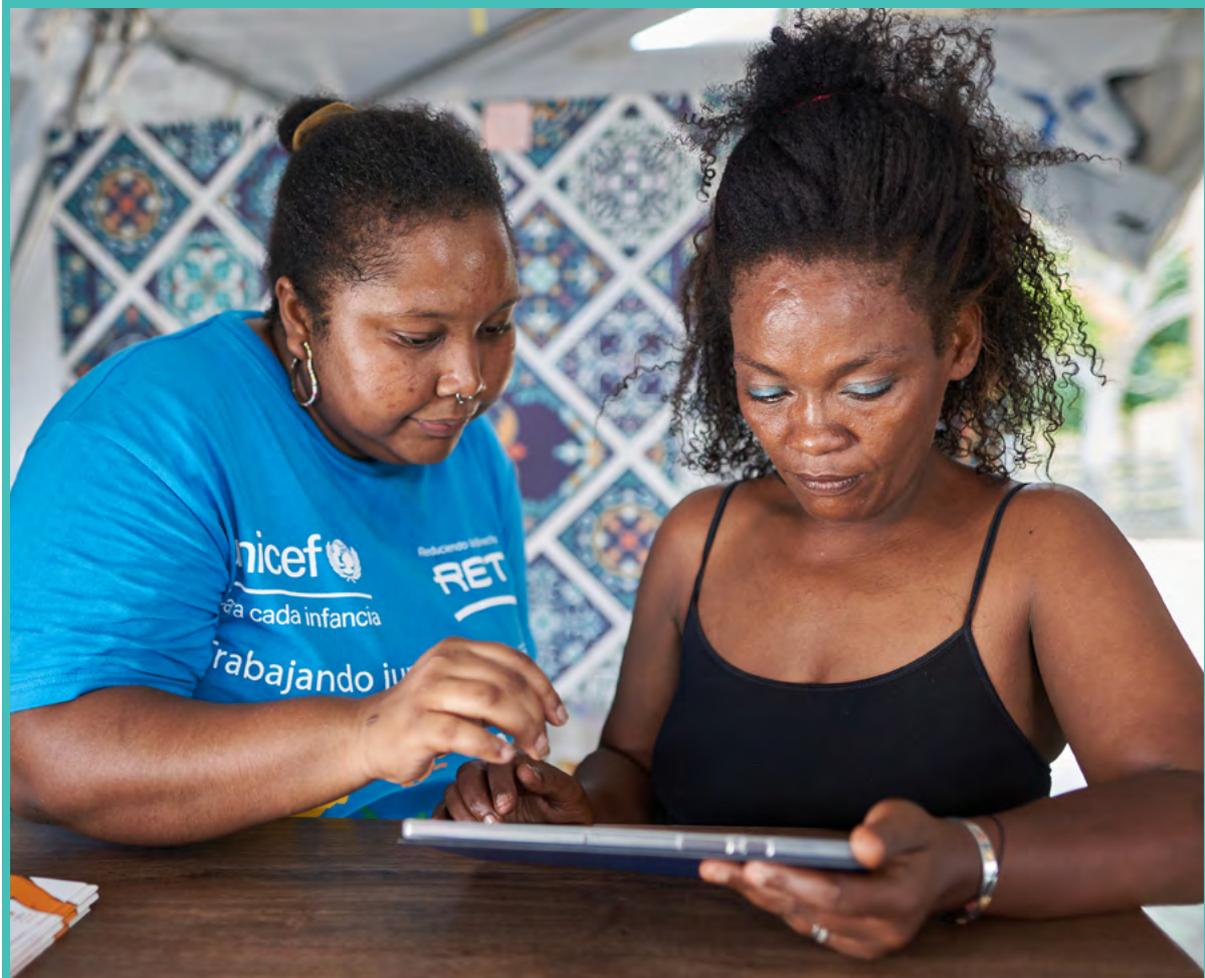
With targeted investment, coordinated leadership and sustained political will, all four countries now have the opportunity to build a resilient, professional and adequately resourced workforce capable of fulfilling their child protection mandates. Priority actions include developing comprehensive national workforce strategies; formalizing regulatory frameworks for accreditation and licensing; establishing Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS); improving practice-based education, pre-service and in-service training; and creating institutional mechanisms for supervision and worker mental health and well-being. Strengthening intersectoral coordination and creating structured partnerships with NGOs and community groups will also be essential to ensure that children receive consistent, holistic support.

Finally, to be truly effective, and to boost recruitment and retention, the child protection workforce, in particular social workers, need to be consistently and robustly supported and recognised, by both governments and the general public. This recognition and support can only be achieved if UN agencies and other international partners join with governments, NGOs and professional associations to plan and implement joint advocacy campaigns, to raise awareness of the key role, and urgent needs, of this vital workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Research consistently shows that an effective child protection system is essential to safeguard children from violence, abuse and exploitation. Beyond preventing and responding to harm, this system also upholds a child's rights to access health, education, justice and family-based care. A key component of this system is a child protection workforce that is empowered, skilled, and resourced to fulfil its mandate across government, private and non-governmental sectors. This workforce encompasses a broad range of professionals and paraprofessionals, primarily members of the social service workforce, including child and youth care workers, social workers, counsellors and community workers, as well as allied professionals such as lawyers, teachers, health workers and law enforcement personnel.

In Latin America, the child protection system remains in the early stages of maturity, with the child protection workforce at varying levels of development across the region. At present, some countries lack a comprehensive legal framework and supervisory mechanisms for the workforce, while others have established such frameworks and initiated systematic training but still lack formal licensing, accreditation and regulatory mechanisms. Strengthening this workforce requires an understanding of its complexity, including professional mandates, skills and competencies, and of how the workforce is distributed across national and subnational levels. It also involves identifying workforce trends, assessing client and community perspectives on service quality and addressing disparities in capacity and access to support.



CONTEXTUALIZED DEFINITION OF THE CHILD PROTECTION WORKFORCE IN LATIN AMERICA

The human resources dedicated to child protection are comprised of persons who have the necessary competencies for the actions they undertake for the prevention and response to violence, abuse and exploitation of children; in cases of separation of children from families; to protect migrant children and families; and, with adolescents in conflict with the law. Human resources for child protection in the Latin America and the Caribbean region operate as per the regulations and under the supervision of the Government, and in line with international standards regarding child protection. These persons may be affiliated with a government or non-governmental organization (NGO) and may or may not hold a professional title.³

This review, commissioned by UNICEF's LAC Regional Office (LACRO), presents a baseline on the state of the child protection workforce in the Andean subregion of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, with a specific focus on four countries: Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The findings are expected to inform UNICEF and its national and regional partners' advocacy, policy development, programme design and research efforts related to strengthening the workforce to better protect children.

Workforce strengthening is a key element of UNICEF's Child Protection Strategy (2021–2030), as part of the overall development and strengthening of national systems to enable effective child protection services. While UNICEF, therefore, has been supporting a wide range of workforce-related initiatives across Latin America, a significant challenge that remains is the lack of a clear workforce capacity baseline from which to measure progress, identify capacity gaps and plan for workforce development effectively. Training efforts, policy reforms and funding initiatives are underway, but gaps persist in evidence-based planning, workforce data collection and monitoring, all of which are critical components for tracking effectiveness and informing continuous improvement.

In response to these challenges, the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA), which UNICEF has supported since it was launched in 2013, has developed a suite of qualitative and quantitative indicators and data-collection tools to systematically measure and monitor the social service workforce, and where required, more specifically the child protection workforce.⁴

In UNICEF's 2026-2029 Strategic Plan, the social service workforce is identified as an enabler and UNICEF makes a commitment to cultivating a "dynamic, inclusive workforce that is agile, forward looking, skilled and technically equipped to drive sustainable results for children worldwide".⁵ UNICEF's Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection (2019) are intended to support UNICEF regional and country offices in planning, developing and supporting the social service workforce in collaboration with national and regional partners, offering evidence-based strategies and lessons learned to guide action.⁶ The key actions and indicators under the three pillars of planning, developing and supporting are shown in figure 1, below. Indicators designed to measure progress on these actions are further presented, below, in Table 1.

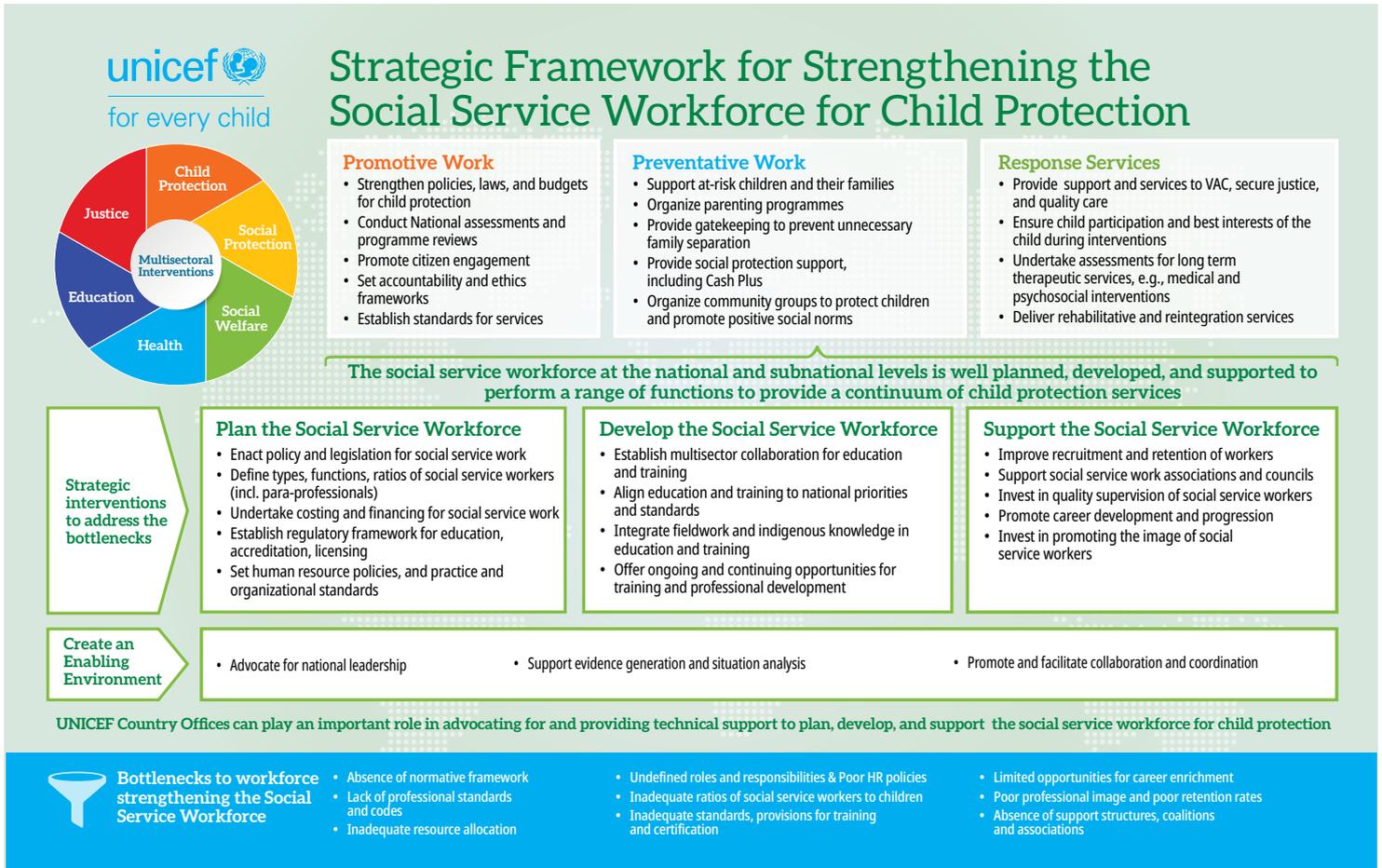
3 UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (LACRO) and Maestral, *Marco Para El Fortalecimiento Del Recurso Humano Dedicado a La Proteccion de La Niñez y Adolescencia En America Latina y El Caribe*, 2020.

4 Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2019): *Social Service Workforce Mapping Toolkit* <<https://socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/social-service-workforce-mapping-toolkit/>>

5 United Nations Children's Fund, *UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2026–2029*, New York, 2025, <www.unicef.org/executiveboard/media/32606/file/2025-29-Strategic-Plan-2026-2029-EN-ODS-2025-10-24.pdf>

6 United Nations Children's Fund, *Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection*, UNICEF, New York, 2019, <www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Guidelines-to-strengthen-social-service-for-child-protection-2019.pdf>

Figure 1. Strategic Framework for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection⁷



⁷ Diagram adapted from UNICEF and Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (2019) *Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection*, New York, 2019. <<https://socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/guidelines-to-strengthen-the-social-service-workforce-for-child-protection/>>

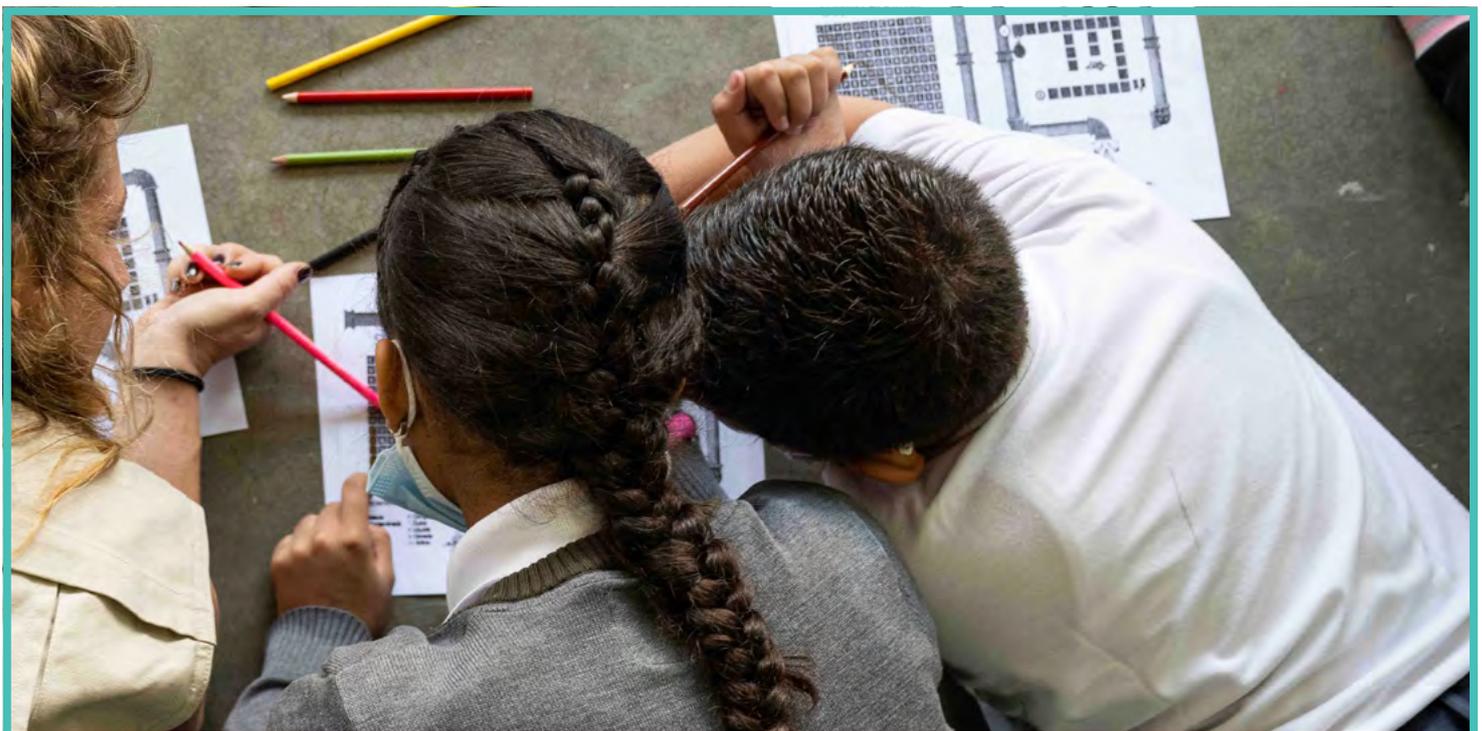


Table 1. UNICEF and GSSWA indicators for strengthening the social service workforce⁸

INDICATORS IN THE RESULTS MATRIX FOR STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE	
Planning the workforce	INDICATOR 1: A National Leadership Group for workforce strengthening is established and holds regular meetings
	INDICATOR 2: A national workforce assessment and analysis conducted within the past four years
	INDICATOR 3: Existence of a national strategic plan to strengthen the social services workforce
	INDICATOR 4: Availability of a normative/regulatory framework for the social services workforce at the national and/or subnational level
	INDICATOR 5: A system of licensing/registration for social service professionals
	INDICATOR 6: Availability of a nation-wide data collection system on social service workforce human resources
	INDICATOR 7: Number of government social service workers with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 children
	INDICATOR 8: Number of NGO social service workers with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 children
Developing the workforce	INDICATOR 9: Total number of degree programmes available to the social services workforce
	INDICATOR 10: Total number pre-service and in-service short courses available to the social service workforce
	INDICATOR 11: Percentage of degree programmes that provide at least three months of field placement
	INDICATOR 12: Percentage of social service workers who report receiving adequate training to meet their job responsibilities, by highest level of education received
Supporting the workforce	INDICATOR 13: Existence of professional associations relevant to the social service workforce recognized by the national government as legitimate and legally approved
	INDICATOR 14: Existence of publicly disseminated professional codes of ethics
	INDICATOR 15: Existence of a system providing supervision and support
	INDICATOR 16: Percentage social service workers who feel they are receiving adequate supervision

Building on these tools and experiences, establishing a baseline for the child protection workforce in the LAC region is an essential next step. A comprehensive baseline would provide insights into workforce capacity, knowledge, attitudes, practices and accountability to children. This understanding can inform the

identification and scaling of innovative practices, leveraging lessons from prior collaborations between the GSSWA and UNICEF. Such efforts are vital for enhancing country programming and ensuring that child protection systems are both effective and responsive to the needs of children and families in the region.

⁸ As derived from Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *Results Matrix for Social Service Workforce Strengthening*, Washington, DC, 2020. < <https://socialserviceworkforce.org/resources/results-matrix-for-social-service-workforce-strengthening/> >

METHODOLOGY

This review was designed around three key questions:

- What is the current state of the child protection workforce in each country, in terms of regulatory frameworks, workforce composition, qualifications, training opportunities and professional associations, and what are the main challenges the workforce face at national, subnational, and community levels?
 - How do members of the child protection workforce—as well as children, youth and families, particularly those with lived experience of violence or residential care—perceive the accessibility, quality, and effectiveness of social services and the workforce providing them?
 - What programmatic actions have UNICEF and its partners, including national governments, implemented to strengthen the child protection workforce in the four countries, and what trends and differences are found across national and regional levels?
- To respond to these questions, the GSSWA research team and UNICEF country offices engaged in a series of activities, including:
- **Document review** of global and country-specific documentation shared by UNICEF LACRO, country offices and their partners, with the GSSWA undertaking an additional targeted online literature review of English and Spanish language primary sources with the support of generative AI tools.
 - **Quantitative and qualitative data collection** with key actors and frontline workers through a structured questionnaire, key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) and analysis. All data were collected by UNICEF country office staff using *KoboCollect*, with support from the GSSWA in all countries and short-term consultants in Bolivia and Ecuador. Audio recordings were transcribed by the GSSWA using *KoboToolBox* and *GoTranscript*, with spot checks conducted for quality and analysed using a combination of tools—including Excel, *KoboToolBox* and generative AI—for initial thematic analysis. The findings were then analysed and expanded on by the GSSWA and validated by UNICEF LACRO and county office staff.
 - **Secondary analysis of data** from recent participatory studies and consultations led by UNICEF and partners (e.g., Doncel, *Red Latinoamericana de Egresados de Protección*, Better Care Network, Changing the Way We Care)⁹ to better understand the perspectives of children, youth and families, their interactions with the child protection workforce and their use of available services. This analysis also included insights from UNICEF Colombia's report on children reintegrated from armed groups¹⁰ and a U-Report poll of Bolivian youth (n=575) on their experiences with social services.

9 DONCEL, *Regional Mapping of Activists with Lived Experience of Alternative Care in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Buenos Aires, 2022, < https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/editob_ing_26octubre_2022mapeo.pdf >, accessed 31 October 2025.

10 United Nations Children's Fund, *Estudio de caracterización: niñez desvinculada*, UNICEF Colombia, Bogotá, n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/colombia/documents/estudio-de-caracterizacion-ninez-desvinculada>

Table 2. Number of KIIs and FGDs by type and country

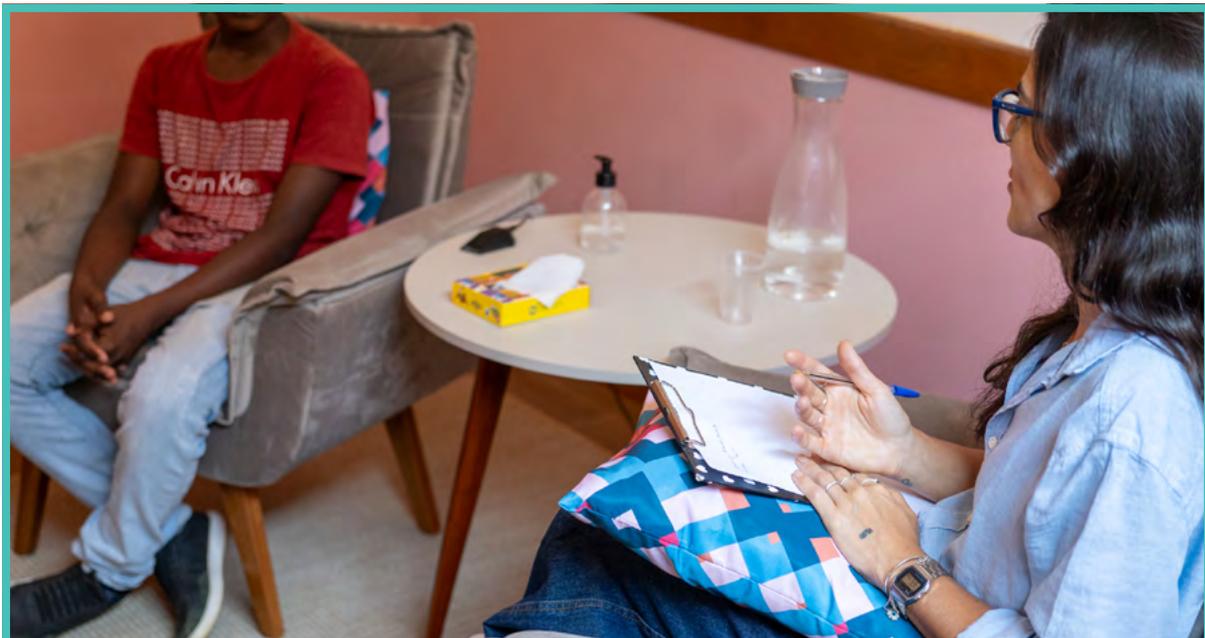
TYPE	BOLIVIA	COLOMBIA	ECUADOR	PERU	TOTAL
KIIs with government, NGOs, educational institutions and professional associations ¹¹	4	3	4	3	14
FGDs with government child protection workforce	3	1	0	1	5
FGDs with non-government child protection workforce	0	0	1	1	2

Limitations

This review provides a valuable snapshot of the current state of the child protection workforce in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru; however, several limitations should be noted. Data collection was conducted over a short period (from September to October 2025) and relied primarily on documentation, the results of key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) and self-reported information facilitated by UNICEF country offices and their partners. Fieldwork was also affected by external factors, including limited government staff availability during election periods in Bolivia, high staff turnover within public institutions in Peru, and protests, strikes and states of emergency in Ecuador and Peru, which at times delayed or restricted participation in KIIs and FGDs.

These findings reflect the information available at the time of review and do not capture the full range of child protection system and workforce actors, particularly those engaged at the lowest administrative levels, by NGOs, academic institutions or professional associations, with whom interactions were more limited than among government representatives. Cross-country comparability is constrained by differences in national definitions of the child protection workforce and in access to up-to-date, disaggregated workforce data. Despite these limitations, the analysis offers an important baseline to inform future, more comprehensive workforce assessments and to strengthen evidence-based planning for child protection across the Andean region.

¹¹ KIIs with educational institution and professional association representatives were only conducted in Bolivia.



OVERVIEW OF THE WORKFORCE IN THE ANDEAN REGION

Each of the four countries selected for this review differs in how it is working to develop and sustain robust child protection systems and services and was assessed in relation to specific national goals and objectives, as well as global indicators included in GSSWA's mapping toolkit (see Table 1). The country data presented here provide an overview of ongoing efforts to strengthen

the child protection workforce, highlighting key country-specific contextual factors and emerging regional patterns that may support or inhibit progress. Individual countries are at varying stages in workforce development, and there is no single approach that guarantees success. A more detailed presentation and analysis of these indicators will be provided later in the report.



Maps are stylized and not to scale. They do not reflect a position by UNICEF or the GSSWA on the legal status of any country or area or the delineation of any borders.

Country data at a glance

 Bolivia	
Contextual Background	<p>Bolivia's 'Plurinational System for the Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents' has been led until recently by the Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency, under the 2014 Children and Adolescents Code, which defines the roles of state institutions and guarantees children's rights across sectors. It states that the child protection workforce must be trained and professionalized and stipulates the requirement for multidisciplinary teams including social workers, psychologists, pedagogues, lawyers and doctors. The National Council for Children and Adolescents coordinates national policies.</p> <p>Bolivia is divided into nine regions (departamentos), where the key bodies are the social services department and specialised services including shelters, centres of therapeutic prevention and care, and services for children in conflict with the law, and children living on the streets. Departmental governments also manage alternative care services, including temporary care shelters, foster care and residential care. At municipal level, frontline child protection services are provided and coordinated through the Child and Adolescent Defence Offices.</p> <p>The workforce in many local services, especially in rural areas, struggle with high caseloads, limited budgets, and insufficient staff. Other challenges noted in recent reports include lack of integration and coordination between the different actors in the system. For children in alternative care, and for care leavers, most of the resources and capacity for casework and individual support are held by NGOs and residential care facilities, with minimal capacity for social work case management or other individual follow-up of these cases.</p>
Education Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 bachelor's degree or license in social work courses (4-5 years), 19 other relevant university degrees • 11 short- or certificate courses
Workforce Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One ministry has lead responsibility for child protection, while the workforce is largely employed at subnational level, at regional and municipal level • Number of governmental child protection workforce: 1,968 • Ratio of child protection workers: 53.46 per 100,000 child population
Professional Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active national associations of social worker (1,566 members), and psychologists (1,000 members), with codes of ethics, though many professionals are not members, and these associations do not have a legal mandate for licensing or registration.
Key Milestones and Innovative Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New legislation in 2025 on digital protection and the prohibition of child marriage, new policy on early childhood development and a policy on the right to live in a family environment. • Increasing integration of services, creating multiple councils at departmental level (for children, youth, combating racism, and human trafficking) with legal mandates, and stronger inter-institutional coordination to combat trafficking, racism, and youth issues. • Innovative new services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including a UNICEF-supported regional network of psychologists stepping in to provide online / telephone mental health and psychosocial counselling for children and families. • Continuing education programmes with judicial institutions now cover digital violence prevention, case management, and stress management, to improve the quality of care and sensitivity in response to complex needs and protect staff well-being.

 Colombia	
Contextual Background	<p>Child protection in Colombia is grounded in the Code of Childhood and Adolescence³ (2006) and the technical guidelines of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF). The child protection workforce includes social workers, psychologists, legal professionals, police units specialized in childhood and adolescence, and administrative officers in entities such as the ICBF, and the Offices for the Family Defenders and Family Commissioner. These professionals are critical in identifying, preventing and responding, in collaboration with child protection authorities, to cases of abuse and exploitation, including violence and recruitment by illegal armed groups. This workforce also advises and provides technical support to child protection administrative authorities on case management procedures. However, resource limitations, high caseloads, and regional inequalities—particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas—undermine the workforce’s capacity to provide comprehensive and timely protection services. Furthermore, gaps in training, psychosocial support for workers themselves, and inter-institutional coordination persist.</p> <p>The nongovernmental child protection workforce in Colombia is composed of social workers, psychologists, legal advisors, community educators, and human rights defenders. Affiliated with NGOs that are licensed and operate as implementers within the specialized child protection system, these professionals play a vital role in complementing state efforts by providing specialized services such as psychosocial support, legal assistance, advocacy, prevention programmes, and emergency responses, especially in areas affected by conflict and poverty. Their work is crucial for reaching vulnerable populations, promoting child rights, and filling service gaps in regions where government capacity is limited.</p>
Education Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 bachelor’s courses in social work, 21 in other relevant disciplines, 3 PhD courses in other relevant disciplines • 5 short or certificate courses
Workforce Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of governmental child protection workforce: 1,215 • Ratio of child protection workers: 7.86 per 100,000 child population
Professional Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Council of Social Work (32,051 members), National Council of Schools of Social Work, and College of Psychologists (38,000 members) • The National Councils of Social Work and of Psychologists both have codes of ethics and have a legally mandated role in licensing or registration
Key Milestones and Innovative Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The commitment of the current government has resulted in a tripling of interdisciplinary staff through a national-level plan to strengthen human resources under ICBF. • New Family Defender Offices created in four conflict-affected regions. • Multi-sectoral approaches becoming more established, with colleagues specializing in law, psychology, social work and nutrition uniting to provide child protection services, and integration for better response to humanitarian emergencies, and to the needs of refugees and migrants, with joint training of personnel in humanitarian and migration response efforts, especially in areas sensitive to conflict. • Regular in-service training has been introduced with a focus on developing differential approaches that consider ethnicity, gender, and neurodivergence, as well as support for caregivers.



Ecuador

Contextual Background	<p>Ecuador's child protection system is structured through a decentralized model that integrates national policy leadership with local-level implementation, underpinned by the Child and Adolescent Code (2003). The Ministry of Human Development serves as the lead institution responsible for coordinating the National System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents. It works in coordination with other key entities - the Ministries of Education and Health, and National Council for Equality in Intergenerational - to uphold children's rights and ensure the provision of protection and care services. At the subnational level, municipal governments are mandated to implement child protection policies and operate local protection systems, which include coordination boards, local observatories, and direct service units. One of the most critical frontline actors are the Cantonal Boards for the Protection of Rights, which are composed of legal, social work, and psychology professionals. They are empowered to issue protection measures for children at risk. Additionally, local social development offices often deliver services such as counselling, family support, and referrals to alternative care. NGOs and faith-based organizations also play a significant role in service provision, training and advocacy.</p> <p>The government and its partners have developed training and accreditation pathways for social workers, psychologists, and community-based actors responsible for case management, family reunification, and violence prevention, though it should be noted that this process has not yet officially been put into practice. Collaborations with universities and organizations like UNICEF and World Vision have supported national efforts to professionalize and expand the workforce, including the development of technical tools, intersectoral protocols, and child-sensitive approaches to case assessment and service planning. However, the workforce still faces structural challenges including insufficient training, high turnover, and uneven coverage in rural and peri-urban areas.</p>
Education Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 bachelor's courses in social work, 67 in other relevant disciplines • 11 master's courses in social work, and 32 in other disciplines, no data on PhD courses • Short course: 5 diplomas
Workforce Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of governmental child protection workforce: 859 • Ratio of child protection workers: 16.37 per 100,000 child population.
Professional Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interprovincial Association of Social Work Professionals (80 members), Pichincha College of Social Workers, National Association of Academic Units (14 institutional members) • Ecuadorian Association of Psychologists (760 members), Pichincha College of Lawyers (19,315) • It is not known if these associations have legal mandates for licensing or codes of ethics.
Key Milestones and Innovative Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National tools for child protection decision-making have been developed, including specialized training modules for judges with intercultural and intergenerational approaches • The Ministry of Education have hired 1,176 professionals to Student Counselling Departments (DECE) in 2024–2025, under the 2024–2030 National Policy to Eradicate Sexual Violence in Education, with new pay scales and career structure for counsellors. They report this has increased coverage by 11.73%, however others note that there remains a gap between current and required workforce, so the DECEs are still over-stretched. • Online learning on psychosocial care, digital safety, inclusive education and restorative practices has been rolled out, and multi-agency training initiatives have been launched on family- and community-based care, engaging judges, policy, local protection workforce and NGOs. • To support the workforce, the Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF and IOM, are implementing 'Together We Care' a care-for-the-caregiver model that includes collective well-being sessions and psychosocial accompaniment. More than 400 teachers and 100 Student Counselling Department (DECE) professionals received support under this initiative in 2025.

Peru	
Contextual Background	<p>Peru's child protection system operates through a multi-tiered framework that combines national policy oversight with decentralized service delivery at the regional and local levels. At the national level, the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations oversees child protection in line with the wider system for children's services created to operationalize intersectoral coordination and to ensure the principle of the best interest of the child guides decision-making across all government levels. The General Directorate for Children and Adolescents within this ministry leads on policy development, sets national standards, and coordinates actions across sectors including health, education, and justice to prevent violence, ensure access to services, and uphold the rights enshrined in Peru's Child and Adolescent Code. At the subnational level, regional and municipal governments are tasked with delivering child protection services. Municipal child rights offices are mandated at local level to receive complaints, mediate family issues, and coordinate response. Violence cases are also responded to by the Women's Emergency Centres. For children at risk of losing parental care, Special Protection Units at regional levels respond to evaluate needs and risks and recommend measures of protection. They ensure provision of family based alternative care and coordinate with the National Comprehensive Family Welfare Programme in provision of residential care.</p> <p>Despite this framework, significant challenges persist in ensuring a robust, professional child protection workforce. Social workers, psychologists, and legal advisors are often overburdened, particularly in rural or under-resourced municipalities. A 2023 UNICEF review of Peru's care reform efforts noted uneven implementation of protection protocols and limited technical capacity at the local level. National strategies aim to improve workforce training, professional recognition, and information system integration, but disparities remain. Ongoing reforms are critical to ensuring that all children, particularly those in vulnerable or alternative care situations, receive timely, coordinated, and rights-based protection.</p>
Education Availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 bachelor's courses in social work, 172 in other relevant disciplines • 5 master's courses in social work, and 94 in other disciplines • No PhD programme in social work, 15 in other disciplines • Short course: 2 secondary specializations
Workforce Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of governmental child protection workforce: 245 • Ratio of child protection workers: 2.54 per 100,000 child population
Professional Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Social Workers of Peru, (15,182 members) has a code of ethics and is legally mandated for licensing. • The other associations (Association of Social Workers in Companies, Latin American Centre for Social Work, Committee for Social Welfare, Network for Scientific Research in Social Work, National Union of Social Workers of Essalud, Society of Social Work, Union of Social Workers – Ministry of Health, Lima) do not have legal mandates, and it is not known if they have codes of ethics.
Key Milestones and Innovative Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A government representative in Peru noted that they had implemented ten emergency measures to close staffing gaps across the interdisciplinary roles in 25 special protection units (UPEs) by the end of 2025, and are aiming for sustainability of these hires in 2026: • In Peru, a government representative emphasized the approval of a new competency-based capacity-building plan with a structured calendar for implementation: • In Peru, child protection authorities introduced a new staff recognition programme using non-monetary incentives, alongside a diagnostic and response strategy to detect and prevent burnout.

Legislation and policies

Public-sector legislation and policies, otherwise known as the 'normative framework', are the foundational blueprints that enable the establishment, maintenance and growth of a country's child protection workforce and system. Clear laws and policies are needed to define mandates and outline the structure of the child protection workforce and frameworks that support the workforce. The degree to which these laws and policies are comprehensive and clear to relevant stakeholders will determine the level of their coordinated implementation. A clear and realistic plan for the development and strengthening of the social service workforce, and specifically the child protection workforce, should ideally be at the heart of the normative framework, in line with the UNICEF and GSSWA Guidelines for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection, and accompanying Results Matrix.¹²

- **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 3: Existence of a national strategic plan on strengthening the social service workforce**
- **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 4: Availability of a normative/regulatory framework for the social service workforce at the national and/or subnational level**

A plan or framework that outlines and defines roles and responsibilities for child protection workers and practice standards, and specifies the required budget and information management systems, is vital for workforce strengthening efforts to be effective. The following section outlines the extent to which these four countries have been able to develop a normative framework that lays a foundation for workforce strengthening by defining and/or mandating workforce roles and responsibilities, numbers or budgets, as much as possible given the availability of policies and legislation that mention the workforce for social services or child protection.

BOLIVIA

The main law governing Bolivia's child protection system (*Sistema Plurinacional de Protección Integral de la Niña, Niño y Adolescente* SIPPPOINA) is Law No. 548, enacted in 2014 (*Código Niña, Niño y Adolescentes*) and its regulation, *Decreto Supremo* No. 2377. This law mandates that the main municipal child protection services, offices of the Child and Adolescent Defenders (DNA)¹³ be staffed by qualified professionals in law, psychology and social work, as well as other related professionals, to provide and ensure specialized and comprehensive care. It also delineates the roles of departmental and municipal governments in overseeing and maintaining these services. Additional laws regulating child protection include Law No. 464, enacted in 2013,¹⁴ which establishes the Victim Assistance Service. This service provides free multidisciplinary support to victims of crime, regardless of age or status. It works in coordination with justice services and other institutions to strengthen the national response to violence and ensure access to justice. A Supreme Decree No. 3463 (enacted in 2018) reinforced the legal protection of children and adolescents who are victims of violence, guaranteeing free and specialized legal representation throughout judicial and administrative processes, and emphasizing inter-institutional coordination to enhance the response to child violence.

As for the regulation of the workforce, there is no comprehensive law or regulatory body covering all social service professions. A government decree, *Decreto Supremo* No. 0212, 2009, created The Plurinational School of Public Management, which is responsible for the ongoing training and professional development of public servants in the social protection sector and ensures that personnel are equipped with the necessary skills and ethical standards to deliver quality services. In the child protection system, only lawyers are subject to formal

12 Guidelines for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection, UNICEF and GSSWA, 2019, and Results Matrix for Strengthening the Social Service Workforce, UNICEF and GSSWA, 2020.

13 Defensorías de la Niñez y Adolescencia (DNA)

14 Ley del Servicio Plurinacional de Asistencia a la Víctima

registration and oversight via the Public Law Registry. Law No. 387 on the Practice of Law (2013), regulates the legal profession, covering licensing, ethics, standards and professional development and is relevant to social services in ensuring that only registered and qualified lawyers can provide legal defence, including in institutions like the Child and Adolescent Defenders (DNA) and under the Law of the Plurinational Service for Victim Support.

COLOMBIA

The Child Protection workforce in Colombia operates within a legal framework grounded in the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, Law 1098 (2006) and the technical guidelines issued by the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). The ICBF plays a central role

in service provision, with institutional staff—especially from the Offices of the Family Defenders¹⁵—actively involved in safeguarding the rights of beneficiaries. While there is no unified legislation governing social service personnel, or the specific workforce of the child protection system, certain legal and technical instruments do define the roles, qualifications and organizational structure of professionals involved in these services. Law 1098 and its Guide G21.P categorize staff into administrative, professional and general services roles, specifying their required qualifications and responsibilities. Operational manuals under the Juvenile Criminal Responsibility System provide detailed guidelines on service delivery, technical criteria and role-specific duties, including for children and adolescents undergoing administrative rights restoration processes.¹⁶

15 Defensorías de Familia

16 Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF), *Modalidades y Servicio para la Atención de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes, con Proceso Administrativo de Restablecimiento de Derechos*, 2022, Bogotá < www.icbf.gov.co/system/files/procesos/mo3.p_manual_operativo_modalidades_y_servicio_para_la_atencion_de_nna_con_pard_v2.pdf > Accessed 31 October 2025.



Although Colombia lacks a specific law naming categories of social service workers, the Juvenile Criminal Responsibility System framework effectively regulates the required human resources. It ensures that professionals such as social workers and auxiliary staff are technically and functionally integrated into service delivery. The document also references Article 26 of the Colombian Constitution, which mandates state oversight of professions that may pose societal risks. The Constitutional Court has defined the scope of Professional Councils, which are public entities created by law and attached to ministries. These councils, composed of administrative officials and professional representatives, oversee the ethical and legal practice of professions. Despite not fitting traditional classifications of public administration entities, they are public in nature due to their legal creation, composition, functions and funding—often from national budget resources or legally authorized fees.

ECUADOR

Ecuador's child protection system is structured through a decentralized model that integrates national policy leadership with local-level implementation, underpinned by the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (2003). However, there is no single law regulating the social service workforce. The Organic Law of Public Service (2010) does provide specialized legislation that, to some extent, includes public sector social service professionals, but it does not contain specific regulations for the obligations and responsibilities of the workforce. Similarly, there are legal frameworks which are relevant to the child protection workforce, such as the Organic Comprehensive Law for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women (2018) which establishes the obligation of the central government to strengthen the network of specialized and free services for legal,

psychological, medical and socioeconomic assistance for victims of violence. This law also mandates the specialization and training of multidisciplinary teams with a gender, human rights and violence-focused approach for women, girls, adolescents, young adults, adults and elderly women to strengthen comprehensive victim care. Nevertheless, there is no regulatory framework that further develops this provision or defines the criteria to ensure specialization and training for social service professionals.

PERU

Peru's legal framework recognizes social work as a profession in both public and private sectors, detailing its expected functions and establishing standards and requirements for practice. Law No. 30112 on the Professional Practice of Social Workers (2013)¹⁷ formally defines social workers as professionals who engage with individuals, families and communities to advance social policy, human development and the exercise of rights. It requires practitioners to hold a university degree and register with the College of Social Workers, which was created by Law No. 27918 (2003) to license and regulate professional practice, ensure ethical and scientific standards, and represent the field nationally. While these laws emphasize the state and CTSP's role in promoting the profession, they lack clarity on mechanisms for supervision, training and adequate labour protections (e.g., salary guidelines or insurance), and they do not include specifics on oversight of the CTSP's accountability or performance.

The child protection system is enshrined in Legislative Decree No. 1297 (2018)¹⁸ and subsequent directives from the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations. The decree and directives integrate social workers into multidisciplinary teams within specialized

17 Ley del Ejercicio Profesional del Trabajador Social

18 Ministerio de la Mujer y Poblaciones Vulnerables, *Decreto Legislativo N.º 1297 para la protección de niñas, niños y adolescentes sin cuidados parentales o en riesgo de perderlos*, 2016, Lima, < <https://www.gob.pe/institucion/mimp/normas-legales/2015609-1297> >, Accessed 31 October 2025.

protection units¹⁹, Women's Emergency Centre and residential care facilities, though their inclusion in municipal protection offices remains optional. Despite these legal stipulations, there is no national strategic plan under development or in place to support their implementation. Complementary laws, such as Law No. 14371 (1963), mandate that companies with more than 100 employees hire at least one social worker in human resources department, though this requirement has led to increased hiring of social work graduates in the private sector and a mismatch between their pre-service training in social service sectors and their expected corporate role.

Composition of the social service workforce

This section examines the composition of the workforce responsible for child protection in the four focus countries. It presents an overview of major employers, their roles and functions, and their overall capacity to deliver responsive services to children and families, based on estimated staffing numbers. It also explores shared challenges and opportunities for improvement, based on learning from the public and non-government sectors.

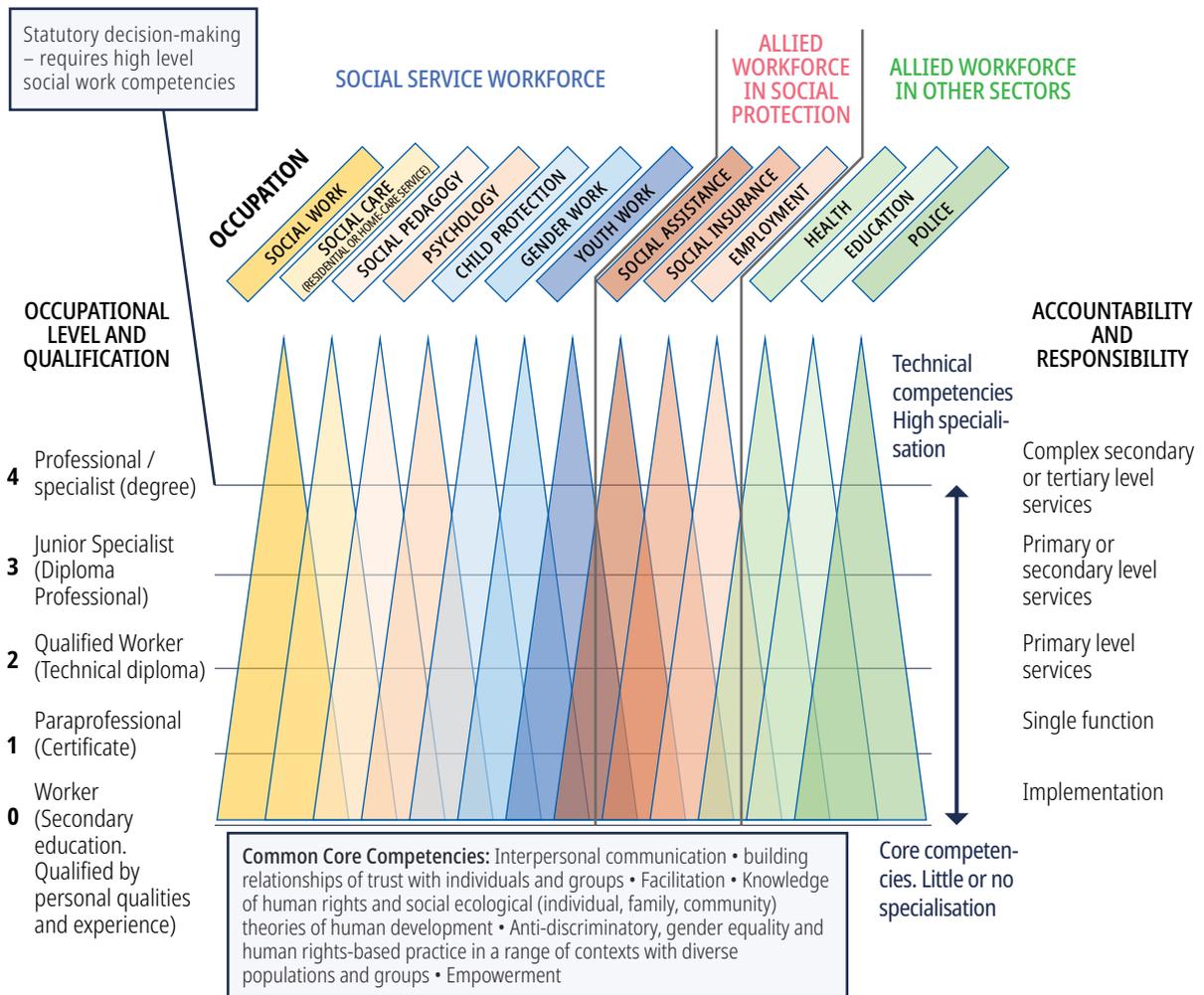
19 Unidades de Protección Especial (UPE) and Defensorías Municipales del Niño y Adolescente



Owing to the interdisciplinary nature of child protection in the region, the workforce data accessed in this study often included allied workers, such as teachers, lawyers and health workers (see Figure 2). While these workers are essential to supporting children and families, the fact that their work primarily falls under other disciplines (e.g., health or education) can lead to gaps in expertise, and there remains a

need for more specifically trained professionals, such as in social work. Wherever possible, therefore, this report focuses on social service or social welfare professionals rather than allied workers (the workforce of health, education or justice sectors), noting the most important aspects of the specialized child protection workforce, both where it exists and where it is still lacking but needed.

Figure 2. Examples of occupations within the social service workforce and allied workforces²⁰



Source: OPM and P4EC

GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE

Governments are primarily responsible for ensuring the availability of high-quality child protection services through a capable,

well-supported workforce. Meeting this responsibility requires coordinated action across ministries and sectors to develop coherent strategies for service provision and workforce strengthening, backed by clear

²⁰ Diagram originally developed for: United Nations Children's Fund and Oxford Policy Management Call to Action on the Social Service Workforce Strengthening in the Europe and Central Asia Region, UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, Geneva, 2018

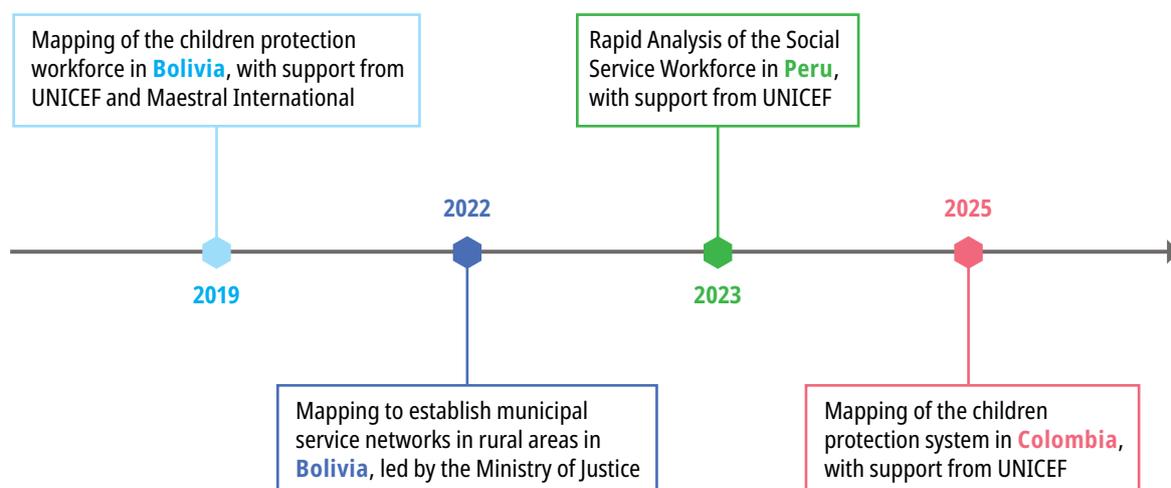
legislation, service standards and institutional accountability. Each country's approach to the governance and organization of its child protection workforce varies according to how decentralized they are, the resources it has available, and the status of its social policies. This section provides insight into how governments in the Andean region have planned and managed the human resources that they directly employ for child protection. It further highlights the common use of the interdisciplinary team model for frontline prevention and response efforts and the implications of this approach for future development efforts.

Mapping the government workforce and data-driven decision-making

Over the past five years, three of the four focus countries—Bolivia, Colombia and Peru—have undertaken a national mapping of the child protection system and/or workforce in line with **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 2** (a national workforce assessment and analysis conducted within the past four years).

The resulting reports provide details on the workforce structure and composition, functions and roles, training and working conditions through the perspectives of key actors from government, NGOs and civil society organizations, and in some cases, members of the workforce themselves, collected via a survey. They represent valuable, point-in-time data to inform decision-making on related policies, programming, and budgeting within countries. Such exercises become even more useful when conducted routinely (e.g., every four years) or as the basis for a continually updated human resources database or information system (HRIS). However, none of the focus countries reported a functioning, comprehensive human resources database or information system per **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 6** (availability of a nation-wide data collection system for human resources for social services). Leveraging the databases generated from these mapping exercises to set up a new or strengthen existing systems for human resources information is a recommended next step, maximizing the return on investments in these resource-intensive mapping exercises.

Figure 3. Timeline of recent child protection workforce and/or system mappings in the Andean region



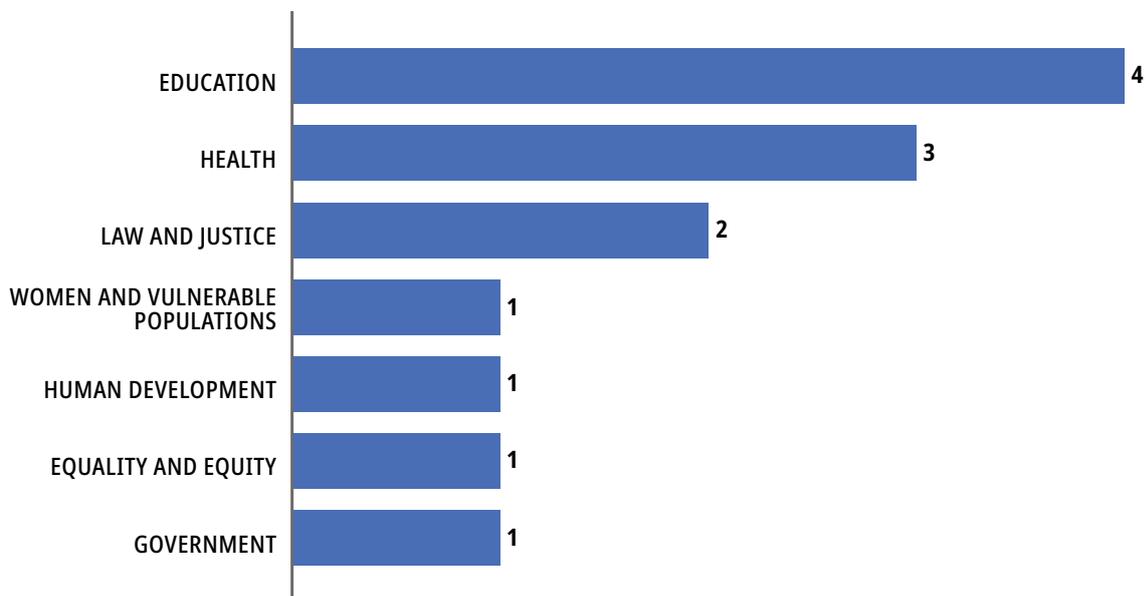
Some of these exercises were designed in alignment with UNICEF-GSSWA's 16 indicators of social service workforce strengthening. Using the same indicators also allows for limited cross-country comparisons to better understand regional trends.

Government ministries with responsibility for child protection

Each Andean country has a distinct structure for how ministries and institutions organize their workforce to support children and families, with varying degrees of decentralization and coordination across national, departmental and

municipal levels. Across all four focus countries, child protection efforts typically involve three to four ministries, most often including education (in all four countries), health (in three countries), and law and justice (in two countries), as shown in Figure 4. Ministries with a lead role for social or family welfare varied by country: the Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency in Bolivia, the Ministry of Equality and Equity (through ICBF) in Colombia, the Ministry of Human Development in Ecuador, and Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations in Peru. Each plays a key role in the formulation and oversight of child protection-related policy and programming, in coordination with the education, health and justice sectors.

Figure 4. Number of countries reporting government SSW by type of ministry



Government workers hold a range of titles that illustrate the multidisciplinary nature of the child protection system and expertise required. Reviewing the job titles of the focus group participants for this study helps give a snapshot of the range of roles in the child protection workforce in this region. The most common titles among FGD participants were those of

social work professionals, followed by those in psychology, law and specialised child protection. Others were specialists in health and nutrition, or serving in other technical and specialist roles. A smaller group was those with coordination and management functions, while some held community-based or multidisciplinary positions (see Table 3).

Table 3. Division of roles among focus group discussion participants

CATEGORY	NUMBER	EXAMPLES
Social work	8	Social Worker, Social Work
Psychology	5	Psychologist, Psychologist – Specialised Professional (Administration)
Law / child protection	4	Lawyer, Socio-Legal Technical Specialist
Health / nutrition²¹	3	Nutritionist, Chief of Health Unit
Technical / specialist roles	3	Specialised Protection Unit team, Child Migrant Protection Specialist
Coordination / management	2	Monitoring Manager, Care Manager
Other	2	Street Educators, Residential Centre Multidisciplinary Team

Ratio of government social service workers to child population

Using available data, the number of government social service workers with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 children was calculated for each country, corresponding to **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 7**. This ratio is intended to approximate the availability and accessibility of child protection services, with a lower ratio suggesting more workers with lighter caseloads and the ability to provide more responsive and/or higher-quality services (see Table 4). Results are more appropriately compared over time within a country to demonstrate progress in workforce recruitment and deployment, rather than across countries, as they may be affected by the inclusion of different types of workers in a country's definition of the child protection workforce, the completeness and accuracy of available workforce data, and other contextual factors. They are presented here as a baseline for these four countries.

In the case of this review, these country mappings generally failed to obtain complete information for the public sector workforce, in part due to the range of ministries and sub-national administrative bodies with responsibility for child protection policy and programming, and the lack of a comprehensive HRIS. For example, in Colombia, recently collected workforce data are most complete for ICBF staff under the Ministry of Equality and Equity, particularly its frontline, interdisciplinary Family Ombudsman²² teams. They do not reflect another important component of the public sector child protection workforce, the Family Commissions' Offices²³ or multidisciplinary teams, which operate at district, municipal or intermunicipal levels in medium to high-density population areas and are overseen by a different ministry, the Ministry of Justice and Law. In Bolivia, data included both national and subnational municipal-level technical and administrative staff, whereas data from Peru were limited to social workers engaged by two directorates responsible for child protection within the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations.

²¹ Nutritionists, while not usually considered a core profession of the child protection workforce, are included as one of the key professions for child and family well-being in Colombia's ICBF (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar)

²² Defensoría de Familia

²³ Comisarías de Familia

Table 4. Number of governmental human resources with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 children

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF WORKFORCE	POPULATION OF CHILDREN UNDER 18	NUMBER OF WORKFORCE PER 100,000 CHILDREN
Bolivia ²⁴	1,968	3,681,052	53.46
Colombia ²⁵	1,215	15,454,633	7.86
Ecuador ²⁶	859	5,248,117	16.37
Peru ²⁷	245	9,648,720	2.54

At subnational level, a range of structures operationalize protection. While data on the structure, specific functions, roles and staffing levels were not available for all countries, those available are listed in tables below, for Colombia (*Table 5*), Ecuador (*Table 6*) and Peru (*Tables 7 and 8*). These detailed examples reinforce

the common features of 1) multisectoral responsibility anchored in government leadership at the national level and 2) the interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary team approach undertaken at the subnational or frontline service provision level, with differing degrees of decentralization and institutional coordination.

24 Human resources estimates from 2025 completed UNICEF Bolivia questionnaire, including national and subnational levels; Population data from 2024 national census <https://cpv2024.ine.gob.bo/index.php/resultados/resultados-demografia-demografia/resultados-demografia-poblacion/>

25 Human resources estimates from ICBF on social workers (1,280), psychologists and lawyers included in DNA teams from 2025; Population data – under 18 projections – from Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) <https://www.dane.gov.co/files/dane-para-ninos/sabias-que.htm>

26 Human resources estimates from 2025 completed UNICEF Ecuador questionnaire, removing 4,167 staff from Ministry of Education Department of Student Counseling (DECE); Population data from Censo Ecuador 2022 <https://www.censoecuador.gob.ec/>

27 Human resources estimates include data from only two directorates, as available in the 2023 Peru Rapid Analysis of the Social Service Workforce; Population data from Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI) 2022



Table 5. Colombia: Number of staff employed in the Interdisciplinary Family Defender Services (Defensorías de Familia) by type and region²⁸

REGION	FAMILY DEFENDERS	NUTRITIONISTS	PSYCHOLOGISTS	SOCIAL WORKERS	TOTAL
AMAZONAS	4	3	4	4	15
ANTIOQUIA	106	73	131	137	447
ARAUCA	10	7	11	11	39
ATLÁNTICO	37	43	45	47	172
BOGOTÁ	148	62	185	190	585
BOLÍVAR	32	31	39	36	138
BOYACÁ	41	15	44	42	142
CALDAS	37	17	40	41	135
CAQUETÁ	16	9	12	16	53
CASANARE	11	12	13	11	47
CAUCA	39	18	40	40	137
CESAR	23	21	31	28	103
CHOCÓ	16	12	14	16	58
CÓRDOBA	25	20	25	25	95
CUNDINAMARCA	61	27	67	67	222
GUAINÍA	3	1	3	3	10
GUAVIARE	5	3	6	5	19
HUILA	32	29	35	33	129
LA GUAJIRA	19	12	21	20	72
MAGDALENA	24	18	25	24	91
META	26	13	29	27	95
NARIÑO	40	25	41	41	147
NORTE DE SANTANDER	31	17	32	33	113
PUTUMAYO	10	11	11	11	43
QUINDÍO	15	8	24	24	71
RISARALDA	24	17	31	31	103
SAN ANDRÉS	4	2	5	5	16
SANTANDER	49	32	63	60	204
SUCRE	17	14	15	15	61
TOLIMA	50	22	51	50	173
VALLE DEL CAUCA	117	54	117	115	403
VAUPÉS	3	2	3	3	11
VICHADA	5	3	4	4	16
Total	1080	653	1217	1215	4165

STRENGTHENING ECUADOR'S CHILD PROTECTION WORKFORCE UNDER THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND THE MINISTRY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Over the past five years, Ecuador's Ministry of Education has achieved major advances in strengthening its child protection workforce within the education system. Through the expansion, training and formalization of Student Counselling Departments (DECE)²⁹ the ministry has enhanced psychosocial support, violence prevention and student well-being nationwide. Between 2021 and 2023, the government introduced key regulatory and structural reforms. The General Regulation to the Organic Law of Intercultural Education was revised to clarify DECE functions, followed by the design of a new DECE management model and large-scale capacity-building efforts, including the Workshop for Team Care and Self-Care implemented with support from WHO and PAHO,³⁰ which reached 1,295 DECE professionals. In 2023, the ministry carried out restructuring and management reforms complemented by a new national salary scale³¹ approved by the Ministry of Labour.

In 2024–2025, Ecuador consolidated these achievements with major investments in recruitment and digital innovation. A Ministerial Decree³² established clear career pathways and workloads for DECE professionals, while a new online information platform, "EDUCAEMPLO," improved transparency in hiring. Over two years, 1,176 new DECE professionals were recruited with USD \$9.8 million in public investment, expanding coverage to more than 529,000 students in public schools, including 10 new DECE posts in the Galápagos. Ongoing partnerships with UNICEF, IOM, Fundación Psicolectiva, and Surkuna have further supported psychosocial care, anti-discrimination training and well-being initiatives for DECE staff. These cumulative reforms mark a transformative period for Ecuador's education sector, reinforcing the professional identity, stability, and reach of its counselling workforce as an important component of its child protection system, though key informants also noted that this workforce still faces an overwhelming caseload, with a ratio of only one counsellor to 350 students, even with the recent addition of 1,179 more counsellors.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Human Development is responsible for Ecuador's Public Policy for the Special Protection of Children and Adolescents at risk. Its Undersecretariat for Special Protection leads on planning, coordination and evaluation. This policy covers children and adolescents who are deprived of a family environment, in a situation of child labour, children on the move and victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. These measures primarily through the Psychosocial Intervention Service for the Prevention of Rights Violations in the Family and Community, and through cooperation agreements with civil society organizations. These agreements cover services in the area of family support, family custody, foster care, institutional care, eradication of child labour and begging, care for homeless people, and migration and host cities. The staff of the Ministry of Human Development providing direct care are drawn from law, psychology and social work disciplines, with additional colleagues from health, education or research. Table 6 below shows how, at the territorial level, the relative proportion of each role varies depending on the department, with roughly equal numbers of social work, psychology, and law professionals in the adoption directorate. However, in frontline residential care services, there are 9 social workers, out of 127 staff in total, as the largest contingent are classified as tutors (91), and in monitoring teams the largest contingent of professionals is from education science.

29 Departamentos de Consejería Estudiantil (DECE)

30 Taller de Cuidado de Equipos y Autocuidado, World Health Organisation

31 DECE Estrategia de Reposicionamiento, y Decreto Ministerial MINEDUC-2023-0010-A

32 'Normativa para regular el escalafón, la asignación de cargos y la jornada laboral de las y los profesionales de los Departamentos de Consejería Estudiantil' MINEDUC-2024-00067-A

Table 6. Ecuador: Distribution of roles and qualifications in adoption and special protection

ADOPTIONS DIRECTORATE				
DEPARTMENTS	TOTAL # STAFF	PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINES	#	TERRITORIAL OR NATIONAL LEVEL
Technical Adoption Units	31	Social Work	10	Territorial
		Psychology	12	
		Law	9	
Family Placement Committees	18	Social Work	7	Territorial
		Psychology	5	
		Law	6	
DIRECTORATE OF PROVISION AND ASSURANCE OF SPECIAL PROTECTION SERVICES				
Legal Clarification Lawyers	23	Law		Territorial 22 National 1
Directorate of Services: Staff of residential care services	127	Coordinator	9	Territorial Level
		Social Work	9	
		Psychology	9	
		Family Facilitator	4	
		Administrative Assistant	4	
		Community Facilitator	1	
		Tutor	91	
Territorial technicians who monitor the implementation of services and programmes at the territorial level	26	Social Work	3	Territorial Level
		Psychology	2	
		Law	3	
		Public Administration	1	
		Education Sciences	9	
		Health Education	2	
		Educational Research	1	
		Evaluation of educational models	1	
		Auditing	1	
		Communication	1	
Accreditation Committee for foster families	9	Law and Psychology		Territorial Level

Table 7. Peru: child protection related social service workforce roles and functions

DEPARTMENTS UNDER THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS	SUB-DEPARTMENT OR DIVISION	NUMBER OF SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE AT NATIONAL LEVEL	FUNCTION AND ROLES
General Directorate for Children and Adolescents	Policy Directorate for Children and Adolescents	2	Monitor and manage the National Multisectoral Policy for Children and Adolescents Provide support to 63 residential care centres administered by the National Comprehensive Programme for Family Welfare, each of which are legally required to have at least one social worker
	Directorate of Local Systems and DNAs	2	Provide support to the 1,754 Child and Adolescent Defenders (DNAs) of which 405 are accredited with at least one psychology and lawyer per team (data on the total number of staff including social workers is not available).
	Directorate of Special Protection	10	Responsible for proposing and supervising the rules, guidelines, strategies, and programmes of the 25 Special Protection Units (UPE) that act in child protection cases and protective orders for families, under which 158 social workers are employed in multi-disciplinary teams with psychologists and lawyers
General Directorate of Adoptions	Directorate of Comprehensive Assessment for Adoption	6	Conduct social assessments of families applying for adoption
	Directorate of Adoption and Post Adoption	9	Support with adoptions and post adoption
	Directorate for training and information register	1	Provide support in resolving queries about the adoption procedure

Table 8. Peru: Number of staff employed in the Specialised Protection Units (UPE)³³

UPE	SOCIAL WORKER		PSYCHOLOGIST		LAWYER		EDUCATOR	
	CURRENT NUMBER	NUMBER OF POSITIONS ASSIGNED						
Tumbes	1	6	3	6	4	7	0	1
Arequipa	10	-	10	-	6	-	2	-
East Lima	16	16	22	22	12	9	4	3
South Lima	14	14	14	14	10	10	3	3
Amazon	2	0	6	0	6	0	0	0
Ucayali	0	6	4	6	4	6	1	1
Puno	4	6	4	6	5	6	1	1
Ica	4	7	3	7	7	7	1	1
Junín	9	9	6	6	5	6	1	1
Piura	4	9	11	14	8	14	0	1
Loreto	5	0	5	0	5	0	1	0
Cajamarca	4	6	3	6	5	7	1	1
Madre de Dios	5	6	6	8	4	5	1	1
Callao	17	21	22	24	18	21	4	4
Huancavelica	3	6	5	6	4	7	1	1
Huánuco	3	0	3	0	3	0	1	0
Lambayeque	5	5	5	5	3	4	1	1
La Libertad	6	6	7	7	4	7	1	1
Ancash	3	6	6	6	6	7	1	1
Tacna	5	6	7	7	6	9	1	1
Moquegua	5	6	4	4	5	6	0	1
Ayacucho	3	4	3	6	4	7	1	1
Apurímac	2	0	2	1	4	1	1	0
Lima	17	17	18	18	12	12	3	3
Cusco	11	11	9	11	9	12	1	1
Total	158	173	188	190	159	170	32	29

33 Source: Defensoría del Pueblo Informes Especiales No. 003-2022-DP

NON-GOVERNMENTAL WORKFORCE

The non-governmental child protection workforce spans many different entities, including community-based and civil society organizations, national and international NGOs, faith-based groups and the private sector. Although government professionals play a central role in providing and regulating services, non-governmental workers often outnumber the public sector workforce and contribute distinct mandates, funding streams and technical expertise to both advise on and directly support service delivery for children and families. Workers for these entities may serve as implementation partners, directly delivering services to children and families, or as technical partners, providing expertise in capacity building, policy development and systems strengthening. Their scope of work extends across multiple levels of engagement: at the national level, they contribute to policy development and system design, while at the community level, they lead interventions that either better connect children, families and communities to existing services or provide direct outreach and care.

Given this range of roles and levels of action, effective coordination is both essential and complex. Clear and well-managed structures (e.g., interinstitutional coordination committees, dedicated government agencies overseeing NGO activities or shared case management systems) are needed to define roles, share responsibilities and harmonize efforts. Without these mechanisms, service delivery risks becoming fragmented, weakening the impact of workers and creating costly inefficiencies over time. Strengthening collaboration and communication across sectors is essential to ensure that children and families receive consistent and effective

support. The following country examples are meant to illustrate the practical realities of coordination in each of the focus countries, showing how specific NGOs collaborate with government counterparts, the types of workers they employ and the key outcomes or results emerging from these interactions.

Bolivia: Bolivia faces challenges in ensuring a well-trained and adequately resourced public-sector child protection workforce. Although the 2014 Children and Adolescents Code mandates the presence of trained social workers, psychologists and legal professionals in municipal Child and Adolescent Defenders' offices (DNA)³⁴, many local governments, especially in rural areas, struggle with high caseloads, limited budgets and insufficient staff.³⁵ To address these issues, efforts have been made by the national government and partners such as UNICEF and Save the Children to strengthen capacity through training, technical guidelines and interagency coordination.³⁶

As primarily technical partners, these entities engage experts in child protection who can support and strengthen public services, or as described by one key informant: *"What happens is, we don't provide social services directly, right? We mainly work on projects that support social services."* They collaborate with government actors like the Ombudsman's Office and staff at the municipal, departmental and national level to ensure that they have the necessary equipment and tools to perform their duties, and with local universities and training institutions, co-develop and deliver training so that government staff are able to adhere to existing and any new requirements. Taking a competency-based approach, training aims to improve staff performance and to produce

34 In Spanish, known as Defensorías de la Niñez y Adolescencia

35 UNICEF Bolivia, UNICEF LACRO, Maestral International. *Reporte de País: Bolivia. Mapeo del Recurso Humano para la Protección de la Niñez y adolescencia en Bolivia*, 2019.

36 Fundación Munasim Kullakita, *Informe de buenas prácticas en protección a la niñez en municipios bolivianos*, 2022.

trainers who can continuously deliver training on topics such as case management, violence prevention and digital harm to incoming or transferred government employees.

Colombia: The nongovernmental child protection workforce in Colombia is composed of social workers, psychologists, legal advisors, community educators and human rights defenders employed by national and international NGOs. Their work is crucial for reaching vulnerable populations, promoting child rights and filling service gaps in regions where government capacity is limited. As implementing partners, these organizations and their staff operate within the national child protection system, adhering to government staffing and service standards. Coordination is both administrative and technical with the ICBF, involving daily operational coordination with ICBF officials supervising residential and other care programmes, regular reporting and participation in ICBF's monitoring system, staff alignment with ICBF manuals for service provision and safeguarding and budgetary harmonization (e.g., salary tables, professional categories) to ensure compliance and, in some cases, expanding beyond state standards. As one NGO key informant put it: *"When the profiles fall within the framework of ICBF programmes... what we do is adjust them to the profile they require—not below their standard, but equal to or better."*

To improve retention and service quality, some NGO representatives shared that they offered more stable contracts, higher pay and structured induction training to new hires compared to the public sector. These staff play a vital role in complementing state efforts by providing specialized services such as psychosocial support, legal assistance, advocacy, prevention programmes and emergency response, especially in areas affected by conflict and poverty.

Ecuador: Although the public sector workforce is a vital component of Ecuador's child protection system, it faces structural challenges, such as insufficient training, high staff turnover, and uneven coverage in rural and peri-urban areas. The Ministry of Human Development and its technical partners have developed training processes and accreditation for social workers, psychologists, and community actors responsible for case management, family reunification, and violence prevention. Technical collaboration with universities and organizations such as UNICEF and World Vision has supported national efforts to professionalize and expand the workforce, including the development of tools, intersectoral protocols, training processes, and child-sensitive approaches to case assessment and service planning.³⁷

As implementing partners, NGOs also work through community structures to expand the reach of state services, particularly in the areas of psychosocial support and family strengthening, coordinating closely with municipal protection agencies and public professionals for case referral and follow-up. As two participants in an NGO focus group shared:

"We work through programmes and projects... we develop our programmes through local partners that are community-based organizations."

"We realized that when we were able to work together with the community... families had access to many more resources... than when they worked only with professionals."

This hybrid coordination model leverages the technical and operational strengths of the country's nongovernmental workforce, working within the national protection system and focusing on community and preventive work that complements government services.

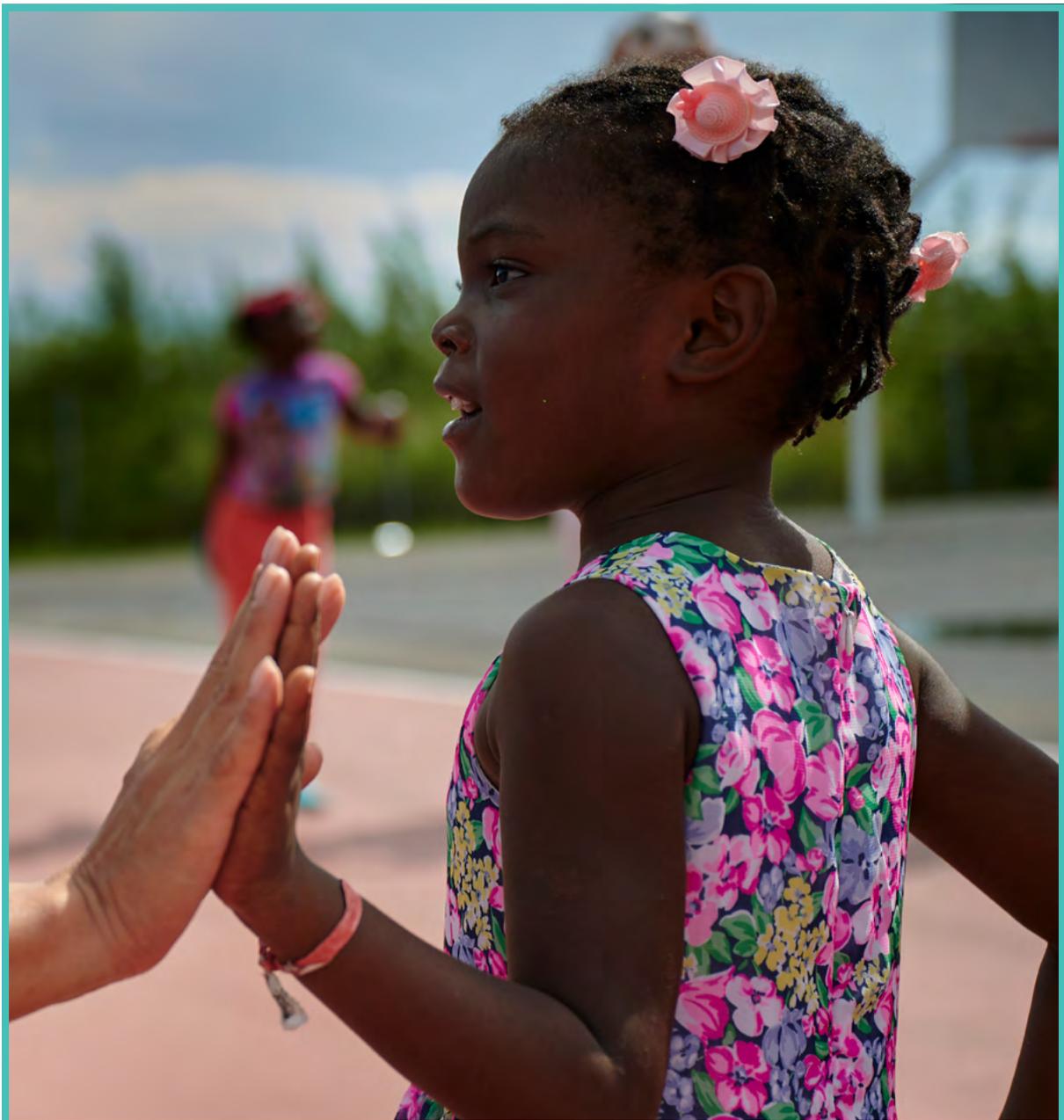
³⁷ World Vision Ecuador, Situación actual de la protección de la niñez y adolescencia contra la violencia en el Ecuador, Quito, 2022; Consejo Nacional para la Igualdad Intergeneracional. Diagnóstico de los Organismos del Sistema de Protección de Derechos de Niñez y Adolescencia, Quito, 2019.

Additionally, it is important to note that a significant portion of the care services implemented in Ecuador are developed through strategic partnerships between the public sector and civil society organizations. This represents a considerable investment of public funds allocated to child protection prevention and response. The Ministry of Human Development reports around 1,900 active

cooperation agreements with NGOs, CSOs, foundations and local government entities that enable the provision of care to children, families and other vulnerable groups.³⁸

Peru: In Peru, civil society and NGOs partner with the Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations, specialised protection units (UPE), municipal child protection services (DNAs), the

38 El Nuevo Ecuador, 'MIES transparente gestión con posibles cooperantes a través del sistema de Registro de Aliados Sociales,' 2024, <<https://www.desarrollohumano.gob.ec/mies-transparenta-gestion-con-posibles-cooperantes-a-traves-del-sistema-de-registro-de-aliados-sociales/>> accessed 31 October 2025.



National Comprehensive for Family Welfare³⁹ and Women's Emergency Centres⁴⁰, among others, to deliver child protection services, often filling gaps left by limited public coverage and resources. This coordination is typically project-based and operational, centring on shared child-protection objectives rather than formalized joint planning. NGOs such as Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision, and SOS Children's Villages employ social workers, who work alongside professionals from other disciplines to identify, refer and accompany cases of children at risk.

Participants in the focus groups emphasized that increasing numbers of projects across state and non-governmental entities has widened employment opportunities for social workers especially for child protection, tied to Legal Decree 1297: *"Because Legislative Decree 1297 established an obligation for child protection services to have social workers."* However, it should be noted that the presence of social workers in the public sector and NGOs remains limited compared to the private sector, in part because existing legislation obligates companies to include a quota of social workers within their human resources departments. In addition, there are reports that social work schools are closing, reducing the number of new graduates entering the field. This situation not only undermines the status of social work as a profession, it also has a substantial impact on service availability and quality. These legislative changes need, therefore, to be accompanied by stronger institutional backing in order to consolidate the profession. Hence, focus group participants called for advocacy and regulation to ensure that social workers, not unqualified personnel, lead interventions with children and families. They recommended:

"strengthening of professional associations to promote the profession of social work" and "strengthening advocacy to prevent further weakening of the profession."

Non-government workers align with government priorities through referral and follow-up mechanisms, joint training activities and technical coordination for case management and psychosocial support. For example, staff from NGOs often participate in coordination meetings with local UPEs to discuss shared cases or to conduct prevention campaigns alongside other public child protection entities. This interaction is typically pragmatic, like sharing case information or aligning outreach activities. However, non-government workers noted that coordination can be uneven because roles and professional recognition differ between sectors: NGO posts may not require a professional qualification in social work, reducing parity with government posts.

A 2023 workforce rapid analysis found that NGO positions often carry generic titles like "facilitator" or "promoter," allowing professionals from various fields to apply, thereby weakening the professional identity of social work and contributing to salary disparities with other fields like law or psychology.⁴¹ Some focus group participants for this review appealed for broader state hiring of social workers and equitable remuneration: *"The state must expand the job offer for social workers."* Overall, these perspectives reveal a workforce motivated by vocation and public service but seeking greater professional recognition, fairer labour conditions and sustained coordination frameworks that value their expertise within both public and private sectors.

39 Programa Integral Nacional Para el Bienestar Familiar

40 Centros de Emergencia Mujer

41 United Nations Children's Fund, *Informe sobre la fuerza laboral de los servicios sociales en el Perú*, UNICEF Perú, Lima, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/peru/documents/informe-sobre-la-fuerza-laboral-de-los-servicios-sociales-en-el-peru>

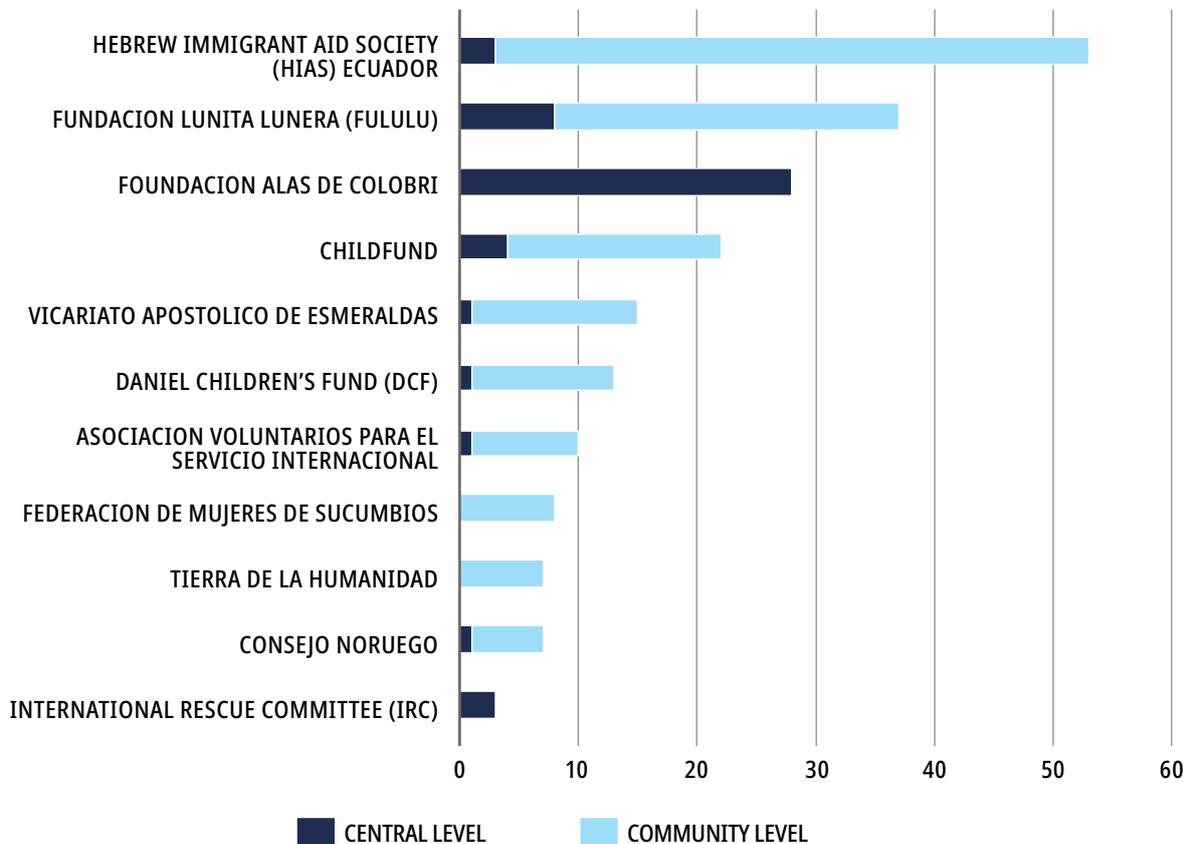
Ratio of non-government child protection workforce to child population

Obtaining comprehensive data on the number of non-governmental workers is a common challenge globally. Few countries have established HRIS, other databases or census data inclusive of this workforce, which was the case for this review, and precluded calculating a ratio according to **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 8** (number of non-government social service workers with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 children). However, the following figure illustrates the results of a partial census of key non-government actors in Ecuador (n=11). At the central or national level (50 staff, 25 per cent), most workers focus on management, coordination and technical support. They include programme directors, national coordinators and technical specialists who

plan activities, provide guidance and oversee projects across regions. At the territorial level (153 staff, 75 per cent), most workers are on the front lines, providing services directly to children, families, and communities. These include social workers, psychologists, community promoters, field technicians and volunteers who carry out daily protection and support activities.

These results suggest that, in Ecuador, most NGO staff work at the community level, while a smaller group at the national level provides coordination and technical leadership to guide and strengthen local actions. However, due to limited comparable data from the other Andean countries, it was not possible to determine whether this pattern is consistent across the subregion but could be explored in future analyses or data collection efforts.

Figure 5. Ecuador: Distribution of NGO staff by level⁴²



⁴² Source: Data prepared by the author based on information provided by participating organizations, September–October 2025, in response to the data requested.

Education and training

To prepare professionals who can effectively address the complex needs of children, families, and communities, educational opportunities should be grounded in global best practice and standards, responsive to local realities and research, and accessible to both the current workforce and students entering the field.⁴³ Across Latin America, universities and other training institutions have offered degree, diploma, certificate and short courses in social work since the 1930s, alongside programmes in psychology, sociology and law, which together reflect the region's interdisciplinary approach to child protection. This section reviews the status of these programmes, highlighting strengths and gaps shared across the four countries as they work to develop the capacity and collaboration of these critical workers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA

Social work education in Latin America emerged amidst an evolving social policy landscape and the influence of Catholic lay movements in the region. During the 1930s and 1940s, as some countries began to formalize welfare and social assistance systems, early programmes for *visitadoras sociales* (social visitors) and *asistentes sociales* (social workers) were founded, often linked to religious institutions or women's organizations.⁴⁴ These initiatives reflected state concern for vulnerable populations, especially children and families, and the Catholic Church's commitment to organized charity and serving the poor. Over time, these faith-based efforts were incorporated into public education systems, leading to the creation of specialized training institutes and, later, university-level schools or faculties of social work.

By the 1950s and 1960s, social work programmes were increasingly situated within universities and tied to national ministries of education and social welfare, signalling a shift toward professionalization and formal accreditation. This process followed the growth of psychology, sociology and law as academic disciplines in the region, all of which contributed to the theoretical and methodological foundations for the social work field. Psychology offered insights into individual and family functioning, sociology contextualized social inequality and structural causes of poverty, and legal education supported the development of child protection and social rights frameworks. Although initially drawing on European and North American models, local pedagogical movements and intellectual traditions in Latin America, such as Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and liberation theology, contributed to a 'reconceptualization' of the discipline and overall identity for social workers rooted in human rights, ethics and social justice.⁴⁵ The formation of national professional associations and councils further increased public recognition and regulation of the profession (see section on Professional Associations).

DEGREE PROGRAMMES

■ UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 9: Total number of degree programmes available to the social service workforce

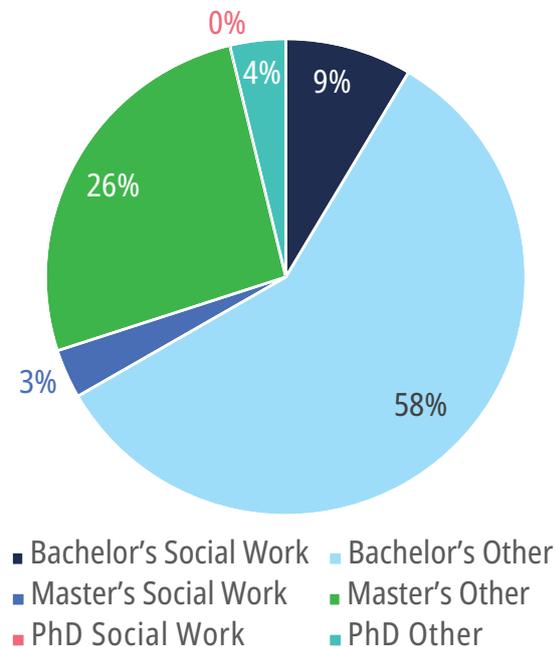
A total of 480 university degree programmes in social work and related disciplines were reported across the four countries, 9 percent of which were bachelor's degree programmes in social work and 3 percent were master's degree programmes in social work (see Figure 6).

43 International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training*, 2020.

44 Pereyra, B. *Social Work in Latin America: A Historical View and the Impact of Reconceptualization in How the Intervention is Seen Today*, Lunds Universitet, 2008 <<https://lup.lub.lu.se/search/ws/files/4009061/1453928.pdf>>

45 Muñoz Arce, Gianinna, 'Imperialismo Profesional y Trabajo Social En América Latina', *Polis (Santiago)* 14, no. 40, 2015, (421–38); Cifuentes, M., 'La formación profesional del Trabajo Social en América Latina: Tendencias y desafíos.' *Revista Latinoamericana de Trabajo Social*, 21(2), 2015, 15–32.; Quevedo, S., *Historia del Trabajo Social en América Latina: Entre la asistencia y los derechos*, Editorial UMSA, 2018.

Figure 6. Percentage of degree programmes by type (based on available information)



The other degree programmes included psychology, sociology, law, early childhood education, nutrition and anthropology. Bachelor's degree or *licenciatura* programmes ranged in length from 24 to 60 months, and master's programmes between 12 and 24 months of study. Notably, 18 doctoral programmes were reported, three of which focused more generally on human and social sciences or social studies (Colombia) and 15 on psychology (Peru). Limited opportunities for higher-level studies in social work can often constrain the availability and quality of individuals who can be recruited for teaching positions or to undertake and expand local social work research.

Accreditation, or the official recognition of an educational or training institution as meeting an established standard of quality, varies

across countries. While all four reported the existence of at least one centralized entity responsible for this process, there was less clarity around the effective implementation of these requirements and limited information on the actual number of accredited social work or related degree programmes.

- In Bolivia, Law No. 070⁴⁶ and Law No. 1153 on University Autonomy establish that all academic programmes must be approved by the Ministry of Education through the General Directorate for University Higher Education and the National Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANECAES)⁴⁷. For public universities, the Bolivian Executive Committee for Universities reviews and endorses the creation and modification of degree programmes, ensuring that the degrees issued are nationally recognized.
- Similarly, in Colombia, academic programmes must officially register with the Ministry of Education and be entered into a national database, the National Information System for Higher Education in Colombia.⁴⁸ For those institutions seeking higher recognition, there is an option to apply for the Accreditation of High Quality, which is reviewed by the National Accreditation Council and recognizes high standards in curricula, faculty, research and outcomes. Currently, there are a total of 17 active social work programmes with this level of accreditation.⁴⁹
- In Ecuador, the body responsible for approving and accrediting academic programmes is the Higher Education Council, as established by the Organic Law of Higher Education.⁵⁰ The Secretariat of

46 Law No. 070 "Avelino Siñani - Elizardo Pérez" (2010)

47 Agencia Nacional de Acreditación y Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior

48 <https://hecaa.mineducacion.gov.co/consultaspublicas/programas>

49 Ministerio de Educación Nacional, [Title missing], Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Bogotá, n.d., https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/articles-342684_recurso_1.pdf

50 <https://siau.senescyt.gob.ec/preguntas-frecuentes/preguntas-frecuentes-instituciones-de-educacion-superior/>

Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation oversees higher education policy, scholarship management, and innovation initiatives, while the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council is responsible for the accreditation and evaluation of higher education institutions and their programmes.

- In Peru, for a programme to be legally offered, the institution must obtain a license from the National Superintendent of University Education, established under the 2014 University Law.⁵¹

In addition, the National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification of Educational Quality offers voluntary accreditation of degree programmes, enabling recognition of quality beyond minimum standards. As of 2023, only one social work degree programme was accredited by the National System of Evaluation, Accreditation and Certification, at the *Universidad Nacional de Peru*, while one other programme at *Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marco* obtained international accreditation from an external body in Mexico.

Table 9. Number of education and training programmes by country and type

COUNTRY	BACHELOR'S SOCIAL WORK	BACHELOR'S OTHER	MASTER'S SOCIAL WORK	MASTER'S OTHER	PHD SOCIAL WORK	PHD OTHER	TOTAL
Bolivia	9	19	No data (ND)	ND	ND	ND	ND
Colombia	4	21				3	29
Ecuador	19	67	11	32	0	ND	129
Peru	10	172	5	94	0	15	296
Total	42	279	16	126	0	18	481

FIELD EDUCATION OR PRACTICAL TRAINING

- **UNICEF's Indicator 11: Percentage of degree programmes that provide at least three months of field placement**

Field education or internships (referred to as *pasantias* or *practica preprofesionales* in the region) are a cornerstone of social work education. These opportunities for on-the-job training should be integrated into degree programmes and be of sufficient duration and complexity to ensure that graduates are prepared for the realities of practice.⁵² To ensure the effectiveness of these placements, universities should ensure support to students in matching them with an agency managing

or providing direct services, set and monitor students' performance against requirements or metrics for field practice, typically with the support of an assigned field supervisor or instructor, and if needed, secure funds to cover or defray costs of transportation or other expenses for students with limited means.

UNICEF's Indicator 11 sets a benchmark of three months for these placements, yet among the reported programmes in these countries, only 58 per cent (23 out of 41 programmes) have this length of practical training. This finding underscores a need for strengthening field education in the region through expanded access, standardized duration and quality so that graduates gain the practical experience needed to serve children and families effectively.

51 <https://wenr.wes.org/2022/03/education-in-peru-2>

52 International Association of Schools of Social Work, *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training*, IASSW, https://www.iassw-aiets.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/IASSW-Global_Standards_Final.pdf

RELEVANT DIPLOMA, CERTIFICATE OR OTHER SHORT COURSES

- **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 10: Total number of pre-service and in-service short courses available to the social service workforce**

Ensuring the availability of options outside of degree programmes is important to enabling

both students and current workers to transition into or further specialize in the field of child protection. A total of 23 relevant diploma, short- or certificate courses were reported across the four countries (see Table 10). All of these options required less time to complete than a degree and ranged from 20 to 150 hours. Many were offered outside of universities, such as through government institutions, and often in cooperation with partners like UNICEF or NGOs.

Table 10. Relevant diploma, certificate or other short courses by country

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF NON-DEGREE COURSES	TRAINING AREA / EXAMPLE COURSE TOPICS	PROVIDERS	NUMBER OF HOURS TO COMPLETE (RANGE)
Bolivia	11 short- or certificate courses	Case management and protection procedures, violence prevention and response, family and alternative care, specialized contexts and vulnerable populations	Ombudsman's Office, UNICEF, Federation of Municipal Associations, Plurinational School of Public Management, civil society and NGO partners (e.g., Maya Paya Kimsa)	20-40
Colombia	5 short- or certificate courses	Comprehensive child protection, child rights and adolescent development, child maltreatment prevention, early childhood development and care, protection and restoration of rights	Ministry of Education, <i>Colombia Aprende</i> , Virtual Campus, National Learning Service, ICBF	20 – 60
Ecuador	5 diplomas	Child and adolescent protection in educational settings, juvenile justice and human rights, human rights and forensic practice, comprehensive child protection and social inclusion	<i>Universidad Católica Santiago de Guayaquil</i> , <i>Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar</i> , <i>Academia Metropolitana de Asesoría Académica</i> Ministry of Labour, <i>Senescyt</i> (Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation), <i>TECH Universidad Tecnológica</i>	80-150
Peru	2 secondary specializations (<i>segunda especialidad</i>)	Social work	<i>Universidad Nacional Jose Faustino Sanchez Carrion</i>	40-50 credit hours (2 semesters)

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER GRADUATION?

Across the seven focus groups, current workers emphasized that education should not end at graduation, calling out the need for continued professional development and supervision once in the field. Many described entering positions and feeling overwhelmed by complex caseloads and legal requirements, *“a totally overwhelming burden”*, which suggests insufficient preparation for the multidisciplinary demands of child protection work. Some participants described a lack of institutional investment in ongoing learning, noting that any efforts to strengthen skills or update practices are largely self-initiated, as one public sector worker in Bolivia explained, *“they don’t provide us with materials... we, the staff, have to invest ourselves”*, reflecting how limited budgets force workers to pay for their own materials or attend unpaid trainings. Similarly, a civil society representative in Ecuador highlighted the need for regular refresher programmes to sustain quality services and morale: *“to provide consistency and ongoing training so they can intervene in an updated, correct, and timely way.”*

Participants also underscored the emotional toll of child protection work and the absence of institutional mechanisms to support staff well-being. A public sector worker in Colombia shared, *“my challenge is not to take it to heart... without losing sensitivity to the cases”*, capturing the struggle to balance empathy with competent practice. Without access to mental health support or reflective supervision, many workers described exhaustion, burnout and high turnover. Together, these perspectives point to a need for stronger post-graduate pathways that integrate ongoing education, structured peer or supervisory support, and strategies for emotional resilience to sustain a skilled and motivated workforce.

Professional associations

- **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 13: Existence of relevant professional associations for the social service workforce, recognized by the national government as legitimate and legally approved**
- **UNICEF-GSSWA Indicator 14: Existence of publicly available professional codes of ethics**

A professional association is a membership organization that represents a specific occupational group within the social service workforce, promotes professional standards and ethical practice, provides continuing professional development and peer support, and advocates for workforce recognition,

working conditions and policy influence. Across Latin America, such groups have formed since the late 1960s, including Bolivia’s College of Psychologists (1967) and National College of Social Workers (1977), Colombia’s National Council of Social Work (1977) and Colombian College of Psychologists (2004), Ecuador’s College of Social Workers of Pichincha (1992) and Ecuadorian Association of Psychologists (1975), and Peru’s College of Social Workers (1979), as well as the five member organizations of the Interinstitutional Commission on Social Work (2000) (*see Table 11*). They play a range of roles, including issuing professional credentials, providing ethical guidance, organizing conferences and national events, and representing their professions in policy and strategic planning forums.

Table 11. Professional associations by country

COUNTRY	ASSOCIATION NAME	LEGAL MANDATE FOR LICENSING AND / OR REGISTRATION	CODE OF ETHICS	MEMBERSHIP	IFSW AFFILIATE
Bolivia	Colegio Nacional de Trabajadores Sociales	No	Yes ⁵³	1,566 ⁵⁴	Yes
	Colegio de Psicólogos de Bolivia (CPsB)	No ⁵⁵	Yes	1,000	N/A
	Registro de Abogados del Estado (RAE)	Yes		10,000	N/A
	Colegio de Abogados	No		93,000	N/A
Colombia	Colegio Colombiano de Psicólogos (COLPSIC)	Yes	Yes	38,000	N/A
	Consejo Nacional de Trabajo Social (CNTS) ⁵⁶	Yes	Yes	32,051 ⁵⁷	No
	Colegio Colombiano de Nutricionistas Dietistas (COLNUD) ⁵⁸	Yes	Yes		N/A
	Consejo Nacional de Escuelas de Trabajo Social (CONETS)				N/A
Ecuador	Asociación Nacional de Unidades Académicas de Trabajo Social en el Ecuador (ANUATSE)		No ⁵⁹	14 institutional members	N/A
	Colegio de Trabajadores Sociales de Pichincha				No
	Asociación Interprovincial de Profesionales en Trabajo Social (ASOINER)		No	80	No
	Asociación Ecuatoriana de Psicólogos (AEP)		No	760	N/A
	Colegio de Abogados Pichincha		No	19,315	N/A

53 Latest publicly available code of ethics from 2015-2017

<https://www.scribd.com/document/575895352/CODIGO-DE-ETICA-PROFESIONAL-DE-LOS-TRABAJADORES-SOCIALES-DE-BOLIVIA2-2-1>

54 <https://www.ifsw.org/member-organisation/bolivia/>

55 Draft bill No 027/2023-2024 C.S. 'Ley de Ejercicio Profesional de la Psicología' aims to regulate professional practice and require registration with CPsB, has been approved by the Senate and is under review by Chamber of Deputies: <https://diputados.gob.bo/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/PL-CS-027-2023-2024.pdf>

56 Information on the IFSW-affiliated association in Colombia, the Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores Sociales (FECTS), was not verified by UNICEF Colombia or its government counterpart, ICBF, and was therefore excluded from the report, whereas data on the Consejo Nacional de Trabajo Social were confirmed as accurate by both entities.

57 Latest publicly available data on membership as of December 2016, CNTS is currently working to consolidate an official membership figure.

58 Colegio Colombiano de Nutricionistas Dietistas is included because a nutritionist is a required member of the Defensoría Teams in Colombia.

59 Code of Ethics currently under development which will govern Asociación Nacional de Unidades Académicas de Trabajo Social en el Ecuador members.

COUNTRY	ASSOCIATION NAME	LEGAL MANDATE FOR LICENSING AND / OR REGISTRATION	CODE OF ETHICS	MEMBERSHIP	IFSW AFFILIATE
Peru	Colegio de Trabajadores Sociales del Perú (CTSP)	Yes	Yes	15,182 ⁶⁰	Yes
	Asociación de Asistentes Sociales en Empresas (ASEM)*	No			No
	Centro Latinoamericano de Trabajo Social (CELATS)*	No			N/A
	Comité Peruano de Bienestar Social (CPBS)*	No			N/A
	Red Peruana de Investigación Científica en Trabajo Social (REPICTS)	No			N/A
	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Sociales y Asistentes Sociales de Essalud (SINATS)	No			No
	Sociedad Peruana de Trabajo Social (SOCIEPTS)*	No			No
	Sindicato de Trabajadores Sociales y Asistentes Sociales – Ministerio de Salud – Lima Metropolitana (SITSAS-MINSA-LM)*	No			No

* indicates membership in the Inter-Institutional Commission on Social Work



Depending on the regulatory model in place, these organizations either maintain separate or combine responsibilities for licensing and registration of workers with the important role of advancing the profession through advocacy for better recognition, working conditions, remuneration, research and continuing education. In some countries, statutory regulatory bodies responsible for licensing and/or registration co-exist with professional associations that maintain voluntary registries and focus on advocacy and capacity strengthening. For example, in Peru, CTSP serves as the legally mandated body for licensing and registration, while multiple professional associations organized under the Inter-Institutional Commission on Social Work operate voluntarily to promote professional development, advance legislative reforms and strengthen working conditions for social workers.

60 Personal correspondence, Elena Flores, Secretary, CTSP, Peru, 22 October 2025.

REGULATING THE SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE AND THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Professional associations, councils, or unions may be involved in formally regulating the workforce, as their mission or legal mandate often includes establishing and enforcing professional standards of practice, raising the visibility of the profession and fostering unity and pride among practitioners. *Licensing* refers to the legal authorization to practice, typically granted by a government-recognized regulatory body established by legislation to ensure that professionals meet defined educational, competency and ethical standards. *Registration*, in contrast, involves recording professionals' qualifications and credentials in an official registry, which may be maintained by either a legally mandated entity or a professional association.

Models for regulating and supporting the SSW range from fully autonomous statutory systems in which independent public bodies license and register workers separate from professional associations (e.g., Colombia) to non-statutory, voluntary models in which associations register members without a legal mandate (e.g., Bolivia, Ecuador). Intermediate forms include association-friendly or semi-autonomous systems, in which regulatory bodies and associations coexist with varying degrees of government oversight and collaboration (e.g., Argentina, Peru), and hybrid models, in which a single national association performs both regulatory and advocacy functions (e.g., Spain).

Throughout the region, these associations or groups face challenges, including variable government recognition, limited resources, uneven enforcement of professional standards and difficulties in reaching and supporting members in rural or remote areas. Such challenges can hinder efforts to fully professionalize the workforce, ensure consistent ethical oversight, and expand capacity for social services and child protection. Nevertheless, these organizations share a commitment to strengthening the quality, accountability and recognition of the child protection workforce, and should be seen as critical actors in advancing professional standards and development of those workers serving children and families.

BOLIVIA

The National College of Social Workers and the Bolivian College of Psychologists aim to promote standardized, ethical practice and professional development for two key types of workers involved in child protection. The National College of Social Workers, established

in 1977, has approximately 1,566 members, and a publicly available code of ethics that sets out professional standards, duties to clients and colleagues and sanctions for ethical violations.⁶¹ The College of Psychologists, founded in 1967, currently maintains a professional registry recognized by the Ministry of Health and has around 1,000 members who follow codes of ethics at the subnational/departmental level, though continuing education is not mandatory to remaining registered. Both associations organize events and training for their members and engage internationally through affiliations and partnerships, e.g., with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and Psychologists Without Borders.

Current initiatives focus on expanding affordable, specialized training for professionals working with vulnerable children and adolescents, placing psychologists in schools to support prevention work, and advocating for laws governing professional practice. For example, a proposed bill,⁶² approved by the Senate and currently under review by the

61 <https://www.facebook.com/p/Colegio-de-Trabajadores-Sociales-de-Bolivia-100064518891028/>

62 Proyecto de Ley N° 027/2023-2024 C.S.

Chamber of Deputies, would require obtaining a professional degree in psychology, registering with the College of Psychologists and adhering to ethical standards to legally practice psychology in the country. However, with no current requirement for these professions to be registered or licensed to practise, membership in both associations remains voluntary, resulting in low numbers and levels of engagement. According to a 2019 survey of the child protection workforce in Bolivia only about 30 per cent of the 423 respondents indicated

belonging to a professional association, a reality which constrains the reach and impact of these associations' efforts at professional development and advocacy.⁶³ Among government staff participating in focus groups for this review, membership was relatively common, especially among Colleges of Psychologists and of Social Workers, though experiences varied. Some noted tangible advantages, *"we get discounts on courses and master's programmes"*, while others highlighted limited accessibility, explaining that *workshops "are inaccessible due to cost"*.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS TAKE ACTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BOLIVIA

During the COVID-19 pandemic, child protection systems around the world faced unprecedented strain. In LAC, it was estimated that up to 55 per cent of children experienced physical aggression and nearly half were exposed to psychological violence in the home, while many support services were disrupted.⁶⁴ In this context of heightened risk and weakened response capacity, Bolivia undertook important efforts to strengthen its child protection system and ensure continuity of care for children and families. In collaboration with UNICEF, groups like the Bolivia College of Psychologists established the Linea Familia Segura, or Safe Family Hotline, where children could call for psychosocial support, and they facilitated coordination with the Special Force to Combat Violence (FELCV).

"Through this hotline, we were able to establish better protocols and ensure that children felt listened to, even in critical situations. In collaboration with the FELCV (Special Force to Combat Violence), we were able to intervene and help respond to acts of violence. All of this has been a particularly significant achievement, and while other countries have similar support lines, I believe this has been the most notable accomplishment." – Verónica Alfaro Murillo, President, Colegio de Psicólogos de Bolivia

COLOMBIA

The National Council of Social Work, National Council of Schools of Social Work, and Colombian Colleges of Psychologists, and of Nutritionists and Dieticians are the main associations supporting standardized, ethical, and evidence-based practice among professionals working with children and families in Colombia. The Colombian College of Psychologists, established

in 2006 through Law 1090, maintains the national registry of psychologists and oversees compliance with the profession's ethical code, which is legally binding for practice though members are not required to sign it.⁶⁵ The National Council of Social Work and National Council of Schools of Social Work jointly promote the development of social work education and professional standards, coordinating across

63 UNICEF Bolivia, UNICEF LACRO, Maestral International. *Reporte de País: Bolivia. Mapeo del Recurso Humano para la Protección de la Niñez y adolescencia en Bolivia*, 2019.

64 United Nations Children's Fund; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 'United Nations warns about the increased risk of violence in the home against children and adolescents amid COVID-19 and issues recommendations to address it', press release, ECLAC, Santiago, 15 December 2020, <<https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/united-nations-warns-about-increased-risk-violence-home-against-children-and>>

65 Colegio Colombiano de Psicólogos, 'Expedición de tarjeta profesional', Colpsic, <<https://www.colpsic.org.co/tarjeta-profesional/expedicion-de-tarjeta-profesional/>>

universities and the public sector to ensure adherence to Colombia's Social Work Profession and Practice Law (Law 53 of 1977).⁶⁶

Across these associations, ongoing efforts emphasize professionalization and ethical practice, improved quality and availability of continuing education, and contributing to public policies and programmes. For example, the National Council of Social Work and National Council of Schools of Social Work have worked to update the Code of Ethics for social workers through The National Round Table (*Mesa Amplia*) for the Regulatory Update of Social Work, which will be submitted to Congress for enactment as law. Colombian College of Psychologists has promoted a range of online training opportunities⁶⁷ and public mental health campaigns.⁶⁸ Despite these advances, limited membership and enforcement capacity outside major cities, and the need for greater intersectoral coordination, continue to limit the potential impact of these groups to strengthen the child protection workforce and improve service quality. Among government staff who participated in a focus group for this review, no affiliations were indicated with any professional association.

ECUADOR

In Ecuador, professional associations play a key role in standardized practice, professional development and advocacy on behalf of the child protection workforce. The National Association of Academic Units of Social Work in Ecuador, founded in 2000, functions as a national academic network, coordinating education, research and community engagement initiatives aimed at strengthening social work across the country.⁶⁹ The College of Social Workers of Pichincha, established in 1992, brings together social work professionals in the country's most populous region including capital city of Quito, and promotes continuing education

and defends social rights.⁷⁰ For psychologists, the Ecuadorian Association of Psychologists, founded in 1975, serves as a social, scientific, and academic society that advances psychology as a recognized profession within Ecuador.⁷¹ Finally, the Interprovincial Association of Social Work Professionals, set up in 2010, works to strengthen inter-institutional connections and facilitate the exchange of best practices among social work practitioners and organizations.⁷² Across these associations, ongoing efforts emphasize professional training and advocacy. The Association of Academic Units of Social Work organizes annual national events and academic dialogues around World Social Work Day, in collaboration with universities. The Interprovincial Association of Social Work Professionals and the Ecuadorian Association of Psychologists engage their members through regular meetings, social media, and formal communications, as well as producing annual reports and research publications. However, focus group participants in this review representing civil society organizations reported no membership in professional associations, suggesting limited visibility and impact of such groups on the professional development of social work and psychology in Ecuador.

PERU

The College of Social Workers of Peru (CTSP) established under Law No. 27918 (2003), serves as the official regulatory body for the social work profession in Peru. It is responsible for licensing and accrediting graduates in social work, granting professional registration and authorization to practice. According to Law No. 30112 (2013), all practicing social workers must hold a university degree in social work and be registered and in good standing with the CTSP. Per legislation, the CTSP is intended to represent the profession

66 <https://www.consejonacionaldetrabajosocial.org.co/>

67 <https://www.colpsic.org.co/eventos/>

68 <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/centros-comerciales-de-colombia-lanzan-campana-por-la-salud-mental-de-que-se-trata/202432/>

69 Asociación Nacional de Unidades Académicas de Trabajo Social del Ecuador (ANUATSE), < <https://carreras.uleam.edu.ec/carrera-trabajo-social-anuatse/> > Accessed 31 October 2025.

70 https://www.facebook.com/ctsp.ecuador?locale=es_LA

71 https://aep.com.ec/quienes_somos/

72 <https://asointerts.wixsite.com/asointer>

nationally, promote adherence to ethical and scientific standards, and support research and professional development. However, despite its central role, current legislation does not provide for external oversight or accountability mechanisms to assess the CTSP's leadership, finances or operations. Furthermore, a 2023 workforce mapping noted that its decentralized structure has contributed to limited capacity to advocate effectively for the profession at the national level, lack of uniformity in requirements and fees across regions, and occurrences of duplicated registration and increased administrative burden and costs for social workers.⁷³ This finding was supported among focus group participants for this review, who described membership in the College of Social Workers and College of Sociologists as primarily procedural, required for practice as a civil servant but not something beneficial: *“they don't benefit us, only for professional licensing.”*

Social workers and other child protection professionals are also supported by a network of professional associations that, unlike the official CTSP, do not have a legally mandated role of quality assurance, but rather have been established to promote workforce development and advocate for the profession. With the right backing, these associations could play an important role in raising visibility and strengthening capacity through the organization of national and international events (e.g., World Social Work Day), trainings and conferences, and promotion of national and regional research (e.g., Centre for Latin American Social Work publishes its own quarterly social work journal). Some of these associations are aligned with specific areas of social work practice, such as health or the private sector, reflecting the range of employers and specialties engaging these workers. Five associations, the Association of Social Workers in Companies, the Latin American

Center for Social Work, the Peruvian Committee for Social Welfare, Peruvian Society of Social Work and Health – Metropolitan Lima, have formed an Interinstitutional Commission on Social Work, with a board that meets monthly to address issues affecting social workers. This collaborative body is actively preparing draft legislation to improve working conditions in the field and to reform the CTSP, as part of a broader movement toward greater professional recognition, advocacy and unity within Peru's social work community.

Client and worker perspectives on social services and the workforce

As part of this regional review, the GSSWA conducted secondary analysis of existing qualitative data to capture the perspectives of children, youth and families. The analysis focused on lived experiences of individuals who have interacted with social services, particularly those affected by violence or family separation or residing in alternative care. Data sources related to client perspectives included publicly available and partner-shared materials, such as participatory studies or consultations led by UNICEF and its partners. Key references encompassed a regional mapping initiative of activists with lived experience by Doncel, the Latin American Care Leavers Network, the Better Care Network and Changing the Way We Care, alongside UNICEF's regional consultations on access to justice⁷⁴ and UNICEF Colombia's report on the experiences of children reintegrated from paramilitary groups⁷⁵. Additional data were gathered via a sample of youth in Bolivia (n=575) who participated in a U-Report poll on their understanding and firsthand experiences of social services (*see Box on the following page*).

73 United Nations Children's Fund, *Informe sobre la fuerza laboral de los servicios sociales en el Perú*, UNICEF Perú, Lima, 2023., <https://www.unicef.org/peru/documents/informe-sobre-la-fuerza-laboral-de-los-servicios-sociales-en-el-peru>

74 United Nations Children's Fund, *Manifiesto Adolescentes Justicia sin Barreras – Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño*, UNICEF, Bogotá, n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/lac/derechos/manifiesto-adolescentes-justicia-sin-barreras-convencion-derechos-nino>

75 United Nations Children's Fund, *Estudio de caracterización: niñez desvinculada*, UNICEF Colombia, Bogotá, n.d., <https://www.unicef.org/colombia/documents/estudio-de-caracterizacion-ninez-desvinculada>

LISTENING TO YOUTH THROUGH U-REPORT: PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES IN BOLIVIA

In October 2025, 575 children and young people across Bolivia participated in a U-Report consultation on their experiences with child protection and social services. The survey was conducted in Spanish over platforms such as WhatsApp and Messenger and reached youth, mostly between 13 and 24 years old and either in high school or university, in both urban and rural areas. Results provided firsthand insights into young Bolivians' awareness of and experiences with child protection and social service systems.

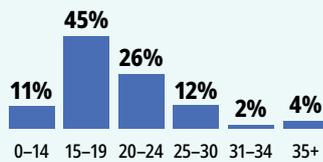
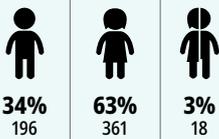
PROTECTION

Consultation on Protection Services 2025

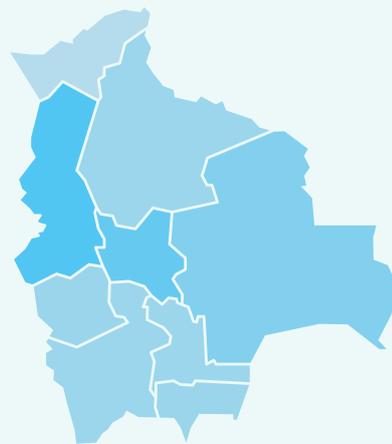
October 27, 2025

575
PARTICIPANTS

95%
RESPONSE RATE



TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS



MAIN REGION: **LA PAZ**
203 PARTICIPANTS // 216 RESPONDENTS

Maps are stylized and not to scale. They do not reflect a position by UNICEF or the GSSWA on the legal status of any country or area or the delineation of any borders.

About one in five respondents (20 per cent) reported having direct contact with social services. Most sought help with 'resolving issues in my family,' specifically from Child and Adolescent Defenders (DNA), and were assisted mainly by social workers and psychologists. Almost all these respondents said this professional did something to help, typically assessing the case, offering guidance or referring them to another institution. When asked what could be improved the most common responses were: more trained personnel, friendlier and more respectful treatment, and shorter waiting times. These findings suggest that when young people reach the system, they experience real engagement, though the perceived quality and empathy of the response vary across institutions.

The remaining 80 per cent of respondents had never received support from a social service institution. About half (45 per cent) know where to go for help if they or a friend needed it, with more not knowing (21 per cent) or unsure (33 per cent). Many associated the term "social services" with "help for families and children in trouble" (67 per cent) or "government programmes" (19 per cent), reflecting limited understanding of existing structures. Main reasons for not seeking assistance were lack of information, fear and shame. When asked how services could become more youth-friendly, the most frequent answers were: greater dissemination of information, more welcoming environments, and outreach activities in schools and communities.

Together, the results highlight both the potential and the limitations of Bolivia's child protection system: when accessed, it provides tangible support, but for most young people it remains distant and poorly understood, underscoring the urgent need for outreach, communication, and trust-building between institutions and youth.

While the reviewed sources offered valuable insights into the lived experiences within child protection and social service systems, they also presented certain limitations. The qualitative data were drawn from diverse studies and consultations that, while rich in detail, were not necessarily representative of all groups or contexts across the four countries. Nonetheless, several key themes emerged. Both service users and workers described a lack of continuity and follow-up, particularly for children leaving care or being reintegrated into families, as well as inconsistencies in how support is delivered. As detailed in a 2020 report, 'More Autonomy, More Rights', based on research in partnership with national associations of care leavers and coordinated by the Latin American Network of Care Leavers with DONCEL, Hope and Homes for Children and UNICEF, young people currently in or graduated from the care system confirmed that this lack of close connection, accompaniment or continuous follow-up is a common experience:

"I really value the guidance and accompaniment, but in a residential facility there are too many children and they don't support you." (Participant, Focus Group with Graduates, Colombia)

"When you leave the institution, they support you for a while. Afterwards you feel alone, it's as if they forget about you..." (Participant, Focus Group with Graduates, Bolivia)

Youth participating in these studies or consultations also cited challenges related to distance and accessibility of services, alongside perceptions of rigidity and bureaucratic processes that can discourage help-seeking or effective engagement. In Bolivia, respondents to a 2024 UNICEF regional consultation on access to justice for rights-based violations described a lack of trust in institutions, making it difficult for them to disclose situations of harm or to believe that reporting something will lead to change:

"Now there are many rules, many rights for women and children, but when you want to report something, they just say, 'we'll look into your case,' and then they let it go and don't solve it—so you no longer want to report again." (Youth Participant, Bolivia)

"If you go alone to report something, when you're underage they don't believe you, they don't believe in children—they think you don't have rights, and your confidence goes down because they don't believe you." (Youth Participant, Bolivia)

In Colombia and Ecuador, youth participants in these same consultations also expressed scepticism and a lack of confidence in institutions meant to protect their rights, leading them to avoid seeking help from key actors within the child protection system, and instead preferring to resolve problems on their own. As described by a young person interviewed as part of UNICEF's study of children recruited to paramilitary groups in Colombia, *"I would say that they should listen to people more (...), that we should be heard and that they should believe the victim's word and not what others are saying, because that's how it is here."*

This lack of confidence is linked to negative experiences with state systems, such as delayed responses and age-based discrimination. They also mentioned fear of retaliation or community stigma as deterrents to filing complaints:

"The proper attention or visibility is not given to us as young people or children when we go to report something. They are physically there, but in the end, they don't function correctly or as they are supposed to."

"Sometimes we don't communicate because we're afraid we won't be understood and that justice won't come."

Qualitative findings from focus group discussions with frontline and managerial

staff engaged in child protection and related services provided further insight into workforce realities, challenges and opportunities (see Table 12). All analyses were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, ensuring confidentiality and

excluding any personally identifiable information. Collectively with the secondary analysis of qualitative data from children, youth and families, these sources helped to contextualize findings within the broader child protection and social service systems.

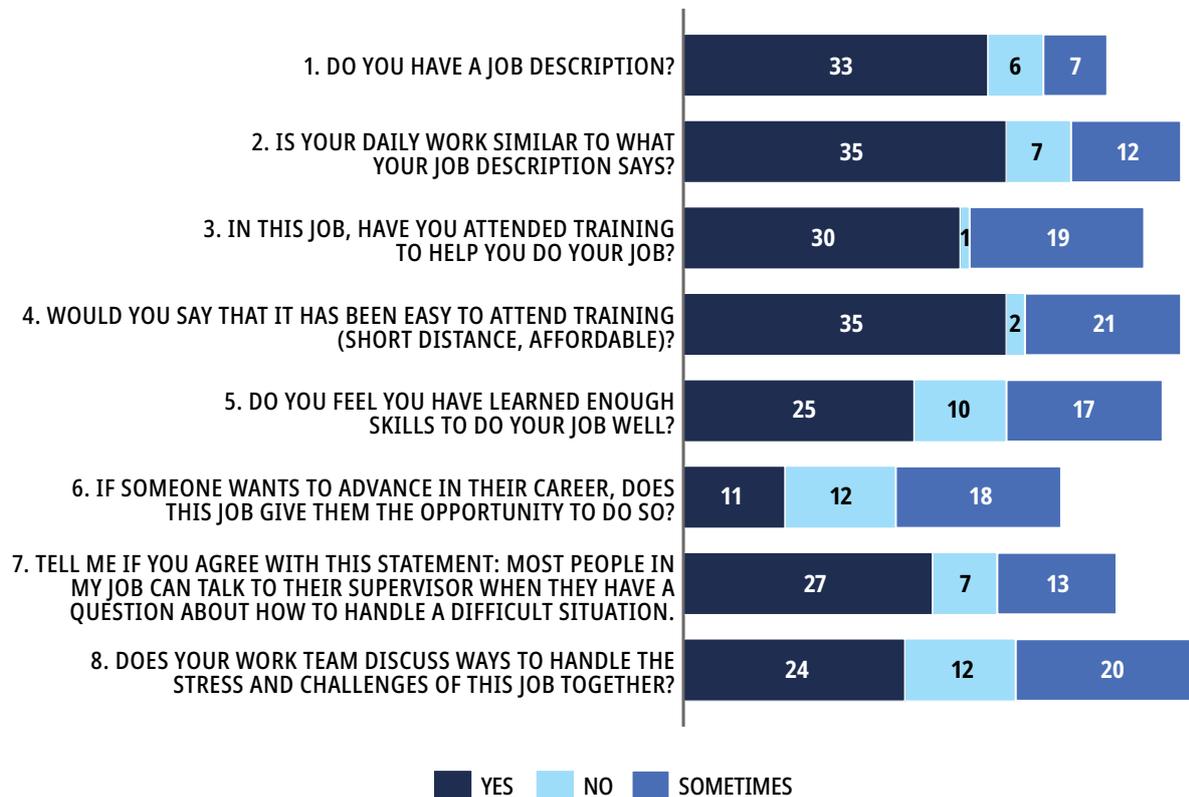
Table 12. Sociodemographic characteristics of focus group participants

VARIABLE	N	%	DESCRIPTION / NOTES
Total participants	40	100	Seven focus group discussions (average ≈ 5.7 participants each)
TYPE OF WORKERS			
Government	27	68	Five focus group discussions (average ≈ 5.4 participants each)
Non-Government	13	33	Two focus group discussions (average ≈ 6.5 participants each)
Total years of experience	392	—	Combined years across participants
Average years of experience	—	—	9.8 years (median = 7 years)
SEX			
Male	11	28	
Female	29	72	
HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED			
No formal education	0	0	
Primary education completed	0	0	
Secondary education completed	0	0	
Short-term training, not related to social services (< 1 year)	1	3	
Short-term training, related to social services (< 1 year)	0	0	
Diploma/certificate, not related to social services (≥ 1 year university)	0	0	
Diploma/certificate, related to social services (≥ 1 year university)	3	8	
University degree, not related to social services (≥ 3 years university)	9	23	
University degree, related to social services (≥ 3 years university)	14	36	
Postgraduate degree (master's, doctorate)	12	31	

Figure 7 summarizes participant responses from the 'face tally' (an exercise involving participants selecting smiling or frowning faces to show agreement or disagreement with certain statements), which was completed during the focus group discussions. It highlights several perceptions related to workforce development. Participants reported, for the most part, that they do have job descriptions, have participated in training and generally found those trainings easy to

access. However, fewer respondents felt they had gained sufficient skills to perform their work well, and even fewer believed their role offered opportunities for career advancement. While these responses offer useful indications of how workers experience issues such as supervision, team communication and stress management, the number of tallies recorded sometimes exceeded the number of individuals in each group and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Figure 7. FGD participants' responses on key aspects of planning, developing and supporting the workforce



From the workforce perspective, both government and non-government staff stressed that they had entered the field out of a deep sense of vocation and empathy, particularly toward children and vulnerable populations, combined with a commitment to defending rights, achieving justice, and finding personal fulfilment in helping others.

"I was drawn to the social work profession through one of my university professors. She inspired in me a spirit of service that felt like a calling." (Non-government worker, Peru)

"I enjoy and love my work because of the children... the mission of the ICBF is centred on children, adolescents, and families." (Government worker, Colombia)

Yet in practice, many emphasized limited time for meaningful one-to-one interactions with children and families, echoing feelings expressed by clients. Workers described doing multiple roles at once, carrying heavy caseloads, and covering nights/weekends, which fuels exhaustion and burnout.

“Because of that commitment, the dedication that professionals try to bring, even if it’s out of goodwill, we’re the ones they send out on operations at dawn, at night, on weekends; we do night shifts, and then the next day we’re back at work. Well, we’ve accepted those conditions too, haven’t we? But, for example, when we go on an operation, to the riversides, to the streets, often with the police — I ask myself, why are we the ones doing this”
(Government worker, Bolivia)

“The challenge I’ve observed is to keep teams motivated and committed to serving, ensuring they don’t lose focus on the well-being of the most vulnerable populations” (Non-government worker, Ecuador)

Other challenges mentioned by workers across the region included pay delays and short-term contracts, which undermine staff retention and service continuity; insufficient operating resources and infrastructure; limited institutional protection and slow judicial processes requiring long-term case management and follow-up; and a lack of focus on prevention activities and the emotional toll of child protection work.

Figures 8 and 9 show how the different challenges facing the workforce were ranked in terms of severity by the two main groups of individuals consulted: key informants and focus group participants. The two sets of results are closely aligned in highlighting heavy workload, followed by inadequate human resources and insufficient budget or general resources as the three most serious challenges, in that order. Low salaries and inadequate

working conditions feature prominently among the next most highly ranked of the challenges. Surprisingly, lack of training and professional knowledge was ranked equally with the challenges cited by focus group participants, alongside lack of opportunities for professional growth and lack of clarity in roles and performance expectations. However, as noted in the limitations section, the relatively small number of individuals consulted (14 key informants and 40 FGD participants) prevents drawing firm conclusions about the relative severity of these challenges across countries. The following section therefore provides a deeper qualitative analysis of participants’ perspectives on the full range of challenges discussed and how they manifest across different contexts.

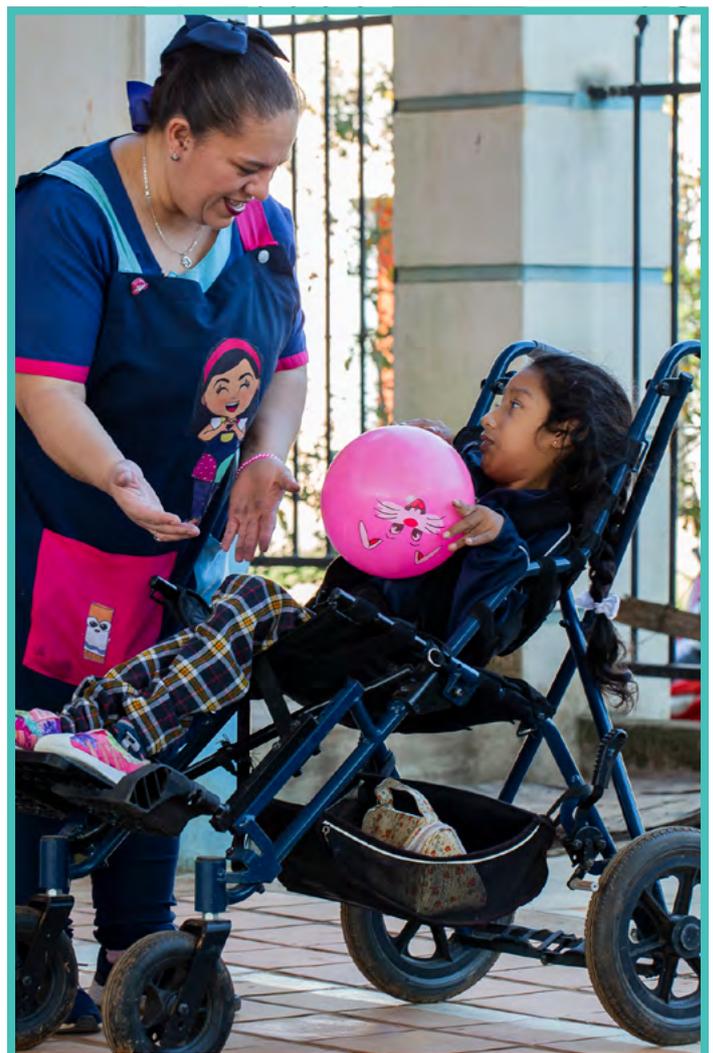


Figure 8. Challenges faced by the child protection workforce as ranked by key informants

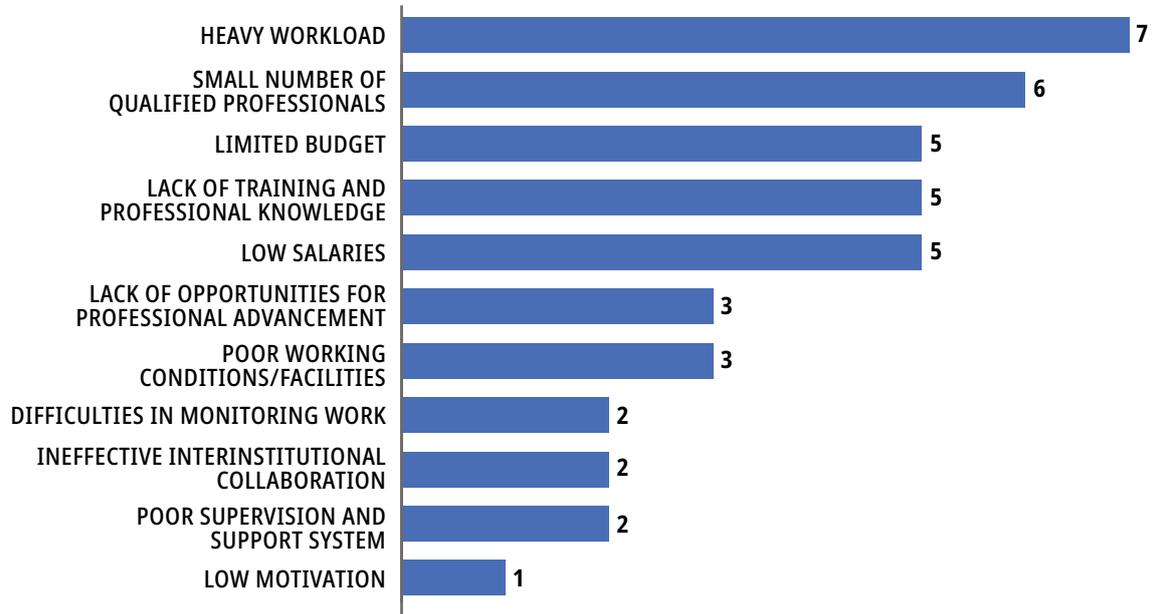


Figure 9. Challenges faced by the child protection workforce as ranked by focus group participants'



EMERGING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPREHENSIVE WORKFORCE STRENGTHENING

Challenges countries face in strengthening the social service workforce

This in-depth analysis of challenges, together with the subsequent examination of strengths and opportunities, is organized around the three pillars of the Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework: planning, developing, and supporting.⁷⁶ Each area of analysis is illustrated by key excerpts in the form of quotes from the qualitative data collected.

1. CHALLENGES IN WORKFORCE PLANNING AND RESOURCING

Inconsistent government leadership disrupts progress and undermines implementation:

A major challenge, which significantly impedes long-term efforts to strengthen the child protection workforce, is the frequent change of leadership and high turnover of political appointments at senior levels within ministries. These constant shifts disrupt continuity, weaken policy leadership and create inconsistencies in oversight and implementation. Participants noted that with each new administration, priorities change, ongoing initiatives lose momentum and institutional memory is lost, making it difficult to sustain progress toward a stable and professionalized workforce.

“Political and social instability generates rotation... investment in training is lost and diluted.” (NGO, Ecuador)

“High turnover and lack of stability prevent the consolidation of technical teams and continuity of care”
(Government worker, Colombia)

The flipside of the political influence on appointments, a key informant from an educational institution in Bolivia noted, is that those who lack political connections do not get appointed to key posts, or do not remain long in the posts they hold: *“If you are not in line with the politics, you do not get to work... or they take you out at any time.”*

Another key informant from an NGO in Bolivia added that low salaries, combined with political turnover, undermine staff stability: *“There is a high turnover due to very low salaries, political shifts and lack of stability.”*

⁷⁶ Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework*, https://socialserviceworkforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SSWS_Framework_ENGLISH.pdf

Inadequate budget leads to understaffing, high workload and burnout: Across all four countries, the individuals consulted described underinvestment in the workforce, leading to severe shortages of qualified personnel, which in turn contribute to excessive workloads and emotional exhaustion, negatively affecting the quality of care they can provide. A former government key informant in Peru noted that lack of investment prevents the workforce from receiving sufficient remuneration:

“Public spending must be a priority. Without investment, gaps cannot be closed, nor can salaries be improved.”

Another key government informant in Peru added that when positions are not filled, it leads to gaps in service, impeding the implementation of reforms:

“There is a major challenge regarding closing staffing gaps... until we implement the operational designs, we cannot expect results.”

That same colleague, along with many others, noted the other reason why understaffing lowers the quality of care, which is that the few staff members who remain become exhausted and burnt out, through: *“professional exhaustion... which affects productivity, the work environment, and child-centred care.”*

Similar observations were made by a local government worker in Colombia, saying they cannot provide the required quality of care: *“The overload of cases means that specific care cannot be provided... we have three family lawyers with their teams, and that’s it.”*

A similar lack of personnel in the judiciary was noted by a government worker in Ecuador and attributed to a lack of budget for recruitment and staff development: *“The biggest challenge is covering the judicial staff deficit... without a budget to evaluate or hire technical teams.”*

Low salaries and precarious contracts destabilize the existing workforce: The quality of services, linked to the low morale and motivation of the workforce, is further undermined by the low levels of pay and insecure, short-term contracts. This was a common finding in all four countries. A government key informant in Bolivia pointed out the paradox that social welfare is the least well-paid sector with the highest workload: *“It’s the sector with the least pay, but the most work. We work 24-7... It’s a type of work for which we make many sacrifices.”*



Several key informants noted that low salaries and insecure contracts lead to high turnover, which further undermines service quality and capacity:

"The lack of consistent remuneration results in high turnover... staff jump from one role to another in search of a better salary." (Former government key informant, Peru)

"The underfunding of the system leads to service providers offering weak contracts and low pay... there is high turnover." (NGO, Colombia)

In Bolivia, a key informant representing a professional association stressed that short-term contracts also harm children through 'revictimization' – having to answer the same questions all over again, each time staff change: *"They contract people for 89 days... the children have a new therapist every 3 months, which causes re-victimisation."*

Ultimately, a lack of continuous financing for human resources undermines sustainability. For example, key informants in Peru noted that while new staff have been hired, the funding for these posts is not secured beyond 2026.

2. CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING WORKFORCE CAPACITY

Insufficient specialization for students and inconsistent opportunities for professional development restrict workers' ability to meet evolving child protection demands: The most common concern expressed in this area was that many professionals enter the field without specific preparation for the complex realities of child rights, trauma, and social inequality. A key informant from a university in Bolivia lamented the outdated content of current curricula: *"The educational institutions are obsolete... the new professionals leave without specialisation and frustrated with the reality of the work."*

A former government representative reflected on the untapped potential for students to further specialize in child protection in their coursework, stating that *"There is no system of specialised training... it would be more interesting if the student could be trained in some kind of specialised protection system."*

One consequence of this, an NGO key informant in Ecuador noted, is that university education not only does not prepare the workforce to work with vulnerable children, it can lead to those

children being pathologized or criminalized, owing to workers' lack of insight into children's lived experiences: *"University education does not prepare one for work with vulnerable children... it pathologises and criminalises the victims."*

Beyond pre-service education, there is a lack of opportunity or consistent system for continuing learning and professional development. A government representative in Ecuador noted that there are current workforce capacity gaps not only in protection of children's rights but also prevention of violence and mental health: *"There is still a need to consolidate systematic programmes of capacity building... in protection of rights, mental health and prevention of violence."*

Key informants in Colombia noted key achievements in introducing new training programmes, but uneven training access and resource constraints outside major cities appeared to limit progress in these areas.

3. CHALLENGES IN SUPPORTING THE WORKFORCE

Limited funding undercuts infrastructure, as well as efforts to bolster working conditions and support for workforce well-being: Across all four countries, planning and budget constraints not only directly undermine services but also create inadequate working conditions where staff lack the required facilities and technology. A government colleague in Bolivia noted that the infrastructure and ICT equipment they rely on are outdated and inadequate: *“We need new infrastructure... our ICT equipment is obsolete.”*

This underinvestment contributes to a negative cycle, compromising workers’ ability to perform and their well-being, which further impairs service quality. Key informants mentioned the negative effects of under-resourcing on the mental health of the workforce.

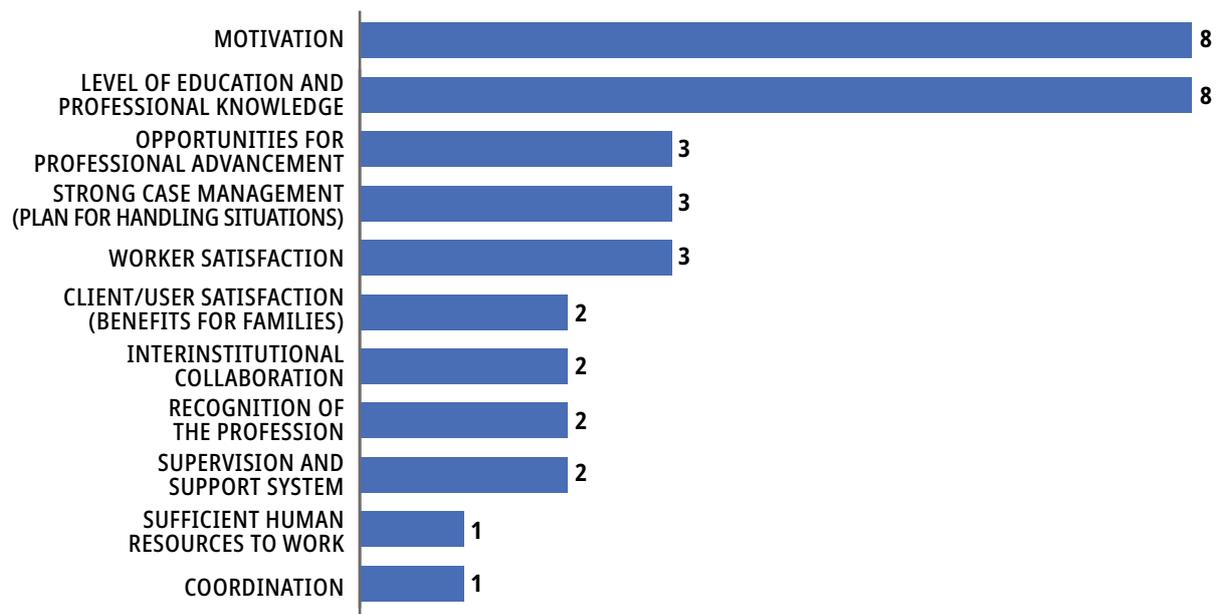
A government representative in Colombia stressed the need for a policy of care for worker mental health, owing to the high stress and exhaustion levels: *“it would be important to implement a policy of care for the mental health*

of staff, because there is a high level of burnout”, while an NGO representative in Bolivia described this as a need to care for the caregivers: *“We need to talk about caring for the caregivers... mental health is completely absent in the system.”*

Current strengths, achievements and opportunities for workforce strengthening

Key informants consistently recognized the workforce’s motivation and its high level of education and professional expertise as primary strengths. They reflected on these assets, as well as others as seen in Figure 10, when discussing key recent achievements and promising areas for further development in their countries, more deeply explored in the analysis, organized around the three pillars of the Social Service Workforce Strengthening Framework.

Figure 10. Strengths of the child protection workforce, as ranked by key informants



1. STRENGTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN WORKFORCE PLANNING AND RESOURCING

New legal and policy frameworks support efforts to improve recruitment, deployment, and support of the child protection workforce:

Across countries, key actors highlighted significant progress in developing and adopting new laws, regulations, and policies related to child rights, advances that, in turn, have prompted efforts to strengthen the human resources responsible for implementing these mandates.

In Bolivia, government representatives underscored the enactment of the Early Childhood Law and the creation of multiple councils on childhood, youth, anti-racism and anti-trafficking, each with a defined legal mandate: *“Each committee has a departmental law... they are not only established institutions, but they also have their own legal framework within which we work with different institutions.”*

NGO representatives echoed this progress, citing the recent passage of national laws on digital protection and the prohibition of child marriage after years of sustained advocacy: *“The law on enhanced protection in digital environments and the law on child marriage were approved... we fought for them for three years.”*

Key informants in Ecuador similarly emphasized the adoption of new judicial instruments that strengthen appropriate and effective responses to restore children’s rights.

These legal and policy developments have been accompanied by renewed attention to the need for more structured human resources systems that govern recruitment, induction, supervision, and working conditions. Key informants stressed that laws alone are insufficient without clear job descriptions, standardized competencies, strong induction processes, and improved contracts and salaries.

As an NGO representative in Colombia explained, sustainable improvement depends on: *“Job and competency manuals, rigorous induction, continuous training... permanent contracts, and competitive salaries.”*

Another Colombian NGO representative reiterated the importance of job profiles aligned with national standards: *“Profiles aligned with ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) job postings... not below those standards.”*

In Ecuador, NGO representatives highlighted the value of embedding safeguarding into recruitment and induction: *“Job descriptions, due diligence, and interviews with a safeguarding component; induction tailored to needs.”*

These key actors emphasized that effective implementation of new legal frameworks requires stronger management systems and operational tools that enable clear role assignment, accountability, and decision-making. A government representative in Bolivia described ongoing efforts to establish an institutional operations management system: *“We have been working... on establishing and having an institutional SOA (System of Operations). This will allow us to better define our actions and responsibilities.”*

A representative from the justice sector in Ecuador highlighted a parallel achievement in developing national tools for child protection decision-making, including specialized training modules for judges with intercultural and intergenerational approaches: *“A guide on alternative care modalities... with an intercultural, intergenerational, and gender focus.”* Together, these advancements demonstrate how new child rights legislation is catalysing broader improvements to the recruitment, structuring and support of the workforce tasked with fulfilling these mandates.

Initiatives to expand staffing and reduce human resource gaps improve coverage and interdisciplinary support: Several key achievements in filling human resource gaps were noted. In Colombia, a government representative reported a tripling of interdisciplinary staff through a national-level plan to strengthen human resources, thanks to the commitment of the new administration: *“This is the first national administration that has recognized the need and strengthened human talent... this makes an absolute improvement in service delivery...”* Such progress in improving staffing was described as unprecedented



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by another, regional-level government representative, adding that new Family Defender Offices⁷⁷ were created in four conflict-affected regions: *“We’ve never had so much support in terms of human talent... new defenders have arrived and others are coming for Catatumbo. It’s an unprecedented situation...”*

A government representative in Peru noted that they had implemented ten emergency measures to close staffing gaps across the interdisciplinary roles in 25 special protection units (UPEs) by the end of 2025, and are aiming for sustainability of these hires in 2026: *“The staffing gap has been closed almost 100%... this is a historic achievement because since 2020 we have never been able to close the HR gaps so fully.”*

Key informants from Ecuador’s Ministry of Education detailed the overall level of ambition in their recruitment plans, with over 1,176 professionals hired to its Student Counselling Department (DECE) in 2024–2025, plus new pay scales and career structure for counseling professionals: *“During this administration... coverage has increased by 11.73%, reducing the existing gap and strengthening the management of Student Counselling Departments.”* However, other key informants in Ecuador noted that there remains a gap between planned DECE coverage (requiring 10,023 staff) and current staffing (4,167, which equates to a ratio of only one counsellor to 350 students).

Interdisciplinary and inter-institutional planning and coordination enhance integrated services for children: While literature on the workforce in LAC reveals widespread concern that child protection services are often disjointed and poorly integrated, a large number of key informants and focus group participants across all four countries noted progress in addressing this challenge as a recent focus of many reforms.

In Ecuador, a government key informant noted the importance of joint strategies and interagency agreements to increase capacity for inter-sectoral collaboration, specifically highlighting: *“Capacity... to coordinate actions with other institutional and community actors, such as health, justice, and social protection services. This inter-institutional coordination strengthens comprehensive and sustainable responses to diverse problems...”*

An Ecuadoran NGO representative highlighted the benefits of joint planning for more integrated services, noting that such plans often require collaborative studies to guide decision-making. This added value was reflected in Ecuador’s recent joint work with UNICEF on financial and operational models for alternative care and emphasize sustainability and prevention: *“We are working with UNICEF on an analysis of the management model for alternative care modalities in Ecuador”.*

A government representative in Colombia detailed how multi-sectoral approaches are becoming more established, observing the synergy across colleagues specializing in law, psychology, social work and nutrition who unite to provide child protection services: *“It’s*

not just the rights defender; there is synergy across the interdisciplinary team... legal, social, psychological, and nutritional work.”

Integration for better response to humanitarian emergencies, including the needs of refugees and migrants, was also noted by an NGO representative in Colombia, with a recent achievement being the integration of academia, NGOs and government in joint training of personnel in humanitarian and migration response efforts, especially in areas sensitive to conflict: *“The dynamics of armed conflict and forced displacement brought international cooperation... they developed human talent and generated an important training ground...”*

In Bolivia, the key achievement noted was the development of strong inter-institutional coordination with national ministries for anti-trafficking, anti-racism and youth programmes. As shared by a government representative, *“We work from the governor’s office with different institutions... strengthened by the Council on Trafficking in Persons,”* emphasizing the importance of alignment between prevention, care and protection: *“Collaboration... with strategic and allied institutions for prevention, care and protection.”*



2. STRENGTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN DEVELOPING WORKFORCE CAPACITY

Scaled training systems, tools and coordinated capacity-building improve workforce competencies:

Across all four countries, key informants highlighted progress in strengthening workforce capacity through expanded training plans, learning systems and tools, and coordinated initiatives implemented by governments and their partners. In Colombia, officials described the introduction of regular in-service training with a strong focus on differential approaches that consider ethnicity, gender, and neurodivergence, as well as programmes to support caregivers. In Peru, a government representative emphasized the approval of a new competency-based capacity-building plan with a structured calendar for implementation: *“This year, a capacity-building plan with a competency-based approach and a structured timeline until December was approved...”*

A key informant from an NGO in Bolivia underscored the importance of investing in competency-based learning supported by globally tested toolkits and continuous professional development: *“...competency-based training... something very few organizations do. [Our organization] invests heavily in training its staff to develop these strengths... we have ‘common approaches’, globally proven toolkits for recurring problems.”*

Similarly, a government representative in Ecuador noted the expansion of ongoing

training programmes, specifically a large-scale training and hiring plan under the *2024–2030 National Policy to Eradicate Sexual Violence in Education*. This effort includes onboarding for 1,176 new counseling professionals in Student Counselling Departments (DECE, part of more than 4,000 staff to be trained) and expanding virtual learning through the *Me Capacito* platform on psychosocial care, digital safety, inclusive education and restorative practices: *“The course under development will have 150 hours in an online format... strengthening the capacities of DECE professionals in matters of psychosocial support.”* Ecuador also noted gains through multi-agency national training initiatives focused on family- and community-based care, engaging judges, local protection councils, specialised police units for children and adolescents (DINAPEN)⁷⁸ and NGOs.

Bolivia has also strengthened continuous training in coordination with justice institutions, covering digital violence prevention, case management and stress management. A Bolivian university representative further noted the value of interdisciplinary student-led initiatives addressing gender-based violence, human trafficking, and digital safety: *“Our students not only see the problem, they provide solutions... (such as) developing a process for safeguarding the data and image of girls, boys, or adolescents.”*



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3. STRENGTHS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN SUPPORTING THE WORKFORCE

Initiatives to boost motivation and protect mental health and well-being among child protection workers: Government, NGO, and university representatives in all four countries highlighted a wide range of initiatives to improve workforce motivation and safeguard the mental health and well-being of child protection personnel. Informants in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru consistently emphasized that strong motivation, service-oriented values, and ethical commitment are critical assets that sustain workers amid demanding conditions:

"The main strength is a sense of vocation... being in a protection service... is not easy; those who are here are here because they love what they do." (Key Informant, Government, Colombia)

"The greatest strength... commitment and a calling to serve... the development of specialized skills is encouraged." (Key Informant, Government, Peru)

"A team committed to protection and well-being... with an ethical and human approach." (Key Informant, Government, Ecuador)

Several concrete achievements were noted in efforts to strengthen well-being. In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF and IOM, implemented 'Together We Care' (*Colectivamente nos cuidamos*) a care-for-the-caregiver model that includes

collective well-being sessions and psychosocial accompaniment. More than 400 teachers and 100 Student Counselling Department (DECE) professionals received support under this initiative in 2025. An NGO representative in Ecuador also underscored the value of peer exchange spaces that reduce stress and foster motivation: *"Spaces for sharing best practices and emotional support... knowing that you are not alone, that there are other people facing the same challenges."*

In Peru, child protection authorities introduced a new staff recognition programme using non-monetary incentives, alongside a diagnostic and response strategy to detect and prevent burnout. A key informant from the government noted: *"Information has been gathered on the diagnosis of professional burnout syndrome... the strategy is being developed based on the diagnosis."*

In Bolivia, continuous training for justice system personnel has incorporated emotional management and stress-reduction components. As one NGO colleague explained, this approach strengthens the quality and sensitivity of care provided in complex cases: *"Training in violence prevention and stress management... helped people see the problem beyond the legal framework."* Together, these initiatives reflect a growing recognition across the region that workforce motivation and well-being are fundamental to delivering high-quality, compassionate child protection services.

CONCLUSION

Across these four Andean countries, there is strong political recognition of the need to improve coverage and quality of child protection services, for which workforce planning, development and support is essential. Governments, donors and civil society actors increasingly acknowledge that investment in human resources is fundamental to reducing violence, preventing unnecessary family separation and achieving measurable child protection outcomes. The UNICEF–GSSWA workforce strengthening indicators offer a clear roadmap for assessing baselines, setting targets, and planning joint action.

This review demonstrates that the Andean region is at a pivotal moment. With targeted investment, coordinated leadership and sustained political will, all four countries have the opportunity to build a resilient, professional and adequately resourced workforce capable of fulfilling their child protection mandates. Priority actions include developing comprehensive national workforce strategies; formalizing regulatory frameworks for accreditation and licensing; establishing Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS); improving practice-based education, pre-service and in-service training; and creating institutional mechanisms for supervision and worker mental health and well-being. Strengthening intersectoral coordination and creating structured partnerships with NGOs and community groups will also be essential to ensure that children receive consistent, holistic support.

Finally, to be truly effective, and to boost recruitment and retention, the child protection workforce, in particular social workers, need to be more consistently and robustly supported and recognised, by both governments and the general public. This recognition and support can only be achieved if UN agencies and other

international partners join with governments, NGOs and professional associations to plan and implement joint advocacy campaigns, to raise awareness of the key role, and urgent needs, of this vital workforce.

This review, therefore, provides a credible, data-driven baseline that can guide government actors, donors and UNICEF in scaling up such efforts to professionalize and support the child protection workforce. By investing in people—the frontline workers who safeguard children daily—countries can accelerate progress toward safe, protective environments where all children can thrive.



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