

# Single Mothers and Child Support in Extended-Family Households: Insights from Six Latin American Countries

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Extended-family households are common among single mothers. Using Luxembourg Income Study data from waves 2014–2019, we study child support receipt among single mothers living in extended-family households in Chile, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. We have three aims: to present the prevalence and characteristics of single mothers living with relatives, compare the level of child support received by extended-family and other single-mother households, and examine whether living in an extended-family household predicts child support receipt. We find the characteristics of mothers in extended-family households vary by country. Overall, these mothers are younger, have lower levels of education, are less likely to be employed, and are, in half of the countries, less likely to receive child support. This has important gender implications, as cultural norms around caregiving often place the financial burden on women, while fathers may reduce their financial contributions when mothers live with other relatives.

*Key words:* child support; single mothers; extended families; Latin America.

## Introduction

Single motherhood has increased in various parts of the world, including countries within Europe (Bradshaw, Keung, and Chzhen 2018; Nieuwenhuis 2020), in the United States (Miho and Thévenon 2020), and Latin American countries, among others. Single-mother families, defined as those in which a

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mother lives with her own children under eighteen years old and is either divorced, separated, or unmarried (Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022; Liu, Esteve, and Treviño 2017), are particularly vulnerable and at a higher risk of poverty compared with two-parent families (e.g. Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis 2015). This vulnerability is largely shaped by the gendered dynamics of caregiving and financial support, raising concerns about gender equality.

From a gender perspective, single motherhood is not only a family structure but a social phenomenon deeply intertwined with broader societal inequalities and gendered social norms. Single mothers often face the dual burden of caregiving and providing (UN Women 2019), exacerbated by societal expectations that place primary caregiving responsibilities on women. In regions such as Latin America, where public protection is weak, extended families often provide crucial support, especially for single mothers to cope with financial challenges and to share caregiving responsibilities (Cerrutti and Binstock 2009; Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022; Reyes 2020). This reliance on extended family support underscores how systemic gender inequalities shape the economic and social realities of single mothers and their children.

It is estimated that at least half of single mothers worldwide live in extended-family households (with other relatives), although prevalence varies across regions and countries (UN Women 2019). Despite the prevalence of extended-family households among single mothers, there is limited understanding of how this family structure interacts with various policies, particularly through a gendered lens. Child support or child maintenance is a financial transfer between parents not living together, where one parent, the noncustodial parent (usually the father), is obligated to transfer resources (monetary and/or in-kind) to the custodial parent, usually the mother, to share the financial responsibility of raising their children (Hakovirta, Meyer, and Skinner 2022; Hakovirta et al. 2022; Kurz 2003). Child support is essential for single-mother families to meet basic needs and reduce poverty (Bartfeld 2000; Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Cuesta and Meyer 2014, 2018; Meyer and Hu 1999; Adelakun et al. 2024). However, despite its significance, many eligible families do not receive it (Cuesta, Guarín, and Eickmeyer 2023; Cuesta and Meyer 2012, 2018; Hakovirta and Mesiäislehto 2022; Ríos-Salas and Meyer 2014).

Child support noncompliance (the failure of noncustodial parents to meet their child support obligations) is a gendered issue shaped by societal expectations of postseparation parenting. Mothers are expected to be both primary breadwinners and emotionally selfless, leading to scrutiny over how they manage child support, often being labeled as “child support queens” if they spend on personal needs. In contrast, fathers are judged more on their emotional involvement than their financial contributions, reinforcing gender inequality. These cultural norms contribute to low child support compliance by downplaying the importance of fathers’ financial responsibilities (Cozzolino and Williams 2017).

This study examines the prevalence of extended households among single mothers and their child support receipt in Latin American countries with comparable data, specifically Chile, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Latin American countries present unique family dynamics characterized by a high prevalence of single-mother households often supported by extended families (Esteve, Castro, and Becca 2023; Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022). Relatedly, transitions to partnership and parenthood often occur in lower socioeconomic groups while remaining in the parental home, also resulting in multigenerational or extended household arrangements (Esteve, Castro, and Becca 2023). Thus, understanding these distinctive family configurations and their socioeconomic implications is essential for informing policies to better support single mothers and their children in the region.

In the context of the current study, we hypothesized that for mothers in extended-family households, if fathers perceive that single mothers are receiving support from other household members, they may reduce the financial support they provide to their children. This reflects gender expectations, where fathers may feel less obligated to contribute financially when mothers are perceived as financially supported by others. Such dynamics can impact the economic well-being of custodial mothers and their children, highlighting how gender roles and family structures shape financial obligations. Alternatively, if single mothers do not receive child support, they may decide to co-reside with other family members to get additional support.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that analyzes the role of child support in extended families from a comparative perspective in Latin America. By adopting a gender framework, we seek to understand the role of extended families in child support receipt. Therefore, we selected countries that offer variation in the prevalence of single-parent and extended-family households but also in how common it is for single mothers to receive child support. This allows us to conduct meaningful comparisons and analyses across different contexts, providing greater insight into the relationship between extended families and child support.

Using data from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) database for the years 2014–2019, we first present the prevalence and characteristics of single mothers living in extended-family households. Then, we compare the level of child support received by single mothers by whether they live in extended-family households. Finally, we examine whether living in an extended-family household predicts child support receipt across countries. Our findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the association between child support and extended families in different countries.

This study provides greater insight into the role of extended families in child support receipt, especially in a region where the prevalence of extended families is increasing, but policy has yet to catch up. Such households may pose challenges for policies that were originally designed to support traditional family units, raising issues of equity, adequacy, eligibility, and allocation of

resources for households with children (Berger and Carlson 2020). Gendered expectations in caregiving and financial support further complicate these dynamics, as policies often assume traditional family roles that may not align with the realities of extended-family households.

## Background

### Single parents and extended-family households

In recent decades, more children spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent home, most commonly with a single mother (Cerrutti and Binstock 2009; Nieuwenhuis 2020). This pattern has been evident across geographic and cultural contexts, with evidence indicating an increase in countries from Europe to Latin America to the United States. In 2018, the proportion of children living with a single parent in OECD countries ranged from 8 percent in Turkey to a high of 26 percent in the United States (Kramer et al. 2019; Miho and Thévenon 2020). Estimates from Central and South America indicate that children living with one parent ranged from 19 percent in Bolivia (2008) and Perú (2012) to 37 percent in Colombia (2015) (Institute for Family Studies 2019).

Single mothers and their children are at a higher risk of living in poverty and generally are more disadvantaged across several domains compared with two-parent families (Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Nieuwenhuis 2020; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018). Extended-family arrangements may provide additional resources in these circumstances. In extended families, there is usually a host family unit and some guest family members who are welcomed into the household. Moving in with other family members, or having family members move in, can reduce housing costs, increase opportunities to pool other resources (Reyes 2020), and satisfy different kinds of generational needs such as childcare and care for older adults or people with disabilities.

Given that extended-family households may play a protective role against economic hardships by providing a safety net of economic support for family members in need, increases in the prevalence of single mothers and resulting economic vulnerability may be related to increases in the prevalence of extended-family households (specifically, three-generation households where a mother typically lives with her children and one or more parents) in recent years (Pilkauskas and Cross 2018). This living arrangement can be particularly important for single mothers and their children as it might enable them to count on other relatives to participate in childcare, thus reducing the conflict single mothers face between work and care (Esteve, García-Román, and Lesthaeghe 2012; Gupta, Ksoll, and Maertens 2021; Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018; Reyes 2020; Tilahun et al. 2021). Having this support network can also improve the food and economic security levels of single mothers and their children (Alderete, Sonderegger, and Pérez-Stable 2018; Kamo 2000).

The prevalence of extended-family households varies by region and country. On a global scale, extended-family households are more prevalent in Central/South America, Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa than in other parts of the world (Child Trends 2015; Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022). In Central and South America, extended families have been historically common and continue to be one of the main family structures (Child Trends 2015), with estimates indicating that the proportion of children living in extended-family households ranged from 39 percent (Bolivia) to 55 percent (Colombia and Nicaragua) between 2000 and 2014 (Child Trends 2015). Although extended-family households are less common in Europe than in Latin America, in Central-Eastern Europe (20–44 percent) and Southern Europe (27–36 percent), a considerable share of the population lives in extended households (with or without children) (Oláh 2015). Estimates for the proportion of children, specifically in extended households, also indicate that this is a common experience for children in some countries. In Europe, this includes a high of 43 percent of children in Romania (2002) and 34 percent in Spain (2001) who lived with related adults in addition to parents. Finally, Cross (2018) estimated that around 16 percent of children in the United States experienced extended family co-residence, and around 35 percent of children lived in some extended-family household configuration during their childhood (Cross 2018).

Extended-family households are particularly common among the more disadvantaged (Cross 2018), including single-parent households. More than half of single mothers in Central and Southern Asia (67 percent) and close to half in Northern Africa and Western Asia (46 percent), sub-Saharan Africa (46 percent), and Latin America and the Caribbean (45 percent) live in extended-family households. Only in Europe and North America do fewer than half of single mothers live in extended-family households (32 percent) (UN Women 2019). In countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico, this proportion is even higher (70 percent) when considering younger single mothers (Esteve, García-Román, and Lesthaeghe 2012). Although these figures vary greatly within regions (Esteve, Castro-Martín, and Castro Torres 2022; Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023), they provide an overview of how common extended-family households are among single mothers.

### Country context and child support schemes

Table 1 presents key characteristics of the countries studied, including the prevalence of children living in single-mother families, child poverty rates in two-parent and single-mother families, indicators of gender parity (as measured by the Global Gender Gap Index), spending on social assistance and family benefits, and each country's child support regime. Each measure in this table provides an important context with which to understand our findings. The prevalence of single-parent households and comparative poverty rates provides a crucial starting point, and the use of the Global Gender Gap to

Table 1. Country context.

| Country   | Percentage of children living in single-mother families <sup>1-3</sup> | Child poverty rates—two parent families (50%) <sup>1-3</sup> | Child poverty rates—single-mother families (50%) <sup>1-3</sup> | Global gender gap index 2021 <sup>1</sup> | Social assistance public spending as percent of gross domestic product (GDP) <sup>2</sup> | Child support regime <sup>3</sup> |
|-----------|--|--|---|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Chile     | 28.1   | 15.2   | 32.6  | 0.736                                     | 3.5 (2015–2018)   | Court                             |
| Guatemala | 15.7   | 16.4   | 17.4  | 0.664                                     | 1.3 (2016–2020)   | Court                             |
| Panama    | 23.6   | 25.9   | 38.5  | 0.743                                     | 0.8 (2015)  | Court                             |
| Paraguay  | 22.4   | 23.6   | 37.5  | 0.707                                     | 1.3 (2016–2017)   | Court                             |
| Peru      | 18.1   | 26.7   | 25.8  | 0.749                                     | 1.2 (2015–2021)   | Hybrid                            |
| Uruguay   | 21.9   | 15.2   | 33.9  | 0.711                                     | 1.1 (2015)  | Court                             |

Source:

<sup>1-3</sup>LIS Cross-National Data Center in Luxembourg (2023).

<sup>1</sup>World Economic Forum (2022).

<sup>2</sup>The World Bank (2023).

<sup>3</sup>Cuesta et al. (2023), Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela (2018), Hakovirta et al. (2022), Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson (2007).

measure gender parity (which includes four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment) (World Economic Forum 2022) is salient given the higher poverty rates in single-mother households. Similarly, in the context of high poverty among single-mother families and partial gender parity, spending on social assistance and family benefits takes on relevance as a means to support vulnerable families.

For countries in our study, the prevalence of children living with a single mother ranges from 16 percent in Guatemala to 28 percent in Chile. Poverty rates are consistently higher for children living in single-mother families than for those living with two parents; child poverty rates in single-mother families ranged from 17 percent in Guatemala to 39 percent in Panama. All countries in this study have closed around 70 percent of their gender gap, which is still far from the top ten countries in the Global Gender Gap Report, which have closed at least 80 percent of their gender gaps (World Economic Forum 2022).

Chile has the highest spending on social assistance and family benefits (3.5 percent of gross domestic product [GDP] and 1.7 percent of GDP), while other countries such as Panama spend less than 1 percent of their GDP on social assistance, substantially below the OECD average for family benefits public spending (2.1 percent) (OECD 2023). This variation in spending highlights the fragmented nature of social protection in Latin America, where limited public support often coexists with a strong reliance on families—particularly women—for welfare and caregiving responsibilities. Such a familial welfare regime perpetuates traditional gender roles and places an uneven burden on families, contributing to persistent inequalities in the region (González 2015). As a result, single-mother families face a challenging environment characterized by high child poverty rates, limited gender parity, and varying degrees of social assistance and public spending.

Gender plays a fundamental organizing role in shaping the experiences and outcomes of single mothers across multiple institutional settings, including courts, families, the labor market, and welfare systems, as some of these institutions remain structured by gendered norms and expectations, which shape access, support, and opportunities (Moullin and Harkness 2021). Patriarchal norms and gendered expectations often position women as the primary caregivers within families, reinforcing the idea that child-rearing is predominantly a female responsibility. This cultural expectation extends into the legal and judicial systems, where courts may implicitly or explicitly favor mothers as custodial parents in cases of divorce or separation (Giraldo Morales, Mayorga Muñoz, and Sánchez Quintero 2022; McNeely 1998). While this may seem beneficial, it often places single mothers in a precarious economic position, especially when child support systems fail to adequately enforce or ensure consistent payments from noncustodial fathers (Cozzolino and Williams 2017).

In the employment sector, gendered norms and discrimination further exacerbate the challenges faced by single mothers. Many women encounter

barriers to full-time employment or higher-paying jobs due to their caregiving responsibilities, leading to a disproportionate representation of single mothers in lower-wage, part-time, or informal work (Berniell et al. 2021; Moullin and Harkness 2021).

Many single mothers are economically vulnerable, and child support policy may improve the economic well-being of single mothers and their children. When parents do not live together, countries require child support payments from the other parent, but the amounts to be transferred differ dramatically across countries. These differences can be explained, in part, by how countries approach child support policy (Cuesta et al. 2023; Hakovirta et al. 2022; Hakovirta, Cook, and Sinclair 2021).

An earlier comparative study on child support systems by Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson (2007) analyzed some key aspects of child support systems across fourteen countries. They considered the logic of formal decision-making, the determination of child support obligations, and the enforcement and penalty provisions used in the event of noncompliance. Three main types of child support schemes emerged: agency-based, court-based, and hybrid systems in which the courts and another agency/institution are involved in decision-making. This categorization was expanded to include new countries by Skinner and Hakovirta (2020) and Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela (2018) for Latin American countries.

Table 1 shows that five countries, namely Chile, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay, operate a primarily court-based national system (Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Hakovirta et al. 2022; Skinner and Hakovirta 2020). In these countries, the main responsibility to determine and enforce child support orders lies within the judicial system. Peru represents a hybrid scheme in which both the judicial system and public agencies play a role in the main tasks of child support (Cuesta et al. 2023; Hakovirta et al. 2022; Ríos-Salas and Meyer 2014). In Peru, the court system and public agencies determine child support (Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018; Ríos-Salas and Meyer 2014). None of our comparison countries operate with agency schemes only. Countries with agencies are generally more likely to operate with more standardized methods for determining child support obligations, such as strict formulas. Court-based systems, on the other hand, use less prescriptive “guidelines” or often operate with a high level of discretion.

This discretion, combined with weak enforcement mechanisms, can allow cultural gender norms to enable fathers to evade financial responsibilities. Fathers may be judged more on their emotional involvement rather than financial contributions, perpetuating a cycle in which noncompliance often goes unchecked (e.g. Cozzolino and Williams 2017). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the different institutional child support settings and discretion within court-based schemes might impact child support determination and how extended family resources are accounted for. Typically, only the income of separated parents and their new partners is considered in child support calculations, while

the inclusion of other household adult's income is not standard practice, it may be considered under specific legal provisions or in complex family arrangements—this flexibility depends largely on judicial discretion and the unique circumstances of each case (e.g. Brito 2005; Cook et al. 2019).

An emerging literature has documented how repartnering, multiple partner fertility, and the resources of the noncustodial parents are accounted for in calculating child support amounts (e.g. Cancian and Meyer 2011). Additionally, previous evidence shows considerable variation across countries in how parents' resources are accounted for (Skinner, Bradshaw, and Davidson 2007) and how second families are considered in calculating child support amounts (Meyer and Skinner 2016). However, there is little empirical work on how child support orders are modified based on single mothers' household structure, or how orders and amounts are affected by the presence of other adults in the household. Indeed, relatively little is known about how extended family members and their resources are considered in child support determination.

Conceptually, there are different potential approaches to this question. First, if single mothers are living with other adults, it is possible the other adults can bring new resources into the household to share with children. Fathers, relying on traditional gender norms that expect mothers to be primarily responsible for caregiving, might count on the additional support single mothers receive and reduce the financial support they provide to their children. This might lead to a lower amount of child support received by single mothers. Second, child support policy rules might consider the resources of other adults in the households in determining child support, which may lead to lower orders. However, discretion in court-based or hybrid systems often means that such considerations are inconsistently applied. Finally, in other cases, the determination of child support only includes the resources of paying parents, meaning the broader resources available to single mothers are not factored into the calculation, even though these gendered dynamics might influence compliance.

## Prior research on child support determinants

Previous work on the correlates of child support receipt considers custodial parent characteristics, noncustodial parent characteristics, and the characteristics of the child support system in place (Cancian and Meyer 2011; Cuesta 2023; Cuesta and Meyer 2012; Ríos-Salas and Meyer 2014). At the custodial parent level, many factors have been considered. Of particular interest for the current study is the potential influence of the custodial mother's family structure or living arrangement on the likelihood that a noncustodial father will provide child support. Previous work indicates that custodial mothers living in three-generation households are less likely to receive noncash support (Guarin and

Costanzo 2020). Similarly, maternal repartnering has been associated with a decrease in child support received by the mother. Nevertheless, new-partner fertility for mothers who are co-residing with a partner was not associated with an additional decrease in child support receipt (Berger, Cancian, and Meyer 2012). In that sense, factors that can impact a noncustodial father's payment of child support might include his perception of whether the needs of the child and the custodial mother are being fulfilled somehow and/or when the mother has repartnered or has had other children of her own (Meyer and Cancian 2012). Likewise, the number of adults in a child's household—independent of their kinship—is negatively associated with the amount of cash and in-kind support received (Garasky et al. 2010).

In addition to the custodial mother's living arrangements, other factors have been considered as correlates of child support receipt. Such factors include different characteristics of the mother, such as ethnicity, level of education, employment status, and age (Garasky et al. 2010). Custodial mothers with a high income level are more likely to receive support (Cuesta and Meyer 2012; Ha, Cancian, and Meyer 2011). Also, mothers who identify as Black, work more hours, and own their homes may have lower amounts of child support receipt (Garasky et al. 2010). In contrast, White mothers, older mothers, and mothers with high levels of education are more likely to receive child support. Mothers who have never been married are less likely to receive any support in comparison with separated or divorced mothers (Allen, Nunley, and Seals 2011; Cuesta and Meyer 2012; Ha, Cancian, and Meyer 2011; Huang 2009).

## Current study

In the current study, we take a comparative approach to understanding how living in an extended-family household may be associated with single mothers' child support receipt. We build upon Cuesta's (2023) work on child support determinants in Latin America to examine the association between child support receipt and extended-family households in eight countries with comparable data that offer contrasts in the prevalence of these households.

We aim to answer three research questions with the following hypotheses. First, how do the prevalence and characteristics of single mothers differ from those of single mothers who live in extended-family households? We hypothesize that single mothers living in extended-family households are more disadvantaged than single mothers not living in extended-family households due to gendered expectations that position women as primary caregivers, often resulting in increased reliance on familial support networks.

Second, what is the difference in the level (prevalence and amount) of child support received by single mothers compared to single mothers living in extended-family households? We hypothesize that single mothers living in extended-family households receive less child support than single mothers not

living in extended-family households because societal norms often view these mothers as having additional familiar support. This may reinforce assumptions that financial assistance from nonresident fathers is less necessary, therefore resulting in a decreased likelihood and amount of child support received.

Finally, is living in an extended-family household a predictor of child support receipt across countries? After controlling for other characteristics, we hypothesize that living in an extended-family household is no longer a significant predictor of child support receipt. This is because extended-family living arrangements often reflect broader gendered social structures and economic inequalities that influence support receipt through pathways such as lower bargaining power and reduced visibility in formal support systems rather than the living arrangement itself.

## Data, sample, measures, and methods

### Data and sample

We use the LIS Database from the most recent year available in each country (waves 2014–2019). Individual countries each submit the data to the LIS, and the LIS harmonizes these data to make them comparable across countries. The LIS data include information on household composition, income, expenditure, and employment (for more information, see [Ravallion 2015](#)). Although this is the standard data source for cross-country studies, not all Latin American countries provide variables on child support, and not all countries include the same variables on household composition, which limited the number of countries we could include in our study (see also [Cuesta, Hakovirta, and Jokela 2018](#)). Our sample includes information on a total of 13,683 single mothers split across all six countries: Chile, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay (see [Table 2](#)). We define single-mother

**Table 2.** Proportion of single mothers living in extended-family households.

|                  | Single mothers in total ( <i>N</i> ) | Proportion of single mothers living in extended-family households (%) |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Chile (2017)     | 5,354                                | 18  |
| Guatemala (2014) | 1,434                                | 57  |
| Panama (2016)    | 885                                  | 25  |
| Paraguay (2019)  | 617                                  | 54  |
| Peru (2019)      | 2,073                                | 22  |
| Uruguay (2019)   | 3,320                                | 37  |

*Source:* Own calculations based on the Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).

households as households with a mother and her under 18-year-old child or children. In our analysis, extended family consists of a mother, her child(ren), and adult relatives. Focusing on single mothers inherently brings a gender perspective to the study, as it allows for an examination of how gendered expectations of caregiving and financial support intersect with family structure, particularly in the context of extended-family households.

## Method

We use descriptive statistics to present the proportion of single mothers with children in each country living in extended-family households, examine the characteristics of single mothers in extended-family households, and document child support receipt rates and child support amounts. We then conduct a series of multivariate models to test whether the presence of extended relatives is associated with the likelihood of child support receipt.

## Measures

In our analysis, we include variables that have been previously identified as predictors of child support receipt, with a particular focus on extended-family households as a key predictor. From a gender perspective, we examine how family structure, specifically living in extended-family households, influences child support outcomes among single mothers. The primary outcome variables are whether child support is received (yes/no) and the amount received, with control variables accounting for other relevant factors.

### Extended-family household

We define extended-family households as single mothers living with relatives and their under eighteen-year-old child(ren). Although a small number of widows may be eligible for child support (e.g., if they had a child with someone, split, then married another person who then died while the child was still a minor), we exclude widows from our analysis because we cannot differentiate those eligible for support from those who are not.

### Child support

Child support refers to monetary child support and alimony received from another household, which is reported at the household level. The LIS data do not distinguish between child support and alimony; however, very few receive alimony (see [Meyer and Hu 1999](#)), and we anticipate this is unlikely to change our findings. In all countries, child support includes cash child support, whether formal (with a legal order) or informal (without a legal order) child support. We use two measures. The dichotomous measure indicates whether the child lives in a family that received any child support, and the continuous measure indicates the total annual amount of child support that the family received in the past year. In the LIS data, incomes are in national currencies. We

adjusted these amounts to US dollars using the 2017 purchasing power parities (PPP) of the International Comparison Program managed by the World Bank, which is considered the most reliable measure for comparing Latin American countries (Chen and Ravallion 2008). The conversion allows us to compare amounts across countries.

### Control variables

Following previous studies on child support among single-mother families, we control for the following background variables at the single-mother level: age (continuous), education (low, medium, high), employment status in the past week, number of children (one, two, three, or more) and disposable income quintile. Incomes are adjusted using the square root equivalence scale.

## Results

### Descriptive analysis

We first present the prevalence and characteristics of single mothers in extended-family households across countries. The proportion of single mothers who live in extended-family households ranges from a low of 18 percent in Chile to more than half (57 percent) of all single mothers in Guatemala (see Table 2).

When comparing the characteristics of other single mothers to those living in extended-family households, we find significant variations and differences within countries (see Table 3). A few trends emerge. In all countries, age differences are statistically significant, with single mothers in extended-family households being younger than their counterparts in half of the countries (Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Differences in education levels are also statistically significant across countries, except in Peru. Consistently, single mothers in extended-family households have lower education levels in all countries apart from Guatemala, where they are slightly more educated. Next, employment differences are not as significant as differences in age and education. However, where statistically significant, single mothers living in extended-family households are less likely to be employed than single mothers living with children only (Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Finally, we find some differences regarding the number of children. In most countries with significant differences, a smaller proportion of single mothers in extended-family households have two or more children when compared to single mothers living with children alone (Chile, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay). Only in Panama and Peru do mothers in extended-family households have more children than other single mothers. Taken together, while there is variation across countries, single mothers in extended-family households generally exhibit characteristics associated with greater socioeconomic

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics per country, single mothers and single mothers living in extended-family households.

|                            | Chile |      |                               | Guatemala |      |                               | Panama |      |                               |
|----------------------------|-------|------|-------------------------------|-----------|------|-------------------------------|--------|------|-------------------------------|
|                            | SM    | SEF  | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM        | SEF  | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM     | SEF  | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square |
| Age, years (mean)          | 39.5  | 42.0 | ***                           | 36.8      | 31.9 | ***                           | 38.4   | 42.0 | ***                           |
| Education                  |       |      | ***                           |           |      | **                            |        |      | ***                           |
| Low                        | 28    | 35   |                               | 81        | 72   |                               | 44     | 55   |                               |
| Medium                     | 50    | 46   |                               | 15        | 23   |                               | 36     | 32   |                               |
| High                       | 22    | 19   |                               | 4         | 5    |                               | 20     | 13   |                               |
| Employed                   | 81    | 79   |                               | 65        | 50   | ***                           | 77     | 78   |                               |
| Number of children         |       |      | ***                           |           |      | ***                           |        |      | **                            |
| One                        | 35    | 30   |                               | 17        | 41   |                               | 29     | 23   |                               |
| Two                        | 42    | 38   |                               | 35        | 29   |                               | 33     | 31   |                               |
| Three or more              | 24    | 31   |                               | 48        | 30   |                               | 39     | 46   |                               |
| Disposable income quintile |       |      | ***                           |           |      | ***                           |        |      |                               |
| Lowest                     | 22    | 13   |                               | 24        | 17   |                               | 21     | 18   |                               |
| 2                          | 20    | 19   |                               | 27        | 16   |                               | 21     | 17   |                               |
| 3                          | 20    | 18   |                               | 20        | 19   |                               | 22     | 15   |                               |
| 4                          | 19    | 25   |                               | 14        | 25   |                               | 18     | 26   |                               |
| Highest                    | 19    | 25   |                               | 14        | 24   |                               | 18     | 24   |                               |

|                            | Paraguay |      |                               | Peru |     |                               | Uruguay |     |                               |
|----------------------------|----------|------|-------------------------------|------|-----|-------------------------------|---------|-----|-------------------------------|
|                            | SM       | SEF  | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM   | SEF | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM      | SEF | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square |
| Age, years (mean)          | 37.6     | 33.9 | ***                           | 40   | 42  | ***                           | 40      | 34  | ***                           |
| Education                  |          |      | ***                           |      |     |                               |         |     | ***                           |
| Low                        | 63       | 57   |                               | 43   | 40  |                               | 69      | 80  |                               |
| Medium                     | 20       | 33   |                               | 38   | 37  |                               | 16      | 16  |                               |
| High                       | 17       | 10   |                               | 18   | 24  |                               | 4       | 4   |                               |
| Employed                   | 80       | 67   | **                            | 89   | 85  |                               | 85      | 67  | ***                           |
| Number of children         |          |      | **                            |      |     |                               |         |     | ***                           |
| One                        | 31       | 42   |                               | 32   | 29  |                               | 35      | 52  |                               |
| Two                        | 33       | 31   |                               | 39   | 38  |                               | 38      | 31  |                               |
| Three or more              | 36       | 27   |                               | 29   | 33  |                               | 27      | 17  |                               |
| Disposable income quintile |          |      | ***                           |      |     | ***                           |         |     | ***                           |
| Lowest                     | 30       | 12   |                               | 23   | 10  |                               | 25      | 12  |                               |

*Continued*

Table 3. Continued

|         | Paraguay |     |                               | Peru |     |                               | Uruguay |     |                               |
|---------|----------|-----|-------------------------------|------|-----|-------------------------------|---------|-----|-------------------------------|
|         | SM       | SEF | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM   | SEF | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square | SM      | SEF | <i>t</i> -test/<br>chi-square |
| 2       | 25       | 16  |                               | 21   | 16  |                               | 21      | 18  |                               |
| 3       | 19       | 21  |                               | 20   | 20  |                               | 20      | 20  |                               |
| 4       | 12       | 27  |                               | 19   | 24  |                               | 17      | 25  |                               |
| Highest | 15       | 25  |                               | 17   | 30  |                               | 16      | 26  |                               |

Note: Results within columns are for single mothers (SM) and single mothers in extended-family households (SEF). Weighted statistics.

Source: Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (Waves 2014–2019).

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

disadvantage, partially supporting our hypothesis that they face more challenges than other single mothers.

Next, we compare the child support received (prevalence and amount) by single mothers living with children to that received by single mothers living in extended-family households. Table 4 presents the prevalence of child support receipt and median amount of child support (PPP) for these two groups. The proportion of single mothers living with children who received child support ranged from a low of 20 percent in Guatemala to a high of 58 percent in Uruguay. In comparison, the proportion of single mothers living in extended-family households who received child support ranged from 11 percent in Guatemala to 50 percent in Peru. In four out of the six countries examined (Chile, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Uruguay), a smaller proportion of single mothers living in extended-family households received child support compared to single mothers living with children only. In contrast, in Panama and Peru, a higher proportion of mothers in extended households received child support (42 percent vs 35 percent in Panama and 50 percent vs 46 percent in Peru).

A comparison of the median child support amounts shows that in four out of six countries (Chile, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay), single mothers living with children receive slightly higher amounts than those in extended-family households. The cross-country comparison also shows that there is great variation in the levels of child support, with the lowest median amounts for single mothers living with children found in Guatemala and the highest in Panama. These findings partially support our second hypothesis that single mothers living in extended households are less likely to receive child support. When they do, the amounts are lower than for single mothers not living in

**Table 4.** Child support receipt and amounts per country, single mothers and single mothers living in extended-family households (purchasing power parity).

|           | Single mothers living with children |       |        | Single mothers with children in extended-family households |       |        |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|--|-------|--------|
|           | Child support receipt, percent      | Mean  | Median | Child support receipt, percent                             | Mean  | Median |
| Chile     | 53                                  | 4,343 | 3,109  | 45   | 3,690 | 2,590  |
| Guatemala | 20                                  | 2,634 | 1,522  | 11   | 2,931 | 1,826  |
| Panama    | 35                                  | 4,723 | 3,336  | 42   | 3,985 | 3,336  |
| Paraguay  | 33                                  | 3,127 | 2,211  | 29   | 2,333 | 2,196  |
| Peru      | 46                                  | 2,945 | 2,403  | 50   | 3,133 | 2,470  |
| Uruguay   | 58                                  | 3,661 | 2,495  | 41   | 2,936 | 2,080  |

*Note:* Weighted frequencies and amounts; amounts converted to purchasing power parity (USD 2017 = 100) for corresponding Luxembourg Income Study year.

*Source:* Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).

extended-family households. This trend holds consistently for four out of the six countries included in the study.

### Multivariate analysis

We then estimated logistic regressions predicting child support receipt by country, including a key indicator for whether the mother lives in an extended-family household and controlling for age, education, number of children, employment status, and income quintile. We find significant differences in the likelihood of child support receipt for mothers in extended-family households, even after controlling for these characteristics, in half of the countries in our sample: Chile, Guatemala, and Uruguay. In these countries, the coefficient for living in an extended family is significant and negative, indicating that single mothers in extended-family households are less likely to receive child support compared with single mothers living with children only (Model 1 in Table 5).

Additionally, we estimated models controlling for whether the single mother is the head of the household (headship information is not available in Chile). This model is important because the mother's role as either the head (host) or a non-head (guest) in an extended-family household can shape her economic position and influence child support dynamics (Cohen and Casper 2002). Specifically, mothers who are heads of households may have more control over resources and decision-making, but noncustodial fathers might perceive them as having less need. Conversely, mothers in a guest role may be more precarious economically, reflecting a lack of alternative financial support. Thus, headship status provides insight into the underlying mechanisms affecting child support receipt.

**Table 5.** Logistic regression predicting child support receipt by country (summary of key indicator: single mother living in extended-family household).

|                           | Model 1<br>b    |     | Model 2<br>B     |    |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----|------------------|----|
| Chile ( $N = 5,333$ )     | -0.28<br>(0.11) | *   | -<br>-           |    |
| Guatemala ( $N = 1,428$ ) | -0.62<br>(0.24) | *   | -0.47<br>(0.31)  |    |
| Panama (881)              | 0.38<br>(0.2)   |     | -<br>-           |    |
| Paraguay ( $N = 1,141$ )  | 0.03<br>(.23)   |     | 0.83<br>(0.31)   | ** |
| Peru ( $N = 2,123$ )      | 0.29<br>(0.16)  |     | -<br>-           |    |
| Uruguay ( $N = 3,826$ )   | -0.46<br>(0.09) | *** | -0.31<br>(0.115) | *  |

*Source:* Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).

*Note:* Robust standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels indicated by \* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ , and \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ . Model 1 controls for mother's age, education, employment status, number of children, and income quintile. Model 2 is presented for those countries with significant results in Model 1. It controls for the same variables as Model 1 in addition to controlling for whether the mother is the household head. Chile, Panama, and Peru are excluded from model 2 because all custodial mothers are identified as household heads in the data.

In this model, the negative association between living in an extended family and child support receipt remains significant only in Uruguay, while in Paraguay, the association becomes positive and significant. Even though the coefficients for Guatemala are no longer significant, they maintain a negative direction. In both models, the association between living in an extended family and child support is positive but nonsignificant in Panama, Paraguay, and Peru, except in Paraguay, where it becomes significant and positive in Model 2 when headship is included.

### Sensitivity tests

To further explore our results, we included interaction terms in regressions for countries where living in an extended-family household had a significant association with child support receipt: Chile, Guatemala, and Uruguay. We tested interactions between living in an extended-family household and various characteristics, including income, employment, number of children, and education (see [Appendix figures A.1–A.4](#)). These tests aimed to identify

whether the observed differences in child support receipt are consistent across subgroups or are driven by specific characteristics.

The results suggest that differences in child support receipt by extended-family status vary across subgroups in each country. In Guatemala, the likelihood of child support receipt is similar for single mothers in extended households and those living independently, regardless of income or employment status. In contrast, in Chile, the gap in child support receipt is primarily driven by lower-income and unemployed mothers, while higher-income and employed mothers show no significant differences. This indicates that the disadvantage for single mothers in extended households in Chile is concentrated among those with fewer resources.

Regarding education, we find that in Guatemala, single mothers in extended families have consistently low rates of child support receipt across all educational levels. However, among single mothers not living in extended families, those with higher education are more likely to receive support. No significant differences in education are observed in other countries.

Finally, the interactions show that the likelihood of receiving child support for single mothers living in extended compared to nonextended families remains roughly the same regardless of the number of children in the household.

## Discussion

Using LIS data, we examine child support receipt and the prevalence of extended-family households among single mothers in Chile, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Our work adds to the limited evidence on the interaction between child support receipt and single mothers' living arrangements, taking into account the cultural norms, gendered expectations, and context of low child support compliance and weak enforcement in the region. The selected countries present unique data to understand family dynamics where extended families often serve as safety nets, reflecting a context in which weak public protection and traditional gender roles shape family structures and economic support.

We find some differences in the prevalence and the characteristics of single mothers with children living in extended-family households across countries. Although overall, and in keeping with the previous literature (Guarin and Costanzo 2020), mothers in extended-family households are to some extent more disadvantaged—more likely to be younger, have lower levels of education, and less likely to be employed—this was not true in all cases. In Peru, for example, mothers in extended-family households are older, and there are no differences in education level. This suggests that though there may be some common threads and drivers of extended-family households, extended-family households may differ across contexts (Hogendoorn and Härkönen 2023).

We find that, in general, single mothers in extended-family households are less likely to receive child support than other single mothers. This holds in the

descriptive analysis for most countries in our sample (four out of six countries) and for many countries in a multivariate context (three countries). Additionally, in four out of six countries, single mothers in extended families receive lower amounts of child support. For example, in Uruguay, the average amount of child support was 1.6 times lower for single mothers in extended families than for those living with children only. That we find a decreased likelihood of receipt in half of the countries in our sample when controlling for differences in family characteristics is notable and suggests that extended-family households may serve as an economic coping mechanism for single mothers who may not receive needed income from child support.

Although we cannot identify the direction of the association between child support receipt and extended-family households, our findings suggest that cultural norms may contribute to this pattern. Fathers may feel less obligated to provide financial support when mothers live with additional family members, reflecting societal expectations that downplay the importance of their financial contributions. This tendency aligns with broader gender norms that prioritize the father's emotional involvement over financial support, especially in contexts where extended families are expected to step in as providers.

Indeed, our estimates suggest that the dynamics of extended-family households are important in understanding child support receipt outcomes. When we control for whether the mother is the head of a household, we find few differences in the likelihood of receipt, with some exceptions (e.g. Paraguay and Uruguay). This suggests that guest mothers—or those who live in the household of another relative—are driving differences in the likelihood of receipt, reinforcing the notion that mothers may be living in extended-family households to access additional resources.

In discussing the differences in child support receipt across countries, it is important to consider how child support regimes might shape outcomes specifically for single mothers in extended-family households. For example, in Peru and Panama, where no difference in the likelihood of child support receipt is observed between single mothers in extended families and those living with children only, these patterns could reflect how different regimes function. In Peru, a hybrid system that combines court orders and public agency involvement is used, which differs from the predominantly court-based models found in other countries. This hybrid system may contribute to more equitable outcomes for single mothers in extended families, as the additional oversight could minimize disparities in receipt. In contrast, countries with purely court-based systems might see greater variation in receipt due to limited enforcement and reliance on formal processes. Notably, previous research found no difference in formal support and a decreased likelihood of informal support for single mothers in extended-family households (Guarin and Costanzo 2020), and therefore, the difference here may be in informal support, perhaps reinforcing the notion of court-based models contributing to more equitable outcomes for these complex families.

As our results suggest, the likelihood of receiving child support among single mothers living in extended and nonextended families varies between subgroups. This highlights the importance of advancing research examining mothers' living arrangements and other characteristics to identify mothers at higher risk of economic vulnerability and missing child support transfers.

These estimates should be understood in the context of some important limitations. First, this is a descriptive, exploratory study that uses cross-sectional data. Therefore, we are unable to identify causality and the ordering of events between child support receipt and living in an extended-family household; some mothers may move into an extended-family household to cope with the lack of child support receipt, while others may receive less child support because of the presence of other related adults in their household. Second, although the LIS data are unparalleled in their use for comparative studies, the sample size is relatively small in some countries, and there are some data differences between countries, which may make comparisons less accurate. These limitations of the LIS data mean that future research could benefit from other data sources, ideally longitudinal. Finally, we measure key characteristics of child support, including whether it was received and the total annual amount received; future work should examine other essential attributes, such as regularity (Ha, Cancian, and Meyer 2011). Despite these limitations, our study highlights the varying prevalence of extended-family households among single mothers in different Latin American countries. It also calls attention to the number of single-mother families in extended-family households. It underscores the importance of understanding the association between a mother's living arrangements and child support policy. These issues are relevant not only for child support policy but also for other areas of family policy, opening the door for future studies focused on the role of family policies intended to support single mothers and their children.

## Conclusion

Across different countries in Latin America, we find that extended-family households, while varying in prevalence, are common living arrangements for single mothers with children. We also find differences in the characteristics of single mothers who live in extended-family households compared to other single mothers. Although there are commonalities in these characteristics across many countries, it remains crucial to take a comparative perspective that considers the specific country context. Future research should examine the similarities and differences in the characteristics of extended-family households globally, particularly how the welfare state, family policy regimes, and gender expectations impact these living arrangements.

Our findings also show that mothers in extended-family households are generally less likely, with some notable exceptions, to receive child support compared to single mothers living only with their children. This has important economic justice

implications for women and families, particularly given the gendered expectations around caregiving and financial support. Cultural norms that emphasize mothers' caregiving responsibilities and reduce fathers' financial obligations may contribute to this disparity. When mothers live in extended families, fathers may feel less obligated to provide support due to the presence of other household members. Additionally, individual-level factors, such as fathers' attitudes and assessments of their children's financial needs, which are not captured in the LIS data, could also play an important role in understanding these differences. Future research should include a focus on these individual-level factors, which may vary significantly across fathers and affect child support outcomes.

Although institutional arrangements of child support policies may lead to different outcomes across countries (Cuesta et al. 2023; Hakovirta et al. 2022), we do not find an obvious pattern according to the child support schemes (i.e. whether they are court-based or hybrid). This finding aligns with Hakovirta and Skinner's (2021) conclusion that judicial decision-making rules in child support show no clear consistency across different scheme types. Furthermore, the role of governments in supporting extended and separated families in middle- and low-income countries may not be clearly defined, leading to gaps in child support enforcement (see Cuesta et al. 2023).

Future research should explore how different child support schemes treat single-mother families in extended households and investigate how these schemes intersect with gendered expectations of financial and caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, establishing a causal connection between living in extended-family households and child support outcomes remains a critical area for future research.

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## Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to the LIS's data use policy. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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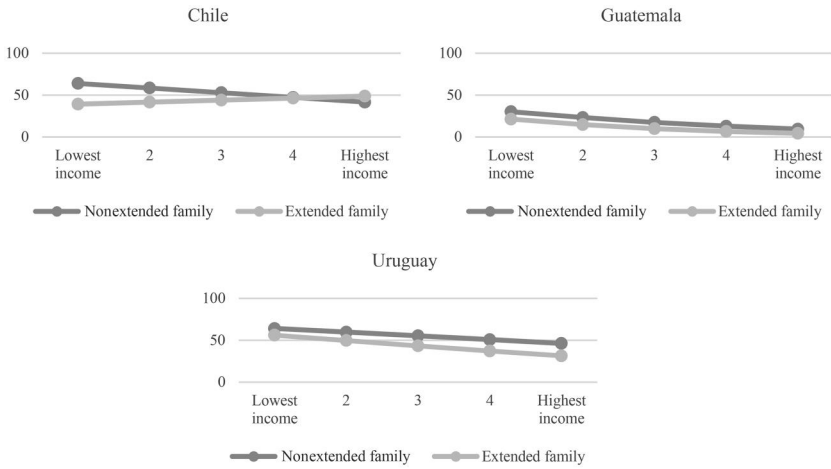
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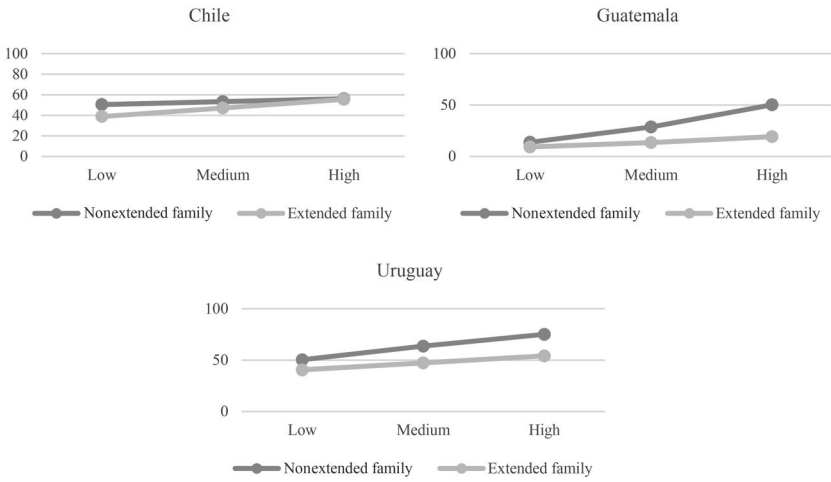
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## Appendix



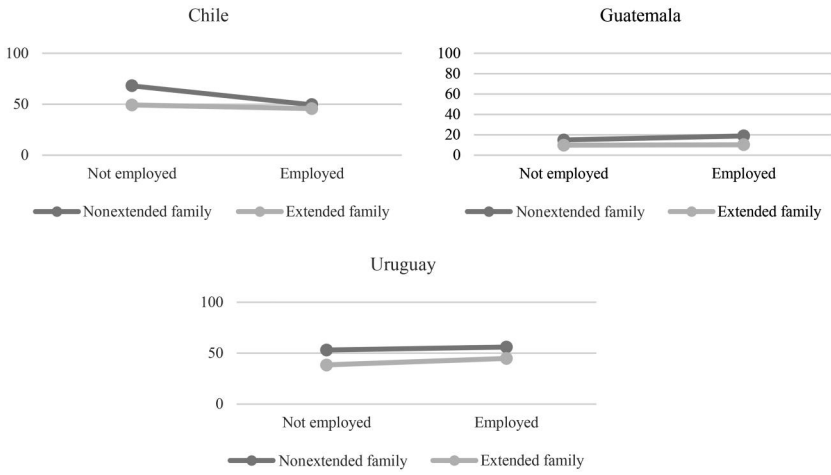
**Figure A1.** Predicted probabilities of child support receipt by the interaction between living in an extended-family household and income quintile by country.

Source: Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).



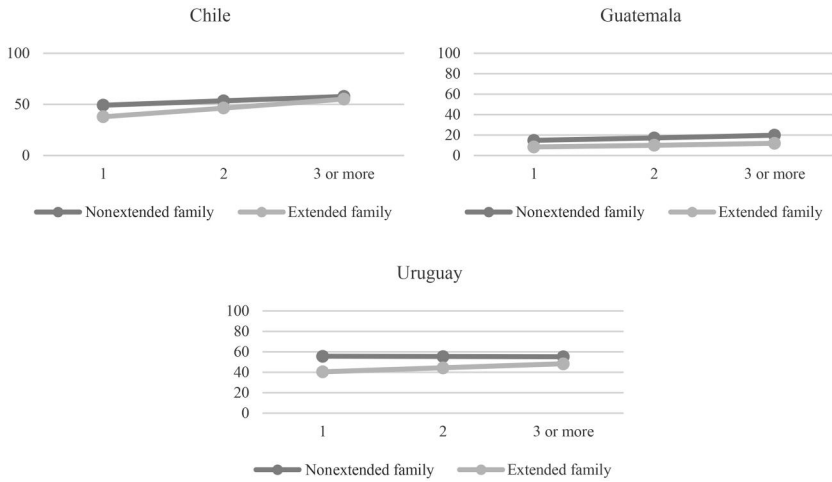
**Figure A2.** Predicted probabilities of child support receipt by the interaction between living in an extended-family household and education by country.

Source: Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).



**Figure A3.** Predicted probabilities of child support receipt by the interaction between living in an extended-family household and employment status by country.

Source: Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).



**Figure A4.** Predicted probabilities of child support receipt by the interaction between living in an extended-family household and number of children by country.

*Source:* Own calculations based on Luxembourg Income Study (waves 2014–2019).

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