

Fainting in the street as a symptom of food insecurity in the elderly

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A few days ago, social networks reported the death of Elías, an elderly man who sadly became famous after images went viral of the moment he collapsed from starvation on Aguilera Street, in the province of Holguín.

According to the report of acquaintances, "El Chino", as he is affectionately called in the neighborhood, was a former combatant of the 1959 Revolution, who was in a condition of extreme poverty. **"He lived alone, thrown away like a dog. He was a combatant and by the checkbook he earned more than 3,000 pesos. That was not enough to live on. Everything is very expensive.** A pound of rice costs 200 pesos, a liter of cooking oil costs 1,200, a liter of milk costs 70, a pizza costs 80. He was not an alcoholic. He lived a dog's life," [an anonymous source told the Cubanet news portal](#).

In his 80s, Elías collected raw materials to supplement his pension. However, the money he earned from these informal economic activities was not enough to ensure his daily food. The peak of his suffering came on May 3, when he collapsed from hunger in front of a bus stop in the provincial capital. Despite the efforts of those present to help him, the old man "died in the hospital the same day he fell. They took too long to give him medical help," one of his neighbors told the newspaper.

Sadly, this is not an isolated event in today's Cuba. [In January 2021, an elderly man fainted while standing in line to buy food in Havana.](#) Once again, those present helped the elderly man who, in the absence of ambulances and police vehicles in the area, was taken by bicycle cab to the hospital.

A year later, [it was learned of another individual who died in the early morning of October 17, while waiting his turn in line for the Identity Card in Guanabacoa, Havana.](#) On that occasion, the corpse remained there for several hours, covered only with a nylon sheet and in full view of passersby.

Cases such as these illustrate the deterioration of living conditions experienced by the elderly in Cuba. According to the [latest Demographic Yearbook published by the National Statistics and Information Office \(ONEI\)](#), in 2020, 21.6 percent of the Cuban population was 60 years of age or older. More recent figures confirm the estimates related to the increase of this group, which is expected to represent a third of the Cuban population by 2050.

The quantitative increase of this population group requires policies, programs and financing to meet their needs. Greater investment in health and care programs, for example, should be social policy priorities. However, if we review the investment section recently published by ONEI, we can see that between January and March 2023, [the Cuban State invested 1.5% less in public health and social assistance than in the same period of the previous year.](#)

To make up for the budget deficit and cuts in social assistance, the Cuban government continues to delegate more and more responsibilities to the family environment. Thus, in the Family Code approved in 2022, legal figures such as "de facto guardianship" appeared, which allows an unrelated person to take care of an elderly person; "foster care", to prevent the forced entry of the elderly into state care institutions; and "voluntary alimony", so that a person can receive financial remuneration in exchange for caring for an elderly person.

However, these forms of legislation do not solve the growing number of elderly people in a situation of abandonment or mistreatment. In addition, the current economic context in which inflation has reduced the purchasing power of Cuban families and, even more so, that of the elderly, makes it impossible for them to acquire the basic inputs for adequate food.

According to the [Hunger Map developed by the Food Monitor Program \(FMP\)](#), there is a very low food consumption index in Cuba, with values between 8.5 and 12.8 on average, together with a deficient food security, which ranges between 38 and 53 points in most of the country.

Ill-advised government policies have worsened the already precarious situation. The disappearance of subsidies for several products of the basic food basket, the significant reduction of quotas due to lack of inputs and the increase in the price of basic foodstuffs such as milk, eggs and bread, put many elderly on the streets of Cuba, performing daily low-paying activities to the point of exhaustion.

In short, the recent news brings to the public's attention one of Cuba's unavoidable realities: the country is facing one of the most important food crises in the region, and it is the elderly who are suffering the worst effects.

From the observatories Food Monitor Program and Cuido60 we want to draw the attention of Cuban governmental actors to their duty to ensure adequate food and care for vulnerable populations, including the elderly. We would also like to remind them of the right to a dignified old age and the areas that, according to the UN, should be considered by the countries in the "Decade of Healthy Aging", subscribed by Cuba and taken into account for the conception of the Family Code approved last year.