

REGIONAL OVERVIEW: LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



HIGHLIGHTS

- Currently there are 106 million young people between 15 and 24 years of age living in Latin America and the Caribbean, 20% of the total population. It is the largest proportion of young people ever in the region's historyⁱ.
- While employment indices for young people have improved over the last decade, the unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group is three times as high as it is for the population between 30-64 years of ageⁱⁱ. Over one-third of workers in the 15-29 age group are employed in the informal sector, a figure that is even higher among womenⁱⁱⁱ.
- Completion of primary education is high, exceeding 93% among both males and females^{iv}. 56% of youth 20-24 have completed secondary education and just under 9% of young people 20-29 completed university education, with females registering slightly higher levels of completion than males (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011)^v.
- However, there are socioeconomic disparities in access to and completion of secondary and tertiary education^{vi}. 10% of women 15-19 are adolescent mothers and this phenomenon is markedly more common among poor adolescents: almost 15% of adolescents in the lowest quintile of the income distribution are mothers, compared with 4% of adolescents in the highest income quintile^{vii}.
- Deaths by violent acts and homicides in the 15-24 age group accounted for 43% of the total mortality in this group and young men are especially vulnerable to homicide^{viii}.

There are approximately 156 million young people between the ages of 15 and 29 in Latin America and the Caribbean, representing over one-fourth of the region's total population (UN 2011). The proportion of young people relative to the total population has reached its highest level since the 1980s. However, in the coming decades it is anticipated that the population of Latin America and the Caribbean will age rapidly. Therefore, the time to invest in youth and capitalize on their potential to serve as agents of transformation in the region is now.

However, youth in Latin America and the Caribbean confront a series of challenges. Despite having higher levels of education than previous generations, they face higher levels of unemployment and receive lower wages. Although they are less likely to become sick, they are much more likely to die as a result of external causes, and youth homicide rates are particularly high in several countries in the region. The high persistence of adolescent maternity raises questions as to the effective ownership of reproductive rights among young women. Moreover, the development of skills, access to opportunities, and exposure to risks among young people are highly segmented by income level, and also by sex, race/ethnicity, and rural/urban residence. Finally, international and





domestic migration also present a challenge, as migrant youth are vulnerable to rights violations and human trafficking and they often hold highly precarious jobs.

Poverty

An evaluation of the dynamic of youth poverty shows that, on average, Latin America has evolved positively over the last decade and has reduced the index of youth poverty and indigence, measured by the availability of income. Nonetheless, there are disparities in this dynamic between countries and, above all huge inequalities when one compares rural and urban youth, men and women, indigenous and Afro-descendants with the rest of the population, and young people from different age sub-groups. It is estimated that 30.3% of youth 15-29 in Latin America and the Caribbean live in poverty, while indigence affects 10.1% (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). Poverty tends to be more acute among youth residing in rural areas, with 46.8% of them affected by poverty, compared to 25.5% of urban youth (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). Young people aged 15-19 and those under 15 are the groups most vulnerable to poverty and indigence in the region (ECLAC 2011).

Youth employment

Young people face important difficulties in entering the labour market. Better educated than older generations, they face much higher levels of unemployment, lower pay, and less access to employment-based social security systems. Employment and unemployment rates improved between 2000 and 2009 for the population between the ages of 15-29, with the former rising from 49.3% in 2000 to 54.4% in 2009 and the latter declining from 16.1% to 12.9% during the same period (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). However, the unemployment rate for the 15-29 age group is three times as high as it is for the population 30-64 years of age (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). It is estimated that almost 1 in 5 young people neither works nor studies, though a significant proportion of this group consists of young women who provide non-remunerated care within the home.

Another facet of youth employment that needs to be addressed is the quality of the jobs available to young people, which can be measured in terms of wage levels (and whether these wages are sufficient to meet basic needs) and access to employment-based social security systems. The availability of decent work for youth in Latin America and the Caribbean is a challenge. On average, slightly over one-third of workers 15-29 are employed in the informal sector, a figure that is even higher among women (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). As is to be expected, available data indicate that few young workers in the informal sector have social security coverage, between 2.1% for 15-19 year olds to 10.8% among 25-29 year olds (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). There are also specific groups of young people that face special difficulties in achieving productive engagement and accessing employment paths that enable them to break the cycle of exclusion and poverty, such as young people with low levels of education, young women in traditional homes where gender roles are rigidly prescribed, rural youth, disabled youth, and ethnic minorities.



Education

In general, young people in Latin America and the Caribbean have increasingly high levels of education, which in the long run creates greater opportunities for social inclusion. The challenge is to work towards more equal education outcomes among young people from different socioeconomic levels, areas of residence, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Another challenge is to complement progress in education with policies that reinforce the links in the transition from education to employment.

Illiteracy is lower among younger populations than previous generations, and completion of primary education is high, exceeding 93% among both males and females (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). Among young people 20-24, 56% have completed secondary education, with females registering slightly higher levels of completion than males, 58.7% compared with 53.1% (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). There is, however, quite a bit of intra-regional variability in secondary education completion rates. For example, while 73% of young women 20-24 have completed secondary school in Peru, just 24% of young women in Guatemala have done so (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). In terms of higher education, just under 9% of young people aged 20-29 completed university education, and here again females have a slight advantage over males (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). There are of course socioeconomic disparities in access to and completion of secondary and tertiary education. For example, while 16.5% of young people from the lowest income quintile pursue post-secondary studies, the figure is 34.8% among those in the highest income quintile (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011).

A main factor leading young people to abandon school is poverty and the draw of the labour market. Youth may also drop out of school because of the school environment, including the attitudes of teachers, the existence of gangs or a high level of violence within the school. School violence and bullying, including gender-based violence, are important factors that result in students dropping out of school in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Health

The three leading causes of death among people 15-29 in Latin America and the Caribbean are external causes (including homicides and traffic accidents), degenerative diseases, and communicable disease (including HIV/AIDS, influenza and pneumonia, TB, among others) (PAHO 2010).

With respect to HIV/AIDS, UNAIDS estimates that the prevalence of HIV among young people 15-24 is 0.2% (UNAIDS 2012a). Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean is one of the regions most affected by HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS 2012b). It is troubling that fewer than 50% of youth 15-24 in the region know how to prevent the transmission of HIV (UNAIDS 2012a).

In other areas of sexual and reproductive health, knowledge appears to be high, yet is not clear whether this knowledge translates into changes in behaviour. For example, although knowledge about contraception is high among young people in Latin America and the Caribbean, with close to 90% reporting knowledge of contraceptive methods, close to 50% of sexually active youth reported that they have never used contraception (UNFPA 2012). Among those that use contraception, 40% does not do so on a regular basis (UNFPA 2012). This has major ramifications for adolescent



pregnancy, which registers very high rates in the region; adolescent pregnancy, in turn, is closely associated with the inter-generational transmission of poverty and exclusion.

The persistence of high rates of early pregnancy and maternity is also associated with earlier sexual initiation among young people, compounded by insufficient sex education in many countries, a lack of public policies on and access to sexual and reproductive health services for single adolescents and young women, and deficits in terms of adolescent sexual and reproductive rights. The age specific fertility rate for women 15-19 in the region is 70.5 births per 1,000 women 15-19, making Latin America and the Caribbean the region with the second highest 15-19 fertility rate in the world, second only to Africa (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011). 10% of women 15-19 are adolescent mothers and this phenomenon is markedly more common among poor adolescents, almost 15% of adolescents in the lowest quintile of the income distribution are mothers, compared with 4% of adolescents in the highest income quintile (UNFPA & ECLAC 2011).

Violence

The increase in youth violence, in which young people are both victims and perpetrators, is a critical topic in Latin America and the Caribbean and is closely related to problems of social cohesion and social inclusion. Deaths by violent acts and homicides in the 15-24 age group accounted for 43% of the total mortality in this group and young men are especially vulnerable to homicide (UNFPA 2013).

The links between youth and violence (including school-based violence, street crime, gang membership, drug consumption and trafficking, and gender-based violence, among others) are complex and highly inter-dependent. Beyond individual-level biological, cognitive, and behavioural characteristics, societal factors create conditions that contribute to youth violence. These conditions are often related to economic crises, a decline in the standard of living, urban marginality, lack of access to social mobility channels, institutional alienation among young people who are neither studying nor working, socialization in aggressiveness and crime from an early age (among families and in neighbourhoods), and frustrated expectations when their higher levels of education fail to guarantee better job prospects. In the context of Latin America and the Caribbean, and in particular Central America, the influence of transnational criminal networks and easy access to small arms cannot be neglected in shaping youth violence trends.

Migration

Young people from Latin America and the Caribbean are active participants in international and domestic migration flows. In the case of the United States, 5.5 million Latin American and Caribbean youth between the ages of 15 and 29 reside in the U.S., which represents over 25% of all immigrants from this region (ECLAC & OIJ 2008). Spain is another major migrant-receiving country: young people from Latin America between the ages of 15 and 29 accounted for 40% of total immigrants to that country (ECLAC & OIJ 2008). With regard to intra-regional migration, young people from Latin America primarily migrate to the Argentina, Costa Rica, and Chile.





Although international and domestic migration may create opportunities for young people, enabling them to realize their potential, those who migrate face challenges and vulnerabilities. In the United States and Europe, young immigrants from Latin America tend to live in poor households. Due to their legal status they may lack access to social services, such as health care and social security systems. Moreover, migrant youth face discrimination and marginalization. This context of poverty, lack of access to institutions and social services, discrimination, and marginalization creates a challenge for their integration into the host society.

The United Nations System's Approach to Youth in Latin America and the Caribbean

United Nations entities in the Latin America and Caribbean region have been increasingly involved in working collaboratively and independently on youth issues, in light of the importance of this population sub-group. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and its regional partners have been undertaking analytical work and policy advocacy that seeks to address the challenges outlined above.

One mechanism for doing so is the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) regional Inter-Agency Working Group on Youth (IAWG-Y), which is currently comprised of the following UN entities: UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP, UNAIDS, UNWomen, WHO/PAHO, ILO, ECLAC, FAO, and UNFPA. The IAWG-Y also works closely with country offices and NGOs, in particular the Ibero-American Youth Organization (OIJ for its acronym in Spanish).

The IAWG-Y aims to contribute to strengthening opportunities for young people to achieve their full development in the region, and it supports the United Nations Development Group for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNDG LAC) efforts for a greater coherence among UN organizations and coordination with external partners in their efforts to reach common goals.

In addition to ongoing collaboration on publications and other activities,¹ the IAWG-Y is currently involved in developing a regional implementation plan for the System-Wide Action Plan on Youth.

¹ Some recent examples of collaborations include:

-*Regional population report in Latin America and the Caribbean 2011: investing in youth* (a joint publication between UNFPA and ECLAC). Link:

<http://www.cepal.org/publicaciones/xml/8/47318/Informejuventud2011.pdf>;

-*20 Good practices in youth public policies* (a joint publication between OIJ, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO, and ECLAC). Link: [20 buenas prácticas en políticas públicas de juventud](#);

-*Adolescent pregnancy and early marriage in Latin America: facts and reflections on these challenges* (a webinar coordinated by UNFPA, UNICEF, and UNWomen held on October 11, 2012 to commemorate the first international day of the girl child);

- *Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) Regional Forum: Young Women, Leadership and Governance. Sharing Experiences World Wide* (a forum held in Panama City, Nov. 22 - 25, 2012 organized by UNFPA, UNDP, and UNWomen).





Regional and National Efforts in creating youth policies

Significant progress has been made in terms of public and political recognition of the significance of the young population in the region. Over the last two decades, not only have all countries established government institutions to formulate youth plans and programmes (national youth institutes), mechanisms have also been put in place to increase knowledge and understanding of youth and to improve the effectiveness and targeting of public policies designed for them. The mechanisms frequently used to support and implement efforts in this area include enacting legislation relevant to youth, designing and monitoring plans and programmes, conducting national youth surveys, and creating youth information centres and Internet portals. Although public policies on youth have made headway over the last few years, progress is still urgently needed in developing comprehensive and integrated approaches that cut across sectoral domains. Another challenge to devising effective policies surrounding youth development is the lack of quality and up-to-date data specific to youth.

Where do we go from here? Recommendations for action

The aim here is not to provide an exhaustive account of the range of policies that could potentially affect the conditions of life and opportunities for young people, but to highlight some possibilities that respond to the challenges outlined above.

I. In terms of capacity building, intervention is required in at least five domains: Making advances in young people's educational development through secondary school and complement this by expanding access to tertiary and technical-vocational education; focusing efforts on equalizing educational opportunities, guaranteeing a fairer and meritocratic system to which all belong equally; ensuring a better flow and adaptation between the worlds of education and employment; combating forms of discrimination that may arise in school socialization and in educational contents, making education a route to collective learning and to respect for diversity and reciprocity of rights; and exploiting the broad public school coverage to give young people connectivity who do not have this in their homes, and incorporate new ways of accessing information and knowledge into teaching practice, which means expanding access, training teachers, and integrating ICTs into the curriculum.

II. In terms of creating opportunities, employment creates the conditions that facilitate young people's development and well-being. Providing high-quality job opportunities to young people is, therefore, an imperative that can no longer be ignored. Although better labour-market participation among youth, as with any other age group, requires an appropriate macroeconomic setting and sustained economic growth, the organizational, technological and social changes that have occurred over the last few decades call for improvements in the institutional framework governing the labour market, together with tools to ensure that the labour market functions properly and protects its weakest participants. Within this framework, there is a wide ranging menu of policy alternatives to promote labour-market participation among young people, including strengthening initiatives for vocational training, training for work, and support for low-income youth entrepreneurs. Generally speaking, employment policies, specifically those targeting young people, need to adopt a gender mainstreaming approach, recognizing the multiple obstacles and inequalities confronting women in access to the labour market and in the world of employment itself.





III. Protection and prevention in the face of youth-specific risks involves addressing risks associated with external causes, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and undesired pregnancies, on a timely basis and using a youth-rights approach.

Prevention programmes are key and when possible, they should be integrated with education policies. In this regard, the inclusion of content dealing with sexuality and reproductive rights, the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and nutrition in normal school curricula provides a powerful tool for prevention. However, as mentioned previously, access to information alone may not be sufficient. Health policies should endeavour to give young people access to the services, professionals, and medicines they need to take care of their health and mitigate risks. Here it is important for workers in the health sector to have an open disposition when dealing with young people suffering from problems associated with alcohol, drugs, STDs, unwanted pregnancies, and injuries caused by violence and accidents. It is essential to promote a holistic health approach that combines open and timely information, support for young people with problems, emphasis on resilience, and suitable referral to care services.

Prevention and protection against violence should consider the multifaceted and complex nature of its causes and consequences among young people. Lessons learned in terms of good prevention and treatment practices show that it is better to accentuate prevention and rehabilitation rather than mere repression; that the social causes which fuel violence need to be addressed, prioritizing a rights approach in dealing with violent youth; that it is better to engage the entire environment of young people in these policies; and that rehabilitation should be promoted by considering the motivations of young people themselves.

Lastly, public policy should support rather than exclude pregnant youth and adolescents, making their right to education compatible with raising their child. Discrimination in school is very serious, because it forces adolescent mothers to curtail the development of their capacities, condemning them and potentially their children to exclusion throughout the life cycle.

For further reading

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ⁱ www.unicef.org/media/files/Fast_facts_EN.doc





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