Introduction to inequality in youth
B. Assessment of inequalities among young people

- Youth is a stage of the life cycle during which the family ties that were all-important during childhood begin to become less so as the individual autonomy that is characteristic of adult life takes on greater and greater importance for them.

- The social inclusion of young people should be based on a multidimensional and integrated perspective that encompasses the existing gaps in education, employment, health, culture, violence and political participation. For example, in 2019 the gross enrolment rate for higher education, which reflects the gap in education, was 52.7%; in other words, half of the population does not reach that level of education. Universal access to education is therefore a goal that remains to be achieved.

- A significant portion of the young population is excluded and marginalized from economic, political and social processes. In 2018, 17.3% of the people between 15 and 24 years of age was neither studying nor working.

ECLAC views youth as a period during which a series of events generally occur that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood (withdrawal from the education system, entry into the labour market, departure from the family home, commencement of life as a member of a couple and the commencement of the reproductive stage), although these events do not follow any set pattern and are frequently non-linear. During this period, the family ceases to play its formerly central protective role, while the market, the State and young persons themselves begin to play a greater part in meeting their needs and upholding their rights (Rossel and Filgueira, 2015).

The approach taken by ECLAC to understanding the issues inherent in this stage of life entails analysing the realities and challenges faced by young people through the lens of social inclusion. Viewed from a rights-based perspective, this concept goes beyond inclusion in (relevant and quality) education and (worthy and decent) employment, which have traditionally been regarded as the main elements involved in the process of inclusion. ECLAC, however, proposes considering other dimensions that are also of pivotal importance if young people are to make headway not only as measured by objective parameters of inclusion (access to education, health, participation and so forth) but also in terms of subjective parameters that make them feel that they are part of a society that they are working with others to shape and build.

Within this framework, a multidimensional, integrated perspective affords a more solid basis for analysing the gaps experienced by young people in the areas of education, employment, health, culture, violence and participation (Trucco and Ullmann, 2016, Soto, Trucco and Ullman, 2015). This focus provides a scaffolding for the following baseline assessment of the realities faced by this sector of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Today, young people are one of the largest segments of the population in the region, as persons between 15 and 29 years of age represent one fourth of the total population. This fact underscores the need to invest in young people as one of the fundamental pillars for the drive to achieve sustainable development with equality and to match their capacities with commensurate opportunities within the framework of a rights-based approach. The available evidence indicates, however, that young people in the region are often excluded from education and employment, from traditional political spheres of activity, decision-making circles and socioeconomic, political and environmental forums.

Universal access to secondary and tertiary levels of education is a goal that has yet to be achieved. Although progress has been made in opening up access to a secondary education, rural areas still lag far behind, and the gaps are even wider in higher education. In 2019, the region’s gross enrolment rate for higher education was 52.7%, meaning that half of the population does not reach the required level of education. Universal access to education is therefore a goal that remains to be achieved.

8 As part of the project entitled ‘Social inclusion of youth in the context of increasing violence and insecurity with a focus on Central America’, ECLAC developed a toolkit for the analysis and design of policies for the promotion of the social inclusion of young people. See Soto, Trucco and Ullmann (2015).
According to the Youth Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (JuVeLAC), nearly 2 out of every 10 people between the ages of 15 and 24 in the region are neither in school nor employed. See [online] https://dds.cepal.org/juvelac/.

The tertiary education enrolment rate was 52.7%. There is also a gender gap in this connection, with the gross enrolment rate for women (59.7%) being considerably higher than the corresponding rate for men (45.9%) (ECLAC, 2021b). Despite women’s higher overall enrolment rate in higher education, however, many fewer women are pursuing studies in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects), which has implications over the long run for their position in the labour market and their pay levels.

It is often difficult for young people to make the transition from school to the workplace, and a considerable number of them have left school but have not succeeded in becoming part of the workforce. In 2018, approximately 17.3% of persons between 15 and 24 years of age in the region (12.6% in urban areas and 17.2% in rural areas) were neither studying nor working (ECLAC, 2021b).

There is also a gender gap within this latter group, as 8.8% of young men were in this category in 2018 whereas 25.9% of young women were (ECLAC, 2021b). For young women, this situation is chiefly associated with the need to perform unpaid domestic and caregiving work, whereas most of the young men in this situation are either unemployed or first-time jobseekers (Espejo and Espíndola, 2016, Soto, Trucco and Ullmann, 2015).

Even among those young people who do manage to enter the labour market, most are confronted by various obstacles in their search for a decent form of employment, whether because they had difficulties earlier in acquiring the necessary job skills or because the labour market offers few opportunities for people without prior job experience.

One of the indicators of these kinds of difficulties is the percentage of the employed young population that belong to a pension plan, which is smaller, especially for those under 25 years of age. This is one illustration of the fact that, as young people have access to fewer social benefits, they are in a more vulnerable position and have less job security (see figure VI.1).

Low percentages of pension coverage are associated with a trend in labour laws and practices towards greater flexibility in employment contracts, the growing use of outsourcing and a tendency for people to change jobs more often. This shift has not, however, been coupled with a reconfiguration of social security systems, which are still based on traditional forms of employment. As a result, fewer young people are able to obtain a pension plan. In Mexico,
Young people are confronted with gaps in education, employment, health, participation, culture and violence.

for example, the 2012 labour reform\textsuperscript{10} introduced more flexible recruitment and contracting provisions. This may well be a positive development for the labour market, but it also means that young people have less of a chance of obtaining social security coverage (loss of labour rights), since the reform was not paired with alternative social security schemes.\textsuperscript{11}

The available data on health care indicate that young people residing in rural areas, along with people in low-income groups, have much less access to preventive and curative care. This type of inequality exists not only in access to health-care services but also in health outcomes in such cases as teenage pregnancies. Young women in the lowest income quintiles, those who live in rural areas and those who belong to indigenous groups or are of African descent are more likely to become mothers while they are still adolescents. This is yet another reflection of how the axes of inequality intersect and overlap and how they deepen the exclusion of vulnerable groups (Trucco and Ullmann, 2016; Rossel and Filgueira, 2015; Soto, Trucco and Ullman, 2015). This situation, for which there are various explanations, places young rural, low-income mothers in a position that makes it harder than ever for them to position themselves as a full member of society by obtaining work or remaining in school, all of which has an impact on their future.

Suicide is another health-related issue for young people. It was already discussed in the section on adolescents but is raised again here because it is a very serious problem in this age group. According to data compiled by WHO (2021), suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people worldwide, after accidents and homicide. There are many different and multi-faceted reasons why young people self-harm or commit suicide, including school bullying and cyberbullying, traumatic events such as domestic violence, armed violence, accidents and natural disasters, which, even if they do not result in suicide, may mark young people either temporarily or for life. Genetic and/or biological factors may also play a role. In most of the countries of the region, suicide rates are highest in the 20–24 age group (see figure VI.2). In addition to suicide, a considerable number of young people suffer from mental, emotional, food-related or behavioural disorders, all of which are mental health issues that need to be dealt with, especially in areas where young people have limited access to health-care providers. One factor to be taken into account is that the suicide rate among young men is much higher than it is among young women. In El Salvador, for example, in 2016 the suicide rate among males between 15 and 29 years of age was 42.5 per 100,000 whereas the corresponding rate for females was 9.7 per 100,000.

\textbf{FIGURE VI.2}

\textit{Latin America (11 countries): suicide rates, by age group, 2016 (Per 100,000 persons)}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{suicide_rates.png}
\caption{Latin America (11 countries): suicide rates, by age group, 2016 (Per 100,000 persons)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{10} See Mexico (2012).

\textsuperscript{11} For further information on the labour market transition and how it is affecting young people, see ECLAC/ILO (2017).
In many countries, young people are also exposed to a great deal of violence. Death by violence or intentional injury is more common among young men, while young women are at greater risk of being victims of sexual abuse or rape, kidnapping or violence at the hands of their partner; they are also more exposed to verbal or psychological violence.

Persons between 16 and 25 years of age report that the kinds of violence that they are exposed to the most are street violence (34.1%), gang violence (26.9%), harassment, intimidation or bullying at school12 (23.2%) and, especially in the case of girls and women, domestic violence13 (25.4%) (Latinobarómetro, 2018) (see figure VI.3). When these forms of violence are intertwined with geographic and ethnic gaps, they take the form, for example, of racist biases against young people of African descent, who are often dealt with more severely than others if they are suspected of having committed a violent act.

One of the areas in which intergenerational gaps work in the young population’s favour is access to cultural activities and the use of cultural assets. Young people have more access to cultural goods and services than adults do. The extent of their access varies across countries and socioeconomic strata, however. Central American youth have less access to these types of goods and activities than their peers in the other subregions of Latin America (Sunkel, 2016; Soto, Trucco and Ullman, 2015). The degree of digital inclusion is also lower among low-income youth as a consequence of the fact that they have fewer opportunities to use or gain access to the associated technology. This results in less use of the Internet as a cultural channel, as well as interfering with their development of computer skills and reducing their opportunities for cultural integration.

Young people's participation in social affairs and their performance of their role as citizens are key factors in their inclusion in society, since these kinds of activities enable them to take part in making decisions that will influence their own development and in working as a team to achieve a shared goal. This kind of engagement is not universal, however (ECLAC/OIJ, 2004). At the regional level, many young people remain uninvolved in conventional politics and distrust that kind of political activity (see figure VI.4).14 preferring instead to engage in social movements as their main avenue for political participation and for voicing their demands (Maldonado Valera, 2016; Soto, Trucco and Ullman, 2015).

12 The term “bullying” refers to various types of intimidation, harassment, abuse, persecution and victimization that are repeatedly inflicted by some students on others.

13 This is the most common type of violence in the home.

14 Young people are not the only ones who view conventional politics with mistrust. The figures shown in the graph for persons between 16 and 25 years of age are very similar to the averages for the population as a whole, which reflect widespread distrust among the general population.
FIGURE VI.4
Latin America (18 countries)\(^a\) persons between 16 and 25 years of age who say that they do not trust selected institutions, 2008-2018 (Percentages)

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of data from Latinobarómetro, "Latinobarómetro Análisis de datos" 2018 [online] https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp.

\(^a\) Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia and Uruguay.