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To cite this article: Ligia Kiss, David Fotheringham & Meaghen Quilan-Davidson (2021): Latin American young NEETs: Brazil as a case study for systemic risks of youth social exclusion, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2021.1965107](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1965107)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2021.1965107>



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Published online: 16 Oct 2021.



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Latin American young NEETs: Brazil as a case study for systemic risks of youth social exclusion

Ligia Kiss ^a, David Fotheringham^b and Meaghen Quilan-Davidson^a

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ABSTRACT

Globally, one fifth of individuals aged 15–24 are ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET). NEETs have become an increasingly important notion in international debate, although criticisms are directed at its all-encompassing nature and lack of concern with the intergenerational, gendered, social and systemic inequalities that influence young people becoming NEETs. Prevalence of youth NEETs is especially high in Latin America, with women disproportionately affected. Brazil has one of the highest absolute numbers of NEETs in LAC. This paper uses data from the last Brazilian census to examine contextual drivers of NEETs in Brazil, and to critically assess broader implications for policy. In Brazil, states with higher coefficients of social inequality and levels of criminality are more likely to have higher proportion of youth NEET. Globally, social inequalities associated with gender, race and crime are pervasive drivers of young NEET status. Latin American youth are in a particularly disadvantageous position. Policies that aim to overcome social exclusion and marginalisation of youth need to focus on systemic drivers of the NEET condition among vulnerable subgroups of young people.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 August 2020
Accepted 2 August 2021

KEYWORDS



NEETs; young people; youth unemployment; marginalisation; social inequalities; social exclusion

Background

NEETs: global magnitude and policy

According to ILO 2017 estimates, approximately one fifth of individuals aged between 15 and 24 globally were not in employment, education or training (NEETs), with a prevalence of 34% among young women and 10% among young men.

NEET young people are at increased risk of long-term unemployment, alcohol and drug misuse, physical and mental health problems, behavioural issues, life dissatisfaction, adolescent pregnancy and involvement in crime (Vasconcelos et al. 2017; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011; Furlong 2006; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Gould, Mustard, and Weiberg 2002; Cerqueira and de Moura 2014; Benjet et al. 2012; Scott, 2020). At the same time, youth with disabilities and mental health problems are more likely to become NEET by leaving school early and facing barriers in finding decent work (Lee et al. 2009; Waghorn and Chant 2005; Rodwell et al. 2018).

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The ILO calls attention to the social costs of the exclusion of a large proportion of youth from school and work, the main mechanisms currently available for their social integration (ILO 2013). Indeed, NEETs are the focus of the only youth-specific target listed in the post-2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) – to meaningfully reduce the global proportion of youth NEET by the start of this decade (SDG 8.6.1). However, progress in this target is currently not being achieved. Recent estimates indicate that the prevalence of NEETs is rising in all regions of the world, with youth facing higher risks of unemployment due to automation. This situation is further aggravated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on education, and on levels of informal work and unemployment, especially among young people (UN 2020; ILO 2020b). Findings from a recent survey in 112 countries reveals that the effects of the pandemics are disproportionately affecting young women, younger youth and youth in lower income countries (ILO 2020b), with lasting effects on their mental health and well-being (ILO 2020b; Power et al. 2020). Unemployment and informality at a younger age also have important effects on long-term labour market outcomes (Bell and Blanchflower 2011; Cruces et al. 2012). This ‘scarring’ in later life can manifest as higher unemployment, lower pay, informality, and poorer health outcomes (Cruces et al. 2012; McQuaid 2015).

In spite of the magnitude and devastating consequences of young people NEET, evidence-based prevention and responses are still limited.

Who are the young people NEET?

NEET is a policy and research label used to designate adolescents and youth who are not engaged in the labour market, in education or training (Maguire 2015; Wrigley 2017). The definition of NEET includes a wide range of situations that young people may face, such as long-term unemployment, just entering the labour market, caring for young children, suffering from ill-health and voluntarily taking time off from work or education (Corbanese and Rosas 2017). Together, most of these situations describe the marginalisation of large groups of young people who are not engaging in education or participating in any of the formal categories of the labour market (Mascherini 2019).

While some in the field value this broadness in the notion of NEETs as an important comparative measure of youth vulnerability (ILO 2015; Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018; Furlong 2006), others consider its conceptual breadth problematic (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011; Furlong 2006; Reiter and Schlimbach 2015).

The notion of youth NEET has been praised for its potential to highlight a wide range of common vulnerabilities that lead to youth’s marginalisation and disengagement (Elder 2016; Ranzani and Rosati 2013). Those who value the concept’s explanatory qualities consider that, by focussing on causes of social exclusion such as unemployment, school dropout and discouragement, the concept of NEET can broaden the scope of policy actions. That is, instead of promoting unemployment-exclusive strategies, the focus on young NEET can shift actions to tackling joblessness and inactivity (Elder 2016; Eurofund 2012).

Conversely, the idea of youth NEET has been criticised for conflating individuals with very different life trajectories and experiences under a single label (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011; Reiter and Schlimbach 2015). For instance, the heterogeneity of the concept is reflected in the Eurofund (Mascherini and Ledermaier 2016) typology for

youth NEET, in which the situation of young European NEET is classified into seven categories: short-term unemployment, long-term unemployment, family responsibilities; illness or disabilities; discouraged, and other NEET circumstances (including the most privileged, the most vulnerable and those following alternative careers). As highlighted by Furlong (2006), at the same time that the term NEET is explicit about the different vulnerabilities experienced by youth, it can also mean 'the official abolition of youth unemployment' (554).

Since the 1970s, youth unemployment and transition pathways from education to work have been at the centre of youth policy and research (Woodman and Bennett 2015). Political and social changes associated with the neoliberal economic model have affected youth unemployment in several parts of the World and led to new models of youth transition. Patterns associated with youth tertiary education and training, youth unemployment, and delayed marriage and parenthood were interpreted by some scholars as a new life-course stage, emerging adulthood or delayed transitions to adulthood (Woodman and Bennett 2015, Arnett 2007). Distinction between these different stages of life became blurred, resulting in changes in their social meaning (Woodman and Bennett 2015). Nonetheless, independently of young people's transitional choices, and their attitudes to employment and education, the term NEET is often used in policy in reference to youth disengagement and social exclusion (Maguire 2015). From this perspective, young people NEET are considered as not fully integrated in all aspects of social life (Daly and Silver 2008; Levitas 2004). Most research and policy, especially in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMIC), tend to focus, therefore, on vulnerable groups of young people NEET. These youths are considered underprivileged, facing multiple comparative disadvantages in access to resources (France, Roberts, and Wood 2018; Daly and Silver 2008). These circumstances of poverty and social inequality can lead to social exclusion, perpetuating individual economic instability and social isolation (Daly and Silver 2008).

Perhaps attentive to the criticisms of the NEET concept, in their 2013 report on Global Employment Trends for Youth, the ILO coined a different term from NEET to refer to this vulnerable youth population, which explicitly excluded the unemployed. The term NLFET was used in this report to designate youth who were 'neither in the labour force, nor in education or training' (ILO 2013). More recently, however, the ILO (Elder 2016) went back to the proposition of a broader definition for NEETs, measured as: unemployed non-students + inactive non-students / youth population. The denominator for this measure includes non-responses (Elder 2016). As a consequence of this definition, unemployed, inactive or unknown are partially conflated under the same statistic (Maguire 2015). The ILO also proposed other concepts to characterise youth vulnerabilities in the labour market, such as residual inactive youth, time-related underemployment, vulnerable employment, irregular employment and youth labour underutilisation. The international use and implementation of these notions was, however, limited (Assaad and Levison 2013).

The definition of young people who are NEETs can also vary substantially between countries and regions in relation to their inclusion criteria for employment, education, age and other individual characteristics. For example, Yuji's (2007) research includes marital status in the definition of young Japanese NEET, who are categorised as non-working unmarried persons aged 15–34, not attending school and not looking for a

job. Conversely, in Uganda, married and unmarried youth can be categorised as NEET. In fact, in Uganda the early age of marriage and family formation are key drivers of the NEET phenomenon, especially among young women (ILO 2017; UNICEF 2020). In Brazil, definition of young people NEET include individuals aged between 15 and 29 years-old, both who are inactive and actively searching for employment (Elder 2016). In Egypt's census, military draftees were counted among non-employed people causing an upward bias in national youth NEET estimates (Assaad and Levison 2013). Furthermore, the definition of 'actively searching' is inconsistent between countries.

Measures of NEETs also do not capture youth engaged in unproductive or marginal employment, such as young people making an income from criminal activities, or individuals in exploitative unpaid work. Most international definitions count youth that engage in any kind of economic activity for at least one hour during the reference week as employed, regardless of the quality, or quantity of this work. Therefore, most NEET's definitions also exclude youth involved in parenting duties and non-paid domestic and care work (Assaad and Levison 2013).

Risk factors concerning NEET young people Individual risks associated with NEET status among young people include low academic achievement, parental unemployment, lower socioeconomic status, coming from an ethnic minority, substance use, homelessness, neurodevelopmental disorders, young parenthood, being female, having low self-confidence and mental health problems (Henderson et al. 2017; Knight et al. 2017; ILO 2020a; Zucotti and O'Reilly 2019). Both in LMIC and High Income Countries (HIC), NEETs are concentrated in poor households, with low levels of parental education and a low number of working household members. Gender, educational attainment, marriage and children are also associated with youth NEET across developed and developing countries (Alvarado et al. 2020).

At the contextual level, NEETs status is associated with growing up in disadvantaged circumstances, and with restricted social support derived from intergeneration structural inequalities (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Vasconcelos et al. 2017; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011; Thompson 2011; Mascherini 2019).

Indeed, young people in disadvantaged situations or with limited social support are more likely to encounter obstacles in their transition from school to work (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Tillmann and Comim 2016). Women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities or mental health problems are at increased risk of exclusion from work, education or training (ILO 2017; Rodwell et al. 2018; Zucotti and O'Reilly 2019). Studies also suggest that transition pathways to adulthood and inclusion in the labour market are varied and do not allow a binary classification between NEET and socially 'incorporated' youth (Roberts 2011). Social norms, family practices and individual perceptions around adulthood, education and work may also affect young people's engagement with different aspects of their everyday life (Woodman and Bennett 2015). These norms, attitudes and behaviours are influenced by cultural changes, broader economic shocks, national institutions or government policies (Assirelli 2011; Vasconcelos et al. 2017).

Structural differences, including those that mark the North – South global divide, also produce different applications of the term NEET (Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018; Cardoso 2013). However, in both the Global North and Global South, the impact of persistent austerity measures, diminishing public welfare, and fragmentation of formal employment has had profound effects on the economic opportunities available to young people, resulting

in prolonged periods of uncertainty for youth (Thieme 2018). This scenario will likely be aggravated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic (2020b).

The effects of the pandemic may be particularly severe in LAC, where, according to the ILO Regional Director for LAC, Vinicius Pinheiro, 'the markets have regressed at least 10 years and the crisis is far from over' (ILO 2020d). Recent estimates by the ILO suggest that Latin American and the Caribbean are home to more than 34 million young NEETs accounting for 21.7% of the all young people living in the region (ILO 2020a). Local governments and international organisation are concerned about the challenges in promoting youth participation in the labour market and in decent work, especially when considering the economic impact of the pandemic (ILO 2020c). However, limited evidence is available to inform policies, with young NEETs remaining an under researched phenomenon in LAC.

The present paper examines the case of Latin American and Brazilian young people NEET, focussing on the role of structural drivers in the regional distribution of NEETs. We hypothesise that poverty, gender, race and crime interact in a context marked by stagnant economic growth and deep social inequalities to produce a large contingent of marginalised youth in the region.

Methods

Data sources

We conducted a review of the academic and grey literature on NEETs in LAC and Brazil to provide a broad overview of the topic, with a focus on the context and recent development in the region. Searches covered local definitions of young people NEET, magnitude, associated risks and policies. At a later stage, during the pandemic, we carried out further searches focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 on youth NEET and on youth unemployment in the region. We used a purposive sampling strategy to identify publications addressing specific question on each of the topics covered by the review.

Additionally, for Brazil, we conducted analysis of data from the most recent Brazilian National Census (2010) by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). IBGE is the official government agency responsible for population statistics in the country, including the national census. We extracted aggregate measures for each of the 26 Brazilian states and the Federal District, using the Atlas of Human Development in Brazil (AHDB), which is a research platform that makes available indicators of education, income, labour, housing and vulnerability based on the IBGE census data. We used the most recent census data available, that is, the 2010 census. More recent prevalence figures for young people NEET have been published based on the National Household Survey (PNAD – Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios) (IBGE 2015). The latter data are not publicly available through AHDB.

Research context

According to the United Nation's geographical classification, Latin America and the Caribbean comprise 33 countries with more than 646,43 million inhabitants (UN, *s.d.*; World Bank 2019). Many countries in LAC have a history of political and economic instability, with high levels of poverty and social inequality. In fact, alongside Sub-Saharan Africa,

LAC is the most unequal region in the world, with more than a fifth of the population living in slums (United Nations 2020).

Brazil is a federation composed of 26 states and a federal district. It is the largest and most populous country in LAC. Pronounced differences in income, poverty levels and economic development exist across Brazilian states (Nakabashi 2018; Goes and Karpowicz 2017). For instance, in 2014 the most unequal federal state had a Gini coefficient 18% higher than the national average, while the least unequal state had a coefficient 20% lower than the national average. Levels of extreme poverty also vary across states, from 1.5% to 17.1% of households in extreme poverty between 2011 and 2014. In 2019, the largest proportion of young people NEETs resided in the northeast states, where levels of social inequality are among the highest in the country. At the same time, the prevalence of youth NEET in the southern states, where social inequalities are lowest, was similar to those of developed countries (Barros and Candido 2020).

The continental size of the country, with its regional socioeconomic and demographic disparities, and the availability of public data makes Brazil an ideal case study for the structural drivers of the NEET phenomenon.

Data analysis

We conducted an exploratory ecological correlation analysis to measure the pairwise strength of association between NEET status, in adolescents (ages 15–17) and youth (ages 18–24), and selected socioeconomic indicators. This analysis investigated the geographical correlations between risk factors and NEETs prevalence by age groups. Youth NEET were defined as young people not in employment, training or education. This includes both unemployed and inactive youth (i.e. not seeking employment or not available to work during the survey reference period), in addition to those engaged in non-paid work. Although the IBGE defines young people NEET as those aged 15–29 years, the data provided by AHDB is split into two age groups (15–17 years and 18–24 years). Therefore, we presented the data by the most commonly used definition of age group (15–24 years). To simplify data description, we called the group aged 15–17 ‘adolescents’, and those aged 18–24, ‘youth’.

All variables were extracted from the AHDB platform, except the data on homicides, which were based on the corrected estimates extracted from the paper by Melo, Silva, and Garcia (2017).

We also used descriptive statistics extracted from the IBGE historical series on rates of school dropouts by region and years, which include data from research conducted by IBGE and data from other governmental sources (IBGE 2019).

Results

Youth NEETs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

Within the last decade, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have experienced economic decline. It was projected that in 2018 the region would experience an economic growth of 1.8 percent. Yet, per capita income grew at an estimated 0.7 percent, with projections for 2019 estimated at 0.9 percent. By comparison, the global GDP growth rate in

2017 was estimated at 2.0 percent (WBG 2019a). This limited economic growth has impacted youth participation in the labour market. In 2014, young people in the region represented 43% of the unemployed (ILO 2014). Between 1999 and 2019, the total youth labour force participation decreased from 54.3% to 48.9% (ILO 2020a). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened social inequalities and pushed millions into poverty, disproportionately affecting women (UN 2021). However, even before the pandemic, economic growth in LAC was stagnant, with local economies facing reductions in GDP, lower investments, decreased consumption per capita, lower exports and deterioration in employment quality (UN ECLAC 2019).

According to recent ILO estimates, one in four people aged 15–24 in LAC are NEET (ILO 2020a). Previous World Bank estimates suggested that the average youth NEET rate in LAC was 19.4%, with substantial variation between countries from 10.9% in Peru to 25% in Honduras and El Salvador (de Hoyos et al. 2016a). These differences may be partly explained by divergences in national definitions of youth NEET. For example, in Colombia youth is defined as people aged 14–26 years. In Mexico this range is 12–29, and in Uruguay 14–25 (Navarrete, Innamorato, and Arias 2017). However, analysis of country-level data suggests that the variation across LAC countries is mainly related to the extent to which labour markets are constrained, gender disparities are normalised, and social inequalities are pervasive in each country (Navarrete, Innamorato, and Arias 2017; de Hoyos et al. 2016b). Across Latin America, low education and early parenthood are the main drivers of youth becoming NEETs, both conditions associated with low socioeconomic status (Pérez 2017; de Hoyos et al. 2016b). Young Latin American NEETs mainly come from poor households. One in four young Latin American NEETs did not finish primary school, while another 43% did not complete secondary education. In some contexts, such as Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, the youth NEET phenomenon may also be associated with delinquency and violence, aggravated by the presence of organised crime (de Hoyos et al. 2016b; Benjet et al. 2012; Navarrete, Innamorato, and Arias 2017; Zaitch and Antonopoulos 2019).

Young women and men engaged in sex work in LAC are also likely to remain uncounted in the NEET statistics because of the invisible and mostly unregulated nature of this type of work (Miguel 2017), and the associated underreporting linked to stigma. Situations of sexual exploitation and human trafficking or forced labour, especially those involving underage people, are even more likely to remain undetected because of its illicit nature (Miller-Perrin and Wurtele 2017).

Young people in the LAC region often face challenges related to national or regional economic growth stagnation, limited private-sector investments and political instability. Youth transitioning from education to employment often lack opportunities, resources and access to the formal labour market, resulting in a high proportion of young people being unemployed or in precarious jobs (Deneulin and Sánchez-Ancochea 2018; de Hoyos, Rogers, and Szekely 2016b). As a result, Latin America is the world region with the largest proportion of young people NEET living in households in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution (de Hoyos, Rogers, and Szekely 2016b). This concentration of young NEETs in the poorest strata of the population tends to be perpetuated across generations, obstructing progress in indicators for social mobility and poverty reduction (Shirasu and Arraes 2019).

In 2014, the ILO's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Elizabeth Tinoco, painted a stark picture of the challenging situation faced by youth in the region: 'It is not surprising that young people take to the streets, as their lives are marked by discouragement and frustration because of lack of opportunities. This has consequences on social stability and even on democratic governance' (ILO 2014).

This picture is likely to worsen due to the impact of COVID-19 on young Latin Americans. The consequences of the pandemic on the region's labour markets, and on young people's socioeconomic well-being, education, exposure to violence and mental health will affect the incidence of young people NEET (UNICEF 2020; ILO, 2020b). In Colombia, for example, the rate of young people NEET increased from 22% in 2019, before the pandemic, to 33% in September 2020 (Cartagena 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is also affecting the most vulnerable in the region through access to education. Social inequalities in access to technology affect access to online education, especially for youth in the poorer socioeconomic strata. For instance, while 92% of students in the wealthier southern region of Brazil can access remote learning, only 52% in the poorer northeast are able to engage in online education (di Gropello 2020).

Figure 1 provides examples of the NEETs distribution in the region and in North America before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the vast majority of countries in the region, women were disproportionately affected by the NEET phenomenon. In LAC, 27% of young women and 12% of young men aged 15–24 were NEET (ILO 2017). The gender gap was higher in Guatemala (ratio female: male at 6.6:1) followed by Bolivia (3.6:1) and Honduras (3.5:1).

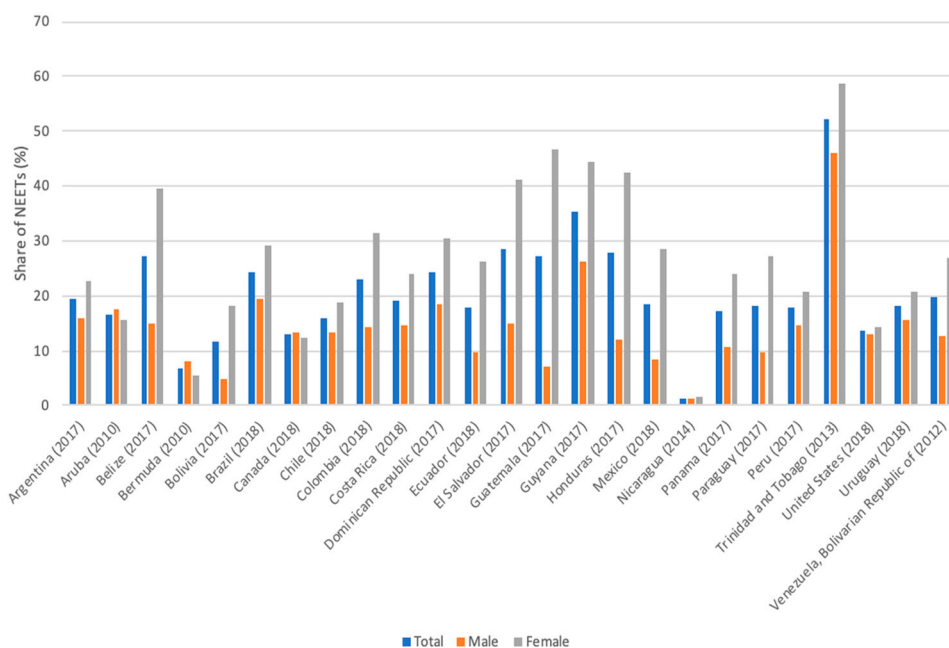


Figure 1. Share of youth not in employment, education or training (latest year available) by selected countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. *Source:* ILO. 2018. Ilostat: Share of youth not in employment, education or training. Geneva, ILO.

According to de Hoyos and colleagues (2016a), the typical profile of a NEET in LAC is a pregnant adolescent or young mother. Adolescent pregnancy is associated with poor education and employment outcomes, such as early school dropout, limited school re-entry, and reduced entry to and stability in the labour market (de Hoyos et al. 2016b; Novella et al. 2018; Borges et al. 2016). Gender norms and the organisation of welfare systems in many Latin American countries are responsible for the disproportional load of unpaid domestic work falling on women and girls (Amarante and Rossel 2018). These young women are also more likely to live in urban settings and belong to the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution (de Hoyos, Popova, and Rogers 2016a). Despite young women representing a larger share of young people NEET in LAC (Monteiro 2013; de Hoyos, Popova, and Rogers 2016a), young men are responsible for the recent growth in both the share and absolute number of youth NEET. Women and girls still account for two-thirds of youth NEET in the region, although the rate of young male NEET increased by 46% from 1992 to 2010 (de Hoyos, Rogers, and Szekely 2016b). This increase among males is attributed to early school dropout, lack of skills and limited secure employment opportunities (de Hoyos et al. 2016a). In some LAC countries, the simultaneous growth in violence and crime figures has raised concerns that illicit activities may attract ever larger contingents of young unemployed males (Benjet et al. 2012).

Key interventions to prevent youth becoming NEETs in the region rely on cash transfers conditional on school enrolment, publicly funded studentships, implementation of full-time schooling regimens, early pregnancy prevention and financial literacy programmes (De Hoyos et al. 2016a). Additionally, active labour market policies have been implemented with some success in the Caribbean. These include skills-building and vocational training, on-the-job training and work-based activities, and programmes that focus on matching employers and job seekers (Parra-Torrado 2014).

Youth NEET in Brazil

Brazil has one of the highest absolute numbers of young people NEET in LAC (de Hoyos, Popova, and Rogers 2016a). The latest annual labour force survey estimate that in 2015 Brazil had 7.3 million youth NEET (ILO 2019a). The country experienced considerable economic growth and poverty reduction in the first decade of the 2000s. Since 2010, however, economic growth slowed considerably from 4.5% (between 2006 and 2010) to 2.1% (between 2011 and 2014) (WBG 2019c). Gains in poverty reduction now risk being reversed. The country also remains one of the most unequal in the world (WBG 2017; WBG 2016) with subnational social and economic inequalities impacting young people's health, education, and employment outcomes. Moreover, the country is expected to face its deepest recession on record with deepening economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, *s.d.*). The effect of COVID-19 on the Brazilian economy and social indicators are deep, with rising poverty levels, decreasing human capital, higher unemployment, and lower working hours and wages (Prates and Barbosa 2020). These effects are likely to disproportionately affect the more deprived strata of the population (Pires, Carvalho, and Xavier 2020).

In Brazil, estimates indicate that 24.2% of youth are NEET (ILO 2019b). Each year, one in four Brazilian adolescents between 15 and 17 years-old drop out of school (Insper 2017). In 2015, NEET youth cost the country 0.6% of GDP (Shirasu and Arraes 2019).

Brazil has 33.4 million youth between 15 and 24 years of age (IBGE 2018), a high fertility rate among young people and one of the highest youth homicide rates in the world. These factors, along with the country's high poverty levels, low quality education, and high youth unemployment, create the conditions for young Brazilians to become NEET (Tillmann and Comim 2016). Indeed, structural social inequalities, gender, ethnicity and poverty are strong drivers of the NEET phenomenon among Brazilian youth (de Almeida and Figueiredo 2017; Dias and Vasconcelos 2017).

Estimates suggest that the proportion and number of young people NEET in Brazil is steadily increasing (IBGE 2018). In 2010, 20.1% of Brazilian youth were NEET, with a rate of 12.3% of male NEET versus 28.2% of female. In 2019, the overall prevalence of young NEETs was 28.9% (WBG 2019b).

The 2014 National Household Sample Survey indicates that, between 2004 and 2014, the proportion of 15–17 year old and 18–24 year old NEETs was highest in the north and northeast macroregions and lowest in the southeast (Figure 2). Rates were higher among 18–24 year olds in comparison to 15–17 year olds. Also, NEET rates appeared higher for 15–17 year olds in the north, whereas they were higher for 18–24 year olds in the north-east. The NEET rate in 2014 ranged from 6.7% among 15–17 year olds in the southeast and 11.9% among 18–24 year olds in the south to 9.6% among 15–17 year olds in the north and 19.7% among 18–24 year olds in the northeast (IBGE 2014).

Economic recession has resulted in a sharp rise in youth unemployment between 2015 and 2017. These high rates are the result of young people both losing their jobs and remaining in unemployment for longer (Corseuil, Poloponsky, and Franca 2018). At the

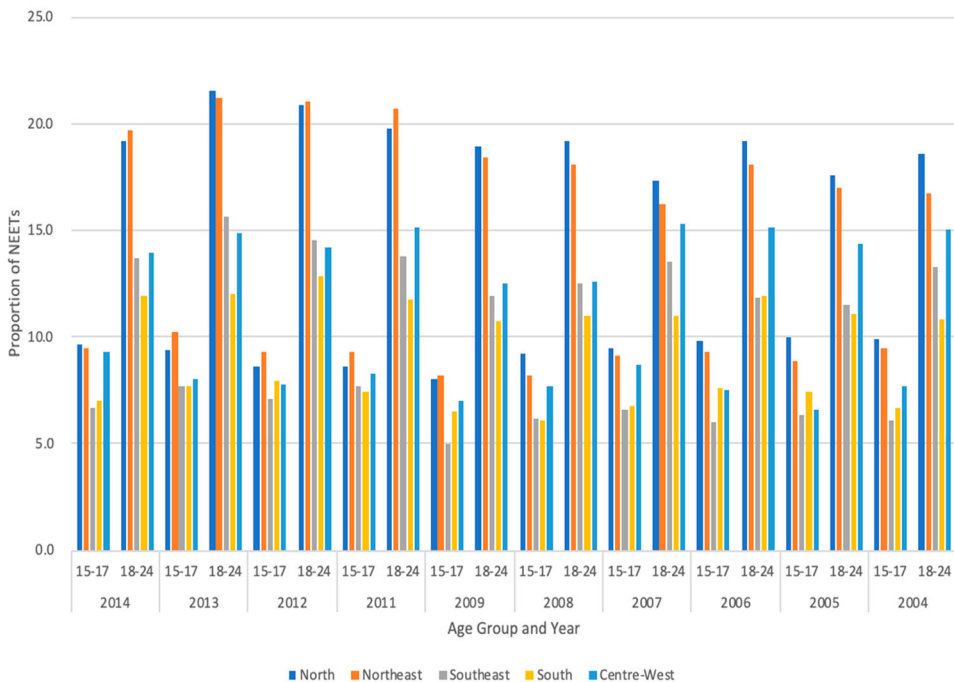


Figure 2. Proportion of Youth 15–24 years of Age Not in Education, Employment, nor Not Seeking Employment by Age Group and Region of Brazil (2004–2014). *Source:* Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. 2014. Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios. Rio de Janeiro, IBGE.

same time, youth who are employed tend to enter the labour market in unfavourable positions. Youth work in Brazil is largely characterised by informality, unstable ties, long shifts, low productivity, unsafe work conditions and low pay (Corseuil, Poloponsky, and Franca 2020; Campos 2013).

Data from 2018 indicate that Brazilian youth who never attended school or dropped out were more likely to be unemployed. More than four in five young people aged 15–29 years who never attended school were unemployed. This youth unemployment rate tended to decline in proportion to the number of years that youth spend in education (Barros and Candido 2020). Young Brazilian women are 1.5 times more likely to be NEET than young men (28% of women and 18% of men) (Novella et al. 2018). Young black and mixed-race Brazilians were also more likely to be NEET (25.8%) than their white counterparts (18.5%), in 2018. This difference was even higher for women, with a 32% prevalence of black and mixed-race female NEETs versus 20.8% for white females (Barros and Candido 2020).

In Brazil, the adolescent (15–19 year olds) fertility rate is 67.0 (per 1,000 women per year) and young women's (20–24 year olds) fertility rate is 105.4 (UNDESA 2017). Borges et al. (2016) analysed the trends in adolescent fertility rate among adolescents 10–14 years of age, finding that nationally the fertility rate among this age group remained steady between 2000 and 2012 (3.38 and 3.29 births per 1,000, respectively). Fertility rates among 10–14 year olds were highest in the northern region (5.85 births per 1,000), while they were the lowest in the south-eastern region (2.24 births per 1,000). In fact, adolescent pregnancy among 10–14 year olds increased over the time period in the north (from 5.46 births in 2000–5.85 births per 1000) and northeast regions (from 3.72 births per 1000 in 2000–4.07 births per 1000 in 2012) (Borges et al. 2016).

According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2018), young people NEET are, for the most part, not inactive. They are attempting to be productive and engage in activities. In Brazil, 36.3% of NEETs are looking for a job; 44.0% care for family members; 79.0% are engaged in domestic tasks/businesses; 4.1% have a disability; and 12.3% are not engaged in an activity and don't have a disability (IDB 2018).

In a historical analysis of youth labour market entry and exit between 1996 and 2010, Corseuil et al. (2014) found that young people did not face obstacles to gaining entry into the formal labour market in Brazil. On average, nine out of ten youth were hired each year, compared with 41% of adults. Despite greater hiring among youth, they experienced a higher rate of termination (voluntarily or involuntarily) with 70% of young workers spending less than a year in a job. The study found that sectors with higher turnover rates employ a greater share of young workers, which could partially explain this difference in termination rates. The authors argue that rapid entry into employment with higher hiring rates in combination with higher termination rates demonstrate how the labour market can be more turbulent for young people. In turn, this may reduce youth motivation to invest in training and education (Corseuil et al. 2014; IDB 2018). Indeed, ILO estimates confirm that 21.2% of youth (15–29 years-old) working in Brazil are undereducated for their current job while 14.6% were overeducated for their occupation (Elder 2016).

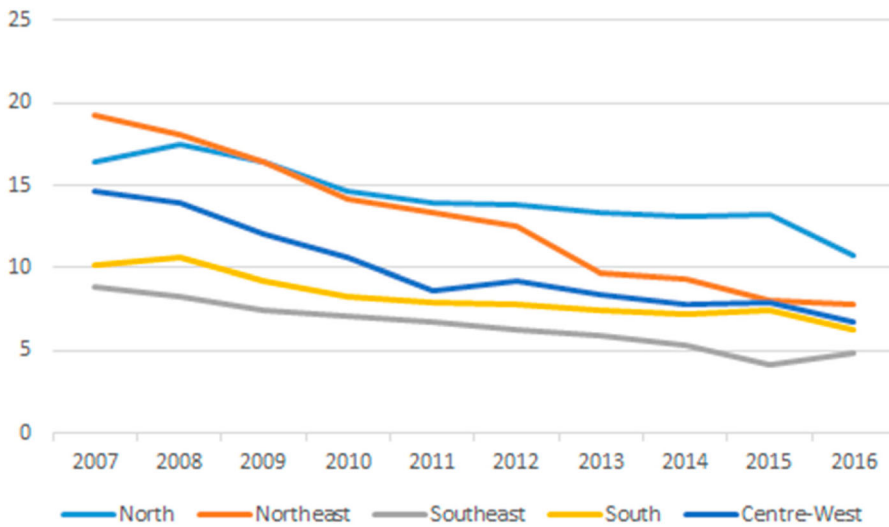


Figure 3. Total school dropout rate in Brazil by subregions (2007-2016)

Not in education, not in training

Our analysis shows that, between 2006 and 2017, the rate of all school dropouts decreased in all five subregions of Brazil. During this period, dropout rates for secondary education ('ensino médio') also followed this downward trend [Figure 3](#).

Not in employment

IBGE's report on social indicators highlights the structural inequalities in the Brazilian youth labour market that keep women, black or mixed-race in more vulnerable positions (i.e. unemployed or in informal employment). These disparities are evidenced by the income differences between these population groups. In 2017, wages among white people were 72.5% higher than among black or mixed-raced people. At the same time, men were earning 29.7% more than women. A similar trend is confirmed for the participation of women (52.7%) and men (72.5%) in the workforce (IBGE 2018).

According to the 2016 Brazilian Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNADC), 27.2% of 15–24 year olds were unemployed. This means 15–24 year olds were 3.2 times more likely to be unemployed than those 25–64 years of age (CEDLAS and the WBG 2018). This proportion is similar to the global figure (ILO 2020a).

Associations with other factors

We examined how the proportions of NEETs varied across the 26 states within Brazil. By comparing this with other socio-economic factors we could measure patterns of association.

[Figure 4](#) shows that none of the factors selected showed a significant correlation with the proportion of NEETs aged 15-17. Although the directions of association (signs of the correlation coefficients) were as expected, none reached significance. This may in part be

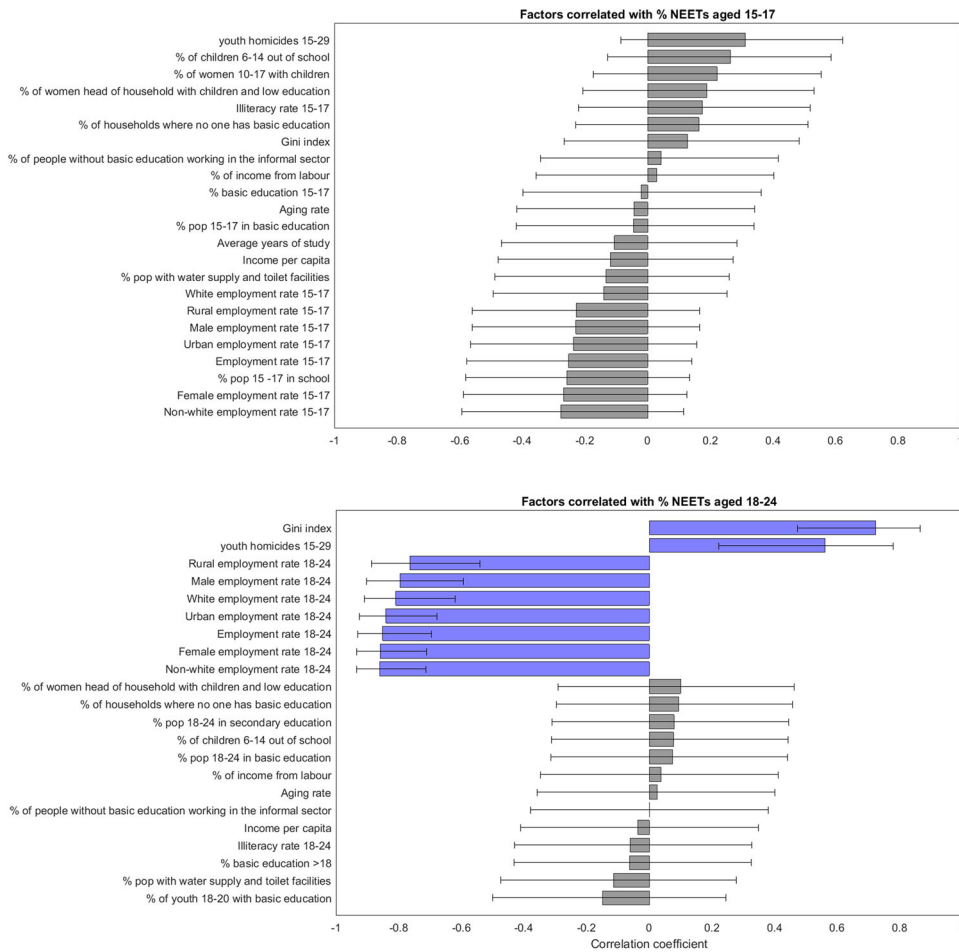


Figure 4. Correlation of proportion of NEETs with socioeconomic indicators across 26 states of Brazil. Top graph – 15–17 year olds, bottom graph 18–24 year olds. Grey bars indicate a correlation which is not significantly different from zero. Error bars show the 95% confidence intervals.

due to the lower variance of the proportion of NEETs across states in the 15–17 age group compared to the 18–24 age group.

In contrast, there were significant correlations for 9 of the factors tested with the 18–24 age group. The Gini index and youth homicides are strongly correlated with % youth NEET. As expected all the employment rate measures are strongly anti-correlated with % youth NEET. Unemployment among non-white people and female unemployment are more strongly correlated with % of youth NEET than white or male employment.

Discussion

Young NEETs and social exclusion

Our analysis of Brazilian census data confirms the importance of structural drivers in youth becoming NEETs (de Almeida and Figueiredo 2017; Dias and Vasconcelos 2017). Our

findings suggest that rates of youth NEETs in Brazilian states are correlated with social inequality and homicide rates for youth aged 18-24. Conversely, state-level indicators of poverty and household education were not significantly correlated with the proportion of young NEETs. These findings suggest that in Brazil, social segregation and crime may be important drivers of youth marginalisation. Growing up in states where social inequality is deep and crime is rampant seems to influence young people's prospects of inclusions in education, training or employment.

These findings echo previous research that highlight that globally, the NEETs phenomenon is rooted in wider social and structural inequalities (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Vasconcelos et al. 2017; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson 2011; Thompson 2011; Mascherini 2019; Ernesto et al. 2020; Rodriguez-Modroño 2019; Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018). For instance, research on European countries has highlighted the primacy of poverty and social exclusion as drivers of the NEET phenomenon (Ruesga-Benito, González-Laxe, and Picatoste 2018). In Mexico, regional disparities in access to education and work opportunities are associated with social exclusion and a higher risk of youth becoming NEET (Vargas-Valle and Cruz-Piñero 2012). In Brazil, structural inequalities are similarly reflected in the increased vulnerability of youth, women, black and mixed-race Brazilians in the national labour market (IBGE 2018; Costa et al. 2021). Intersectional vulnerabilities linked to poverty, gender and ethnicity have been found to impact youth access to employment and educational attainment not only Brazil, but in diverse countries, such as the UK (Zucotti and O'Reilly 2019), South Africa (Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018), Peru (Alcazar, Bullard, and Balarin 2020) and Sri Lanka (Abayasekara and Gunasekara 2020; Wickremeratne and Dunusinghe 2018).

Gender divisions that perpetuate inequalities in access to educational and work opportunities limit positive re-engagement of young mothers in LAC and elsewhere. However, as recognised by Russell (2016), choices are not homogenous and static among this group: 'Young mother want different things from their official support structures at different times' (p.105). Policies that target young mothers' NEET need to recognise the complexities in their experiences and how these interact with structural barriers to their integration. Recent reports indicate that efforts of government in LAC to address women's economic security and their unpaid care and domestic work during the COVID-19 crisis have been limited (Bergallo et al. 2021).

As confirmed by the findings from the survey Millennials in LAC, 'being NEET seems to be much more about certain disadvantages rather than a simple lack of interest in a productive lifestyle' (Alvarado et al. 2020, 1286). Research in Eastern Europe confirms that personality predispositions, lack of critical thinking and low effectiveness of actions are not necessarily related to a person becoming NEET when unemployed (Tomczyk et al. 2018). Indeed, not surprisingly, studies show that young people with higher income and educational levels have better information about labour opportunities and a wider social network to help them access higher quality job opportunities (Paulino and Bendasolli 2018). This inequality in cumulative social capital and labour opportunities available for youth from different socioeconomic strata tend to perpetuate intergenerational poverty and social exclusion (Daly and Silver 2008). Additionally, research from Mexico demonstrate the impact of crime and violence on young people's social capital. Analysis of panel data conclude that Mexican youth exposed to high levels of local violence tend

to spend less years in education and find employment earlier in life (Brown and Velásquez 2017).

Given that LAC has the highest percentage of young people NEET in the bottom 40% of the income distribution, opportunities for intergenerational social mobility are limited (Deneulin and Sánchez-Ancochea 2018; de Hoyos, Rogers, and Szekely 2016b). Policies that only address individual drivers of marginalisation also neglect important trends in the labour market. These include the rise in informal employment and ‘hustling’, and the trends for mass unemployment and underemployment associated with technological automation of human labour (ILO 2019c; Thieme 2018; Ford 2015). Young people will be most affected by these technologies as they often work in jobs at higher risk of automation (ILO 2020a). In this context, it will be particularly important for policies to favour access to education and training in information technologies to the most marginalised groups (Ruesga-Benito, González-Laxe, and Picatoste 2018). These policies may be especially important in the economic crisis and recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, likely to disproportionately affect youth unemployment (Brada, Marelli, and Signorelli 2014; Ernesto et al. 2020). However, these investments are far from being a panacea, as the ‘the correlation between education and training, on the one hand, and secure employment, on the other hand, seems less certain than it once was’ (Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018, 258). On the contrary, changes in labour market configurations associated with neoliberalism have greatly reduced opportunities for secure employment, especially among youth (ILO 2020a). Economic instability has turned into a life style for many, especially in developing countries, where economic growth is stagnant and social protection structures are insufficient. However, at the same time that the risk of economic exclusion influences youth’s discouragement, it also fosters alternative interpretations of work in the ‘hustle economy’ (Ruesga-Benito, González-Laxe, and Picatoste 2018; Thieme 2018). These economic changes and the growing income differences in contemporary society affect young people’s living conditions, everyday lives, social roles and identities (Hämäläinen and Matikainen 2018). They will inevitably have an effect on social norms around work and social participation and, as a consequence, on the interpretation and meaning of youth social exclusion. Policies targeting young people will need to be sensitive to these changes.

Investing in the education and employment opportunities for young people presents an important opportunity for social and economic growth, given that they represent approximately 17% of the population (IDB 2018). In general, interventions that address social exclusion and foster school enrolment can help reduce the prevalence of youth NEET. For instance, findings from a recent study by Vasconcelos et al. (2017) indicate that Brazilian young people who received cash transfers conditional on school enrolment were less likely to be NEET, especially among those in conditions of extreme poverty. These investments can also help tackle precarious work among youth – a less visible problem faced by young people in Latin America and globally. ILO estimates show that three out of five young people can only find informal employment with little stability, lack of a contractual framework, low wages and the absence of rights and social protections (ILO 2019). None of these social indicators has improved in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic (UN 2020; ILO 2020b). On the contrary, the consequences of the pandemic are disproportionately affecting the groups most likely to become NEET: young people, particularly women, in lower income countries (ILO 2020b).

Our study also confirmed that aggregated rates of homicides are correlated with a high proportion of young people NEET in the Brazilian federal states. Unemployment and school dropouts are probably some of the mechanisms behind higher criminal engagement among youth NEET. For example, the study by Cerqueira and de Moura (2014) found that a 1% increase in the unemployment rate among 25–29 year olds and 18–24 year olds was associated with a 3.8% and 2.1% increase in the homicide rate of this population, respectively. Additionally, the study found that adolescent boys aged 15–17 were less likely to engage in criminal activity if they were enrolled in school. In LAC, a similar situation affects Mexico, with concerns that drug traffickers and criminal organisations will recruit new members from the large pool of youth NEETs (Benjet et al. 2012). Both in Brazil and Mexico, organised crime has thrived in a context of political corruption, institutional crisis of the police and an overstretched penal system (Luz, Lara, and Ferreira 2020). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR 2015) attributes the escalation of violence in LAC to the coexistence of multiple factors. These include the presence of organised criminal groups, the large number of firearms available to private individuals, social tolerance of violence and social legitimisation of criminal groups' actions. These are aggravated by institutional weaknesses in the police and justice system, poor systems for social reintegration of inmates, and the ability of organised crime to co-opt State institutions (IACHR 2015). Many other Latin American countries have a high level of violent organised crime that place youth at risk, including Colombia, Paraguay, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala (Zaitch and Antonopoulos 2019). Globally, there are similar concerns that larger contingents of young, unemployed, poorly educated, single men are recruited by criminal networks (Juárez, Urdal, and Vadlamannati 2020). For instance, analysis of global data shows that youth unemployment is associated with domestic terrorism, depending on a country's level of corruption, government ineffectiveness and limited rule of law (Adelaja and George 2020). In some African countries and regions, high fertility rates, poverty and unemployment among youth, increase the pool of young people vulnerable to radicalisation. Groups such as ISIS, for example, advertise 'job opportunities' in their recruitment campaigns to attract unemployed youth. In the Niger Delta region, lack of employment prospects have facilitated recruitment of youth into MEND. In the Borno State, Nigeria, where illiteracy rates among youth are as high as 83%, Boko Haram activities are intense. In Mauritania, most young people apprehended for terrorism had dropped out of secondary school (Cachalia et al. 2016). A study of Dutch youth who went to warring Syria found that social disadvantages, deprivation, unemployment, previous links to crime and educational environment were important contributors to radicalisation (Neve et al. 2020).

Research with young people engaged in drug trafficking in Brazil suggest that financial motivations are the main driver for youth joining illicit activities. The majority of participants in this study had some professional experience before joining organised crime, but reported that the precarious working conditions in available jobs made drug trafficking more attractive. They also report that the lifestyle and friendships associated with drug trafficking influenced their choice (Willadino, Nascimento, and Silva 2018). Globally, research shows the importance of a shared identity, solidarity and identified territories in youth motivation to join gangs (O'Brien et al. 2013).

Notwithstanding, if unemployment and engagement in crime are intrinsically related, improving access to jobs for men should help preventing them engaging in crime

(Cerqueira and de Moura 2014). In Brazil, this may be especially important for young male black and mixed-raced youth, as they are disproportionately affected by unemployment, and over-represented in Brazilian homicide rates. Indeed, black Brazilians ages 12–18 are almost three times more likely to get killed than their white counterparts (Murray, de Castro Cerqueira, and Kahn 2013; HRW 2009). Black male youth are also over-represented in the Brazilian prison population (Moura and Ribeiro 2015), and in those affected by the rising tide of police violence in the country (Pérez 2017). Similarly, American black men are more likely to transition from school to unemployment and incarceration than their white counterparts (Han 2018). This higher incarceration rate leads to lower education attainment, school dropout, job termination and isolation from family among black youth in the US (Blankenship et al. 2018). In South Africa, systemic inequalities in access to quality education also result in higher unemployment and lower wages for the black population.

At an individual level, Corseuil et al. (2014) suggest that the turbulent job market for Brazilian youth could lead to demotivation for an individual's investments in education and training. This proposition echoes the remarks from Elizabeth Tinoco on the discouragement and frustration faced by young people in LAC because of the lack of opportunities available to them (ILO 2014b). Nonetheless, the ILO's call for innovative policy initiatives seems to underestimate the systemic push factors for youth marginalisation and how these risks particularly affect young people growing up in LAC and in the Global South, where the quality of education is low, jobs are precarious, and the welfare provisions are often insufficient or non-existent (ILO 2019c).

How can the concept of NEETs help?

The notion of NEETs has gained undeniable momentum in the international debate on youth vulnerabilities and youth unemployment. The fact that SDG 8.7.1 focussing on the reduction of NEETs is the only youth-specific target in SDG 8 (Elder 2016) illustrates the importance of this concept. However, the use of NEETs as an umbrella term for different social configurations and trajectories of marginalisation experienced by young people can obscure the circumstances surrounding the NEETs status among particular groups of youth (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015; Russell 2016).

Youth NEET can be a useful category for economic analysis as an indicator of marginalisation in the labour market or an overall measure of youth vulnerability (Reiter and Schlimbach 2015; ILO 2015; Holte, Swart, and Hilamo 2018; Furlong 2006). Estimates of NEETs provide approximate indicators for youth vulnerability, which can be useful for advocacy and high-level policy-making. However, a narrow interpretation of the concept often underestimates the systemic impact of youth unemployment and structural inequalities on the lives of young people. Labour markets, education systems, and training opportunities are not homogeneous within and between countries, and are not equally available for different youth subgroups (Elder 2016). Importantly, policies targeting youth NEETs need to recognise that 'the challenge of overcoming poverty through work involves trade-offs between unemployment, low-income work and decent work among young people experiencing poverty' (UNDESA 2020, 43). As opportunities for stable and secure employment become ever more scarce, the concept of NEETs seems to miss the changing and dynamic forms of youth economic and social engagement.

Limitations

Our review of the literature was not exhaustive and our data analysis was exploratory. Ecological analysis runs the risk of misleading inferences when conclusions on individuals are derived from the interpretation of aggregated data. To avoid inferential biases, we deliberately selected literature from different institutions, academic authors and in different geographies. In our data analysis we were careful to restrict interpretation of findings to the contextual level, to situate findings in the broader theoretical and empirical body, and clearly describe the limited implications of our results.

Conclusion

Young people transitioning from education to the job market face numerous challenges. Globally, social inequalities associated with gender, race and crime are pervasive drivers of young NEET status. Latin American youth seem to be in a disadvantageous position, especially regarding systemic inequalities and intersectional vulnerabilities which are likely to persist throughout their lives. These inequalities are being aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis, which created disparities in educational attainment in the region and accentuated women's economic insecurities. Policies that aim to overcome social exclusion or adverse incorporation need to go beyond individual trajectories and focus on the systematic drivers of the youth NEET subgroups, while carefully taking into account the labour market trends that are likely to completely change our understanding of economic integration and social incorporation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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