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# LATIN AMERICA: Education ills threaten social progress

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## Abstract

Persisting challenges in education policy.

A new study by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and UNICEF's Regional Office draws attention to a high rate of educational desertion as a key factor in perpetuating regional inequalities and posing a threat to future development and social cohesion.

## Full Text

SUBJECT: Persisting challenges in education policy.

SIGNIFICANCE: A new study by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and UNICEF's Regional Office draws attention to a high rate of educational desertion as a key factor in perpetuating regional inequalities and posing a threat to future development and social cohesion.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Achieving broader coverage of secondary education will prove more complex than merely offering access.

Completion of primary education will no longer be a guaranteed escape route from poverty.

School desertion among girls will continue to reflect a culturally-ingrained division of work.

In recent decades, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has achieved huge progress in expanding education access: albeit with differences between countries, 91% of its 15-19 year-olds now have complete primary education (see LATIN AMERICA: Poverty, inequality progress slowing - December 3, 2012). Similarly, initial enrolment in secondary education reaches around 90%, up from less than 30% in the early 1970s.

However, according to the new study, *Adolescents: The Right to Education and Future Well-Being* (available only in Spanish), almost half LAC's young people have dropped out of secondary schooling by the age of 17. Mirroring pre-existing disadvantages, desertion is most prevalent among low-income segments, people of indigenous and African descent and in rural areas. In the poorest fifth of the population, only one in five pupils completes secondary schooling as compared to four in five for the richest quintile.

Causes of desertion.

As a result, the study estimates that a fifth of 12-18 year-olds in LAC are not attending any educational institution, a figure that also appears to be rising. Based on household surveys, the main reasons for this situation include:

**Economic pressures.** Low family income appears to be the single most important reason for desertion, explaining around a quarter of cases and affecting boys and girls almost equally.

**Paid work.** In a related factor, 20% of boys, but only 9% of girls, attribute their desertion to a preference for paid employment. This is in addition to the 11% of 12-18 year-olds who report working while also attending school. The study found that young people in rural areas are twice as likely to work as their peers in urban areas.

**Domestic work and early maternity.** According to 13% of girls not attending school, this is explained by a need to help with household tasks or pregnancy and childcare.

**Lack of interest.** According to 24% of boys and 16% of girls not attending school, this reflects a lack of interest, suggesting either a failure to perceive the benefits of secondary education or a lack of alignment of the syllabus with their needs.

A further reason for desertion, not identified by household surveys, appears to be having had to repeat a year of schooling. According to the study, this phenomenon is so prevalent that only one in three pupils who complete their secondary schooling do so without having to repeat at least one year and that a significant number of secondary-age pupils are still attending primary school, with the resulting incentive for dropping out.

Differences between countries .

As well as differences between social groups within the same country, there are also important differences between countries:

**Compulsory schooling.** On average, ten years of education are compulsory in LAC. However, as of 2012, this ranged from six years in, for example, Honduras and Nicaragua and eight years in Bolivia to 14 years in Uruguay and Venezuela.

**Non-attendance.** Based on figures for around 2010, the study concludes that non-attendance ranged from approximately 10% of 12-18 year-olds in Argentina and Chile to 35-40% in Guatemala, Honduras and Peru. The case of Uruguay, with just over 20% of non-attendance amongst boys and around 15% for girls, demonstrates that neither a long period of compulsory education nor a relatively high per capita income guarantees attendance.

Completion of secondary schooling. In Argentina and Chile, around 70% of 20-22 year-olds have completed secondary schooling while, in Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, the figure drops to around a quarter.

Gender differences.

LAC women have benefited most from the increase in education access. Correcting their low starting point, they are now more likely than men to complete secondary education (57% of 20-24 year-olds as compared to 51% for men). However, this has yet to be reflected in the labour market ( see LATIN AMERICA: Female employment gains salience - October 1, 2013). According to the study, 67% of LAC women are in low-productivity jobs, their unemployment rate is 35% higher than for men and their earnings are between 60-90% those of men. This latter gap is not merely a lagged effect of women's more limited access to education in the past but also applies to women with the same educational qualifications as their male peers.

Policy options.

The study points out that, with the achievement of virtually universal primary education and the increasingly technical nature of labour market demands, complete secondary education has become a minimum threshold for access to decent employment and protection against poverty. In this context, LAC countries have various policy options:

Curricular reform.

There is growing evidence, including complaints from employers, that LAC's secondary schools are not equipping pupils with the skills required by the labour market. Possibly a factor in drop-out rates, this suggests that the secondary syllabus, historically designed for an elite likely to go to university, has failed to match the needs of a broader segment of the population.

Second opportunity .

The study highlights the importance of alternative mechanisms -- for example, evening classes compatible with work -- to allow young people who dropped out to complete their secondary education. These exist in many countries but often have the stigma of a 'second best'.

Conditional transfers .

Monetary transfers tied to children's school attendance have been implemented in countries including Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico (see MEXICO/BRAZIL: Differing structural challenges persist - June 25, 2013). However, although successful in improving enrolment and attendance, their impact on pupil attainment and employability is not clear.

Retention of adolescent mothers .

Boys who drop out are usually able to supplement their education through workplace experience whereas the evidence suggests that girls who drop out due to early pregnancy achieve only a low level of labour market insertion, helping to lock in poverty across generations. This is particularly a problem because LAC not only has a high rate of adolescent pregnancies compared to other regions but, at an estimated 15.4% in the poorest quintile, it is almost four times as high as in the richest quintile. As well as measures to reduce adolescent pregnancies, the report highlights the need for measures to ensure that laws forbidding discrimination against pregnant pupils -- in place in most LAC countries -- are enforced and also suggests provision of free childcare.

**CONCLUSION:** In addition to the well-known problem of the low attainment of pupils who do complete their schooling, the region faces the less-recognised challenge that, despite increased access to secondary schooling, its coverage remains limited. Rather than being merely a matter of educational policy, this calls for

a multi-dimensional approach to issues that include families' economic situation, cultural attitudes and pupils' expectations.

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