

en breve



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ARGENTINA Today's Youth – An Untapped Potential¹

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Argentina's youth—6.7 million between the ages of 15 and 24—are an important, but to a certain extent untapped, resource for development. Over 2 million (31 percent) have already engaged in risky behaviors, and another 1 million (15 percent) are exposed to risk factors that are correlated with eventual risky behaviors. This totals 46 percent of youth at some form of risk. This note addresses these issues and draws on to findings of a recently completed World Bank report aiming at generating, consolidating and sharing knowledge about the risks faced by youth in Argentina as well as the policy options for addressing them.

Today's youth cohort is the country's largest ever and its largest for the foreseeable future. If policymakers do not invest in youth now—especially in youth at risk—they will miss a unique opportunity to equip the next generation with the abilities to become the drivers of growth, breaking the

Education Can Protect Youth, But Gaps In Achievement Are Large

Argentines are well educated, with an advanced education system when compared with most of Latin America. Argentina has made great progress since the 1980s: enrollment in primary education is nearly universal and average educational attainment has increased, reaching 10.4 years in 2005 (compared with the regional average of 5.9 years and East Asia's average of 7.6 years). The government is to be commended for maintaining high enrollments through difficult times.

However, significant differences in educational outcomes persist by wealth and location. While less than 1 percent of 6–17-year olds from the richest 20 percent of households are not in school, this number rises to 8.2 percent for those from the poorest 20 percent of households. Children and youth in rural areas have a higher probability of dropping out than those in urban areas.



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“What often happens is that you have a job you know will last three months, and you think ‘Well, I’ll study next semester.’ But the time comes and you realize that if you stop working you don’t get money. You have to keep working and you have to put off your studies.”

- Leonardo, 24 years old, participates in the Dirección Nacional de Juventud (DINAJU) Project, province of Buenos Aires

intergenerational spiral of poverty and inequality and moving Argentina back into the group of high-income countries. If youth are educated and skilled, they can be a tremendous asset for development. If not, they can burden society and public finances.

A third of youth attending school are below the expected grade for their age. Repetition is common in Argentina, most frequently occurring in grades 1–4. Repetition—especially during early grades—can hurt outcomes. Students who repeated a year between grades 1 and 7 are less likely to attend or graduate from secondary school, and multiple repetitions compound these negative effects. Parents play an important role—youth whose parents did not complete primary

education are 12 percent less likely to enroll in secondary school. Limited access to learning materials (textbooks, for example) further reduces student outcomes. High-risk groups need special attention and support to offset cumulative disadvantages.

The gains from keeping youth in school are large. Schools can be safe havens for youth, protecting them against the many harmful effects of early school dropout: early entry into the labor market, drinking, smoking, drug use, risky sex, and becoming the victim of crime. Staying in school makes youth less likely to commit a crime, engage in risky sexual behavior, or use drugs and alcohol, and more likely to vote, play sports, and participate in clubs and cultural activities.

Economic Shocks Hit Youth Hard—And Hinder Transitions

Some Argentines start working at age 15, while others wait until their early twenties. In either case, they expect to reap the benefits of investments in education and health. An important mark of independence, the transition to the workforce is often difficult and costly. The labor market is critical for youth as a place to earn income and accumulate skills after leaving school. Unemployment deprives them of these benefits, lowering labor force participation and raising adult unemployment. Unemployment can also be a risk factor for violence and may lead to depression and other health issues.

The transition from school to the labor market, however, has become a bottleneck for many youth. They experience wider fluctuations than adults in their unemployment rate and wages, often acting as a buffer that absorbs macroeconomic shocks. Economic crisis not only reduces income levels and raises unemployment, but it often also exposes youth to other risks such as crime and violence or health hazards.

Many Argentines start working at very young ages, with severe consequences for later life. In Argentina 8.6 percent of 7–14-year olds work exclusively. Those who sacrifice schooling when young are more likely to be poor as adults, their productivity reduced by a lack of accumulated human capital and skills. Early labor market entry is associated with a number of risky behaviors, including unsafe sexual activities and alcohol and tobacco use.

Although young people are more educated today, they face difficulties entering the labor market. The informal labor market has absorbed a large share of youth that used to work in the formal sector. The unemployment rate increased between 1992 and 2003, peaking at 38.8 percent in 2002, and has since declined considerably as the economy has picked up. Youth are more than 17 percent more likely than adults to stay unemployed after having entered into unemployment. Youth unemployment is three times that of adults.

- *“I’m working right now, but I’m always wondering if I might get fired, and I’m looking for another job just in case because I know there’s no sustainability”*

- - Agustín, 25 years old, Cordoba.

Youth who find jobs tend to work in the informal sectors, earning less with less job security. Wage and unemployment analyses show that education contributes to higher wage returns, especially for tertiary-educated youth. Higher education also protects youth from unemployment during economic downturns. Young people, however, have far lower returns than adults to all levels of education, even controlling for experience and other factors. The least educated young workers face the highest job instability.

Education Is Key To Reducing Health Risks

Youth in Argentina are healthier today than ever before. But still, the probability that a 15-year old will die before the age of 60 is higher than expected for a country of its income (90 deaths per 1,000 women and 176 deaths per 1,000 men). Probability of premature death is comparable to the levels in Mexico, but higher than in Chile. This can in large part be attributed to health-related risk-taking patterns among youth.

Youth, especially young women, are starting to smoke earlier in their lives. The most likely to smoke regularly, however, are young males, youth who drink alcohol, and youth who do not attend school. Binge drinking is a problem for a significant proportion of young males (19 percent binge drink on the weekends). Excessive alcohol consumption, a risk in itself, also raises the probability of being involved in traffic accidents, smoking, engaging in risky sex, and being a victim of crime and violence. Education stands out as a protective factor for various types of health risks, so keeping youth in school must be

a priority. School attendance plays an important role delaying sexual initiation, promoting contraception use, and restraining smoking and drug use.

Forming Families—High Stakes For Youth And The Next Generation

Reproductive health and nutrition are among the central human capital investments that facilitate a successful transition into adulthood. Adequately preparing young people for family formation and parenthood decreases fertility and dependency, facilitating human capital accumulation, productivity gains, and thus growth and poverty reduction. The intergenerational transmission of well-being is key to a more nurturing environment for the next generation. Childbearing early in life can have many negative consequences—low educational attainment, inactivity, and early entry into the labor force.

Early sexual initiation can undermine a successful transition to adulthood. Leaving school and having work experience are significant determinants of sexual initiation among men and even more so among women. The odds of sexual initiation for young women not attending school are 2.6 times those of women who are attending. Perhaps one of the gravest concerns regarding youth health arises from the low levels of consistent condom use among youth. HIV/AIDS levels are 100–200 percent higher in Argentina than among youth in Chile and Uruguay.

Youth Can Change Society For The Better

Youth participation and civic engagement encourages long-term political stability, good governance, and better accountability, but disengaged youth can pose a number of risks for society, including increased violence, crime, drug addiction, and social instability. This is particularly true in times of social crises, when opportunities decrease sharply for less advantaged groups and social differences are most marked. Alternative channels of mobilization and political participation have emerged. The *piqueteros* and *barras bravas* movements—appealing particularly to marginalized youth—have organized youth around their social exclusion.

Although Argentina has worked to advance human rights for children and youth internationally and has had some success experimenting with alternative models of juvenile justice, youth incarceration rates are high, indicating that these approaches have not yet permeated the juvenile jus-

- *“I’d like to participate in forums where concrete public policies can be discussed. Not a very political forum, not in a partisan environment, but rather to discuss more concrete public policies.”*
 - - Carolina, 24 years old, studies and works for a nongovernmental organization, city of Buenos Aires.

tice system. Becoming the victim of crime—or its perpetrator—severely inhibits the ability of youth to transition to responsible adult citizenship. Most criminal careers begin in adolescence, making a compelling case for focusing crime prevention efforts on youth and offering feasible rehabilitation options to those who have committed offenses. Unfortunately, young offenders—often dismissed as lost causes—tend to be treated the same way as adults.

Policy Directions To Reduce Youth At Risk

Because youth respond to their environment, it is sensible to focus on getting the environment right by combating risk factors and promoting protective factors. Targeting poor youth is essential for maximum effectiveness. A mixed portfolio of programs and interventions, some specific to youth and some more broadly focused, is required to achieve a balance between short-run targeting of those already suffering negative consequences of risky behaviors—such as second chance programs and rehabilitation for youth already “stuck”—and long-run prevention for other youth to keep them from engaging in risky behaviors.

By focusing policies and programs on the individual (improving life skills, self-esteem), on key relationships (parents, caregivers, peers), on communities (schools, neighborhoods, police), and on societal laws and norms, the chance of reducing the numbers of youth at risk over the long term is greatest. Specific recommendations were developed during consultations with government counterparts. As a basis for discussions, a basic strategy should consider: i) *Invest earlier in life and expand youth opportunities*, including scaling up early child development programs, improving education to make young people able to complete secondary school, improving the information available to youth to help them make the right decisions regarding their health and life choices; ii) *Targeting at-risk youth more effectively*, including scaling up cash transfer programs for disadvantaged youth, investing in youth service programs, scaling up internships and trainings targeted at youth in risks; iii) *Influence policies that are not youth-specific*, includ-

ing promoting labor market reforms, designing micro-credit programs for youth, building safer neighborhoods and communities; iv) **Promote youth inclusion** and participation, empowering youth to play an active role in the development of their community and the country; and v) **making public policies work for youth**, including by ensuring that young people have a voice in designing and implementing policies.

Table 1 - Youth behaviors and outcomes are interrelated

	Inactivity (3)	Early school dropout (3)	Early labor force entry (4)	Use or abuse of alcohol and tobacco (5)	Use or abuse of illegal drugs (5)	Risky sexual behavior (6)	Victim of crime (7)	Domestic violence (7)	Participating in society (7)	Involvement in sports or culture (7)
Inactivity (3)a		yes	NA	some	some	yes	yes		no	little
Early school dropout (3)			yes	yes	yes	some	yes	yes	some	little
Early labor force entry (4)				some	some	yes	yes		little	little
Use or abuse of alcohol and tobacco (5)					yes	yes	some	yes	little	some
Use or abuse of illegal drugs (5)						yes	some	yes	little	some
Risky sexual behavior (6)b							yes		little	little
Victim of crime (7)								little	some	some
Domestic violence in household (7)									some	some
Participating in society (7)c										yes
Involvement in sports or culture (7)										

A: Not working or in school. b: Has entered parenthood. c: Participating in at least one organization (community, union, church, student, artistic, ecological, human rights). See appendix IB for definitions of variables and clusters.

Note: Numbers in parenthesis are chapters in which the area is addressed.

Source: Cluster analysis using YSCS.

NOTES

1 “Argentina. Today’s Youth – An Untapped Potential,” World Bank (2007). The Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) and the World Bank jointly produced a new survey dataset for this report: the Youth Social Conditions Survey. The risk behaviors and outcomes analyzed were identified through consultations with the Argentine government and youth—the report’s primary audiences. The report team met on a bi-monthly basis

with the majority of ministries of the Argentine federal government to consult on the work in progress. Youth behaviors and outcomes are interrelated

About the Author

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