

# Executive Summary

---

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.

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 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.

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 (YSCS; see Box 1.3 for the survey instrument). 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. The report's objective is to generate, consolidate, and share knowledge on the risks faced by youth. The findings presented here were used as a basis for consultations with the Argentine federal government and leading universities to jointly develop policy recommendations for this final version of this report.

Although often fraught with risks, youth is also an age laden with opportunities—for youth themselves and for families, society, and the economy. Decisions about developing skills, starting on the road to financial independence, and engaging with the broader civic community will determine the quality of the next generation of workers, parents, and leaders. With more knowledge about the issues facing youth, parents, and governments can better understand and serve this group.

Overall, Argentina is blessed with high enrollment rates in school, low levels of crime and violence, and moderate to low drug use by youth. However, youth employment, smoking and binge drinking (including its effect on traffic accidents), teen pregnancies, and HIV pose challenges for youth policy. While most youth in Argentina are educated, skilled, and healthy, a large group is potentially at risk of engaging in myopic behaviors, including school absenteeism and leaving, substance use and abuse, delinquency, crime, and risky sexual behavior. The consequences of these risky behaviors—unemployment, adolescent pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, addiction, incarceration, violence, and social exclusion—make it difficult for youth to successfully transition to adulthood, imposing large costs on individuals and society.

Applying the framework of the *World Development Report 2007*, this report examines the five life-changing transitions that all youth confront: leaving school and continuing to learn, starting to work, developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle, forming a family, and exercising citizenship. Identifying risk and protective factors associated with these

behaviors—individual, interpersonal, community, and societal characteristics—can inform prevention programs (World Bank 2008). Certain risky youth behaviors and negative outcomes are of particular concern:

- Early school dropout.
- Unemployment, inactivity, and informality in the workplace.
- Substance use and abuse and traffic accidents.
- Risky sexual behavior, early parenthood, and HIV/AIDS.
- Low levels of civic participation and problems of crime and violence.

Poor youth are at greatest risk—and thus a particular focus of this report. Youth make up a disproportionate share of the poor in Argentina: 31 percent of the poor are between the ages of 15 and 24, while these youth account for 17 percent of the total population. Only 24 percent of low-income students complete secondary education. Poor youth are also more likely to engage in risky sex, be victims of violence, and not participate in sports, clubs, and other organizations and cultural activities. These youth share a strong sense of injustice, believing that economic growth and state policies have not benefited them. With so many unfulfilled expectations and so little to lose, some poor youth have become disaffected (Fundación Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires 2005; Vommaro 2000; Garcette 2005). Many poor youth identify insecurity, inequality, and lack of political representation as critical issues (Table 1). Although youth violence in Argentina is not as prevalent or severe as in Central America or Brazil, youth—particularly poor youth—feel increasingly insecure (Kuasñosky and Szulik 1996; Rodgers 1999, 2005).

The presence of several risk factors—poverty, violence in the home, unemployment—increases the likelihood that youth will engage in risky behaviors, and risky behaviors often damage several dimensions of the transition to adulthood. School dropout is associated with early labor force entry, use or abuse of alcohol, tobacco and drugs, and increased likelihood of becoming a victim of crime. Dropouts are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior and to avoid participating in society, sports, and cultural activities. Risk factors are correlated, but causality may be more difficult to determine (Table 2). For example, it is not clear whether a young girl is inactive in the workforce because she has become a mother, or whether she became a mother because she was inactive.

Table 1. Top Problems Identified by Youth Ages 15–24, By Socioeconomic Strata  
(as a percentage of those selecting the category)

	Lack of Education	Lack of Employment	Drugs	Insecurity	Inequality	Lack of Representation
High income	16.5	9.1	10.5	9.7	9.3	11.2
Middle income	38.0	37.8	33.8	29.0	39.5	44.4
Low income	45.5	53.1	55.6	61.3	51.2	44.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Calculations based on YSCS.

**Table 2. 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) <sup>a</sup>		yes	NA	some	some	yes	yes	some	no	little
Early school dropout (3)			yes	yes	yes	some	yes	yes	some	little
Early labor force entry (4)				some	some	yes	yes	some	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) <sup>b</sup>							yes	some	little	little
Victim of crime (7)								little	some	some
Domestic violence in household (7)									some	some
Participating in society (7) <sup>c</sup>										yes
Involvement in sports or culture (7)										

<sup>a</sup> working or in school.  
<sup>b</sup> entered parenthood.

<sup>c</sup> participating in at least one organization (community, union, church, student, artistic, ecological, human rights).  
 Numbers in parenthesis are chapters in which the area is addressed.

Cluster analysis using YSCS.

Note: Source:

T

Ear Ear Use Use

Par

Not Has Par

**Box 1: Types of Youth at Risk**

More than 40 percent of youth in Argentina—2.8 million—are at risk of engaging in or suffering the consequences of risky behavior. This report categorizes youth at risk into three groups:

- Type I: Risk factors are present, but the person has not yet engaged in risky behaviors.
- Type II: Youth have engaged in risky behaviors, such as skipping school or having unprotected sex, but without serious negative consequences, such as dropping out of school, acquiring a sexual transmitted disease, or becoming pregnant.
- Type III: Youth have experienced the consequences of risky behaviors, such as teenage motherhood, dropping out of school, or incarceration.

**Rewards for Investing in Youth Are Great—So Are the Costs of Inaction**

With Argentina shifting toward the top-heavy demographic profile of an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country, the youth share of the population is currently peaking. Argentina's population distribution has changed from a pyramid in 1990 (many children and few old people) to a silo with more young people, adults, and elderly compared with children. The population will continue to age through falling birth rates and increasing life expectancies. Today's youth and tomorrow's youth (today's children) are the largest cohorts in Argentina.

The majority of Argentina's population will reach working age in the next five years, creating a window of opportunity to boost economic growth. These trends bring a potential demographic dividend. They also bring fiscal and social challenges, some already evident. Long-term unemployment could waste human capital, while treating the results of crime, violence, drug addiction, alcoholism, and HIV/AIDS may put a heavy strain on the health care system.

**Education Can Protect Youth, But Gaps in Achievement are Large**

Argentines are well educated, with an advanced education system compared with most of Latin America. Argentina has made great progress since the 1980s: illiteracy has been virtually eradicated among today's youth, 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.

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 (Table 2): 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 (World Bank 2008). Unemployment can also be a risk factor for violence and may lead to depression and other health issues.

Recent social and economic changes have heavily affected youth. For decades, entry into the labor market marked the transition to adulthood. 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, compared with 4 percent in Chile. 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 (World Bank 2006b). Early labor market entry is associated with a number of risky behaviors, including unsafe sexual activities and alcohol and tobacco use (Table 2).

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. Young women with low educational attainment and young informal wage earners face the highest risks.

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—with youth earning on average 57 percent of the wages earned by adults. 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 Uruguay and Mexico, but higher than in Chile, Italy, or Spain. This can in large part be attributed to health-related risk-taking patterns among youth.

A substantial proportion of youth in Argentina engage in risky behavior that will likely affect their well-being and productive capacity and drive up the public health burden in the future. 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), especially those who are not in school or who work. 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.

Moreover, excessive alcohol consumption is also related to increased propensity to carry out crime and violence (including gender based violence). Illicit drug consumption is a problem primarily for youth who have dropped out of school and do not live with both parents.

Some of the risks young people take can be prevented easily and at very low cost, but health coverage among youth remains low, restricting the implementation of adequate disease prevention and control programs. Even when young people have information about the risks of certain behaviors, they continue to make choices that put their health at risk. Recently, public health interventions have focused on teaching at-risk groups life skills—how to think critically, to be assertive, and to understand the influence of community, family, and gender in decisionmaking. It is important to evaluate public health interventions carefully, focusing on changes in young people's behavior, rather than just increased knowledge, in order to learn which interventions work best in a given context.

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 (Table 2). To be effective in reducing the future health burden, prevention programs must target youth in school as well as those who have dropped out.

## 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.

Some parts of Argentina, such as Chaco and Misiones, have adolescent fertility rates of more than 100 births per 1,000 people—rates comparable to Africa. Regional differences in pregnancy rates suggest that context, such as values toward gender and maternity, has an important effect on young people's reproductive decisions. Youth from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are the most exposed to unplanned pregnancies, and young women whose mothers have not completed high school are twice as likely to become pregnant. In Latin America 52 percent of pregnancies are unplanned and 23 percent end in abortion. Illegal in Argentina, abortions are often performed under unsanitary and unsafe conditions, resulting in infection, hemorrhage, and sometimes death.

Because later sexual initiation, delayed marriage, lower pregnancy rates, and greater use of contraceptives are closely linked to higher educational attainment, school attendance in poor and rural areas should be encouraged, especially among women. Furthermore, sex education programs can teach youth the necessary life skills to make sound decisions and negotiate safe sexual behavior with peers and partners.

## 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.

Unemployment—most harmful to low-income youth—has hindered the transition to adulthood for many, leading to social exclusion and impeding the development of full citizenship for those affected. Poor youth have also suffered from limited access to health care and services provided by the state. Lacking integration through the educational system, labor markets, or state services, some youth have become isolated and alienated. Because appropriate channels for participation within the politico-institutional arena are sometimes limited, low-income youth are poorly represented in civil and political institutions and policymaking and tend to have lower voter participation rates.

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 justice system. Becoming the victim of crime—or

its perpetrator—severely inhibits the ability of youth to transition to responsible adult citizenship. Violence is also extremely costly to society—in medical bills, lower productivity, and policing and incarceration costs. 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.

Easing the transition of poor and marginal youth to full citizenship can be achieved through economic, social, and political empowerment. The potentially positive impact of youth on economic and social change may be squandered if they are isolated economically, socially, and psychologically. Facilitating youth engagement in community development activities and transferring resources and decisionmaking responsibilities to youth is likely to contribute to better governance and accountability. Bringing youth into community activities forges a common vision and sense of identity, increasing solidarity and trust. Building the capacity of state institutions at different levels to address youth issues and facilitate youth participation in policymaking is a critical challenge.

## 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. A number of evaluated programs show that these goals can be achieved even under tight fiscal constraints, for instance by expanding early childhood development and gearing the school environment toward lifelong learning and citizenship. Targeting poor youth is essential for maximum effectiveness (McGinnis 2007).

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 (McGinnis 2007).

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 the following.

### *1. Investing earlier in life and expanding youth opportunities*

- Prevention strategies and programs are effective not only in developing the potential of young people, but also in addressing both early and late onset of risky behaviors. Improving and expanding existing interventions will broaden opportunities for young people to develop their human capital.
- Consideration could be given to: i) Scaling up existing early child development to reach most children 0–3 years of age; ii) Improving education so that young people are able to complete secondary school and have better basic skills for further learning, job placement, and practical living; iii) Enhancing the information available

to young people to make the right decisions regarding their health and life choices (reproductive health, HIV/AIDS; substance abuse; conflict resolution/violence prevention; participation).

## 2. Targeting at-risk youth more effectively

- Moving away from zero tolerance (or *mano dura*) and toward comprehensive youth development has proven successful and cost-effective.
- Addressing risk and protective factors, with a focus on providing second chances (or in some cases rehabilitation) to youth already at some form of risk, has been an effective approach.
- Areas that might be given consideration could include: i) Scaling up cash transfer programs for disadvantaged youth (for example, cash transfers conditional on completing secondary school and reducing specific risky behaviors); ii) Establishing degree equivalence systems, recognized by the formal education system; iii) Investing in youth service programs—actively engaging young people in the delivery of social services and public works, especially at the neighborhood and community level; iv) Supporting after-school activities and mentoring services; v) Scaling up internship, training, and employment information services targeted to at-risk youth.

## 3. Influencing policies that are not youth-specific

- In addition to the policies directly targeted at youth, many policies have an important impact on them, even if youth are not the primary target. These policies focus on the community and on some of the broader contexts affecting youth.
- Among interventions that might be considered are: i) Promoting labor market reforms that balance job protection with the flexibility to encourage job creation and that improve the conditions in the informal sector; ii) Focusing micro-credit/micro-enterprise programs to create economic opportunities and generate employment for youth; iii) Strengthening the police and justice system responses to reflect age-specific needs and priorities of the young and enhance their rights; iv) Building safer neighborhoods and communities, combining improved urban designs, social services, community policing, and traffic and road safety; v) Limiting the availability of alcohol and tobacco and reducing the availability of firearms.

To achieve success, these strategies require strong cross-sector, multi-stakeholder collaboration among ministries, the justice system, municipalities, police, military, courts, prisons, media, community-based organizations, youth organizations, parents, rights-based nongovernmental organizations, schools, universities, sports clubs, private enterprises, and churches.

## 4. Making public policy work for youth

Positively influencing youth transitions and having a successful mix of policies and interventions directed at youth requires decisive action that ensures coherence of youth goals

- Improving data for more effective targeting and implementation—including disaggregated age-specific data on households and specialized surveys (for example, victimization surveys in low-income areas).
- Ensuring that young people have a voice in designing and implementing policies and interventions that affect them (thereby encouraging effective youth participation and engagement)—including recognizing youth as key stakeholders for development, expanding their options for engagement at the national and local levels, and supporting youth service and youth-led initiatives.
- Enhancing coordination and having clear lines of accountability across policies and sectors that affect youth—including strengthening youth focal points tasked with the responsibility of identifying youth development synergies, opportunities for cross-sector collaborations and coordination, facilitation of action plans and budgets, and monitoring and evaluation.
- Improving monitoring and evaluation—compiling basic youth indicators; monitoring progress in the implementation of cross-sector interventions; carrying out effective evaluations that emphasize the identification of both the spillover effects from one youth transition to another and the complementarities across transitions.

### *5. Engaging youth for better accountability and governance*

Youth inclusion and participation in public policy gives young people more choices, enhances their capabilities, and improves their lives, as well as those of their communities. Integrating youth into the development process as stakeholders and decisionmakers—from consultations to policy, from implementation to evaluation—gives them ownership of the policies and interventions that affect them and enhances national and local development processes.

Interventions should also involve youth in delivering assets to others. Youth service programs can: (i) Empower youth to play an active role in the development of their community and the country; (ii) Help them acquire the experience, knowledge, skills, and values necessary for employment and active citizenship; (iii) Provide constructive alternatives to risky behaviors and reintegrate marginalized youth; and (iv) Be an important and cost-effective tool in addressing a wide range of development priorities (for example, combating HIV/AIDS).

