



# Reducing Boys' School Dropout and Helping Boys At Risk<sup>1</sup>

- A reverse gender gap has taken place in Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) where more boys are dropping out of secondary school. This phenomenon comes with higher likelihood of engagement in risky behaviors, lesser human capital accumulation, and lower future labor market outcomes like lower quality jobs and reduced earnings.
- The WBG identified nine effective approaches to help young men remain and progress in school, while paving the way to a safe, productive path to adulthood. Financial incentives that encourage young boys' education completion, after-school programs that create youth-friendly spaces, and job training programs paired with subsidized internships are some examples that have shown promising results.
- The WBG has also supported operations that address the cross-cutting problem of boys' dropouts and at risk as a gender issue related to development challenges, such as alienation from education, crime and violence, male marginalization, access to the labor market, and poverty.

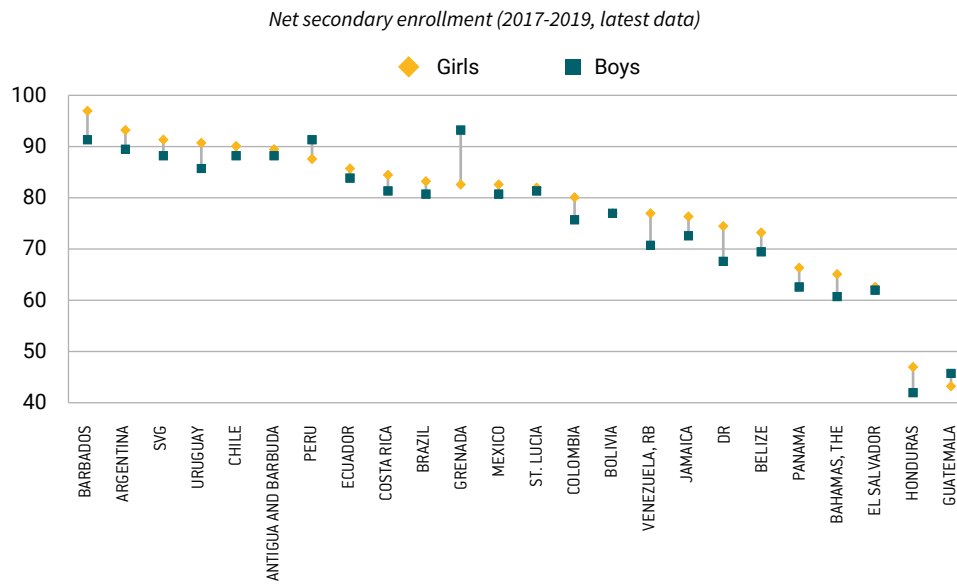
<sup>1</sup> This note was prepared by Ursula Casabonne and Daniela Maquera with guidance from Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich, as part of the LCR Regional Gender Coordination in the Poverty and Equity Global Practice. It received inputs from Paola Buitrago, and Carlos Rodriguez Castelan. For more information, contact [LCR\\_Gender\\_Coordination@worldbankgroup.org](mailto:LCR_Gender_Coordination@worldbankgroup.org)

# THE CONTEXT

In the last two decades, the LAC region has seen two of its biggest educational successes: achievement of gender parity in primary school enrollment and the significant increase of net enrollment rates for secondary education (up from 59% in 1990 to 77% in 2018). As of 2019, average net enrollment rates

in primary school were 94% for both girls and boys. However, in addition to secondary school enrollment remaining far from universal (78% for girls and 76% for boys), the gap in most LAC countries has tended against boys (**Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Boys' Secondary School Enrollment is Lower than Girls' in Most LAC Countries**



Source: World Bank Indicators

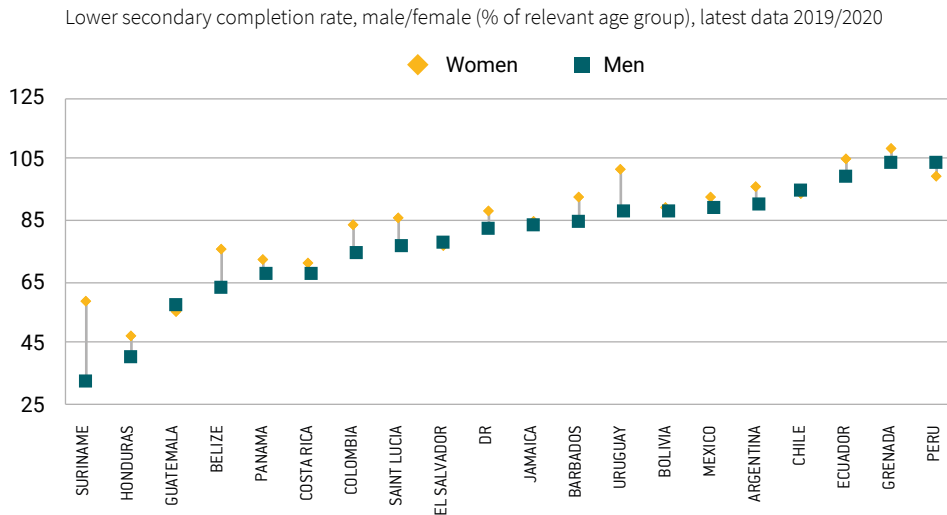
As a result, one of the greatest gender-related challenges in the LAC region has become the generally low attendance, progression and completion rates of boys in secondary and tertiary levels. In a majority of LAC countries, boys' lower-secondary school completion is below that of girls (**Figure 2**); in Caribbean countries enrollment starts to diverge significantly (against boys) at upper secondary. Similarly, in tertiary education, enrollment rates are lower among men than women (**Figure 3**). Educational underachievement among boys and men is often driven by (i) labor market characteristics that

contribute to the decision to underachieve; (ii) social norms that diminish the importance of education (e.g., certain notions of masculinity); and (iii) characteristics of educational processes that lead to low interest/aspirations (e.g., lack of classroom environments that respond to boys' special needs, access to role models).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, socially disadvantaged boys are at increased risk as they face higher attendance costs (e.g., school meals and transportation), and the pressure to access money through premature work.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank (2022). *Educational Underachievement Among Boys and Men (English)*. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

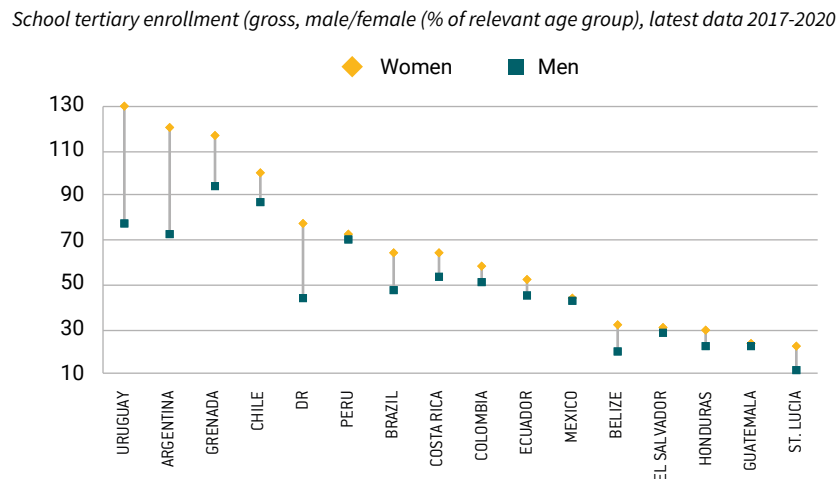
<sup>3</sup> World Bank (2022). *Country Gender Assessment Jamaica*. World Bank, Washington, DC.

**Figure 2. Boys' Lower Secondary School Completion is Lower than Girls' in Most LAC Countries**



Source: World Bank Indicators

**Figure 3. Men have Lower Tertiary Enrollment Rates than Women in all LAC Countries**



Source: World Bank Indicators

## EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS

The WBG report [Supporting Youth at Risk: A Policy Toolkit for Middle-income countries](#) identified nine evidence-based approaches to help prevent young men from engaging in risky activities and reduce the dropout phenomenon. The following list pairs the nine general approaches with examples coming, primarily, from LAC countries:

- Job training programs that offer a mixture of technical and life skills with internships, like the *Jóvenes* program in Chile and Argentina
- Financial incentives for young people to promote good decision making and productive time use through *CCT programs such as in Mexico and Brazil*
- Education equivalency programs for over-age young men to help them complete their formal education, such as Colombia's *Tutorial Learning System (SAT)* program
- Out-of-school time or after-school programs that create youth-friendly spaces like Brazil's *Abrindo Espaços* program
- Youth service programs or public sector internships like Jamaica's *National Youth Service* program
- Programs in which caring adults mentor at-risk youth such as the United States's *Big Brothers/Big Sisters* program

- Employment services targeted at youth at risk
- Self-employment and entrepreneur programs like Peru's *Young Micro Entrepreneurs' Qualification* program
- Incorporating life skills into all interventions targeted to at-risk youth

This list is non-exhaustive and can be extended to broader strategies around school-to-work transition, social norms, and positive engagement in learning. For instance, providing youth with information on the returns to education, promoting positive masculinity through community-based approaches such as trained male role models, and improving boys' learning engagement through a curricula that meets their needs and interests.<sup>4</sup> The following section provides examples of interventions specific to the LAC region<sup>5</sup> whose results are helping close reverse gender gaps:

**CCT programs encourage young people to enroll and stay in school, which is one of strongest protective factors for young people's lives.** In **Brazil**, an [evaluation](#) of the expanded *Bolsa Família* program found a positive effect on school enrollment of 16-17 year olds from poor families and their decision to study and work. Since 2004, this poverty-alleviation program has provided cash to families conditioned on their investment in health and education. For education, children 6-15 (or 17) years old are required to be enrolled in a schooling program and maintain an attendance of at least 85% (or 75%) of school days. Results show that the education conditionality increased school attendance by at least 5 percentage points among 15 year olds as well as their decision to both work and study by 30%. Differentiated results were observed by region—youth in rural areas attained higher schooling outcomes—and by gender—with positive significant effects among boys.

The benefits of CCT programs on young men expand beyond education to those linked to the labor and behavioral change as well. According to a [review of CCT programs](#) in low- and middle-income countries, cash transfers in LAC have contributed to the greater reduction in child labor and the intensity of work, especially among boys. CCTs have also shown to reduce youth's engagement in [risky behaviors](#), for example, by lessening their alcohol consumption or number of sexual partners. Additional [positive effects](#) among participants include reduction in poverty, higher psychological wellbeing (e.g., fall in suicide rates), and better socio-emotional skills.

**After school programs can help reduce risky behavior among young people while increasing their employability.** In **Brazil**, the *Abrindo Espaços'* (Open Schools) program provides a combination of academic, athletic, cultural, and work-related activities for young people after school and on weekends. This type of program is cost effective as it maximizes existing public

spaces and is largely staffed by dedicated volunteers and older youth who exchange their commitment to the program for university tuition waivers. According to a UNESCO [evaluation](#), which was a central partner in the program inception, schools that participated in Pernambuco's *Abrindo Espaços* experienced a 60% reduction in violence as well as lower rates of sexual aggression, suicide, substance abuse, theft, and armed robbery (Waiselfisz and Maciel, 2003).

**Encouraging boys of secondary school age to prepare for their futures while reshaping their aspirations improves their learning approach and confidence inside and outside of the classroom.**

In **Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**, a pilot intervention *Projetando Futuros* (Designing Futures) aimed at increasing aspirations of boys and girls and assisting them in transitioning from school to the workplace. In partnership with the Promundo Institute and the Secretaria Municipal de Educação do Rio de Janeiro, Designing Futures reached 250 first-year high school students from two schools in the poorer areas of northern Rio. Informed by a [qualitative study on the causes of youth NEET in Brazil](#), the program resulted in the development of a toolkit "Designing Futures" for teachers in the classroom. The toolkit offers activities relative to discrimination in education and the labor market, resilience when looking for a job, and learning from role models, among others. After the first round of implementation, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive with teachers noticing lower absenteeism and that students were recognizing the value of completing their education and of getting a quality job. School had also become a place where students felt a sense of community and felt 'heard', according to a qualitative evaluation.

**Vocational training programs for young people have shown promising results to increase youth employment and their earnings.**

This type of youth program, which first started in Chile, has targeted disadvantaged people and offered them a package of classroom training, work experience, life skills, job search assistance, and counseling. For example, in **Peru**, the youth labor training program *ProJoven* provided young people aged 16–24 from poor households with a 3-month vocational training and paid internships at private firms for at least 3 months. During the internship, trainees received a small stipend (lower than the minimum wage) and had their transportation fees, meals, and medical insurance covered. Women with children under 5 of age received a double stipend. [An impact evaluation](#) found that participants' employment rates 6-12 months after training increased as well as their formal employment rates (by 7 to 18 percentage points) even 18 months post-training (Diaz and Jaramillo, 2006). These results support that skills training paired with subsidized internships can increase youth's probability of formal employment in the long run, increasing their earning prospective.

4 World Bank (2022). *Educational Underachievement Among Boys and Men* (English). World Bank, Washington, D.C.

5 The interventions here provided were selected based on three criteria: 1) they have been implemented in a LAC country, 2) they connect and expand on to the nine approaches suggested by WBG report cited above, and 3) their impact and effectiveness are supported by rigorously conducted studies.

**Expanding technical education in combination with traditional subjects in schools may keep young people in school.** A quasi-experimental research found that offering technical training, even online, in combination with traditional subjects reduced students' likelihood of dropout without affecting progress in core academics. The State of **Pernambuco in Brazil**, offered virtual technical courses, concurrent to academic teaching, to students in their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years of high school. The courses were offered in either STEM, humanities, or general services for 15 hours per week (a total of 800-1200 hours). Students were required to attend a minimum of 75% of in-person or online activities. An

entrance examination required that students received a grade higher than zero in mathematics or Portuguese to be admitted. Students who scored above the admission cutoff and, thus, had access to *concurrent* online technical education in their 2<sup>nd</sup> high school year were, on average, 3 percentage points less likely to drop out between their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years of high school. Stronger results were found among students who made use of supportive roles like in-person tutors and labs. These results support expanding access to technical education as a supplementary mechanism to reduce dropout rates among young people.

## HOW ARE WBG PROJECTS ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE?

Through its support to country operations, the WBG is working to address the cross-cutting problem of boys at risk as a gender issue related to development challenges, such as alienation from education, dropping-out, crime and violence, male marginalization, access to the labor market, and poverty.

- In **Colombia**, one of the aims of the [Program for improving learning outcomes and socioemotional education \(PROMISE\)](#) (P176006) is to reduce gaps in school retention and achievement by incorporating combined learning assessments and updated pedagogical practices. In addition to the standardized test *Pruebas SABER*, the program supplements its assessment learning with *ExA*, a tool for grades 3 to 11 that informs teachers on the needs of children and youth and helps identify those at higher risk of falling behind or dropping out. The Program All to Learn or PTA (*Programa Todos a Aprender*), part of PROMISE, aims at improving pedagogical practices by offering large-scale mentorship and training to teachers. This program contains a remedial component that offers strategies on differentiation-by-learning-levels in the classroom and tutoring in basic competencies to help students recover from individual learning losses, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. These activities have a special focus to ensure that boys improve learning in reading, while girls in math and science. The PTA program also has a socioemotional learning component which promotes gender sensitivity in classrooms and provides tools to parents and caregivers to have a more effective involvement in school. The program tracks promotion rates among boys in lagging regions as well as gender differences in promotion rates in lower secondary.
- In **Guyana**, the [Guyana Strengthening Human Capital through Education](#) (P177741) project incorporates a gender strategy to combat growing dropout rates among boys and close reverse gender gaps in enrollment and performance at the secondary level, especially in mathematics. While the project's principal aim is at

boosting the capacity of secondary school teachers, it incorporates activities to raise boys' interest in learning and school retention. For instance, low-cost communication campaigns are used to inform on wage returns to secondary education, and teachers are trained on how to make mathematics more concrete and life-relevant to students. Through an enhanced early warning system, the project also trains teachers on how to identify at-risk students and how to respond with socioemotional counseling and academic support. Sex-disaggregated indicators for secondary school enrollment and grade 9 survival rates are used to monitor progress in narrowing the reverse gap in enrollment, with a target of increasing boys' survival rates by 20 percentage points from the baseline.

- In the **State of Piauí in Brazil**, the [Piauí Productive and Social Inclusion Development Policy Loan](#) (P146981) aims to reduce school dropout among public upper secondary students, especially young men, by providing monetary incentives to students from municipalities with the highest rates of extreme poverty. The Youth Savings Program (*Programa de Incentivo Educacional Poupança Joven*), supported through this initiative, provides students in participating municipalities with an annual financial reward for each of their three years of secondary education successfully concluded. An additional condition is for students to participate in extracurricular activities, such as good citizenship, crime prevention, and gender equality programs. Between 2014 and 2019, the secondary school dropout rate of the schools benefitting from the program declined from 16.0% to 10.9%, and the number of students enrolled in the Youth Savings Program who pass to the next grade increased from 8,900 to 22,240.
- In **Brazil**, the [Support to Upper Secondary Reform Project](#) (P163868) aims to increase the relevance and quality of upper secondary education. With one of its objectives being the reduction in repetition and dropout rates, which

heavily affect boys, the project involves a nationwide upper secondary reform centered around a curriculum change. Given an overloaded schedule that offers 13 mandatory subjects and a four-hour instruction day in most public schools, the project funds a new curriculum with two key features: more flexibility and extended school hours (seven hours per day). The project is set to decrease the sum of dropout and repetition rates by 3.5 percentage points per year during the first five years

of operation. In order to achieve this target, promising in-classroom interventions that increase educational engagement of boys (and girls) include training teachers on how to use differentiated classroom management strategies, school-based focal groups for students to discuss the challenges they face, and tutoring of small at-risk student groups by themes relevant to their communities rather than academic topics.

## RELEVANT RESOURCES

### WORLD BANK PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC

- Chioda, Laura. 2017. Stop the Violence in Latin America: [A Look at Prevention from Cradle to Adulthood](#). Latin American Development Forum;. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Cunningham, Wendy; McGinnis, Linda, García Verdú, Rodrigo; Tesliuc, Cornelia and Verner, Dorte. 2008. [Youth at Risk in Latin America and the Caribbean: Understanding the Causes, Realizing the Potential](#). Washington DC: World Bank.
- Cunningham, Wendy; McGinnis, Linda; Cohan, Lorena M.; and Naudeau, Sophie. 2008. [Supporting Youth at Risk: A Policy Toolkit for Middle-income countries](#). Washington DC: The World Bank.
- de Hoyos, Rafael; Popova, Anna; and Rogers, Halsey. 2016. [Out of School and Out of Work A Diagnostic of Ninis in Latin America](#), Policy Research Working Paper 7548, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group
- Kattan, Raja Bentaouet, and Székely, Miguel. 2014. [“Dropout in Upper Secondary Education in Mexico: Patterns, Consequences and Possible Causes.”](#) World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 7083.
- Welmond, Michel J. and Gregory, Laura. 2022. [Educational Underachievement Among Boys and Men](#). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
- World Bank. 2006. World Development Report 2007 : [Development and the Next Generation](#). Washington DC: World Bank.

### OTHER KEY REPORTS

- Escotto, Teresita. 2015. [Juventudes en Centroamérica en contextos de inseguridad y violencia: realidades y retos para su inclusión social](#). Santiago de Chile, Comisión Económica para América Latina.
- Guisquin, Maia. 2019. [Situación de las juventudes rurales en América Latina y el Caribe](#). Santiago de Chile, Comisión Económica para América Latina.
- Randall, Laura, and Anderson, Michael. 2016. [Schooling for Success: Preventing Repetition and Dropout in Latin American Primary Schools: Preventing Repetition and Dropout in Latin American Primary Schools](#). Routledge: New York.

### GENDER STATISTICS, INDICES, AND MEASUREMENT TOOLS

- [UNDP Human Development Gender Inequality Index](#)
- [UNDP Human Development Gender Development Index](#)
- [World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report](#)
- [OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index](#)
- [World Bank Gender Data Portal](#)
- [World Bank World Development Indicators](#)
- [World Bank Women Business and the Law](#)
- [World Bank Global Index](#)
- [World Bank Group Enterprise Survey](#)

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- Diaz, J. J., and Jaramillo, M. 2006. An evaluation of the Peruvian ‘Youth Labor Training Program’ -ProJoven. Working Paper: OVE/WP-10/06. Washington DC: Inter-American Development Bank
- Elacqua, G., Navarro-Palau, P., Prada, M. F., Soares, S. C. 2021. The Impact of Online Technical Education on Schooling Outcomes: Evidence from Brazil. IDB Technical Note IDB-TN-02292. Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, DC.

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