Working Papers on Regional and Urban Economics - Denied Opportunities: A Portrait of Exclusion and Precarious Work for Young People in Cartagena

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The combination of persistent poverty, inequality, and limited labor market opportunities increases the vulnerability of young people in the city, which may lead them to seek income-generating options in illegal or highly risky activities.

Publication Date: Friday, 22 of May 2026 **Focus**
This document analyzes the evolution of living conditions and labor market outcomes for young people in Cartagena between 2012 and 2024, with a particular emphasis on gender differences. The study compares the city's youth population—especially women aged 18 to 28—with the adult population of Cartagena and with young people in Colombia's main cities. To this end, it examines indicators of poverty, inequality, education, labor force participation, unemployment, informality, and labor income, within the context of an economy highly dependent on tourism and services.

In addition, the document discusses the need to strengthen institutional capacities to generate employment opportunities for young women in vulnerable situations, as opportunity gaps are particularly pronounced for this population group. Being a young woman with a low level of education in Cartagena often implies access only to the informal labor market, in positions where the average monthly income is around half of the minimum wage.

Contribution
This paper provides a comprehensive characterization of the gaps faced by young people in Cartagena, articulating demographic, social, and labor market dimensions. It also shows that Cartagena's economic and tourism dynamism has not translated into better opportunities for the majority of the city's youth. Moreover, the document introduces evidence on inequality of opportunity, showing that in Cartagena, being a woman represents a much more marked disadvantage than in other cities in the country.

Results
The results indicate that youth in Cartagena face higher levels of poverty and labor market precariousness than the average observed in Colombia's main cities—a situation that worsened during the COVID 19 pandemic and whose recovery has been incomplete. These challenges are particularly acute among young women, who register higher unemployment rates and inactivity, lower labor income, and greater exposure to informal employment. Despite the economic dynamism associated with tourism and services, these sectors generate a significant share of low-quality and informal jobs. In this context, the combination of persistent poverty, inequality, and limited labor market opportunities increases the vulnerability of young people in the city, potentially inducing them to

seek income-generating alternatives in illegal or highly risky activities.

Fuente: https://www.banrep.gov.co/en/publications-research/working-papers-regional-urban-economics/denied-opportunities-portrait-exclusion