Youth Education and Employment in Mexico City: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Research on young Mexicans tends to focus on their limited educational and occupational opportunities and the increasing extent to which they are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). In this article, we describe the prevalence and determinants of being NEET in Mexico City using data from the National Survey of Occupation and Employment and from forty in-depth interviews. Quantitative findings on the determinants of education and employment in this study are consistent with previous research. Barriers to education for those in NEET include low rates of admission to public universities, economic difficulties, family obligations, and difficulties connecting schooling and future employment. Barriers to employment include a lack of job opportunities, discrimination against inexperienced workers, and the undesirability of low-wage employment. Despite setbacks, respondents expressed a desire to attain education and gainful employment in the future, but many, especially the most educated, were willing to wait for the right university or job.

Keywords: children and youth; education; inclusion and exclusion; qualitative methodology; quantitative methodology

Recently, a specific concern in the literature on youth in Mexico is the proportion of young people who are "neither in education, employment, or training" (NEET) (International Labour Organization 2010; Pérez Baleón 2012). Much of the conversation in research and policy

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regarding NEETs in Mexico has centered on their potential impact on the future of the country's labor force. Existing work has focused on challenges in the measurement and definition of NEET and on identifying characteristics related to NEET status. Research finds that being NEET is related to socioeconomic status, to the characteristics of the household of origin, and to decreasing labor opportunities despite increased enrolment in high school and college (Rosique Cañas 2013; Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vázquez 2012; Murayama 2010). However, more insights are still needed, as some definitions may overestimate the degree to which NEET youth are inactive, particularly for those who are engaged in unconventional employment, housework, and caregiving. Additionally, research that explores how young people perceive their challenges and opportunities is required to better understand how these factors relate to NEET prevalence.

This article has two objectives: first, to compare the prevalence of NEET status relative to other activities; and second, to explore the determinants of being NEET relative to other activities. We use data from the Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo (ENOE; National Survey of Occupation and Employment) and data from in-depth interviews with NEETs collected in Mexico City during 2015 and 2016.

Background

Mexico has the sixth highest proportion of NEETs among the member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). By some estimates, there are 7.8 million NEETs in Mexico, or 22 percent of the population aged 12 to 29 (Rosique Cañas 2013; Negrete Prieto and Leyva Parra 2013; OECD 2020). Although only some of these youth declare themselves to be unemployed, 19 percent are not actively looking for a job and are detached from the labor market altogether (OECD 2016).

The presence of NEETs in Mexican culture goes beyond academia; the Spanish acronym for NEET[1] has made its way into colloquial language as a shorthand for youth's unfulfilled potential, often perceived to be due to lack of motivation and disregard for hard work. A quick review of national and regional media shows an increase in its use during the last decade. The rhetoric goes from alarmist news that speak of NEETs as a "lost generation" (Zepeda 2013; Murayama 2010), while more measured media speaks of them as victims of structural disadvantages in the education system and labor market (Roldan 2016; Rosique Cañas 2013; Miranda 2015).

Existing research about Mexican youth in NEET focuses on two main areas. The first focuses on the definition, measurement, and prevalence in nationally representative data. Leyva and Negrete Prieto (2014) question the widespread assumption that NEETs are inactive or "doing nothing," and suggest many in this category do not attend school or engage in work due to family and care commitments. In addition, it is likely that sporadic and unpaid work is not properly reflected in employment data available from cross-sectional surveys. Another possibility is that activity status varies throughout the year as employment and educational opportunities fluctuate.

The second area focuses on the causes and consequences of youth inactivity and how limited educational and employment opportunities lead to an increase in the number of NEETs (Rosique Cañas 2013). This research relies on national data and does not focus on local labor markets and educational contexts. Also, this work has yet to explore the barriers to school or work as perceived by youth and how household context influences activity status. Difficulties making the transition from school to work, especially in contexts where higher educational credentials are expected and work experience is considered a requirement for employment, are related to a higher risk of inactivity (Lloyd 2005; Carcillo et al. 2015). Young people around the world are especially vulnerable to economic downturns and shifts in the labor market. Estimates show that the labor force participation of youth aged 16 to 29 in OECD countries has declined significantly since 2007. After the Great Recession, employment loss was five times higher for young adults than it was for other adults (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2013; Carcillo et al. 2015; OECD 2016).

Determinants of Youth Activity

The transition from school to work is determined by socioeconomic and parental background and by the opportunities provided by the local labor market (Kerckhoff 2003; Mier y Terán and Rabell 2005; Mortimer et al. 2002). Parental income and household socioeconomic status are strong predictors of educational attainment, earnings, and occupational attainment (Cerrutti and Binstock 2004; Nam and Huang 2009; Giorguli Saucedo 2002). Parental resources allow youth to delay entry into the labor market to attain higher education, resulting in a better position in the labor market later in adulthood. In contrast, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more vulnerable to early transitions out of school and into employment, which are likely to result in unstable employment and lower earnings (Johnson 2002; Juárez et al. 2013; Pérez Baleón 2012; Mora Salas and de Oliveira 2009). In addition, once young people have dropped out of school, it is unlikely that they will return to complete their education (Pérez Baleón and Lindstrom 2014). Previously, youth inactivity has been connected to low educational attainment in Mexico (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vázquez 2012). However, recent estimates show that inactivity is also prevalent among the highly educated (ILO 2013).

Previous work on Mexico shows that NEETs are more likely to come from households in poverty and where the household head has little schooling (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vázquez 2012). They are more likely to be younger and female and to be engaged in household work (ILO 2013; OECD 2016). Women who are NEET are more likely to be in a union and have children, while men with families are more likely to work (Arceo-Gómez and Campos-Vázquez 2012; Bermúdez-Lobrera 2014). Despite insights from previous research, there is not a lot of evidence of the role of family structure on activity status.

In the last few decades, Mexico has taken important steps to increase access to public education, and these efforts have resulted in significant increases in

attainment. However, the country still faces high dropout rates in middle and high school. As children move through the educational system, a smaller proportion of them makes it to the next level; just about 38 percent of adults 25 to 34 years old in 2008 completed high school (Giorguli Saucedo et al. 2010; Murayama 2010). Among children who start schooling in Mexico, only 14 percent will achieve a college degree, and many of those graduates will still be at high risk of unemployment or underemployment later in life (Rosique Cañas 2013).

The transition into a first job for many Mexicans is a fraught process, filled with frustration at the lack of attractive and stable work opportunities. Overall, young people are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, be self-employed, and work in jobs without benefits (Murayama 2010; Solís 2012).

Research Questions and Expectations

Our main research questions are, How prevalent is NEET status in Mexico? What are the determinants of youth inactivity at the household and community levels? And what are the barriers to education and employment that those in NEET face?

We expect fluctuations in activities (school and work) over the observation period. We expect NEET status to be more prevalent among women, less educated youth, and children of the household head living in two-parent households. Engagement in full-time work would be more likely among men and among the most disadvantaged, while school attendance would be associated with higher economic resources in the household. We expect that NEET youth are well aware of the barriers to education and employment that they face. In narratives about their limitations, we expect them to mention the role of socioeconomic status and work opportunities in the local context.

We focus on the Mexico City metropolitan area, as it encompasses a varied context of work opportunities and occupational diversity, making it an excellent case study to explore these patterns of instability and precariousness that characterize large urban areas across the developing world.

Data and Methods

Data

We use data from five quarterly waves of the ENOE from April 2015 to June 2016 to explore the activity patterns of youth from the Mexico City metropolitan area (N = 4,512 men and 4,453 women) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática 2016). The ENOE is a quarterly survey with a rotating panel that collects information on employment dynamics. Each selected household remains in the survey for five consecutive panels. Data include household structure and family socioeconomic characteristics besides individual-level indicators. We selected people ages 18 to 25 who completed middle school and

matched individual records to labor force composition data at the delegation or municipality level.[2]

Then we used data from in-depth interviews with young NEETs in Mexico City collected in 2015 and 2016. We conducted forty interviews with youth ages 18 to 25 who finished middle school, and who did not attend school, or did not work in paid employment in the three months before the interview.[3] We recruited interviewees through contacts with colleagues and organizations in the city and through a public Facebook group. We also recruited through our respondents. This approach allowed us to access a diverse pool of young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, comprising 23 women and 17 men. In this article, we use the information collected on the demographic and socioeconomic background of our respondents, as well as their perceived barriers to education and employment.

Quantitative analysis strategy. Using the ENOE data, we show the prevalence of different activities throughout the observation period. We describe the characteristics of youth who are in each activity category, and we estimate a multinomial logistic regression model to predict the risk of being NEET, a full-time student, or combining school and work, relative to being a full-time worker. Standard errors are adjusted for clustering at the individual level to account for a small proportion of the sample who participated in more than one wave.[4]

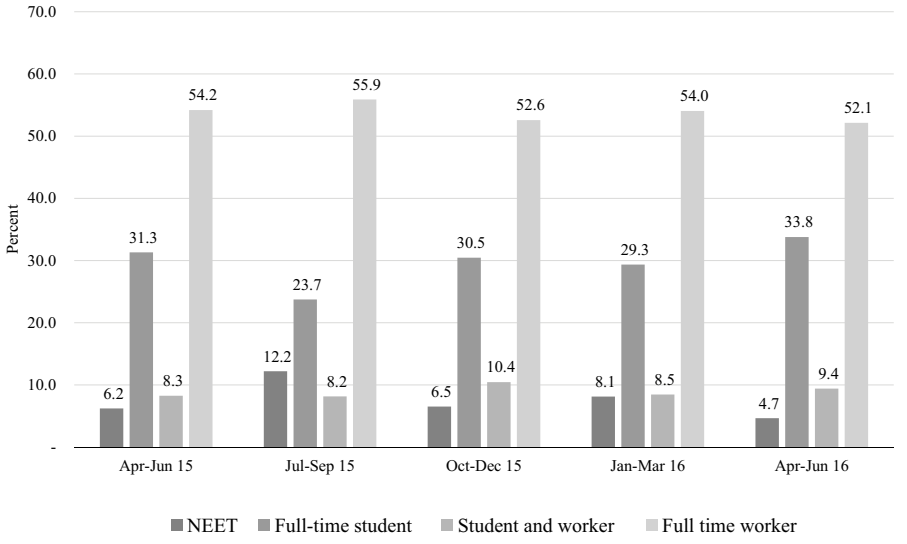
Independent variables. Our analysis controls for age and educational attainment, a combined measure indicating the sex of the household head and whether the household is single-headed, educational attainment of the householder, relationship to the household head, whether the respondent is in a marital or cohabiting union,[5] monthly household income per capita, and the dependency ratio of the household. We control for the proportion of the labor force working in the secondary sector, commerce, and services in the delegation/municipality, and for the period of the ENOE.

Qualitative analysis strategy. We use information from our qualitative interviews to understand whether quantitative definitions of activity status reflect the experiences of NEETs. We identify the main narratives associated with being NEET and how socioeconomic status and family background are associated with school and work experiences. The interviews were coded using NVIVO 10. In this article, we focus on perceived barriers to education and employment. We use the insights acquired through our fieldwork to inform model specification, interpretation, and conclusions.

Characteristics of the ENOE Sample

Figures 1 and 2 show the prevalence of the four activity status categories over the period of observation for men and women, respectively. Most men are working

FIGURE 1
Activity Status across the Observation Period for Men Aged 18 to 25



SOURCE: ENOE, Mexico City 2015–2016.

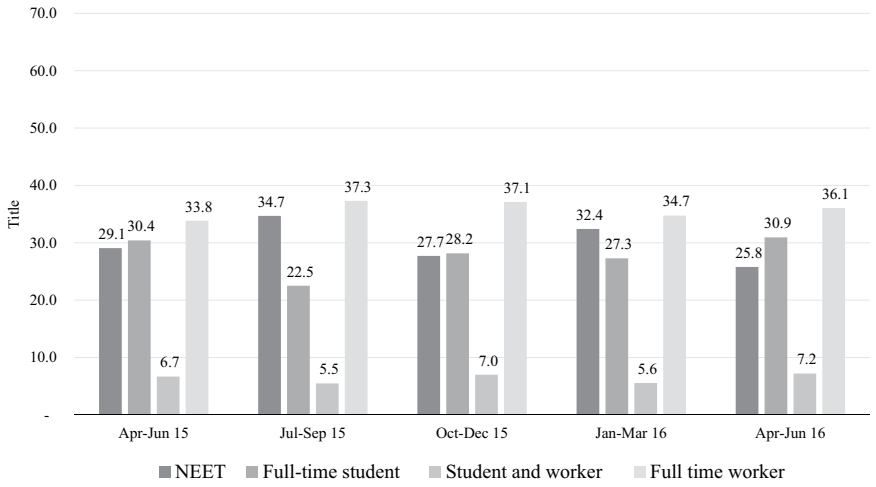
full time; full-time student is the second most prevalent status among men. Being NEET is not as prevalent among men, although the prevalence increases in the summer months and at the beginning of the calendar year. These changes may represent transition moments between work and school or school desertion after the partial completion of a grade.

Figure 2 shows that working full time is not as prevalent among women, and being NEET or a full-time student alternate as the second most prevalent activity among women. For a couple of periods, being NEET is more prevalent than being a full-time student. This is consistent with the trends observed in our interviews, where we found that activity status is not fixed across time and that youth enter and exit activities frequently due to the instability of the labor market.

Table 1 presents sample characteristics by activity status and sex. Among men, NEETs and full-time students are younger than full-time workers and those combining school with work. Among women, full-time students are the youngest, followed by NEETs, while full-time workers are the oldest. Male NEETs are highly educated, in contrast to female NEETs, who have middle or high school education. Most full-time workers have middle or high school education. Those studying full time and combining school and work have higher levels of schooling.

Among NEETs, only 4.5 percent of men are in a union, in contrast to 53 percent of women. Among men, full-time workers have the highest percentage in a union (29 percent). Students, both full time and in combination with work, are the least likely to be in a union.

FIGURE 2
Activity Status across the Observation Period for Women Aged 18 to 25



SOURCE: ENOE, Mexico City 2015–2016.

Most of our respondents come from two-parent, male-headed households. Full-time working females are the least likely to live in two-parent, male-headed households, while NEETs and full-time students are the most likely to do so. About one-quarter of respondents live in households headed by a single mother; and among these, the proportion of NEETs is lower, and the proportion of workers is higher. Full-time workers live in households where the head has lower education, while heads with higher education are found in households with students.

Most male NEETs are the children of the householder; while female NEETs are, in descending order, daughters, spouses, or daughters-in-law of the head. Most respondents in the sample are the children of the householder, independent of activity status. The household dependency ratio is greater in households where youth work full time or have female NEETs. The median household income per capita is higher among youth who combine school and work, followed by full-time workers, which may reflect the respondent's contributions to the household total income; and for those who combine school and work, it may denote a strategy to finance their education. Relative to youth in the other categories, NEETs live in households with lower income. At the community level, the average proportion of workers in the secondary sector is 18 percent, in commerce 22 percent, and in services 56 percent.

Determinants of Youth Activity Status

Table 2 presents the relative risk ratios from the multinomial logistic regression predicting the determinants of being in each status category. We find that age is

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics by Sex and Activity Status, ENOE 2015–2016

	Men				Women			
	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	Full-Time Worker	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	Full-Time Worker
Age (mean)	20.5	20.7	21.6	22.2	21.5	20.6	21.5	22.1
Education (%)								
Middle school or less	16.4	4.4	8.8	37.1	39.7	3.1	4.4	29.7
Some high school	21.4	23.2	18.0	10.2	12.4	21.7	15.3	9.3
High school	26.8	21.8	23.5	35.3	30.7	22.4	19.7	37.5
Some college and higher	35.4	50.7	49.8	17.4	17.2	52.8	60.5	23.5
In marital or cohabiting union (%)	4.5	0.7	5.2	29.4	53.0	2.4	5.8	24.7
Household headship (%)								
Male head, two parents	67.0	66.6	62.6	60.7	70.2	67.5	61.2	59.5
Female head, two parents	5.1	5.3	5.9	7.2	6.4	4.7	6.8	7.1
Male head, single parent	9.5	7.3	8.8	9.1	4.4	3.4	5.4	6.1
Female head, single parent	18.5	20.8	22.8	23.0	18.9	24.4	26.5	27.2
Education of household head (%)								
Middle school or lower	20.5	20.6	25.6	30.4	30.3	18.9	22.8	30.8
Some high school	33.3	22.3	28.4	39.3	35.6	27.9	27.2	36.7
High school	19.4	26.5	22.8	19.5	21.8	23.0	18.0	16.7
Some college and higher	26.8	30.6	23.2	10.9	12.3	30.3	32.0	15.8
Relationship to household head (%)								
Household head	3.3	1.6	4.3	14.4	1.5	1.1	4.4	3.4
Spouse	0.3	0.0	0.2	1.0	25.1	0.2	3.4	11.7
Son or daughter	77.7	80.6	79.2	63.5	48.4	84.5	77.2	64.1
Son- or daughter-in-law	0.6	0.0	0.2	6.0	15.6	0.9	0.7	6.1
Other	16.4	15.3	14.5	14.7	9.0	12.8	12.2	11.7
No relation	1.8	2.4	1.7	0.5	0.3	0.6	2.0	3.1
Household economic characteristics								
Dependency ratio (mean)	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.4
Household income per capita per month (median, MXP)	1,009	1,061	2,758	1,774	1,186	1,163	2,257	1,872

(continued)

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

	Men				Women			
	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	Full-Time Worker	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	Full-Time Worker
Period (%)								
Apr–Jun 15	16.4	20.9	19.2	20.1	20.4	21.7	20.8	18.8
Jul–Sept 15	32.7	16.4	18.7	21.0	23.6	15.8	17.7	20.9
Oct–Dec 15	17.0	20.0	22.5	19.2	17.6	20.2	21.4	20.4
Jan–Mar 15	21.1	19.7	19.2	20.0	21.2	19.5	16.3	20.0
Apr–Jun 16	12.8	23.0	20.4	19.7	17.2	22.9	23.8	20.0
N=	336	1,352	422	2,402	1,305	1,241	294	1,613
% of sample	7.4	30.0	9.4	53.2	28.9	27.5	6.5	35.7
Total *N*=			4,512				4,453	
	Mean	*SD*	Min.	Max.				
Economic characteristics of municipality/delegation								
Proportion of workers in secondary sector	18.3	5.1	8.9	42.0				
Proportion of workers in commerce	21.9	3.7	14.0	38.1				
Proportion of workers in services	55.6	7.5	29.8	73.9				

SOURCE: ENOE, Mexico, 2015–2016.

negatively related to all our outcomes relative to being a full-time worker. College-educated men are almost three times more likely to be NEETs relative to those with some high school, while those with middle-school education have a decreased risk of being NEET. There is a decreased risk of being NEET among women with high school education. In contrast to full-time work, full- and part-time school attendance are positively associated with college education and negatively related to lower education. Higher education leads to a bifurcated path where some become NEETs and others continue to pursue more schooling. More research is needed to understand who takes the path of being NEET and whether inactivity among the highly educated is related to failed transitions into a job post-graduation.

Men who are in a union have a decreased risk of being in all activity categories, relative to work. This is consistent with the expectation that family formation and full-time work are compatible roles for men. Among women, being in a union is associated with an increased risk of being NEET and a decreased risk of being a student or combining school and work. This finding shows that even though female labor force participation has increased in Mexico, conflict between family responsibilities and work outside the home remains significant.

TABLE 2
Relative Risk Ratios from Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Activity Status, Ages 18–25, Mexico 2015–2016

	Men			Women		
Relative Risk Ratios relative to Being a Full-Time Worker	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker
Age	0.59*	0.55*	0.74*	0.81*	0.62*	0.75*
Education						
Some high school (ref.)						
Middle school or lower	0.42*	0.11*	0.20*	1.00	0.11*	0.15*
High school	0.72**	0.62*	0.61*	0.66*	0.48*	0.48*
Some college and higher	3.53*	6.59*	3.61*	1.03	2.87*	2.88*
In marital or cohabiting union	0.38*	0.10*	0.38*	4.16*	0.42*	0.35*
Household headship						
Male head, two parents (ref.)						
Female head, two parents	0.59*	0.62*	0.68	0.88	0.58*	0.94
Male head, single parent	0.80	0.70**	0.85	0.87	0.39*	0.78
Female head, single parent	0.71*	0.79*	0.92	0.75*	0.77*	0.84
Education of household head						
Middle school or less (ref.)						
Some high school	1.31	0.82	0.90	0.85	1.21	0.86
High school	1.49*	1.63*	1.25	1.26*	1.78*	1.02
Some college and higher	2.31*	1.91*	1.31	0.94	2.07*	1.19
Relation to the householder						
Household head (ref.)						
Spouse	3.37	0.00*	1.60	1.67	0.20*	0.85
Son or daughter	2.28*	3.04*	1.62	1.85*	2.19*	0.52
Son- or daughter-in-law	1.39	0.00*	0.29	2.09*	1.87	0.30
Other	2.33*	2.51*	1.35	1.55	2.88*	0.70
No relation	3.04*	4.47**	2.28*	0.18*	0.63	0.51
Household economic characteristics						
Dependency ratio	0.60*	0.93	0.83	1.35*	0.68*	0.57*
Household income (logged)	0.89*	0.90*	1.02	0.93*	0.92*	1.01
Economic characteristics of municipality/delegation						
Proportion of workers in secondary sector	1.00	0.95*	0.97	0.99	0.98	1.05
Proportion of workers in commerce	1.01	0.96*	0.96	1.01	0.97	1.02
Proportion of workers in services	1.01	0.96*	0.99	0.98	0.96*	1.05*
Period						
Apr–Jun 15 (ref.)						
Jul–Sept 15	1.62*	0.63*	0.80	1.09	0.47*	0.58*
Oct–Dec 15	1.06	0.99	1.24	0.75*	0.70*	0.85
Jan–Mar 15	1.21	0.90	0.98	1.00	0.70*	0.62*
Apr–Jun 16	0.78	1.11	1.11	0.80**	0.96	1.03
Constant	4,092	9,855,024	998	135	83,536	4.6

(continued)

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

Relative Risk Ratios relative to Being a Full-Time Worker	Men			Women		
	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker	NEET	Full-Time Student	Student and Worker
Prob > χ^2		.0000			.0000	
Pseudo R^2		.2588			.2265	
N=		4,512			4,453	

SOURCE: ENOE, Mexico, 2015–2016.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .10$.

Among males, living in a house headed by a woman (whether or not there is a second parent) is related to a lower risk of being NEET and of being a student compared to those living in two-parent, male-headed households. No significant effect is found for households headed by single fathers, except that those living in such households have lower risks of being a full-time student. Relative to those living in two-parent, male-headed households, women living in other types of households have a decreased risk of being enrolled in school full time, and those living with a single mother are less likely to be NEET than to work full time.

Further, higher education of the household head is related to an increased risk of males being NEET. For women, there is an increased risk of being NEET when the household head has a high school education. For both sexes, living in a household where the head has more than a high school education is associated with a higher relative risk of studying full time versus working full time. These findings may seem counterintuitive, but it is possible that the higher SES of the household is related to flexibility in activity status for some, while for others it is related to a longer time spent as a full-time student. Ultimately, it is likely that being NEET is something that the children of families with some resources can afford, while the poorest youth cannot afford to be NEETs and have to take whatever job they can get.

Sons of the household head have a higher risk of being NEET. Other relatives are also at an increased risk, although the largest risk is among those unrelated to the householder. These same groups are more likely to be students. This echoes the trend observed for the effect of household head's level of education; it appears that in terms of household characteristics, there is a bifurcation between youth who are NEET and youth who are students. A different picture emerges for women—the only relationship categories associated to a higher risk of being NEET are daughters-in-law and daughters of the householder. Daughters and other relatives of the household head are more likely to be full-time students rather than working, while spouses have a decreased risk of attending school. A higher dependency ratio in the household is associated with a lower risk of being NEET for men; for women, it is associated with a decreased risk of full-time school attendance and school and work combination and an increased risk of

being NEET. Higher household income is associated with decreased risk of being either NEET or a full-time student for both sexes.

Last, a high proportion of workers in the secondary and tertiary sectors decreases the risk of being full-time students for men, while only the proportion in services is negatively related to women's risk of being full-time students.

Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample

To better understand the experiences of youth identifying as NEETs, we analyzed narratives related to the perceived barriers to work and school. Our in-depth interview respondents are 22 years old on average; 57 percent of them are women; almost all live with at least one parent and are single; and most have no children (two of our female respondents were mothers and one of our male respondents was a father; two women were married, and one was in a cohabiting union). About 35 percent have less than a high school education, 25 percent have a high school diploma, 30 percent have some college, and 10 percent have completed college. This distribution is consistent with the findings from the ENOE data, where we saw that NEETs can be found among the least and the most educated. Many of our respondents left school while attempting to complete high school or in the early semesters of college. Many of our respondents did not "leave school" per se but were in the process of seeking admission into university; others left college when they discovered their chosen path was not what they had expected.[6] Only five of our interviewees had never worked.

To better understand how family background affects being NEET, we ascertained our respondents' socioeconomic status by asking about (1) household assets and access to services, (2) self-assessed socioeconomic status, and (3) monthly household income. Responses to the first and third questions show that they come from varied socioeconomic statuses. However, when asked to self-identify their social class, most of them identified as "middle class." More than one-third of their parents have at least some college education, whereas around 40 percent have lower than a high school education. Levels of parental education are slightly lower in the ENOE data.

The occupations of parents run the gamut from agricultural worker to managerial and professional positions, but the majority are concentrated in jobs in the secondary and tertiary sectors, with a few in white-collar occupations.

Barriers to Education and Work

In our analysis of the interview data, we identify common barriers to schooling and work. Many of our respondents could not continue education due to bureaucratic hurdles and institutional limitations. Others could not afford higher education or had obligations to fulfill at home. Barriers to work are

mainly related to a lack of job opportunities, low wages, and discrimination due to age and experience.

Our respondents mentioned two main limitations of the educational system: the difficulty in transfering credits across education systems (i.e., from a Mexico State high school to a national university high school) and the discrepancy between the number of students applying for higher education and the number of places available at universities. A few of our respondents cited the lack of vocational guidance and mentoring in high school as a reason for their disenchantment with higher education. For many others, it was hard to find a connection between the skills obtained in school and the requirements of the labor market. Some of our respondents left school after failing to gain admission into the college of their choice, but others did so after not getting admitted into any college. Failing to enter public high schools and universities means that their only educational opportunities are either the more expensive but good-quality private schools—which they cannot afford—or the cheaper but poor-quality private for-profit schools that prey on students rejected by the public education system. To illustrate the lack of access to higher education, for the academic year 2015–2016, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the largest and most prestigious public university in the country, only admitted 9 percent of its applicant pool—of 128,000 applicants, only 11,470 were accepted (Olivares Alonso 2015). Many of our respondents were NEET while preparing to retake admission tests, and their parents thought that their temporary inactivity would be worth it if they could eventually get into their desired university.

Antonio (male, 20 years) hopes to go to UNAM to study medicine, but both his attempts at the admission exams have been unsuccessful. He and his family have decided that he should not work while he continues preparing. He tells us about his and his peers' experience trying to get into college. For those who did not go to a UNAM high school and gained direct admission, it can be very difficult to get in. Among his friends, half of those who were trying to get into college have already given up.

Irene (female, 19 years old) wants to be a nurse and has taken three admissions exams, two at UNAM and one at another local university, all unsuccessful. Even though she has a high school degree, she has not found a job because she has never worked, and most employers prefer workers with six months to a year of experience. Her family is not doing well financially—her father makes $1,500 pesos a week (~80 USD), which is not enough to support a family of five. Irene does not think the family has enough to pay for her school:

> They've told me that they will support me [to cover the costs of school] but I am looking for work right now because. . . . From what I see, the school requires uniforms, I would need daily transportation fare. . . . I can apply for a scholarship.

Besides Irene, many others mention economic problems as barriers to further educational attainment. Many parents are unable to pay for school, even if they support their children's desire for higher education. Others talk about having responsibilities at home, encompassing both housework and caregiving. Mara

(female, age 22) was working on a bachelor's degree in psychology but left school to take care of her baby. Several other respondents mention having to care for younger siblings, elder relatives, and do housework, because their parents have to work to make ends meet. These respondents engage in sporadic rather than full-time work. One of the most extreme cases we encountered is Quetzal (female, age 21), who has not finished high school and is responsible for everything at home: "These days I take care of my grandma, I take care of my sister, do the housework, food. . . . I am the housewife [laughs]." Her grandmother has Alzheimer's disease and needs to be cared for all day. Quetzal does not have free time, and if she plans to go out, she has to let her family know at least a few days in advance so they can make other arrangements.

Even those with responsibilities at home comment on the scarcity of well-paid formal employment in the local labor market. From their job search, they have found that most of the opportunities for young people are in precarious, unstable, low-wage jobs. Ernesto (male, age 25) has to work because his family is unable to support his education, and he dropped out of high school to work full time at a cell phone company. Despite working long hours, his salary was too low, and he quit. He still has not found a new job and finds himself caught between looking for a new job and saving money to go back to school.

Many respondents cite discrimination in the labor market due to age, experience, or even looks and style. Ageism is present in job ads that require applicants to be within a specific age range but also expect them to be educated and have several years of experience. This was the most common example given by our respondents, who were particularly exasperated to see how their credentials do not translate into better jobs. Carlos (male, 24 years), has a BSc in biotechnology. He sees opportunities for those with a college education, but wages are low and work experience is required:

> I think there are opportunities, but the problem is that most of them require experience . . . and unfortunately, the few jobs available offer very low wages. . . . I was looking for job opportunities on OCC [job search website], there was an ad for a job at a higher education institution that would be compatible with my profession, they offered to pay $3,000 pesos a month [~160 USD] and that's too little. . . . Often there are positions available as a research fellow at the university but those pay even less . . . though for many of us these are useful just to gain experience. . . . I want to start gaining experience more than the money itself.

Carlos says one can also walk away from his or her profession and get a job in a call center, but that job will be even more exploitative. Many respondents speak badly of these kinds of customer service, marketing, or sales jobs that fall under the call center umbrella. The common story is one of long working days, unpaid training periods, and very low salaries because of working on commission. From our respondents' experiences, salaries at call centers barely cover transportation and meal expenses. Alas, for many young people in Mexico City, these are some of the only nonmanual jobs one can access without a college education.

A small group of our respondents experienced discrimination because of their looks and style. We heard young men with piercings and tattoos tell stories of

being turned away from jobs only because of how they looked. The narratives of discrimination were varied, but all resulted in stunted educational and occupational opportunities for our respondents. Some of them adapted and worked around these hurdles, however. After dropping out of high school because his image clashed with teachers and school regulations, Cristian (23 years old) went to technical school for a certificate in electronics repair and taught himself to fix computers. He now repairs computers, cell phones, and other electronics from home and continues to teach himself to repair equipment. Despite his talent and his desire to learn more, he does not feel he fits in the conventional educational system or in a regular job. "I have tattoos, piercings, my hair is red! My whole physical look blocks my entry into many places." He has encountered prejudice in school and in the labor market, where people rely on "good presentation" too much. "Good presentation" is a common requirement in job advertisements—most of the time it means having a conventional clean-cut look for men, and for women it also means being attractive and well groomed.

Despite their disappointment with the educational system and the labor market, most of our respondents agree that there is great value in schooling, and many desire careers that require extensive training and schooling. A few think that the value of education relates mainly to having a diploma to show employers. A few others expressed that the value of education relates to the skills and knowledge acquired.

Discussion

Our interviews reveal that NEETs face institutional barriers and lack of vocational support in school. However, despite setbacks, many of them express a desire to access education or employment in the future. Our quantitative analysis shows that activity status is not constant over time. Women are more likely to be NEET than men. Men with some college education are more likely to be NEETs, while higher education does not have a significant effect for women. Our data analysis shows a bifurcation in the paths of youth—for some, higher education leads to increased risk of being NEET; while for others, higher education is associated with being a full-time student.

Given what we see in the experiences of our interviewees, more work is needed to explore whether a difficult transition from college to work is related to these findings. Most of our interviewees with college degrees describe struggles getting jobs. On the other end of the spectrum, many could not find a job because they do not have a high school diploma. Another problematic transition takes place between high school and college. Many of our respondents found it difficult to enter university even after years of trying.

While being in a union is associated with working full time among men, women in unions are more likely to be NEETs. This, combined with low rates of female labor force participation, shows that family transitions are strongly related to women dropping out of school and work. Further, position in the household relative to the householder and the socioeconomic status of the family are related to activity, and these

effects differ by sex. Higher education of the household head is associated with an increased risk of being NEET, and this is consistent with the characteristics of our interviewees as well. It seems that a significant proportion of NEETs are inactive because they can "afford" to be—some could afford to not work as they prepared for college admissions; others could afford to wait until they found a satisfactory job. Being NEET during a period of transition between high school and college, especially when preparing for entrance exams, is also prevalent in other countries (Park 2013); and for youth who can afford to not work, this may be the best chance to attend the college of their choice. This is not a luxury that the poor can afford; the informal labor market is full of youth from disadvantaged backgrounds doing menial and dead-end jobs. These types of situations are not well reflected in our qualitative analysis, because poor youth are less likely to have finished middle school and more likely to have been working since their early teenage years.

We find that local availability of work in the secondary and tertiary sectors discourages studying full time. However, we should acknowledge that our measure of labor context is limited. In Mexico City, the labor markets that people have access to often span large areas of the city. People are used to long commutes and to living in the fringes of the city and traveling to the core every day for work. The same goes for education. Since Mexicans are not restricted to attending schools in their neighborhoods, they may accept a considerable commute to attend the school of their choice. Future work should more adequately reflect these processes. Another potential limitation is that our qualitative evidence is only a snapshot of the experiences of NEETs and does not include youth in other activities. To overcome this limitation, we collected as much retrospective information on trajectories of school and work experience as possible.

It is clear from our analyses that economic opportunity and family background are close determinants of successful transitions into adulthood. Our respondents' narratives show a desire to overcome NEET status and to move on with their lives. For some, this would mean finally being admitted into college; while for others, it would mean finding a well-paying, steady job.

Policy-makers should create targeted programs that improve access to higher education and entry-level work opportunities. Programs could include efforts to increase enrollments in universities and improve vocational training in high school. Exclusionary and discriminatory practices in the labor market should be banned, and salaries should be regulated to avoid the exploitation of young workers. Schools, employers, and the government can promote the transition into a first job and, instead of requiring work experience, use probationary periods to measure ability. School-to-work training programs and apprenticeships would be ideal to connect education and work.

Notes

1. In Mexico they are referred as "NINIs," an abbreviation derived from the phrase *"ni estudia, ni trabaja"* (which translates into "not studying, not working.") For the sake of consistency with international terminology, this article uses the English abbreviation "NEET."

2. Mexico City is divided into administrative units called *delegaciones*. As the metropolitan area extends outside of the City's territory, parts of the surrounding metropolitan area include municipalities from the neighboring states. Starting in October 2018, *delegaciones* became *alcaldías* or mayoralties.

3. This qualitative data collection was conducted with funding from the Department of Demography and the College of Public Policy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. The data collection received human subjects research approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at San Antonio.

4. The survey reinterviews about 20 percent of the sample in each wave from one quarter to the next for five quarters, which results in information for one year and one trimester. The remaining 80 percent of the sample is only interviewed once.

5. We only have fertility information for female respondents. We tested the indicator in preliminary models and found that having children is associated with a decreased risk of being a full-time student or a student/worker, but it had no significant effect on the risk of being NEET. We decided to use union status as our family formation indicator because it is available for both sexes and its effects are similar.

6. In Mexico, students have to choose their major before applying to college. Students apply for admission directly to the department of their choice. Some programs have a common core (e.g., engineering) and then split into more specific specializations from there (e.g., civil engineering, electrical engineering, etc.). For a student who wishes to change programs, the process may require her or him to drop out and reapply to another program. There is also a high degree of vocational tracking starting in high school. Students choose a track related to the area they are interested in pursuing in college (e.g., social sciences, life sciences, humanities, physics and math, and so on). Thus, for a student who wants to radically change majors, this process may require taking additional high school credits before being able to apply to a new program.

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