Is There a New Youth Policy in Mexico?

Minor Mora-Salas¹ · Gustavo Adolfo Urbina Cortes¹

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Abstract

This article analyzes the youth policy promoted by the Andrés Manuel López Obrador administration. We contend that, although this government claims to be implementing an alternative approach to promote social inclusion for the youth, its actions seem to be far from fulfilling this commitment. “Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro,” the chief youth program of this government, hardly improves employment prospects for the most deprived youth and brings about no improvement in terms of the existing social stereotypes concerning this population. By assuming that this group of marginalized youth faces the risk of being recruited into organized crime, the authorities’ narrative contributes toward reinforcing conventional social stigmas that exacerbate social marginalization.

Keywords Youth · Stigma · Violence · Marginality · Job training · Informality

Introduction

Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the current president of Mexico, came to power in December 2018, with an amazing political capital and high social expectations due to his center-leftist political agenda. The development of a broad-spectrum policy to reduce social vulnerability for the youth, to foster the improvement of their life chances, and to offer them institutional opportunities for social inclusion were among the most important electoral promises. These commitments and nationalist and neo-developmental political program, augured the end of the neoliberal thought hegemony in the arena of public policy and ushered in a new era of progressive public intervention. The new government’s fundamental challenges lay in pacifying the country, reducing violence, fighting corruption, and improving the living

✉ Minor Mora-Salas
mimora@colmex.mx

Gustavo Adolfo Urbina Cortes
gurbina@colmex.mx

¹ Center for Sociological Studies, El Colegio de México, Mexico City, Mexico

conditions of the poor. AMLO has highlighted the need to address the problems of the youth, considering the fact that the preceding neoliberal governments abandoned young people, especially the underprivileged, to their own fate, triggering an unprecedented process of social marginalization that now fuels violent crimes all over the country. In order to reverse this situation, the AMLO administration claims to have adopted a broad-based youth policy, making this theme a national priority.

However, as many specialists have argued, framing the “social question” from the perspective of social inclusion is not a triviality, as this concept is vague, contested, and has no univocal root within a particular sociological theory. Despite having a strong positive connotation, this concept can be associated with both conservative and progressive political ideologies and public policies (Levitas 2005; Silver 2012). Indeed, scholars have argued that, to guide a progressive and transformative political agenda, the social inclusion approach must imply a model of good society, endorse an egalitarian agenda, put redistributive policies and social recognition processes at its center, promote human rights promotion and enforcement, and the active and democratic participation of social actors in public life (Levitas 2003; Silver 2012; Sandoval 2016).

Considering these complex issues, we want to shed some light on whether the policy agenda of the current so-called center-leftist Mexican government is indeed a transformative one, directed toward youth inclusion, particularly while addressing the necessities of the most deprived and stigmatized groups. In order to carry out the analysis, we will focus on Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro—Youth Building Future (Spanish acronym: JCF—the principal youth program of the current administration. We will use three sources of information: the first one relates to the institutional documentation and data available about JCF, providing information on the program’s salient features: its coverage, implementation, and outcomes; the second one is the review of the main academic criticisms leveled at the program; and the third one comes from ten in-depth qualitative interviews with trainees and graduates, all of whom live in Mexico City. The interviews, conducted by the authors between July and August 2020, address different topics such as the participants’ living conditions, family background, reasons for joining the program, quality of training, experiences at training centers, job searching strategies, post-graduation plan, opinions on youth and crime, and political affiliation. We conducted 10 in-depth interviews with young people enrolled in JCF. This purposively qualitative sample was designed, as part of a larger research study. Following Emmel’s guidelines (2013), we sought to increase the variance of this small sample by selecting interviewees of different sex, age, educational level, social-background, and time of exposure to the program. We contacted them through our social networks plus personal contacts from four research assistants, ensuring that the interviewees did not know each other, that they live in different neighborhoods, and that they were enrolled in different firms or institutions. Interviewees’ ages ranged from 19 to 28 years old; six out of ten are women; six came from low-income households and the rest belong to middle-class households. The time exposure to the program varies from 2 to 12 months; only two were JCF graduates. Regarding the training location, six interviewees are being trained in private companies and four in public institutions. Their school level is diverse: three had 9 years or fewer of schooling, two reached high school level, although one

dropped out. Five interviewees reach tertiary education. Four completed their degree and one dropped out. Seven were unemployed, two quit their job, and one was neither studying nor working before joining JCF. The interviews were voluntary, recorded, and anonymized. The interviewees gave their oral consent to the interviews. At the beginning of the interview, we asked them to use a pseudonym, and we did not gather any information to contact them once the conversation was over.

Between Marginalization and Stigmatization of Impoverished Youth

Mexico is the world's 15th largest economy; it is the second largest in Latin America. However, its per capita GDP of US\$ 9001 barely makes it a middle-income country. Despite its size, since the 1980s, the Mexican economy has achieved only moderate to low growth rates. In the twenty-first century, it has reported an average annual per capita GDP of barely 0.04, revealing the structural constraints that hinder the improvement of its population's living conditions. Having a skewed distribution of wealth and an extensive amount of poverty, Mexico is a typical Latin American country. Regarding the wealth distribution, Campos et al. (2016) estimated that the richest 1% account for 21% of the nation's total income, and Castillo (2017) estimated a Gini coefficient of total wealth controlled by the top decile in 0.79, while CONEVAL (2021) calculated that 52.8% of the Mexican population live below the poverty line.¹ This figure has remained unchanged after the economy crack-down in 1995.

With a quarter of its population aging from 15 to 29, most living in hardship, the new government faces a major challenge in addressing the youth challenge. A spiral of violence triggered by Mexican drug cartels has further deteriorated the living conditions, especially in the territories most afflicted by clashes among these criminal organizations INEGI (2019) counted 325,884 intentional homicides from 2006, when the government declared the war on drugs—to 2019, and country's murder rate—29 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2019—is the ninth highest in the world (Indice Paz Mexico 2021).

In this context, lower-class youths have suffered increasing stigmatization for their alleged links to organized crime, as they constitute the age-group that is most affected by murders executed by drug cartels. Barba and Valencia (2019) have documented how the media stereotypes the poor, presenting them as a threat to public safety. Valenzuela (2014) argued that the drug trade appears in the media with a sensationalist slant and gets invariably associated with young people living in marginalized neighborhoods. Reguillo (2008) contended that youth gained prominence in the public sphere as criminals and individuals prone to violence since the late twentieth century. Azaola (2004) argued that these stereotypes have contributed to the widespread feelings of social mistrust against youths living in peripheral neighborhoods. Regarding the last issue, De las Heras (2019) reported that 60% of Mexicans have a

¹ Same proportion for young people aging 15 to 29.

negative opinion of young people, thinking that despite having opportunities, youths found it easier or more comfortable to engage in delinquency.

The most stigmatized youths are, in fact, the least privileged and most deprived. By extrapolation, common sense attributes to marginalized youths a high propensity of participating in organized crime, ignoring the structural and intervening factors one must consider while linking poverty and crime (Kingston and Webster 2015). Behind such prejudice, criminal behaviors are conceived as byproducts of individual choices that reflect a preference for “*la vida loca*”—the crazy life—a licentious but risky way of life, associated with marginalized neighborhoods, drugs, violence, jail, and murders, contributing to the reproduction of stigmas associated with these groups. Despite the popularity of this notion, its underlying logic is flawed. First, it ignores the fact that most impoverished youth never engage in criminal activity but are rather more likely to be the victims (Azaola 2017). Second, specialists have proved that the relationship between poverty and crime is elusive and intricate, involving complex interrelationships among mediating individuals, the family, the community, and macro-social factors (Crutchfield and Wadsworth 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993). Finally, as Hernández (2021) proved, a key factor to understand the risk of crime in Mexico is neither poverty nor the lack of life opportunities, but the systematic presence of criminal organizations in local settings.

Goffman (1986) posited that stigma is a relational practice of social classification, which serves as a means of social control. Tyler (2013) complemented this view by arguing that stigma also reflects asymmetrical power relations between elites and subaltern groups. The assumption of a connection between poverty and crime, both in political and social discourse, contributes to the reinforcement of three misconceptions. First is the belief that impoverished youths are more prone to criminal life, which justifies any punitive actions adopted against them. Second, it both urges punitive actions against deprived youth as the only effective strategy to control potential juvenile offenders. Finally, it essentializes the relationship between the socio-economic marginalization and the making of a living at any price, leaving impoverished youth with no option other than crime.

Toward a New Social Inclusion Youth Policy?

From the outset of his mandate, AMLO emphasized the requirement to rebuild institutional bonds with the youth, in order to promote social integration and reduce violence. To push this agenda forward, the government launched a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand, the AMLO administration introduced a scholarship program named Jóvenes Escribiendo el Futuro—Youth Writing the Future—to prevent school dropouts. On the other, a massive job training program named Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro—JCF; Youth Building Future—to foster the economic participation of the youths who neither study nor work hoping to reduce crime and violence.

It is noteworthy that the official narrative on less advantaged youth is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it uses a social inclusion rhetoric, alluding to structural factors such as labor market exclusion, school dropout rates, chronic poverty, government neglect, inefficient public policies, and negligible social mobility. On

the other, AMLO insists, in his political speeches, on conveying a negative image of underprivileged youth by establishing a connection between “youth at risk” and organized crime. He constantly highlights that the government must demolish this link. In his public speeches, he usually states, “We have to compete with organized crime, tell [criminal organizations] ‘you want our young people, let’s see who can do better’, because I’m going to give them options, because I don’t want you to take them and ruin them.”² He pinpoints the need “to offer young people options so that they [organized crime] do not take them away and to prevent them becoming an organized crime reserve army.”³ When the president talks about disadvantaged youths, especially those who neither study nor work, he stresses the loss of values as an aggravating factor for risk of crime. He usually points to the moral component of the new youth programs, which not only deliver socio-economic opportunities but also show the youths to behave.

Levitas (2003) argues that in the UK, moral underclass discourse inspires public policy, guided by a conservative orientation, reducing the social inclusion problem to a small group of marginalized outsiders who lack moral values and are lawbreakers. When a public policy follows these guidelines, it shifts the burden to the people. Indeed, this is what AMLO has done, by systematically connecting youth and crime and stressing the loss of values. By holding that JCF seeks to prevent young people from joining organized crime, he unveils the true purpose of his “new” youth policy. We contend that the current administration’s policy surrounding young people seeks not to uphold underprivileged citizens’ rights but to create a political frame and a social discourse that promotes a simplistic understanding of violence. Paradoxically, this discourse only contributes to the deepening of youth stigmatization, oversimplifying the complexities that underlie the criminal problem and neglecting a broader vision of social inclusion.

Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro: Features and Outcomes

JCF forms the backbone of the AMLO administration’s youth policy; indeed, it is the only public program aimed at young people aged between 18 and 29. It focuses on training the youths, both excluded from the educational system and the labor market, in order to improve their chances of finding a job. The official discourse assumes that this population makes up a “vulnerable group,” so they were detached, during the neoliberal administrations, from the community and institutional bonds that generate social cohesion; therefore, they face the risk of engaging in crime. The government assumes that economic hardship, persistent marginality, and social frustration force disadvantaged young people into a criminal life, and it trusts JCF to make a difference. Horacio Duarte, Under-Minister of Employment in the Ministry

² <https://www.milenio.com/politica/amlo-dice-que-se-debe-competir-por-los-jovenes-con-la-delincuencia-organizada>

³ <https://www.contrareplica.mx/nota-Con-nueva-estrategia-se-evita-que-mas-jovenes-caigan-a-la-delincuencia-indica-AMLO2020190>

of Labor and Public Welfare (Spanish acronym STPS), stated, in January 2020, “The program [JCF] seeks to take 1 million youths off the streets and out of organized crime. As the president has said, it is a way of winning our young people away from organized crime.”⁴

JCF aims to expand employment opportunities for 2.3 million youths that are marginalized from school and work. It is a federal program, run by the Ministry of Labor, which does not include any selection criteria based on socioeconomic characteristics. The initial plan was to reach the program’s total coverage in 2 years; notwithstanding, in September 2020, the Ministry of Labor amended the schedule, establishing that it would reach its total goal by the fourth year of the current administration. In fact, this is not a minor change. It hints at operational problems and budget cuts that call into question the government’s self-proclaimed centrality assigned to this program.

JCF grants its beneficiaries MXN\$ 3600 in monthly stipends, plus a public health insurance for 1 year, with the amount increasing to MXN\$ 3748 in the year 2020 and to MXN\$ 4310 in 2021. The stipend is exactly equal to the national minimum wage and increases once a year under the directives of the Ministry of Labor. The program centers its approach on a diagnosis that the two greatest barriers for young people in securing a job are the lack of employability and insufficient work experience. Therefore, it defines an intervention that seeks to address these two obstacles simultaneously. To achieve its ends, it proposes to develop a 12-month skills development program based on an on-the-job training strategy. The practical training would take place at workplaces—Spanish acronym CT—such as public institutions, firms, social organizations, or even in collaboration with self-employed individuals. Each CT defines its training plan and the number of trainees it would receive annually. As part of the process, a tutor is appointed to supervise and guide the trainees. Employers join the program voluntarily, having to take the initiative and register themselves through an online platform on the JCF website. Once they finish the paperwork and get enrolled, they operate with almost total independence. The Ministry of Labor exerts almost no control or supervision regarding the CTs’ training plan.

Potential beneficiaries must fill in an online application, which is processed by the Ministry of Labor. When a candidate completes the application, they define, in order of priority, some areas of interest in which they require training,⁵ in a venue near their home. After identifying an establishment, the candidate schedules an in-person interview with the tutor assigned to oversee the program there. If the parties agree, they sign an acceptance letter in which they undertake to comply with the program guidelines and then register on the program website, formalizing their admission and designation as a trainee. After completing this step, accepted candidates receive the benefits and their training.

⁴ *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro los alejará del crimen organizado*, El Heraldo, 12–2-20 <https://heraldododemexico.com.mx/nacional/2020/2/3/jovenes-construyendo-el-futuro-los-alejara-del-crimen-organizado-stps-150099.html>

⁵ Areas of training are arts and sports, administration, sales, services, agriculture-environment, trades, industrial, and electricity.

The Ministry of Labor reports the program operates nationwide, being present in 99% of Mexican municipalities, although its relative importance varies regionally. The states with the highest number of trainees include Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, State of Mexico, and Guerrero—the least developed states in the country, except for the fourth, which is the most populous. However, excluding Guerrero, these are not the regions that are very afflicted by organized crime; hence, the association between the level of violence in a region and the operation of JCF is almost negligible.⁶

The government considers JCF a successful program. In 2019, in its first year of operation, it reported an enrollment of 1,000,000 youths. In 2020, the program's second year, 500,000 new trainees were added, and in the third year, it expects the addition of an equal number. The program claims it will reach a grand total of 2,000,000 youths trained in just 3 years. According to Luisa María Alcalde, Minister of Labor, JCF accomplished an outstanding achievement due to its gender balance, as young women account for 58% of the trainees. However, beyond this political statement, it has to be stressed the program faces problems in recruiting youths with a low educational level; most trainees have a higher level of formal education, with six out of 10 having finished high school or some level of college education. This information casts doubt on the idea that JCF is serving the most “vulnerable” youths for three reasons. First, it does not concentrate its operations in the regions that are most exposed to organized crime. Second, considering the fact that in México the homicide rates among men is nine times higher than that among women, it does not seem appropriate to have a gender-balanced program; it should rather aim to help diminish the risk of lower-class young men committing crimes. Finally, there is a notorious gap between the educational level of JCF trainees and the educational background of underprivileged youth, since only 37% of poor youth, aged 15 to 29, were noted to finish high school (ENIGH 2020). The gap is even wider if one looks at the educational profile of incarcerated youth, probably the group that is most at risk of having any association with organized crime. Among imprisoned youth, 77% report less than 9 years of education, and only 22% graduated high school (INEGI 2017). The educational profile of juvenile offenders simply does not match that of the young people enrolled in JCF.

JCF's apparent success in enrolling youth should be accepted with caution. Since the first year, the program has undergone major budget cuts, raising questions on the alleged top priority the government assigns to this program. Initially, in 2019, the allocated budget was MXN\$ 40 billion—US\$ 2,038,736. However, because of the austerity measures implemented by the federal government, besides under-use of funds allocated to JCF,⁷ the Ministry of Finance cut its budget by MXN\$ 23,915 billion—US\$ 1951 billion—resulting in a 41% reduction of the funds that were originally allocated. In 2020, the federal government cut JCF's allowed budget by 36%

⁶ In 2020, the five states with the highest intentional murders rates were Colima, Baja California, Chihuahua, Zacatecas and Michoacán. See the report by *México Social* entitled “*Estos son los estados con peores tasas de homicidios del país* of 08–25-2020.” <https://www.mexicosocial.org/estados-con-peores-tasas-de-homicidio/>

⁷ From January to June 2019, JCF spent 20.6% of the amended budget.

compared to the initially allocated budget. In 2021, the allowed budget was MXN\$ 20.6 billion; again, JCF saw a 33% reduction in funding compared to the previous year. With less funding than expected, JCF cannot meet its expectations, widening the gap between political discourse and actual achievements.

The Debate over JCF

The operation of JCF has been the subject of intense debate from its very beginning. Arceo (2018) argued that the program's target population does not serve the 8,500,000 young people who neither study nor work and excludes the most vulnerable youths, those aged between 15 and 17. Flores and Székely (2019), on the contrary, claimed that JCF overestimated the size of the targeted population, as there are only 1,500,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 29 who are unemployed and available to work. These criticisms relate to a controversial issue. Counting the total number of young people who neither study nor work depends on the assumptions, conceptualization, and measurement decisions adopted by analysts, for example, using the broadest definition—ages 15 to 29, with no exclusionary criteria—we estimate that 6,338,519 youths are excluded from the labor market and the school system, a majority of whom are women (78%).⁸ Truthfully, to argue, as the government does, that most of them are at risk of crime is simply unrealistic, as the vast majority of these young women are doing unpaid work at home, whether it be caring for other family members or engaging in domestic work.

Casar and Székely (2020) stated that since this is a politically oriented program that aims to build an electoral clientele, the government did not care to learn about the international wisdom concerning youth employment and training programs. Because of this fault, JCF might not provide its trainees with the quality training necessary to enhance their chances of getting a job (Castañeda 2019; Irigoyen and García 2019; de Hoyos and Rendón 2020). These criticisms cast serious doubts on the conceptual, technical, and operative consistency of this program and the value it adds to trainees' employability level.

CONEVAL (2020) raised some doubts concerning the day-to-day operational criteria of JCF in selecting companies capable of offering quality vocational training and competent and committed tutors. National Auditing Office (2021)—Spanish acronym ASF—questions the reliability of the program's list of beneficiaries, and NGOs identified major deficiencies in the selection of CTs and trainees (MCCI 2019). The rush with which JCF has attempted to reach its coverage goals may explain, but not justify, most of the identified weaknesses. However, the same does not apply to the training component of the program, is cornerstone. Actually, these are no minor critiques, as JCF's backbone lies in allocating youth to CTs, to develop the skills employers are looking for.

⁸ They represent 20% of the total youth population. Sixty-seven percent live below the poverty line and 24% in extreme poverty, meaning, their families have not income to buy a minimum food-basket (own estimate based on ENIGH 2020).

In order to ensure that the program achieves nationwide coverage, it was critical to incorporate large numbers of CTs, to allocate trainees. To speed up this process, project managers registered CTs hastily, without guaranteeing either its organizational capability or tutors' competences to carry out on-the-job training plans. In reality, JCF developed no certification process to accredit CTs or tutors and offered no training plans or comprehensive supervision process, compromising the quality of the training program. From the beginning, program managers faced a dilemma: whether they should hasten to meet political pressures or proceed with restraint to ensure the program's quality. They solved it by choosing the first path, running a program that lacks solid technical foundations.

To date, JCF has registered 344,170 CTs, which is not a negligible figure by any means.⁹ These include private companies (71%), public institutions (27%), and social organizations (2%).¹⁰ Although "private companies" are clearly the category that provides opportunities for vocational training to most beneficiaries, it must be noted that this is a highly heterogeneous group, including self-employed individuals, micro-businesses, and companies of different sizes. In August 2020, Dayra Vergara, JCF National Coordinator, reported that 94% of incorporated firms had between 1 and 50 employees.¹¹ It is an open secret that only a tiny number of these organizations have the institutional capabilities and knowledge to develop a high-quality training program.

The execution of this strategy reveals the program operators' belief in the alleged advantages of a skill-development market-oriented strategy. By giving the employers full control over the training process, without having a strategy for the selection, supervision, and regulation of CTs, training plans, and tutors, as well as not testing the "skills" developed during the training process, they reveal the improvised and hasty manner that characterizes the JCF's implementation. It also unveils the naïve idea that employers would responsibly and efficiently take over the youth training process. Let us discuss this core assumption carefully.

JCF in the Trainee's Eyes

Market-oriented training programs are supposed to secure tight correspondence between the skills inculcated and those demanded by employers. Such an assumption also implies the unwary idea that firms can readily operate as training organizations. It overlooks the fact that the vast majority of firms/institutions do not have any experience in working with trainees and have received no kind of advice and training to implement an on-the-job-training program. This belief ignores that this

⁹ Figure reported on March 2, 2021, by the STPS on the JCF website <https://jovenesconstruyendoelfuturo.stps.gob.mx/datos/>

¹⁰ The distribution of beneficiaries by type of training center follows the same pattern, with 68%, 20%, and 3% in the private sector, public sector, and social organizations, respectively.

¹¹ See the report by Ariadna Ortega entitled "Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro no va a resolver el problema del desempleo," May 28, 2020, *Expansión Política*. <https://politica.expansion.mx/mexico/2020/05/28/dayra-vergara-jovenes-construyendo-el-futuro-no-va-a-resolver-el-desempleo>

sort of capability requires time, organizational arrangements, and qualified personnel; this is not simply a matter of rolling up one's sleeves up and getting busy. This flaw increases the likelihood that such "formative" experiences may prove counter-productive, as the youths we interviewed told us.

Most trainees complained to us about the fact that their training has no relation to their areas of professional interest or does not improve their skills at all. Saúl, a 23-year-old man, who was being trained in a private company, said, "What you do is no training but just working." He added, "Obviously, on the program page, the guidelines, everything is very good. But I think it's very different in practice. Actually, the tutors do what they want. That's the biggest problem." Angel, a 28-year-old man allocated to be trained in the private sector, stated, "The program I feel it is leaving the fellows to luck at most, because it does not know if we are really taking advantage of the program or if in the firm where we are being taught something new or if the tutors do their job well. Anybody cares about these matters." Lesly, a 23-year-old trainee in a public institution, said, "What my mentor taught me was discipline, to obey, to follow orders and not to complain. I do not think the program aims at developing useful skills for getting a job once you finish your training. That is a big problem." Kluge et al. (2019) have already shown that market-oriented skill development programs, without public regulation, do not improve the employability level of young trainees. Polanyi (1975) argued, more than 70 years ago, that in capitalism, the automatic regulation of markets is a myth. There is no theoretical or empirical reason to assume, as the authorities responsible for JCD do, that, in this case, the regulation of the labor market would happen spontaneously.

Political authorities assumed companies would offer many trainees a job once they finished their training. The assumption was very simple-minded. If an employer trains some youths, it is to be expected that they are interested in hiring them, considering the fact that they tailor the training to satisfy their own needs. From an economic standpoint, it would be rational for companies to formalize such hiring, since they would have to invest in recruiting and training new employees otherwise. Interviewees pointed out that working centers rarely hire the trainees they graduate, as most firms or institutions do not have any vacancy. In fact, many JCF participants joined the program expecting to be hired, but as soon as they walked into a CT, they were told that this expectation was not realistic. Ana L., a 26-year-old, who entered the program and completed her training in a public institution, shared with us, "From the beginning we were told that because of austerity policies it would be difficult, if not impossible, to be hired. We were told not to make any illusions." The same situation takes place in the private sector, as Carlos, a 21-year-old, told us, "No, I really got in because I needed work more than anything, more than experience and knowledge or training. I needed to work more than anything. But from the very beginning, they told me they were just going to train me. They said, 'we will not hire you or anyone else. We have no place for new employees'."

Scholars and media commentators have criticized this program, arguing that it is not overcoming youth unemployment but subsidizing companies by offering them free labor. Our interviewees shared this critique, contending that JCF ensures a continuous flow of trainees who do a lot of work at zero cost for the employers. Lesly, a 23-year-old trainee, said, "The program is poorly planned. Firms and institutions

do not hire graduates once your training is over. They do not have to open new vacancies, because that would increase their cost and because they better operate with trainees and trainees and trainees. They have no incentive to hire us.” Luis, a 26-year-old trainee, told us, “Many companies are not interested in training you, because it is free labor for them. So, some companies run the program unfairly. They think, I accept 10 fellows for free. Once they finished the so called ‘training’, let them go. The ensuing year, they will accept another 10 trainees, and so and so forth.” JCF authorities could argue this outcome is an unexpected implementation effect. Nonetheless, it is hardly the case. Mexican employers have historically shown no interest in promoting youth training programs on their own or in alliance with the State. Furthermore, they have always defended their interests from a narrow profit maximizing perspective. When authorities designed JCF, they excluded the participation of counterbalancing actors, such as trade unions, youth organizations, or NGO’s. Left unchecked, the employers had all the opportunities to take advantage of the public resources for their own benefit.

It could be counterintuitive that trainees with higher education face more difficulties getting hired in the private sector, considering the fact that they have a university degree. The answer is that most private-sector firms enrolled in JCF do not require highly qualified laborers to work with and those that call for highly qualified labor have simply not shown interest in it. The interviewees told us that private employers considered them to be overqualified, leaving them off the list of possible future recruits. Ivonne, a 25-year-old industrial engineer, stated, “In this company, we had several trainees with degrees, mostly psychologists and engineers, but they gradually came out because they [the firm] only wanted to hire unskilled workers. There were no vacancies for someone who has a professional certificate.” The public sector does not hire JCF graduates because of the austerity policy decreed by AMLO’s administration, aiming to limit public expenditure and avoid inflationary pressures.

Another factor that hampers the recruitment of JCF graduates in the private sector involves an unexpected and counterproductive consequence of the program. In popular jargon, JCF is known as the “Ni-Ni” program, a degrading term used to label young people who neither study nor work. For this reason, trainees and graduates are assigned a set of negative traits and stereotypes. Most interviewees report negative experiences during the training process because of the treatment they received, especially in large companies or public institutions. In particular, at CTs, when workers saw trainees as “Ni-Nis,” they were treated with contempt. There was a permanent suspicion about their work ethics, commitment, and job performance. Few employees wanted to work with or teach them something at work. When trainees had to carry out a task, their work was always looked at with suspicion. There was always “an eye on them,” not to help them do a better job, but out of mistrust. Ivonne, for example, said that for her, this was an awful experience. As trainees, she and her fellows were treated unfairly. She added, “So everything we did was like: oh yes, write it down because we have to review it. And then what we did wasn’t as useful because other workers had to do it again; the supervisors were told to monitor us carefully; they did not trust us. And then they referred to you as ‘ah she is a Ni-Ni!’ and start laughing at you. And, when a new trainee got into the CT, then they said contemptuously ‘um, another Ni-Ni’, and I said, ‘sorry, but we are professionals’.

But they did not care, we were just Ni-Nis for them.” In this case, authorities completely overlooked the social implications of labeling young people, who neither study nor work, as prone to criminal activities or as a “reserve army” for organized crime. In so doing, the government itself, despite saying otherwise, strengthened the processes of social stigmatization of the most disadvantaged youth. Stigmas are stereotyped representations of the social world of groups based on fallacious extrapolations. It hinders the opportunities of the stigmatized groups to improve their living conditions, to be recognized and treated with respect and to demand from the State their rights as citizens.

Being stigmatized as a “Ni-Ni” has ramifications beyond the training process. Some interviewees noted that, in their experience, accrediting themselves as JCF graduates dwindled their chances of being hired in the private sector, even among firms not related to JCF. Leslie, for example, commented, “When I finished the program, I was unemployed for three months, and it didn’t help me say I was a JCF graduate. Employers used to tell me, ‘Ah, you’re Ni-Ni’. Immediately, they rejected me. The letter JCF gives you at the end is worthless. I didn’t see this as a plus, or something that will help you get a job, but quite the opposite.”

A Hostile Context for a Skill Development Program

Finally, JCF is based on the assumption that the program would have a conducive economic context to encourage job creation, leading to the recruitment of its graduates. This assumption was, however, proven wrong. In 2019, the Mexican economy stagnated, and the annual GDP decreased by -0.14% . In the first quarter of 2020—before the SARS-CoV-2 crisis—it continued falling at -2.4% . The outlook turned even darker since April 2020, when the economy’s poor performance worsened in the lockdown’s wake. Along with the rest of the world, Mexico went into a period of acute recession. This year, the GDP plunged at -8.5% , and the country lost over 1,000,000 formal jobs because of the economic effects of COVID-19. As a result, one of JCF core assumptions collapsed; the macro-economic conditions and actions taken by firms to cope with the crisis became not only negative but also hostile toward a program aiming to enhance youth employment opportunities.

However, even before the economic lockdown, employers showed limited interest in hiring JCF graduates. In March 2020, the Ministry of Labor reported that only 2% of the program graduates had secured a stable employment. In August 2020, based on an analysis of exit questionnaires completed by program graduates, only a quarter of the total graduates had found a job or had the promise of a formal contract. The remaining three-quarters were seeking jobs (24.7%), attempting to become self-employed (39.1%), or considering re-enrolling in school (10.7%). If we simply add the first two categories and define them as job seekers, the open unemployment rate among JCF graduates is skyrocketing at 63.8%, far beyond the 8.4% estimated for the country’s young workforce in the third semester of 2020 (ENOE 2020).

JCF graduates’ low recruitment rate casts doubts on the program’s ability to fulfill its promise. Knowing this, the Ministry of Labor put into practice a “remedial” intervention called “Mes 13” (Month 13). This ad hoc intervention serves to provide

an additional month's stipend to JCF graduates, to fund their job hunting or expedite alternatives, such as self-employment or re-enrolment in school. By activating this initiative, the government implicitly acknowledged the difficulties JCF graduates face while trying to rejoin the labor market; unemployment and labor market exclusion become, again, everyday realities. Clearly, an additional month's allowance is not even a short-term alternative; it is just another hasty action, hoping to douse a fire. But if this group of youths returned to be excluded from work and school, and the President on arguing they are at risk for crime, then JCF brought about no change at all. If this is the case, the authorities should admit that the program has failed.

According to the authorities' perspective, we should expect a reduction in the homicide rate as JCF progresses, since the alleged ties between "vulnerable" youths and organized crime would be severed or at least weakened. Evidence does not support this claim. The number of violent homicides continued growing in 2019 and 2020—36,661 and 36,579, respectively—till it reached its peak level since 1990 (INEGI 2021a, b, c). Evidently, something is wrong here. There is a missing connection between implementing a skill-development program and bringing crime down. There is also a missing link between carrying out an on-the-job training program and being able to offer trainees good jobs, out the informal economy where 61% of the youth labor force works currently (ENOE 2020). Despite these shortcomings, the current government does not seem to care much. Faced with this evidence, we posit that the AMLO administration makes a serious mistake by linking deprived youth who neither study nor work to crime, assuming they make up a sort or "reserve army of organized crime." One thing is for sure: this approach does not shatter stigma but reinforces them.

Conclusion

We have maintained that JCF has been the core instrument of public policy under AMLO's administration. The Mexican government claims that it is rebuilding social and institutional ties between "vulnerable" youth and the state through this program. It also contends that the program increases the employment prospects for underprivileged youths, leading to a reduction in crime rate. However, there is no evidence to suggest that JCF has made any contribution to the opening up of new employment opportunities for marginalized young people and the reduction of social violence in the country. Official data shows that JCF graduates are not doing well after graduation: an overwhelming majority return to unemployment or give up looking for a job. Regarding the expected reduction in crime rate, the evidence points in the opposite direction: violence homicide has gone up, and the war on drug cartels is out of control. By implementing JCF, the government itself is contributing to stigmatize the most disadvantaged youths. In particular, when it states that this program will reduce their risk of being recruited by organized crime. Contrary to expectations, instead of opening new venues to promote their social inclusion, this type of discourse has narrowed them. This "unexpected" effect arises from linking JCF to the government strategy to reduce crime and

violence, which is still based on mobilizing troops to combat drug cartels and other criminal organizations. This strategy inevitably leads to punitive actions against those who are profile as potential criminals, mainly marginalized youths living at the bottom of the class structure. In this sense, Tyler (2013) is right to argue that stigmatization arises in context shaped by unequal relations of power. The irony of the Mexican case is that this political dispositif is being actively and uncritically implemented by a supposedly left-center government whose leitmotiv is: “for achieving the common good, first we should help the poor.”

Evaluated as a skill development program, JCF has severe limitations. The most glaring is that it can neither guarantee a quality training nor serve as an effective platform to place its graduates in a decent job. As a market-driven strategy, it assumes uncritically the supposed superiority and efficiency of any training initiative provided by employers, which, once again, has proved to be wrong. JCF’s shortcomings have forced policymakers to seek employment alternatives for its graduates. They have “come out” with a “solution” by stimulating subsistence self-employment among their graduates. Ironically, in doing so, they could strengthen the informalization of youth employment—something the Ministry of Labor should fight against.

It is also clear that a policy agenda based on promoting youth employability levels among the marginalized youth, despite being relevant, it is hardly a sound contribution toward a progressive and transformative social inclusion program—in the sense formulated by Levitas (2005)—especially if it ignores that the structural features of the Mexican labor market are highly unfavorable for these groups. With high levels of labor deregulation, generalized precarious employment, and endemic informality, there are few chances for impoverished and stigmatized youth to find good jobs. This does not depend solely on improving their levels of employability, but on the promotion of a new development strategy aiming to restore the links between work, citizenship, and well-being. JCF is far from this transformative agenda the country needs to lay the groundwork for a new and comprehensive social inclusion youth policy.

Interviewees (Pseudonymous)

Ana L, female, 26 years old, lawyer, 08–2020.

Ángel, male, 28 years old, bachelors in biology, 08–2020.

Erik, male, 26 years old, high school dropout, 08–2020.

Ivonne, female, 25 years old, chemical engineer, 08–2020.

Karen, female, 23 years old, primary school graduate, 07–2020.

Lesly, female, 23 years old, sociologist, 07–2020.

Saul, male, 23 years old, high school graduate, 07–2020.

Yathziri, female, 23 years old, bachelors in dentistry dropout, 06–2020.

Yadis, male, 23 years old, high school dropout, 07–2020.

Luis, male, 19 years old, secondary school graduate, 07–2020.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate Not applicable.

This is an observational study. The FACI-COLMEX Committee that approved this project gave its consent on its methodology and ensured that it complies with all ethical requirements. Letter of approval Of. No. SG-170/19 signed by Dr. Gustavo Vega Cánovas, Secretario Técnico, Fondo de Apoyo Colmex a la Investigación (FACI).

Oral informed consent was obtained from participants at the beginning of each interview. We only interviewed young adults (ages 18–29) who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. Their real names are not reported in the paper to ensure anonymity and privacy.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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