

## **¿Por qué más educación no conduce necesariamente a la reducción de la pobreza? Un estudio preliminar de las trampas de la pobreza en Colombia**

Why more education doesn't necessarily lead to poverty reduction?  
A preliminary case study of poverty traps in Colombia

*Porque é que mais educação não conduz necessariamente à redução da pobreza? Um estudo preliminar sobre as armadilhas da pobreza na Colômbia*

### **- Artículo de investigación -**

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### **Resumen**

A finales del siglo XX, los economistas colombianos identificaron un fuerte vínculo entre la educación y la reducción de la pobreza. Sin embargo, a pesar de una importante expansión de la cobertura educativa, los niveles de pobreza no han disminuido como se preveía. Este problema se extiende más allá de Colombia y ha impulsado el desarrollo de teorías económicas, centradas en factores como la deserción escolar temprana, las imperfecciones del mercado, el aumento de la incertidumbre y los costos de la educación, todos los cuales contribuyen al enigma de las trampas de la pobreza. Métodos: Utilizando un enfoque cuantitativo, la investigación analiza la relación entre los logros educativos, las oportunidades de empleo y los antecedentes socioeconómicos de la población más joven. Además, explora los motores de la desigualdad en el mercado laboral, haciendo especial hincapié en las divisiones de clase social y en el papel de las redes sociales a la

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hora de configurar el acceso al empleo. Resultados: Los resultados preliminares ponen de relieve una desconexión persistente entre el aumento de la educación y la integración en el mercado laboral de los jóvenes más pobres de Colombia. El estudio identifica una clara asociación entre la segregación de clase social y el acceso diferencial al empleo, acentuando el papel influyente de las conexiones sociales en la obtención de oportunidades laborales. Conclusiones: Esta investigación desvela las complejidades que rodean a las trampas de la pobreza en Colombia, dilucidando por qué la mejora de la educación no se ha traducido en la esperada reducción de la pobreza. Subraya la necesidad imperiosa de examinar en profundidad los retos políticos a los que se enfrenta el país. Al abordar las barreras de acceso al mercado laboral para los más vulnerables, este estudio contribuye significativamente al discurso más amplio sobre la intrincada relación entre la educación y la reducción de la pobreza en Colombia. Las conclusiones también son pertinentes para otros países que se enfrentan a retos similares, y ofrecen valiosas perspectivas tanto a los responsables políticos como a los investigadores.

**Palabras clave:** Pobreza, Desarrollo económico y social, Educación, Empleo de jóvenes, Desigualdad social

**Abstract:**

In the late 20th century, Colombian economists identified a strong link between education and poverty reduction. However, despite a significant expansion of educational coverage, poverty levels have not declined as predicted. This problem extends beyond Colombia and has prompted the development of economic theories, focusing on factors such as early school dropout, market imperfections, increased uncertainty, and the costs of education, all of which contribute to the enigma of poverty traps. Methods: Using a quantitative approach, the research analyzes the relationship between educational attainment, employment opportunities, and socioeconomic background of the younger population. In addition, it explores the

drivers of labor market inequality, with particular emphasis on social class divisions and the role of social networks in shaping access to employment. Results: Preliminary results highlight a persistent disconnect between increased education and labor market integration among Colombia's poorest youth. The study identifies a clear association between social class segregation and differential access to employment, accentuating the influential role of social connections in obtaining job opportunities. Conclusions: This research unveils the complexities surrounding poverty traps in Colombia, elucidating why improved education has not translated into the expected reduction of impoverished. It underscores the imperative need to take an in-depth look at the policy challenges facing the country. By addressing the barriers to labor market access for the most vulnerable, this study contributes significantly to the broader discourse on the intricate relationship between education and poverty reduction in Colombia. The findings are also relevant for other countries facing similar challenges and offer valuable insights for policymakers and researchers alike.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Economic and social development, Education, Youth employment, Social inequality

## Resumo

No final do século XX, os economistas colombianos identificaram uma forte ligação entre a educação e a redução da pobreza. No entanto, apesar de uma expansão significativa da cobertura educacional, os níveis de pobreza não diminuíram como previsto. Este problema estende-se para além da Colômbia e levou ao desenvolvimento de teorias económicas, centradas em fatores como o abandono escolar precoce, as imperfeições do mercado, o aumento da incerteza e os custos da educação, que contribuem para o enigma das armadilhas da pobreza. Métodos: Utilizando uma abordagem quantitativa, a investigação analisa a relação entre os resultados escolares, as oportunidades de emprego e o contexto socioeconómico

da população mais jovem. Além disso, explora os fatores de desigualdade no mercado de trabalho, com especial destaque para as divisões de classe e o papel das redes sociais na definição do acesso ao emprego. Resultados: Os resultados preliminares evidenciam uma desconexão persistente entre o aumento da educação e a integração no mercado de trabalho dos jovens mais pobres da Colômbia. O estudo identifica uma associação clara entre a segregação da classe social e o acesso diferenciado ao emprego, acentuando o papel influente das ligações sociais na obtenção de oportunidades de emprego. Conclusões: Esta pesquisa revela as complexidades que envolvem as armadilhas da pobreza na Colômbia, elucidando porque a melhoria da educação não se traduziu na redução esperada da pobreza. Sublinha a necessidade imperativa de analisar em profundidade os desafios políticos que o país enfrenta. Ao abordar as barreiras ao acesso ao mercado de trabalho para os mais vulneráveis, este estudo contribui significativamente para o discurso mais alargado sobre a intrincada relação entre a educação e a redução da pobreza na Colômbia. As conclusões também são relevantes para outros países que enfrentam desafios semelhantes e oferecem informações valiosas tanto para os decisores políticos como para os investigadores.

**Palavras-chave:** Pobreza, Desenvolvimento social e económico, Educação, Emprego dos jovens, Desigualdade social

## **Introduction**

At the end of the 20th century, Colombian economists showed how poverty decreased while the poorest had access to education (Ocampo 2002; Behrman et al. 2001). Once a high number of families overcame the cycle of poverty through poverty, it was expected that the next generation would most likely double their movement up in the socioeconomic hierarchy (Behrman et al. 2001). However, despite the education coverage increased by 89% and the proportion of students

below the poverty line increased by 59% in recent decades (MinEducación, 2016), more education didn't lead to a reduction in poverty (World Bank, 2017).

Colombia has not been the only country to witness this phenomenon, therefore there are different economic theories that have studied it. On one hand, the theoretical school of experimental development economics argues that the reduction of poverty and the increase in education are disparate because the poorest drop out of educational systems earlier than others (Duflo, 2001; Nguyen, 2008; Haushofer and Shapiro, 2016; Balboni. et al., 2021). On the other hand, macroeconomic schools argue that it is due to imperfect markets, increased uncertainty, and high costs of education (dcGalor and Zeira, 1993; Galor and Tsiddon, 1997; Ceroni, 2001; Zhang, 2014; Barham. et al., 1995; Becker, 1981). Despite the differences between each one of the theoretical perspectives, all of them try to explain how the poverty trap is built based on the inequality of opportunities.

Variables studied by previous theories are relevant for understanding the complexity of the relationship between education and poverty reduction. However, there may have limitations to explaining the phenomenon in Colombia, a country in which 1) school dropout has decreased in parallel with the access of the poorest to education (MinEducación, 2022), 2) public policies have reduced the investment costs in schooling (National Planning Department, 2018) and 3) people living impoverished have built safety nets over time (Martucelli, 2006).

In this sense, the existing gaps in the literature lead me to answer the question of why people in Colombia have not been able to overcome poverty even though they are increasingly more educated. Throughout this paper, I will argue that the poverty trap is a result of the fact that the children of the poorest, despite having been integrated into the educational system, have not effectively integrated into the work system.

In the first part of the study, I will explore the relationship between the educational level, employment, and socioeconomic origin of the youngest in a quantitative approach. In the second part, I will discuss the results to introduce a reflection on the possible reasons why there is inequality in the access to labor markets in Colombia. Specifically, I will focus on the relationship between social class segregation, the power of social connections, and access to the labor market. This will allow me to build the shape of the poverty trap in Colombia, which, I hope, can open the discussion on the challenges that public policy faces in the country.

## **1. Literature review**

The question of the relationship between education and poverty has been answered through the study of the *poverty trap*, a term introduced during the 1980s by Dasgupta and Ray (1986). The concept refers to a phenomenon in which moving up in the socioeconomic scale depends on how much initial capital people have. In their study, Dasgupta and Ray. (1986) mention that the initial investment of the capital of the poorest (in the form of money, calories, work, human capacity, etc.) evidences a brief initial positive development, with which one would expect they will overcome poverty, but over time they are dragged back to their initial position.

There are three theoretical perspectives that seek to explain this phenomenon and its relationship with education: one in a micro approach and two in a macro approach. On the one hand, experimental development economics theorists mention that the reason why the poverty trap exists is schooling dropouts. The initial hypothesis was built by Esther Duflo (2001) who found that the distance from home and educational institutions had an impact on the proportion of students who remained within the educational system.

Although this hypothesis was predominant during the first decade of the 21st century, current research focuses on microstructural factors and the agency of

individuals. For this reason, most of the studies argue that there is no motivation to keep children in the educational system given the low positive perception that communities have about the possible return on education investment (Nguyen, 2008; Haushofer and Shapiro, 2016). This happens according to Balboni, et al. (2021) because of an information gap.

On the other hand, macro theories seek to understand imperfect markets, income, and consumption. These are divided into two. Firstly, authors such as de Galor and Zeira (1993), Galor and Tsiddon (1997), and Berti Ceroni (2001) mention that the origin of the problem lies in household consumption choices and investment behaviors. According to them, the impact generated by economic shocks leads to increased consumption by the families of the poorest, who consequently reduce educational expenses (Ceroni, 2001). The authors of this perspective consider that only large amounts of investment by the government could considerably improve the initial capital of the poorest so that they do not succumb to consumption (Galor and Tsiddon, 1997).

Secondly, the perspective that focuses on debt argues that the investment that the poor makes in education is higher than the benefits they receive from it (Zhang, 2014; Barham et al., 1995; Becker, 1981). Empirical studies within this framework show that the poorest must assume additional costs such as debts (Zhang, 2014). At the same time, the investment can be counterproductive to improve intergenerational social mobility since the debt could pass to the children (Barham et al., 1995). Others acknowledge that the poorest face barriers accessing to social safety nets that allow them to have financial support in external crises (Becker, 1981), an aspect that is directly related to the first macroeconomic perspective.

Despite the virtues of these arguments, it is possible to observe how some of the variables proposed might not apply to the Colombian context, or at least may not be conditions that by themselves can be sufficient to explain the phenomenon in the

country. Policies in Colombia have emphasized differentiated protection systems for the poorest, especially in two areas: increasing the initial productive capital of families and access to education for the younger generations (National Planning Department, 2018). Under this system, public policy has created special programs that seek to reduce the cost of investment for the poorest. This means that those who usually get into debt or assume the cost of education (tuition, transportation, food, etc.) are not the ones below the poverty line, but those who are above it.

On the other hand, safety networks may be stronger due to the sense of community that culturally characterizes Latin American societies. The sociologist Danilo Martuccelli (2006), who leads the sociological perspective of individuation in Latin America, attributes the social order not to the State, but to the quality of the ties that individuals build. It is believed that during crises, the poorest are those who have the most safety nets, since community cooperation has allowed them to respond to external shocks such as conflict and economic crises. For this reason, the answer may not lie in the strength of the links, but in their diversification, an aspect that I will study in the second part of this paper.

The existing gaps observed in the literature open the possibility of thinking about a fourth alternative that can establish a dialogue with them. Especially, opening the discussion on a factor that has a direct relationship with the micro and macrostructural factors, and arises in the middle of them: access to work.

Effective access to work can be one of the most important conditions for reducing poverty, especially in developing countries because it is the primary source of the income that people receive. Some studies written by the Nobel Prize winner in economics Abhijit Banerjee (2006) suggest that it is through work that the poorest can invest in their future. In other words, work is a tool to reduce the saving gap, which in turn will allow the family to obtain initial capital to get out of the cycle of poverty. Although in quantitative terms effective access to work is key, it is also a



tool to integrate effectively the poorest into protection and care systems, which also increases well-being and self-esteem feeling (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Although work has been seen as an additional variable for poverty reduction, in this paper it is presented as a fundamental and necessary one, meaning that if there is education, but not an effective integration into the work system, poverty will not see significant changes.

## 2. Methodology

I will use descriptive statistics to explore the condition of people who are within the educational poverty trap. The dependent variable of this research is poverty, while the independent variable is effective access to employment. Since the intermediate variable is the educational level, I will study the proportion of those who graduated during the last few years, the performance of their access to formal work, and their socioeconomic origin. My hypothesis would be tested in the case that those who are positioned in the lowest socioeconomic hierarchy, have fewer employment access over time after graduation compared to the others.

The data that I will use for the analysis is available in the Labor Observatory for Education (OLE) of the Colombian Ministry of Labor<sup>2</sup>. As a cross-sectional indicator, I will use the proportion of graduates, since this is the stage in which investment in education is expected to translate into higher income. To measure access to formal employment, I am going to use the contribution to the pension system as an indicator, since is a procedure that by legal obligation can only be done when people are employed. Finally, due to limitations in the information disclosed by the Observatory, I will use the type of university (public or private) as a proxy-variable, to measure the socioeconomic origin, considering that in Colombia the poorest usually go to public universities. This indicator may be weak as an explanatory one

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<sup>2</sup> To access the data: <https://ole.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/noticias/Noticia/411288:Conozca-los-indicadores-laborales-y-academicos-2020>

because the division between private and public in Colombia is increasingly in a gray zone.

Therefore, to strengthen my argument, in addition to the data that I already have, I am going to combine some variables with the data from the 2017 census, using social stratification<sup>3</sup> as an indicator to understand poverty performance. In this way, I will focus on those who are in levels 0, 1, 2 (the poorest), and 3 (those who are about to overcome relative poverty). The idea is to see, by socioeconomic stratification, how is the percentage of unemployed within one year of graduation. This means that I will also explore the relationship between access to education, unemployment, and socioeconomic stratification to later compare if these results vary from the first ones or not.

As a result of the analysis, in the discussion part, I propose to build a scheme that could show the shape of the education poverty trap in Colombia. According to the scheme, I will leave some reflections on the programs that public policy in the country has successfully created to reduce poverty, without effectively reducing inequality.

### **3. Results**

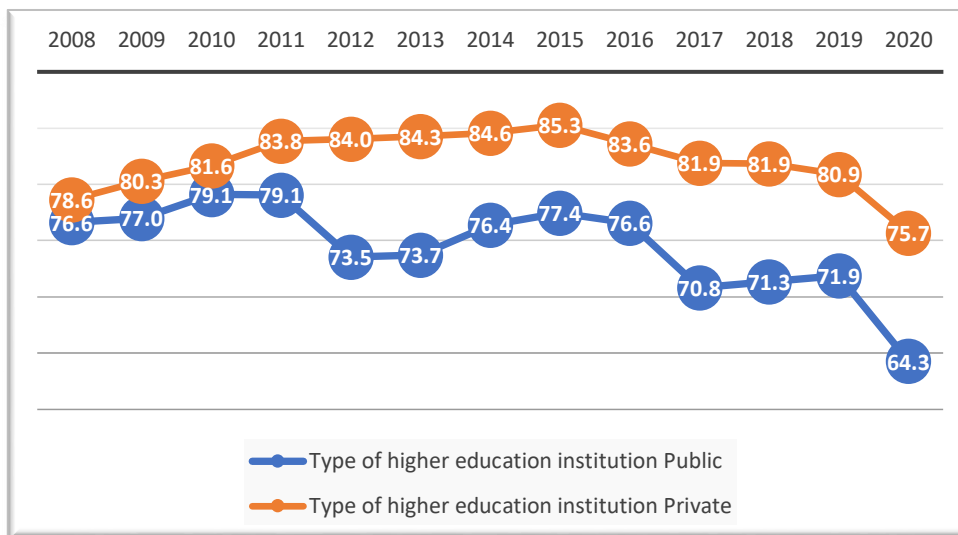
The results show that, in general, people who graduate from public institutions have a lower percentage of participation in the labor market than those who study at private universities. In the same way, it is observed that over the years, there is a phenomenon of decrease in the rate of access to formal work that is more unstable for students from public institutions than for those from private. This indicates that people below the poverty line have not only less participation in the labor market

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<sup>3</sup> This indicator is the basis for multidimensional poverty metrics. It is used to characterize the population according to the services available to them (electricity, gas, health, internet, neighborhood) and the income they receive (DANE, 2013).

after graduation but have also face a reduction in the possibilities to participate over the years.

Figure 1. Access to employment one year after graduation by type of institution



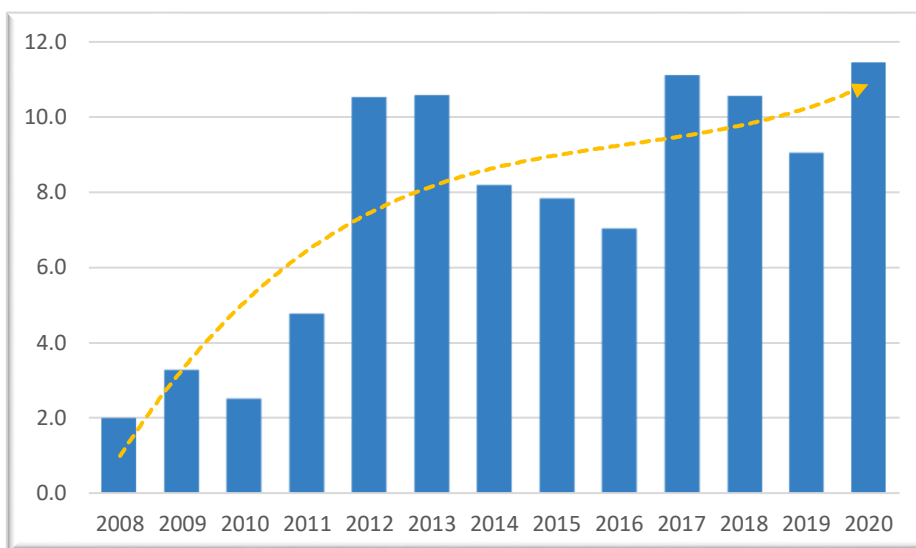
Source: calculations based on Labor Observatory for Education (OLE) dataset

The first graph shows a difference between graduates from public and private universities; however, it does not allow us to visualize in greater detail the performance of these gaps over time, in this sense, there is a question about the tendency lines.

The labor market participation gaps between graduates from public and private universities are crossed by a polynomial tendency line, which indicates that it is a phenomenon that fluctuates in three specific periods but tends to expand exponentially. For 2014, the gap is three times higher than the one that existed in 2008, and for 2020 the gap increased six times the value of 2008. Likewise, the results show a trend in the increase in inequalities in connection to formal employment since the fluctuation develops up and not down. Although more

evidence is needed to be able to draw more specific conclusions, it could be expected that the tendency line will be projected in the same way for the next years.

Figure 2. Tendency line within the gap between public and private graduates' access to work (one year after the graduation)



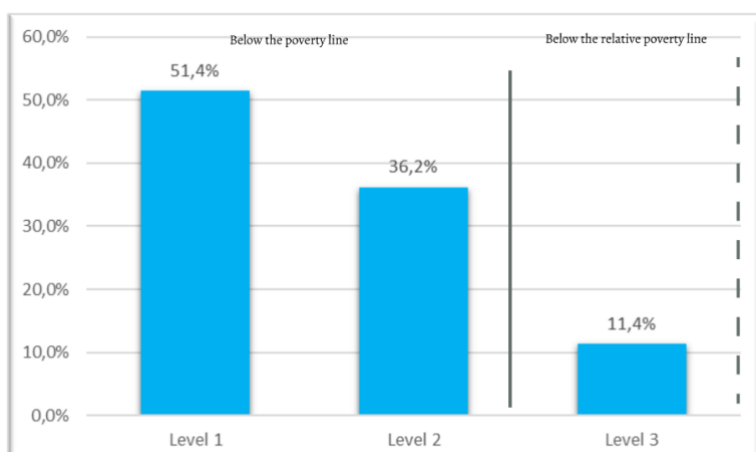
Source: calculations based on the dataset of the Labor Observatory for Education (OLE)

On the other hand, at a disaggregated level, participation in the labor market differs depending on the type of institution that people attend, even among those who attend public institutions. The more down people are in the social pyramid, the less likely they are to be employed with a university degree. This is an interesting finding because in theory it would be expected that once the poorest move up the educational ladder, the probability of being employed will simultaneously increase and, therefore, they will obtain a better salary.

However, the data for Colombia show the opposite, especially for those who are within the first level of social stratification (ie, the poorest of the poorest). For this population, those who graduate with a single-year degree have a higher rate of participation in the labor market than those who earn a university degree. These data

show that access to the labor market is a phenomenon that is not experienced in the same way for all those below the poverty line.

Figure 3. Employment rate after the first year of graduation of those who studied in non-university higher education institutions according to socioeconomic stratification.



Source: calculated based on the Labor Observatory for Education (OLE) dataset in correlation with the data from the Integrated Household Survey (DANE-GEIH)

Even so, one could argue that regardless of the type of higher education institution people attend, the fact that they enter the labor market means that they will receive a better salary than those who do not. In this sense, the burden in the household should be alleviated. However, this may not be the case for people below the poverty line because their work does not differ much from what their ancestors (parents, grandparents, etc.) did.

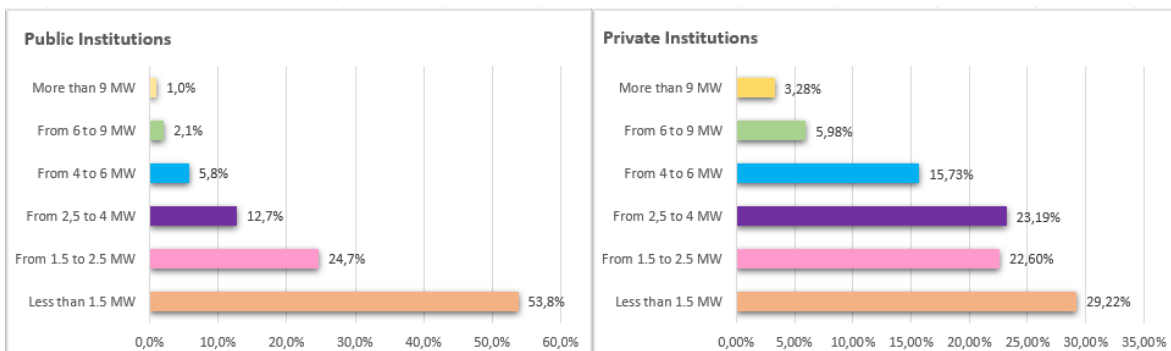
Degrees offered by one-year institutions boil down to blue-collar jobs, such as jobs that assist those with a university degree. According to the information provided by the report of the largest educational institution in this sector (National Learning Service - SENA), most of the titles are named auxiliary or assistant in various sectors: logistics, commerce, agricultural industry, and customer service, among others. Although all of these are very famous, the program to which most young

people subscribed in 2019 was Advanced Work at Heights, to be able to be construction workers in the tallest buildings (SENA, 2019).

These jobs continue to be jobs that do not exceed considerably the minimum wage but are considered formal jobs because they have a special hiring figure in the country that legally bands the counterparties to pay for health and life insurance. The discussion on this point is that contemporary young people are most likely doing the same jobs as their predecessors (their parents or their grandparents), but with higher qualifications and without a radical difference in the salary they receive.

This phenomenon can be seen when looking at the salary gaps between those who graduate from public and private institutions. The graphs strongly suggest that more than half of the graduates from public institutions receive a salary of less than 1.5 minimum wages, while the percentages for those who graduate from private universities are more spread out within the income ranges, even though both graphs have a pyramid shape. For example, almost half of those who graduate from private universities receive a salary higher than 2.5 minimum wage in their first year of graduation, while only 20% of those who graduate from public institutions receive the same salary within the first year of graduation. This reflects the income gap, but at the same time supports the argument that there may be a correlation between unequal income and the type of educational institution from which young people graduate.

Figure 4. Salary received by 2016 graduates who joined the labor market in 2017 disaggregated by type of institution

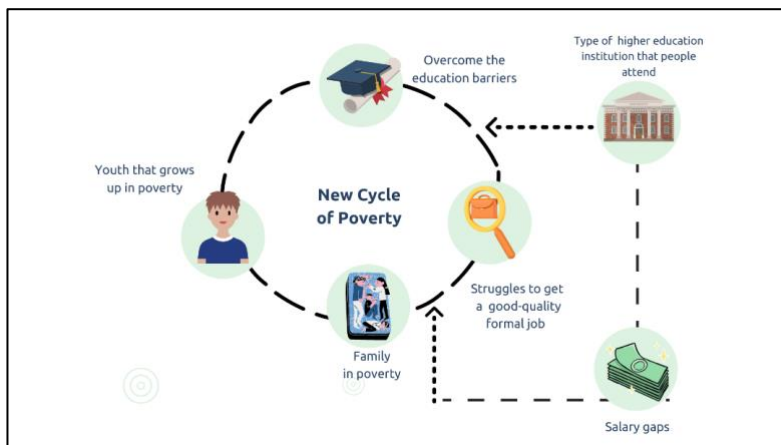


Source: calculated based on the Labor Observatory for Education (OLE) dataset

## Conclusion

The results presented above suggest not only that there is inequality in the participation of the poorest in the workforce, but also that probably there is an inequality in the types of jobs that the poorest have access to. These two results indicate that the poorest have not been able to effectively integrate into the work system, even though they have been more educated, which in turn suggests that the initial hypothesis proposed in this study may be suitable.

Figure 5. The qualitative shape of the poverty trap in Colombia



Source: created according to the findings

The graph of the poverty trap proposed in this work shows that the poorest in theory have the same initial educational conditions to enter the labor market. However, they are less likely to do it. This indicates that probably to change the shape of the trap, public policy could work on reducing the existing gaps in the explanatory variables, in other words, on the intermediate points of the graph presented above (type of institution assisted in relation with the salary gaps).

More specifically, the new question that this study invites us to answer is why the lower the socioeconomic level, people have the lower the probability of getting a job with a university degree. Although there may be several possible reasons why this phenomenon occurs, a first approximation would indicate that the variable of high social segregation in the country together with the diversification of social ties can make a difference when accessing job opportunities. Studies conducted by Aparicio-Baquen (2023), Castañeda et al. (2019), Salcedo (2008), among others, suggest that social mobility in Colombia is not determined by meritocracy but by families' connections and social networks. In Colombia, it seems that meritocracy is not the rule but the exception, so education as a strategy to access a better job may not be the best (or at least the only) strategy to overcome the trap of poverty.

On the other hand, this phenomenon can also be an indicator of the overeducation of the poorest. If it is analyzed from the educational offer and the demand of the future workforce, when it is only analyzed from the offer, the results generate biases that can lead to policies with weak results (Mora, 2008; Gómez et al., 2019). For this reason, it seems relevant that future policies focus on both supply and demand. For example, a program could be made especially aimed at those who attend the university and are part of levels 1, 2, and 3 of the social stratification. This is not a new proposal in Colombia. One-year institutions are designated by the government as job training entities. Its focus is on generating that connection between the youngest and their future employers (Hernández, 2010), while universities do not have these programs. In this sense, from public policy, these programs for



connecting to the labor market could be transferred to universities, to create a more equal ground in access to good quality work for future graduates.

Although the hypothesis could be tested in this study, there are some limitations. Firstly, due to the scarcity of official data, it was difficult to observe the population that had graduated and compare their career trajectory the following year. Usually, being able to follow the trajectory of the same individuals in different phases of their lives is very complicated due to the economic investment that must be made to collect periodic information. However, being able to correlate two datasets made this process easier, setting a precedent for future longitudinal studies to be carried out in the country.

Secondly, because the indicators existing in the datasets are general, there is less possibility of disaggregating the data. Therefore, it would be useful if for future research it could be disaggregated by socioeconomic origin or make a judicious collection that avoids third parties. Having this type of data more disaggregated would allow measuring, in the same way, with greater accuracy, correlations between the type of educational institution attended, the types of jobs, and the salary received, which was observed in this work, but wasn't the core variable for the paper. These recommendations related one to another would allow strengthening the hypothesis presented in this paper. In the same way, they open the possibility to specifically analyze each of the integral aspects of the educational poverty trap in Colombia.

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