

Research Article

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Education, ICT, and Youth Employability Strategies for Reducing Labor Informality in Guayaquil

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Abstract

Background/purpose. Youth labor informality remains a persistent socioeconomic challenge in Ecuador, particularly in urban areas such as Guayaquil. Many young people are pushed into informal employment due to limited access to quality education, lack of professional experience, and the urgent need for income. This situation limits their opportunities for long-term professional growth and social protection. The purpose of this study is to identify the root causes and consequences of youth labor informality and to propose educational and policy-based strategies that foster youth employability and support their transition into formal labor markets.

Materials/methods. This research applied a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 384 young individuals working in the informal sector across various urban zones of Guayaquil. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three human resources experts to gather professional insights into the causes and possible solutions to youth labor informality. The data were analyzed to identify patterns, correlations, and recurring socioeconomic factors that influence informal employment among youth.

Results. The findings show that 84% of surveyed youth work informally due to limited education, lack of experience, and financial necessity. Most respondents identified low wages, job instability, and lack of social security as key disadvantages. However, informal work was also seen as accessible and flexible. Interviews revealed the need for policy reforms, youth-targeted hiring incentives, and technical training programs. The study highlights a mismatch between educational preparation and labor market requirements.

Conclusion. Structural barriers, including insufficient education, limited job opportunities, and inadequate employment policies drive youth labor informality in Guayaquil. The study concludes that implementing integrated educational strategies, improving access to technical training, and enforcing youth-inclusive labor policies can significantly reduce informality rates and support a more equitable employment landscape for young Ecuadorians.

1. Introduction

The basic aspects of the quality of life of young people, in many cases, are remarkable. However, when they lack the necessary resources to survive, they often look for ways to earn a living day by day. Approximately 4 million young people are working informally in the country, often with limited education, and are frequently forced to live in rural areas with little to no control or monitoring in the labor market. Many are unemployed, and many more work in the informal economy. This means that they have no formal contracts or benefits (Almeida Tuquiñagui, 2023).

To improve this situation, it is necessary to change the employment structure for young people. Few strategies, such as offers in formal but complex jobs and human resources selection processes in many job platforms, tend to be the best option for young people, but experience is considered, and at a young age, getting work experience is very complicated (Santana et al., 2021; Vásquez Rodríguez, 2023).

There are researchers studying this problem from a global perspective, as well as examining its specific manifestations in Guayaquil (Guerrero et al., 2024; Villamar et al., 2024). The numbers show that the situation is worrisome. Many young people work informally, 58.4%, while 7.3% are unemployed (Andrade Quimís, 2023).

According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), this youth population of workers represents 25% of men and 29% of women, recognizing that both young men and women suffer from this social phenomenon, the figures are key indicators of the need for labor from that age, given the economic complications seen in social development (Luque et al., 2023).

Although previous research in Latin America has analyzed youth labor informality from a descriptive perspective, few studies have addressed employability strategies tailored to the specific socio-economic realities of Ecuadorian cities. The existing literature often highlights unemployment rates and structural causes but does not propose integrated approaches to reduce informality among young people. This gap justifies the present study, which focuses on Guayaquil as a case study to analyze both the causes of informality and the strategies that may strengthen youth employability.

The research aims to analyze the socioeconomic causes of youth labor informality in Guayaquil and its impact on formal employment opportunities among young people aged 15 to 29. The research question is: What are the main causes of youth labor informality in Guayaquil and how do they affect the opportunities for formal labor insertion?

The significance of this study lies in its dual contribution. Beyond diagnosing the structural causes of youth labor informality in Guayaquil, it emphasizes the design and implementation of employability strategies that can facilitate the transition from informal to formal work. By addressing both educational gaps and policy deficiencies, the research not only contributes to the academic debate but also provides actionable insights for decision-makers. This focus makes the study relevant for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners seeking sustainable solutions to youth employment challenges in Ecuador and other Latin American urban contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Context of Youth Informality

Globally, the rate of informality of young people between 15 and 24 years of age for 2023 is estimated to be around 26% of young people in informal jobs, one of the highest in recent years, which implies that the labor reality points to informal jobs without job insurance or security (Maza-Ávila, 2023). Likewise, many countries such as Guinea, Madagascar, Burkina, Chad, among others, are considered as countries with the highest rate of youth labor informality, with a statistic of 80% to

90%, their labor reality is far from improving, given the living conditions and the lack of regulation in these countries (Pastoriza, 2023).

2.2. Regional and Continental Trends

As it is analyzed with more specificity, it is compiled that, by continent, the labor reality presents many aspirations and challenges in the population of young people seeking their first job or are in informal jobs due to economic necessity, it is recognized that the diversity of factors influences this decision; these factors are generally cultural, economic and social. (Sanhueza, 2023; Sumba and Sanchez-Bayón, 2024). Upon entering the American continent, there is a statistic indicating that 48% of cases of labor informality among young people occurred in this region in 2023. This figure is considerably high and is estimated to be a challenge to be worked on for the countries of this continent in the long term (Armijos Orellana, 2023).

Youth labor informality has a high impact in countries such as Ecuador, Honduras, Paraguay, Bolivia and Nicaragua, where these countries have an average labor informality rate of 60% (Gasparini, 2023). There are explicit causes of this phenomenon in these Latin American countries, among them is the economic obligation, in which it is necessary to work in whatever is necessary to cover living expenses, in many cases, young people seek any paid job, even the minimum, to obtain an income that "helps" them to be able to buy food, pay debts, etc. (Cardona, 2023).

2.3. National and Local Dynamics (Ecuador and Guayaquil)

The rate of labor informality in the young population of Ecuador reached 62% in 2022, being one of the figures with the highest increase and one of the highest compared to other countries, generating a serious problem in the development of young Ecuadorians (Luque et al., 2023). Labor dynamics in Ecuador, including e-commerce (López & Andrade, 2020) and youth participation in the labor market, are not equitable or proportional, resulting in considerable unemployment among both young people and adults (Jaramillo Flores, 2023). On the other hand, laws such as the humanitarian 2020 changed the dynamics of employment (Vallejo-León et al., 2024).

Guayaquil is considered one of the largest cities in Ecuador. In this city, youth labor informality is predominantly found among young people under 18 years of age, who are engaged in the sale of candy, beverages, and stalls in supply stores (Mejía Chavez, 2023). The youth labor panorama is made up of informal enterprises, generally in bustling streets, lively markets and a lack of security, which also leads to a proliferation of criminal acts (Luque et al., 2023), all of which also goes hand in hand with the deterioration of the family economy in Ecuador (Cueva-Estrada et al., 2021).

In this city, the informality rate among young people was 65.2% in 2023. This figure is the highest in the city and represents a major challenge for the local government (Andrade, 2023). Labor informality increases in urban areas. Economic constraints, lack of formal opportunities, and inflexible labor regulations contribute to this phenomenon in Ecuador. Guayaquil faces a high labor demand, but the formal supply is often insufficient, which favors informal work (Arango, 2023).

There is a reason why many people work informally in Ecuador, emphasizing the city of Guayaquil, the reasons generally associated with the need and interest to work are key points, there are economic problems and lack of formal jobs as well, which makes people prefer to work informally until they find a stable job (Chasi Llumiguano, 2023). Complicated rules and paperwork also make it difficult to formalize jobs, especially for small businesses. In Guayaquil, there is a high demand for work, but not enough formal employment opportunities. Internal migration and a lack of formal education lead people to prefer informal jobs that offer more flexibility and faster pay (Orellana, 2022). In addition, Guayaquil has many small businesses and services, which makes it easier to work informally. People often view informality as the best option when formal jobs are scarce (Célleri, 2023).

In Guayaquil, numerous businesses, including small stores and services, operate without official registration. This makes it easy to perform tasks without adhering to all the rules. Some experts suggest that people engage in this behavior because there are not enough traditional jobs available (Moscoso, 2023). It is essential for young people in Guayaquil to recognize and understand why people take on informal jobs. By understanding this, we can better assist them in overcoming the challenges they face in finding regular employment. Many studies show that by understanding this, we can make programs and rules that better fit what they really need (Sanchez, 2023).

According to Avila Muñoz (2023), young people in Guayaquil find work in a particular way, and it is essential to recognize that they are seeking ways to enhance their job opportunities, even if it is incremental. Several studies affirm that understanding this need in young informal workers can help establish programs and policies that benefit them more. It is crucial to understand this to find solutions that help everyone. However, some believe that talking too much about informality detracts from the image of young people who work informally. It is essential to share all the stories, including success stories, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation (Rosero, 2023).

Some young people choose to work informally because they want to have more control over their work. The complex situation to which young people are subjected after high school forces them to make decisions that, in many cases, are against their will, students are projected with a mentality of a fair and paid job with the benefits of the law, not an exploitative job with problems of insecurity or labor deficiencies (Chávez, 2023).

2.4. Employment Strategies and Youth Employability

Beyond the statistical evidence on youth informality, several studies have emphasized the importance of designing employment strategies that strengthen young people's transition into formal labor markets. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) highlights that targeted technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs can significantly improve employability outcomes when aligned with market demands. Similarly, Kluve et al. (2019), through a meta-analysis of active labor market programs in developing countries, demonstrate that interventions combining skills training with job-search assistance yield the highest impact for youth. In Latin America, Fawcett (2002) point out that wage subsidies and hiring incentives for firms employing young workers reduce barriers to entry into formal employment. Another strand of research emphasizes the role of partnerships between educational institutions and private companies. According to McKenzie (2017), structured internships and apprenticeship schemes improve the likelihood of securing permanent formal employment. Finally, evidence from emerging economies suggests that strategies should not only focus on technical training but also on the development of soft skills such as teamwork, adaptability, and digital literacy, which are increasingly valued by employers (World Bank, 2021).

2.5. Identified Gaps

Although international studies highlight the effectiveness of TVET, hiring incentives, and education–industry collaboration, little research has examined how these approaches can be adapted to the specific socio-economic realities of Ecuadorian cities. Much of the literature remains descriptive of informality rates, without exploring concrete mechanisms to reduce them. This gap highlights the importance of the present study, which not only examines the causes of youth informality but also proposes educational and policy-based strategies to enhance employability and promote formal job opportunities in Guayaquil.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously. The survey provided statistical evidence of the prevalence, causes, and consequences of youth labor informality, while the semi-structured interviews offered deeper insights from human resource experts. Both data sets were analyzed independently and then merged during interpretation, allowing for triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The following variables are identified:

Dependent variable: Employment status (formal/informal).

Independent variables: Educational level, age, gender, residence, work experience.

3.2. Population and Sample

The surveys were randomly distributed in both urban and rural areas, covering a range of different socioeconomic levels and youth age groups, from 15 to 29 years old. The survey questions addressed topics such as educational level, income, labor participation and key factors of labor informality.

The population consists of 707,090 people between the ages of 15 and 29 (INEC, 2022). Applying the finite sample size formula, with a 95% confidence level, yields a minimum of 384 individuals to survey. A continuación, en la tabla 1 se muestra como estuvo compuesta la muestra:

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants.

Variable	Categories	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male / Female	58 / 42
Age group	15–19 / 20–24 / 25–29	20 / 48 / 32
Education level	Primary / Secondary / Higher education	35 / 33 / 32
Residence area	Center / North / South / Southwest	34 / 33 / 20 / 13

On the other hand, semi-structured interviews with 5 questions were conducted with 3 experts in the labor field and human resources from leading companies in the city, to learn from their perspective the causes and consequences of labor informality, as well as certain possible solutions and public policy proposals.

3.3. Instruments

The quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed by the research team based on previous literature on youth employability and informality. The instrument consisted of 20 items grouped into three dimensions: (a) socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education level, residence), (b) employment status and experiences (formal/informal trajectory, income, job stability), and (c) perceptions of informality and strategies for employability. Items related to perceptions were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Content validity was ensured through expert review by three specialists in labor economics and education. Reliability analysis indicated good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the surveys were processed using SPSS (version 29). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were computed to summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of participants and to describe patterns of youth labor informality in Guayaquil. This analysis provided an overview of the distribution of variables such as age, gender, education level, type of employment, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of informal work.

For the qualitative dimension, data from the semi-structured interviews with three human resource experts were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. This process involved six steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming them, and producing the report. This method was chosen to identify recurring patterns and to complement the descriptive findings from the survey.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Although this study did not require formal approval from an ethics committee, it was carried out in accordance with recognized ethical principles for research involving human participants. All respondents were informed about the study's objectives and voluntarily agreed to participate before completing the survey or interview. Participation was anonymous, confidentiality was guaranteed, and the data collected were used solely for academic purposes. These measures ensured that the rights and well-being of participants were respected throughout the research process.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Findings

In the results obtained from surveys conducted among the youth population of the city of Guayaquil, a total of 437 people participated, which led to the main question: Have you worked, or do you work, in the informal sector? We obtained responses from 384 people who responded with a 'yes' and 51 people who responded with a 'no', proceeding to continue with the youth population of interest.

In the surveys, 58% of the population was male and 42% was female. The age distribution of the youth population is as follows: 20% are between 15 and 19 years old, 47% are between 20 and 24 years old, and 31% are between 25 and 29 years old. The sector of residence of each participant was known: 33.9% live in the center of Guayaquil, 32.8% live in the north, 19.5% are from the south, and 13.8% live in the southwest (suburbs).

According to monthly income, 13.5% earn less than \$200, 19.8% earn between \$201 and \$300, 22.7% earn between \$301 and \$400, 28.1% earn between \$401 and \$500, and 15.9% earn more than \$501. 55% of participants work in the informal sector, and 45% of workers are employed in the formal sector but are not affiliated with the Social Security Institute, IESS. This means that they do not have access to social security benefits, including health insurance and retirement benefits.

On the other hand, information is obtained on the time spent in informal work. Most workers, between 1 and 2 years, indicate a high turnover rate. In contrast, 27% work between 3 and 5 years, and 11% work more than 5 years, reflecting the difficulty of leaving this informal sector. This is shown in Figure 1.

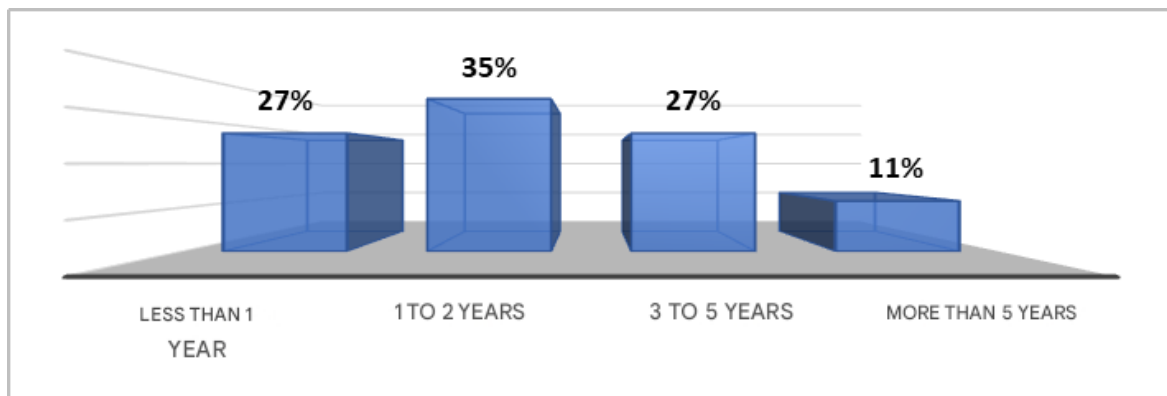


Figure1. Time in Your Informal Job (Source: Own Elaboration)

It is also known that the main advantage of informal work is that you are not required to have so much experience (36%), 27% have flexible hours, 27% say that it makes it easier to get a job, 9% have greater autonomy and a smaller percentage (1%) say that they do not deduct (IEES), generate a higher income and earn more than the basic salary. To find a job in the formal sector, the strategy being applied is: 36% of the respondents send resumes constantly, 24% decide to study short courses, 24% prepare and continue their studies, 14% are not interested in a formal job and 1% decide to attend job fairs and lever income.

It is mentioned that the main disadvantages are the lack of affiliation to the IEES, low salary and unstable work, because they have a negative impact on the quality of life of informal workers and their families, while a lower percentage indicate that low self-esteem and not being able to plan long-term debts are a less relevant factor, as shown in Figure 2:

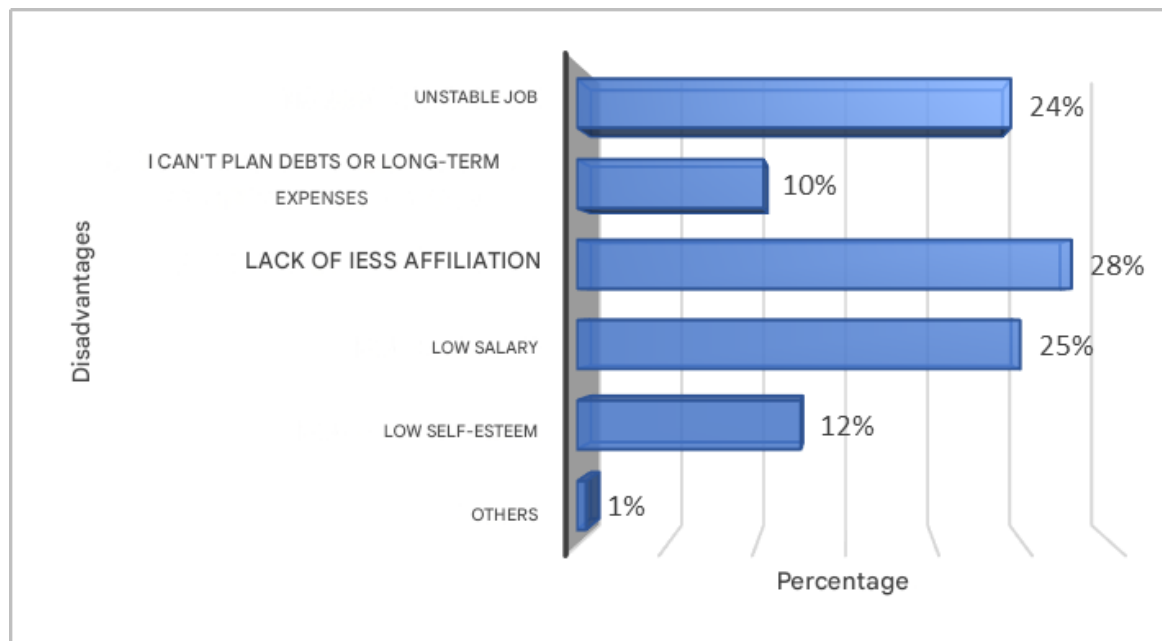


Figure 2. The Main Disadvantage of Working in an Informal Manner (Source: Own Elaboration)

In Figure 3, respondents express their desire to obtain formal employment, mainly motivated by improving their economic income and accessing benefits such as IEES affiliation. In addition, the prospect of retirement and increased self-esteem also play a fundamental role in obtaining a formal job.

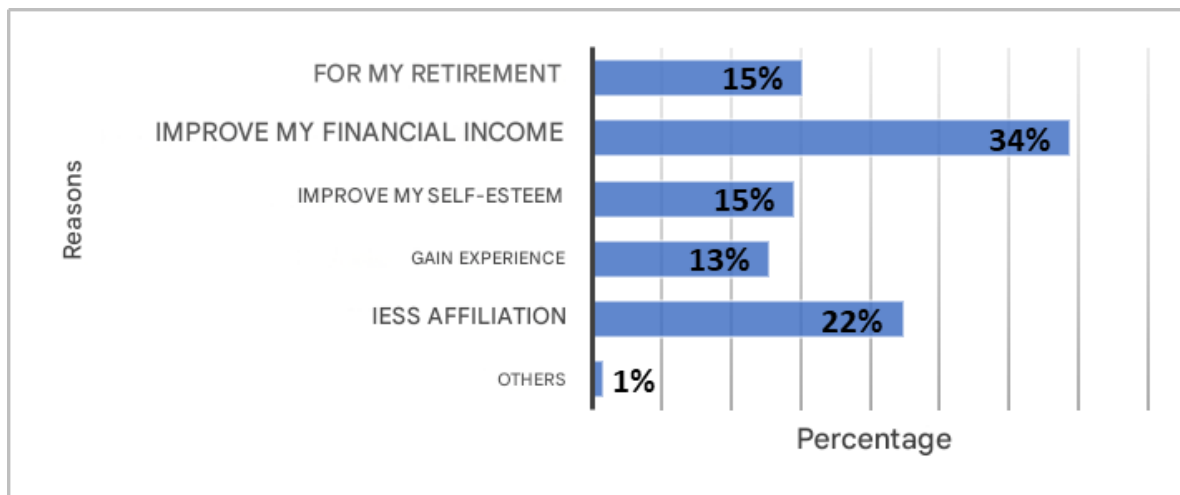


Figure 3. Key Factors for Obtaining a Formal Job (Source: Own Elaboration)

Of the respondents who are in the informal sector, they report various tasks as shown in Figure 4:

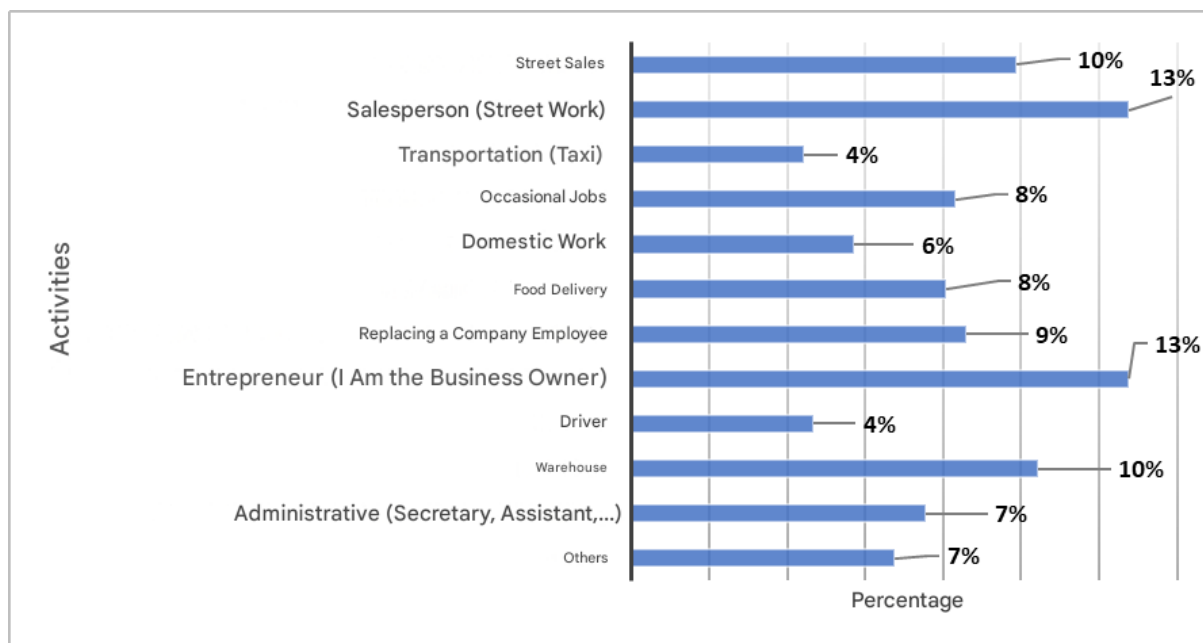


Figure 4. Task Performed in the Informal Sector (Source: Own Elaboration)

A broad overview of the causes that, according to the population of Guayaquil, affect the lack of formal employment for young people is presented. Lack of incentives for hiring with 26%, high labor costs 14%, insecurity 17%, poverty 25% and corruption 15% are the main factors that hinder access to the formal labor market for this segment of the youth population.

Figure 5 shows that the economy in the city of Guayaquil is dominated by the service and commercial sectors, which employ the largest number of workers. Although the agriculture, manufacturing and construction sectors also play significant roles in the local economy, they reflect a low percentage compared to the other sectors mentioned, which is the largest labor force.

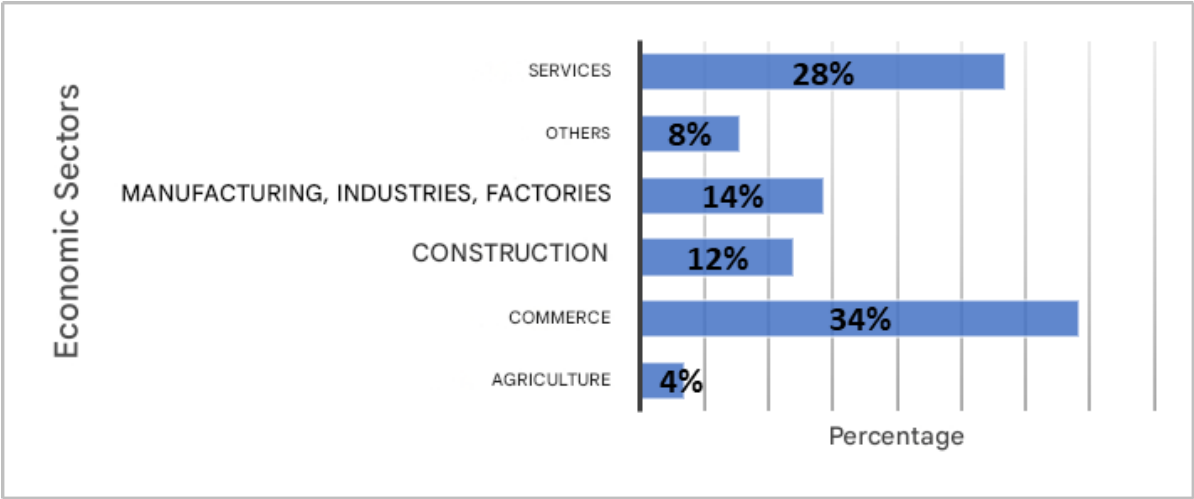


Figure 5. Sector in Which It Operates (Source: Own Elaboration)

Useful information is provided on the distribution of respondents' previous jobs, where it is mentioned that their previous job was an informal job (58%), a formal job (17%), and their first job (25%).

In the surveys conducted, the difficulties in obtaining a formal job in the labor market are evident, where 39% indicate the lack of a referral who recommends them. Followed by 34% for lack of work experience and 25% for lack of academic training. It is worth noting that respondents placed other difficulties, such as lack of programs, job discrimination, competition, and leverage, with a percentage of 2%.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

The interview was conducted with three professional experts on the subject. Through the interview, the opinions of the interviewees were known in depth. The first expert, Manuel C., is the Financial Leader of the company Santa Priscila. Our second expert, Fiorella Z., is a Human Talent and Culture Specialist at the company Contecon Guayaquil. The third expert, Sofía M., is a Personnel Selection Assistant at Dole. This is show in Table 2 – 6:

Table 2. Policies or Programs What Help Reduce Labor Informality.

What policies or programs do you consider could help reduce labor informality among youth and promote the creation of formal jobs?	
Expert 1	In terms of policies and programs, companies or entrepreneurs can be encouraged to implement tax credits for hiring young people; however, the important thing is to have a long-term policy or program. What does it mean? I hired a young person between 18 and 19 years old, and he has worked with me for two or three years. Thus, in the matter of the work being formal and giving me a tax credit to the company as an incentive.
Expert 2	I would consider it very important to have a policy that allows you to do your internships. When it is your first job, you should also be allowed to fulfill this requirement not only as a temporary contract or internship contract, but as a formal contract as well. In Ecuador, nowadays, what is really done is an internship contract or a temporary contract that lasts 6 months, which, when placed on the

resume, would not be considered as the relevant time to have worked or to have had formal experience.

Expert 3 Personally, I would implement a policy of prohibition of youth work on the streets, because many times these young people start working before they are 18 years old, because they cannot pay their expenses, which makes them prefer to work in an informal way, and this makes them not prepare themselves academically. It is possible to develop skills, competencies, and technical knowledge that focus on enhancing soft skills, leadership, teamwork, and communication, enabling individuals to excel with great talents.

Analysis: Through the interview with the 3 experts, it was possible to know that the policies or programs are very important. If ever one of the policies addressed on the prohibition of informal work in the streets is important, because if that is the case, young people are forced to prepare themselves academically and not to be conformists, if these policies are implemented in the right way, great results can be achieved that allow in some way or another to reduce the rate of informal work.

Table 3. Role of Education and Technical Training

What role does education and technical training play in reducing labor informality among youth?

Expert 1 The fundamental role of education is to look for a place where there is not only teaching, but also quality teaching. In our environment, there are some institutions where teaching may occur, but it lacks quality. And what we are looking for as a company is to look for innovation. Where does innovation come from? From teaching coupled with quality. Many young people come, perhaps because of scarce resources, or because of low-quality schools or technological schools, where the content of the subjects or what they learn is minimal.

Expert 2 Education and technical training are very important in reducing informality, because it allows young people to train and specialize in more areas. Technical training is a crucial aspect, as it enables young people to develop practical and technical skills. Training in courses is essential for young people to learn about a more specific area and thus stand out in terms of job opportunities.

Expert 3 Education and technical training play an important role, since companies are modernizing, and academic preparation does not ensure a job for life, since young people must adapt and implement new challenges, however, many young people do not leave their comfort zone and this makes other people stand out to the bosses of companies, as they have the plus that leaders are looking for.

Analysis: The role played by education and technical training is important, since according to the experts, young people should not only be satisfied with what they have studied in the classroom, but on the contrary, they should have a technical training that allows them to explore practical skills, which favors engineering students, medical care that allows them to explore beyond their knowledge.

Table 4. The Biggest Challenges Young People

What are the biggest challenges young people face when trying to access formal jobs in Guayaquil?	
Expert 1	One of the biggest challenges facing young people is the lack of job opportunities. There are thousands of students entering universities and as thousands of students enter universities, so do thousands of graduates leave. When the labor supply is scarce, the best thing would be for the state to promote training programs for recent graduates.
Expert 2	I would say that the challenge faced today in securing a formal job is not only the experience and competence in one's own area of training, but also the ability to train others. Because throughout one's academic training, one is acquiring different skills. The fact of finding a formal job in Guayaquil is a significant challenge, and this is even more pronounced in terms of the experience that universities provide through internships, which can open doors to various opportunities.
Expert 3	The biggest challenge that young people face when looking for a job is that many students have graduated without experience, which makes them unable to secure a job due to a lack of experience. On the other hand, young people do not leave their comfort zone, and this makes them unable to enhance their profile, young people should study English, technology issues, new web technology tools. The strength of soft skills is important because it allows young people to stand out in their knowledge.
Analysis: The challenges young people face when entering a formal job are several, according to experts. The main reason, according to them, focuses on the lack of work experience. Today, most companies choose to hire people with experience, which can hinder students or young graduates seeking to position themselves in a company.	

Table 5. Collaboration of Business and Government

How can business and government work together to address labor informality and create employment opportunities for youth in the city?	
Expert 1	To incentivize the company, the government should offer a tax credit, as it does for the elderly or disabled individuals. For a certain number of employees, a tax credit could be provided, giving the company an incentive to hire people with little to no experience, which is what they are looking for.
Expert 2	I would consider that there are already plans in which the companies and the government join forces to face this case, however, employment opportunities for young people should be formalized a little more. Where multinationals or private or public companies do allow them, in this case, to settle for a certain period and fulfill a working day.
Expert 3	Companies and the government can align through social responsibility programs, strengthening and revolutionizing young people to meet the needs of companies

today. Above all, the government should encourage or require a higher percentage of youth staff, ideally 15%. The state should require that the company's request be a policy that young personnel, not just interns for 6 months, but as permanent staff, can develop their professional life from a young age.

Analysis: Analyzing the interview of the experts it is known that companies and governments can work in a very significant way, implementing a law that forces companies to hire young personnel in a fixed way, not only as an intern but on the contrary that the young person can work in a proper way and thus along the professional path this will perform in a correct way.

Table 6. Recommendation to Young People

What do you recommend for young people to help them secure a formal job?

Expert 1	As a recommendation to young people, we could say that many young people today believe they already want a position as a boss, supervisor, or manager, while the reality is that they lack knowledge of the labor market. It is necessary to adapt and be flexible to the constant changes that exist in the labor and economic world, as a recommendation addressing all these issues, is that young people first must look for their job opportunity in the company that opens the doors for them, no matter if it is a small, medium or large company.
Expert 2	The recommendation to young people so that they can get a job is that they should not lose hope, that opportunities come, that training is always important, not only the one obtained at university, but also the training that one will acquire to be able to establish oneself as a formal worker in search of a job. I believe that it is very important to also, in this case, demonstrate that limits are never impossible and that it is true that there will be days or months in which, well, you will not be able to do anything.
Expert 3	Personally, I recommend that young people identify company cultures and lean towards values and principles when seeking a formal job, as this makes their behavior more appropriate and allows them to feel motivated to give their best. New knowledge should be acquired because companies are always learning and evolving. Young people should also create a personal brand with the best profile that can be offered and should ultimately strengthen both technical and soft skills that can influence their professional development.

Analysis: Each expert indicates that in order for young people to get a formal job they must prepare themselves more every day, not only to be satisfied with what they have studied at the university, but on the contrary to specialize more in other areas that allow the young person to have an open mind so that the individual can explore his ideas.

4.3. Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into youth labor informality and employability strategies in Guayaquil, several limitations should be noted. First, the quantitative analysis was descriptive in nature, which was consistent with the study's objective of outlining socio-demographic profiles and identifying general patterns, but it did not aim to establish causal relationships. Second, the qualitative evidence was based on three expert interviews, which provided in-depth and context-

specific perspectives; however, broader samples could enrich future research. Third, the findings are contextualized in Guayaquil, and while they reflect dynamics common to other Latin American cities, comparative studies could enhance external validity. Recognizing these limitations highlights opportunities for future work, while the present results remain a valuable contribution to understanding the challenges of youth employment in Ecuador.

5. Discussion

The results of this study highlight three key findings: (a) youth labor informality in Guayaquil remains alarmingly high, affecting more than 60% of young people; (b) socio-economic factors such as limited education, lack of work experience, and economic necessity are the main drivers of informality; and (c) strategies proposed by experts emphasize the importance of technical training, employability skills, and supportive public policies to facilitate youth transition into formal employment.

Through the results obtained through the implemented research, it could be observed that informal work among young people is a worrying and important issue that encompasses young Ecuadorians, since according to (Fajardo-Ronquillo, 2020), it indicates that young people work in the informal sector, which is distinguished by having a maximum group of 100 employees in their business that do not have a Single Taxpayer Registry (RUC), because through this type of business young people seek a quick source of income due to the lack of job opportunities in the formal sector.

Regarding the work of Gagliardi (2022), it can be noted that informal work among young people occurs because many of them are unemployed, either due to a lack of vocational training or involvement in vulnerable situations, in which they adapt to what they find without pursuing higher aspirations. The lack of preparation continues to prevent young people from leaving their comfort zone, limiting them to formal job opportunities that do not allow for a career on the rise.

In relation to what is exposed by Maldonado-Guzmán & Pinzón-Castro (2023), it is evident that women are generally working in the informal sector. This is because, unlike the survey results, which indicate that the highest percentage of men work in the informal sector, different situations may be at play. As stated by Pérez and Hurtado (2019), Guayaquil is a city where informal work among young people is common. Most of them, upon finishing high school, seek any means of employment, often isolating themselves from opportunities to prepare for a professional field.

According to Angeles (Angeles, 2022), it can be verified that 42% of respondents indicate that most young people are restricted to work in a formal manner, because they do not have work experience, as well as the survey conducted in this work, which shows that 34% of young people work informally, because they do not have experience, since this is one of the main difficulties that do not allow them to obtain a formal job. The lack of work experience also prevents young people from developing specific job-related skills.

The findings of this study are consistent with evidence from other regions, which emphasize the structural challenges that young people face when entering the labor market. In Latin America, Da Silva Bichara, Robayo, and Delgado (2022) demonstrate that high youth unemployment and informality rates persist, and that existing research often remains inconclusive, focusing primarily on human capital, particularly in contexts such as Ecuador, where informality plays a central role. Complementing this, international studies highlight that employability is not only determined by education, but also by the way soft skills are perceived.

For example, Atilla-Bal and Okay-Somerville (2024) demonstrate that employers and young people, particularly women, diverge significantly in their assessments of transferable skills, personal attributes, and work-related values, underscoring the socially constructed nature of employability. Finally, evidence from South Africa indicates that active labor market policies integrating multiple

components can be effective. Khan et al. (2023) find that youth employability programs that combine job matching, soft skills training, and financial capability interventions significantly improve the chances of employment, particularly when tailored to participants' educational level and local conditions. Together, these studies support the need for comprehensive strategies that not only address structural barriers but also integrate training, soft skills development, and targeted policy interventions to reduce youth informality.

This study contributes uniquely to the literature by focusing on the urban dynamics of Guayaquil, where youth labor informality reaches levels higher than national and regional averages. Unlike prior research that has remained largely descriptive, our findings integrate survey data with expert perspectives, highlighting both the structural causes of informality and the potential of educational and ICT-based strategies to strengthen employability. By linking local realities with international evidence, the study offers not only a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Ecuadorian youth but also practical insights for designing policies and programs that can be adapted to other Latin American cities with similar socio-economic conditions.

6. Conclusion

Through the research process, it became clear that several causes and consequences affecting the youth population of Guayaquil include informal work due to a lack of professional preparation and work experience. Through the respective study it can be verified that the objectives have been met. It was possible to verify several dimensions associated with the article. One of the dimensions examined is businesses or jobs that do not have RUC. This type of business is aligned with workers who mostly do not have university studies, which makes them more accessible to young people without experience, however, labor exploitation is manifested in the same way, since young people are subject to work in exploitative work environments where their source of income is limited.

The economic and social causes and consequences of informality among the youth of Guayaquil are determined. Among the perceived social causes is the lack of investment in higher education, because at present the income quotes for students are limited in the public sector, while in the private sector the costs are high, which makes them prohibitive for young people. The lack of economic growth is another cause present, as the country's current situation leads many businesses to close their doors, leaving young people vulnerable to a lack of formal job opportunities. The lack of social protection is one of the social consequences, because it restricts access to social security, which makes them more vulnerable to being cut off from the benefits of the IESS.

Interviews with experts revealed several strategies that could be implemented. One of them is to create a law that allows each company to make mandatory hiring of 15% of young people, so that there is a wider gap in the possibilities of obtaining formal jobs. On the other hand, it is feasible to create non-profit academies that are associated with companies that provide the opportunity for young people to learn technical skills that focus on the use of office management, computer programming, and project management. Another strategy that can be implemented is to create agreements with universities that allow students to work and gain experience.

The research provided an in-depth understanding of the dimensions, causes, consequences and strategies that influence informal work among young people in Guayaquil. Informal labor is a problem that hinders economic growth, which must be eradicated through processes that allow young people to prepare and develop professionally for a better future.

7. Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that public institutions and private sector stakeholders collaborate to implement targeted policies aimed at reducing youth labor informality. These should include tax incentives for companies that formally hire young workers, the development

of short-term technical training programs aligned with current labor market demands, and partnerships between educational institutions and industries to facilitate internships and first-job opportunities. Furthermore, awareness campaigns highlighting the risks of informal employment and the benefits of formal work could empower youth to seek stable and secure job options. Strengthening soft skills and digital literacy should also be prioritized to enhance the employability of young people in emerging economic sectors.

Future research could extend this study by applying inferential and longitudinal approaches to capture causal relationships and the evolution of youth informality over time. Expanding the qualitative dimension to include perspectives from policymakers, educators, employers, and young people would provide a more comprehensive view of the challenges and strategies surrounding employability. Comparative studies across different cities and countries in Latin America would also enrich understanding of regional trends and enhance the generalizability of the findings. In addition, evaluating the effectiveness of specific employability strategies such as technical and vocational education programs, internships, or financial capability interventions through quasi experimental designs would generate valuable evidence for policy and practice.

Declarations

Author Contributions. Authors contributed equally to the current research. All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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