



# Why Is Youth Unemployment So Intractable in South Africa? A Synthesis of Evidence at the Micro-Level

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## Abstract

South Africa is faced with persistently high youth unemployment levels, despite significant investments into a variety of Active Labour Market Programmes across the government, private and civil society sectors. The intractable nature of the challenge called for a systematic synthesis of evidence to better understand what contributes to the issue, and inform policy and programmatic direction. We undertook a systematic and robust synthesis of existing evidence published between 1994 and 2018 concerning the factors that contribute to this complex problem. This enabled us to consider evidence that exists within disciplinary siloes but rarely brought to bear simultaneously on the issue, consider where the balance of evidence lies and what gaps remain in our understanding of the challenge, and point to the important role that evidence synthesis methods can play in informing planning. A key finding is that emphasis remains on supply-side features of the labour market, with little attention paid to the behaviour of employers, and that the gendered nature of the labour market is poorly understood in relation to youth. The lessons learned from the South African context may be important when considering other middle-income contexts with similar youth unemployment challenges.

**Keywords** Youth unemployment · Evidence synthesis · Active Labour Market Policies · Middle-income country · South Africa

## Introduction

Youth unemployment is an issue of global concern. A growing interest, both in policy and academic arenas, has resulted in a plethora of research about the factors that contribute to these challenges. However, youth unemployment is a complex issue,

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arising from a range of intersecting factors. Understanding these myriad drivers of youth unemployment is essential if we are to inform better policy-making. Yet scant research has sought to systematically synthesise the evidence that often continues to exist in disciplinary silos in order to inform solutions. This article addresses this gap in the literature.

Focusing on South Africa, a country with critically high levels of youth unemployment as well as a substantial body of rigorous evidence about the issue, this article presents the results of an evidence synthesis project, in which 256 journal articles and academic papers were reviewed to identify what factors contribute to youth unemployment in South Africa. Although the full study explored factors at both the micro- and macro-levels, this article focuses specifically on drivers of youth unemployment at the micro-level. We define micro-level factors as those operating at the level of the individual work-seeker and employer, and within households. This is as opposed to macro-level issues, which are those operating at the structural level including the labour market, the economic growth context and the policy framework of the country. Specifically, it seeks to overcome disciplinary siloes and brings together insights from a variety of disciplines.

The main argument presented in the article is that even if macro-level contexts were favourable to the employment of young people, there are a range of micro-level barriers to employment that continue to shape access to the labour market in ways that perpetuate existing inequalities. Any interventions seeking to address the challenge need to account for this complexity, which is often overlooked by economists and policymakers.

The article proceeds by providing a background to the challenge of youth unemployment in South Africa and then describes the methodology used in this study. The synthesis of the evidence highlights firstly that the majority of evidence is concerned with barriers that exist in the lives of young work-seekers, that is, on the supply side of the labour market equation. Relatively little evidence exists about employer attitudes and hiring behaviour. The evidence highlights nine key issues that continue to create barriers to employment for young people. We consider the evidence for each and provide recommendations arising from the synthesis.

## Background to Youth Unemployment in South Africa

There is broad consensus that youth unemployment in South Africa is critical, with latest figures confirming that half of all young people aged 15–34 years are unemployed by the broad definition<sup>1</sup> (Statistics South Africa 2019). This is not a new challenge in the country. The earliest estimates of youth unemployment originate from the 1996 National Census, conducted just after the country's transition to a new, democratically elected government, and reported that 53.2% of young people between the ages of 15 and 34<sup>2</sup> years were unemployed (Central Statistics Service 1996).

Since 2000, more reliable data has been available, indicating that unemployment began to drop across all of the youth age groups between 2004 and 2008, largely as a result of increases in absorption of young work-seekers supported by the economic

<sup>1</sup> The broad definition includes those who have given up looking for work.

<sup>2</sup> South Africa has a broad definition of youth, which influences how data on youth is reported.

recovery. However, since the global economic downturn of 2009, it returned to the levels of the early 2000s. Despite some economic recovery since 2009, youth employment rates have not recovered, and certainly for the youngest age cohort (15–29-year olds), the unemployment rate has worsened. This situation is partly explained by low absorption rates of young people into existing jobs and low job growth in general (Bernstein 2014; Kraak 2013; Lekena 2006; Burger and von Fintel 2009). It is also motivated by increases in labour market participation generally and specifically amongst young people (Branson and Wittenberg 2007; Burger and Woolard 2005; Makiwane 2009). Some have argued that this increase is due to an increased youth population in general (Makiwane 2009). Others have shown how changes in education and training policies pushed older youth out of the education system in the late 1990s and early 2000s effectively increasing labour market participation, and importantly amongst young people with low skill levels (Burger and von Fintel 2009; Burger et al. 2012; Burger et al. 2013; Burger and Von Fintel 2014). Today, youth unemployment rates continue to be affected by high levels of early school-leaving (Spaull 2015) and commensurate low access to post-secondary education (Branson et al. 2015) as is discussed in more detail below. The persistence of high youth unemployment rates is despite significant investments into Active Labour Market Programme (ALMP) to support youth employment. Such programmes include investments into reforming the post-secondary education system to expand access and throughput, investing in work-integrated learning programmes, a tax incentive to employers to encourage the employment of young people, various entrepreneurship grants and programmes, and extensive public employment programmes, all of which have high targets for reaching youth beneficiaries. This conundrum of high investment in ALMPs and no improvement in youth unemployment rates points to the need to synthesise evidence to better understand a complex challenge.

## Methodology

The study applied an evidence synthesis research design which involved searching, sorting and analysing the large body of existing literature on youth unemployment in South Africa. Evidence synthesis methodologies aim to systematically identify, synthesise and analyse *all* available evidence about a particular topic. The ethos underpinning these methodologies is that “a review of all the evidence available is always more reliable than a single piece of evidence” (Gray 2014: 135). They are thus intended to eliminate bias by developing rigorous and systematic approaches to searching for, screening and assessing available evidence. They are also useful in drawing together evidence from a range of disciplines to better answer a question.

Although evidence synthesis is typically used in research assessing interventions, we employed it in this study to ensure that the review of evidence was systematic and rigorous, going beyond the requirements of a literature review. We followed the same steps as a systematic review but also differentiate the method because we chose not to exclude studies on the basis of method used, did not interrogate the methods used to assess the quality of evidence, and sought to include studies not normally included in evidence synthesis studies such as unpublished literature, working from the assumption that these studies and documents can provide insight into features of the challenge and types of interventions needed, that may be overlooked if not included.

We limited the scope of the study by outcome, population, location, period and type of publication. Our *primary* outcomes of interest were youth employment and youth unemployment. Whilst we acknowledge the integral link between education and employment, we did not include searches of the South African literature pertaining to educational outcomes *only*. We also did not specifically focus on entrepreneurship in this study. The scope of the study was further limited to studies that pertained to youth residing in South Africa. We defined youth broadly according to the National Youth Policy (The Presidency 2015) as people between the ages of 15 and 34 years. We searched for studies published or circulated between 1994 and June 2018.<sup>3</sup>

We conducted searches of five international and one South African database—ProQuest, Science Direct, SAGE, Taylor and Francis, EBSCOHost and SA ePublications. All of these databases house journals that publish articles across a range of disciplines. The following search terms were used:

- Youth AND (unemploy\* OR employ\*) AND South Africa.
- Youth AND (unemploy\* OR employ\* OR work OR labo\*r) AND “South Africa”
- Youth AND (unemploy\* OR employ\* OR work OR labo\*r) AND (“South Africa” OR “southern Africa” OR “sub-Saharan Africa”)
- Youth AND (unemploy\* OR employ\* OR work OR labo\*r) AND Africa\*

The searches generated 10,926 academic articles. In addition, we identified 43 research organisations that conduct research on employment, youth employment or youth unemployment and searched their websites. One hundred and seventy publications were identified through this process. Furthermore, we contacted a number of experts working in the field of (youth) unemployment in South Africa, who have published regularly about the issue and asked whether they had any work currently in process or not yet in the public domain that they thought we should include. An additional 12 documents were subsequently added to the database. Table 1 summarises the number of articles included from the academic literature search.

Once these documents had been identified, we sorted through them on the basis of reading the abstract or introduction where abstracts were not available. We applied the abovementioned scope limitation criteria to discern whether the articles still fell within the scope of the study. Following this process, a total of 256 journal articles and other academic publications were reviewed to identify the drivers of youth unemployment.

The articles were analysed according to a typology, which determined whether the article presented evidence of micro-level factors, macro-level factors, supply-side factors or demand-side factors. Table 2 demonstrates the spread of articles after coding by the typology.

Articles could be coded to present evidence in more than one category. Table 2 and 3 demonstrate that evidence is heavily weighted to the supply-side and to micro-level factors. Typically demand-side evidence tends to be at the macro-level and supply-side

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that there were almost no articles identified from the 1990s, despite including these dates in the search.

**Table 1** Number of sources per search type

Type of search	Number of articles included
Academic databases	10,926
Search of research organisation websites	170
Emails to experts	12
TOTAL number of articles	11,108

evidence tends to be at the micro-level. Finally, a series of brief summaries that drew in the nuances of the articles was developed.

## Findings

Our analysis indicates that the bulk of the existing evidence on micro-level drivers of youth unemployment relates to the supply side of the labour market equation. Multiple studies consider the issues to do with young people themselves, including evidence about their skills and education levels, their aspirations and the effects of their households and communities on their labour market engagement. Our review shows that there is far less evidence in the South African body of research about the demand-side drivers of youth unemployment, including on employer behaviour and attitudes towards hiring young people. It is unclear why there is a lack of emphasis on demand-side factors generally, but particularly at the micro-level in the available literature in South Africa. Whilst Statistics South Africa does collect employer survey data, such data is not publically accessible. Furthermore, there seems to be a similar bias internationally in the literature on addressing unemployment as argued by McKenzie (2017). Although this study sought to synthesise evidence across the supply and demand side of the labour market, the limited evidence on the demand side leads to an overemphasis on supply-side challenges.

## Educational Attainment and Low Skill Levels

Young South Africans have significantly higher education levels than their parents did. However, this achievement has not resulted in better employment prospects for youth. Furthermore, although survey data analysis indicates that there is still a premium on the completion of high school education in the labour market, this is small compared with that on higher education (Pauw et al. 2006). Returns on investment in education really only accrue to an individual once they have a diploma or degree (Van der Berg and Van Broekhuizen 2012; van Broekhuizen and Van der Berg 2016). Young people with higher levels of education stand a better chance of finding employment, and of finding

**Table 2** Sources per macro/micro typology

Micro-level drivers	185
Macro-level drivers	75
TOTAL	260

**Table 3** Sources per supply-/demand-side typology

Supply-side	187
Demand-side	69
TOTAL	256

employment faster than their peers with lower levels of schooling (Bhorat and Mayet 2012; Burger and Von Fintel 2014; Mlatsheni and Ranchhod 2017). This is partly because the economy of South Africa has shifted to one in which higher levels of skills are increasingly in demand (Gastrow 2012; Reddy 2016). Consequently, the high levels of early school-leaving amongst a large proportion of young South Africans place them at a significant disadvantage in the labour market as they face longer spells of unemployment and a higher risk of becoming discouraged.

Levels of incomplete secondary education in the country remain very high: almost 50% of every grade 1 cohort exits the schooling system before reaching the final grade 12 (or matric) year (Spaull 2015). The trajectories to the labour market for those who do not complete matric are limited. These learners are less likely to be enrolled in other forms of education one or two years after dropout, compared with those who successfully complete matric (Branson et al. 2014). Whilst some policies are in place to allow those who leave school after grade 9 to continue their education through the technical and vocational stream, very few learners do so (Branson et al. 2015; Perold et al. 2012). They thus enter a labour market that demands higher levels of skills with very limited skills and no certificate that could “flag” to employers what their skill levels or competencies are.

Although there is limited research on what basic skills are required by which type of employers, there is evidence that basic literacy and numeracy are viewed as the minimal requirements for entry-level jobs. There is ample evidence to show that young people progress through the basic education system without gaining these skills, even when they do complete their schooling (Spaull 2015). Thus, whilst some young people do achieve higher levels of education, this does not necessarily mean they exit the schooling system with the skills required by the labour market.

In addition, given that the highest return on education investment accrues to those with higher education qualifications, there is a real challenge in the low rates of access to and completion of the post-school education system (Branson et al. 2015). These low access rates, as well as low throughput rates in the post-school sector, contribute to continued racial and class inequalities in youth unemployment.

Despite recent expansion in access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and to universities (Council for Higher Education 2016), only 8% of 15 to 24-year olds attend a university or college and even fewer graduate (Branson et al. 2015). This leaves the bulk of youth outside of the systems that have the best chance of changing their labour market prospects. Worst affected by all of this are African and Coloured youth from a low socio-economic background (Branson et al. 2015).

In addition, whilst TVET colleges offer an alternative pathway to gaining a qualification, the poor quality of teaching and learning at many of these colleges (Perold et al. 2012) interacts with the aspirations of young people (see below), also contributing to the lower participation rates in TVETs.

## Aspirations, Perception of Opportunity and Reservation Wages

A relatively small, but consistent body of qualitative and quantitative research has identified that large proportions of young South Africans have high aspirations for their futures, both in terms of educational attainment and possible careers. For instance, 2005 Cape Area Panel Study data demonstrated that 50% of young people aged 16 to 25 expected to achieve a degree or higher qualification (Bray et al. 2010). These aspirations were high across racial groups, though highest amongst African and lowest amongst Coloured youth.

Several qualitative studies conducted since the time of the country's transition to democracy reflect young people's understanding of the opportunities that should be available in the "new" South Africa (Bray et al. 2010; Henderson 1999; Ramphele 2002; Soudien 2007; Swartz 2008). These aspirations play out in particular ways in young people's engagement with the education system and in their transition to the labour market. For instance, the fact that African youth remain in high school until later ages than their Coloured peers, and that parents and young people seek out ways to access better—often English medium—schools, has been interpreted as an indication of the high value they attach to education as a pathway out of poverty (Bray et al. 2010; Babson 2014). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that young people's expectations for a degree, and for a professional career rather than a menial job, lead them to value university education over TVET education (Babson 2014; Odora and Naong 2014). Thus, TVET education has for some time now carried an associated stigma, which is in turn fuelled by the difficulties with the quality of teaching and learning at these institutions.

There has also been debate about whether young people's wage expectations (reservation wages) hinder their engagement with the labour market. Some survey data analyses seem to indicate that young people do have somewhat higher expectations of what they should earn than what would be realistic in the labour market (Rankin and Roberts 2011). However, others have questioned how people interpret survey questions about reservation wages and point at the potential for measurement error (Zoch 2014). Additional survey data analysis has indicated that youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds have, in fact, significantly lower reservation wages than their middle-class peers (Zoch 2015); that young people's expected wages are in line with national average wages for youth (Ingle and Mlatsheni 2016); that unemployed youth are willing to pursue lower-qualification learnerships to improve their employability (Wakelin-Theron 2015); and that they make extensive attempts to find work, without consideration of the wage. More recent qualitative data from employed and unemployed youth shows that young people are willing to accept wages below sectorally determined minimum wages because they realise that they need work experience. On balance, the evidence seems to refute the idea that young people have unrealistic wage expectations that would inhibit their willingness to search for or accept work.

However, the body of qualitative—and some of the quantitative—evidence shows that urban young people have career prospects that are often at odds with their own educational achievements. Young people typically indicate aspiring to professional and office-based jobs synonymous with socio-economic betterment, and with economic security and stability (Babson 2014; Cosser and du Toit 2002; Lekena 2006; Newman and De Lannoy 2014; Odora and Naong 2014; Papier 2009). This final question is partly explained by a broader challenge that many young people face—that of a lack of information.

## Lack of Information

The information paucity that young people face begins at school where there is limited career guidance. Career guidance forms part of the Life Orientation subject of the high school curriculum. However, several qualitative studies indicate that young people—especially those from a lower socio-economic background—are not thoroughly informed of the need to choose subjects that match their skills and interests, or are simply not given the opportunity to choose the subjects they would like—or need to. The absence of adequate career guidance has a potentially severe effect on the learning and career trajectories of high school learners (Branson et al. 2015).

As young people exit the schooling system, there are few readily accessible, reliable points of information about how to apply for jobs, how to compile their CVs or how to access further education opportunities. Qualitative work in mainly urban areas of the country has documented how young people ‘feel’ their way through the systems with little to no guidance or information to help them in this process (Fourie 2007; Marock 2008). Whilst there is some evidence to indicate that community-based NGOs can fulfil a ‘bridging role’ (Dieltiens 2015; Kraak 2015), qualitative work also shows that even when youth actively seek out support from such NGOs, they may not be given adequate guidance, and that although such information should be provided by teachers at schools through the Life Orientation curriculum, both teachers (Marock 2008) and learners (Branson et al. 2015) find the information limited.

Survey data has also shown that most young people look for work by relying on their networks of friends or relatives (Magruder 2007). However, African young people from a low socio-economic background have very few ‘productive’ social networks of support that could provide them with the kinds of information needed for effective job searches (Mlatsheni and Rospabe 2002; Narker 2004).

This means that young people typically ‘flounder around’ when looking for a job, engaging in inefficient job search strategies, which in turn results in high levels of effort being expended, often at significant financial cost, with limited gain—a situation that may partly explain increasing levels of discouragement.

## Discouragement and Mental Health

Although we are seeing a consistent increase in levels of discouragement amongst youth (Statistics SA 2019), the connection between joblessness and the increased risk and severity of depression or mental ill-health has been given little attention in the South African research on youth unemployment (Mlatsheni and Ranchhod 2017).

Some qualitative evidence indicates the severe strain that unemployment and unsuccessful job search has on young people, but does not capture levels of depression in comparable manners. Depression may, amongst other things, hamper young people’s access to interventions aimed at connecting them to labour market opportunities.

It is possible that mental health also creates challenges on the demand side, that is where employers stigmatise and discriminate against workers with mental health issues. However, no studies were identified that interrogated this issue specifically. This is in line with the limited evidence on employer behaviour generally and thus emerges as a gap in evidence.



## Geography and Costs of Work-Seeking

There is a convincing body of evidence pointing to how apartheid-era spatial planning continues to affect young people's ability to search for and enter jobs. Poor people typically still live in townships on the outskirts of the cities, or in less economically developed rural places, far from areas where jobs are located and with limited reliable and affordable transport options to search for work (Ardington and Hofmeyr 2014; Mlatsheni and Ranchhod 2017). This drives up the costs of work-seeking, as well as the costs of working, and, in turn, reduces the amount of income that an individual is actually able to take home.

Amongst a sample of young people participating in youth employability programmes, median work-search costs were \$38 per month respectively. These young people typically came from food-insecure households where monthly per capita household income was \$36. (Graham et al 2016) Both quantitative and qualitative data from other studies confirm these high expenses (Porter et al. 2015). Qualitative work further shows that young people borrow money from friends and family members to look for work, placing significant pressure on their relationships. Limited income, exacerbated by location and high transport and data costs, thus emerges as a clear contributor to youth unemployment.

The corollary of this is that several studies have shown that when households begin receiving social grants, there is a positive association with working-age household members beginning to look for work (Ardington et al. 2016; Samson et al. 2004). This is likely due to the fact that the grant provides members with the resources to invest in work-search. However, related studies indicate that this finding may not hold for all groups of young people (Blalock 2014; Abel 2013).

## Lack of Work Experience

Economic evidence shows that young people wait longer in the labour market queue, especially before finding their first job (Ingle and Mlatsheni 2016). Qualitative evidence indicates that young people are told that lack of work experience is a reason for being turned down in the labour market. Survey research in the Western Cape shows that middle-class youth, who gained some work experience during their high school years, transition more smoothly into work than those with no experience (Seekings 2012). Mlatsheni and Ranchhod (2017) analyse national panel data and show that when youth engage in part-time work whilst at school or studying, they are at an advantage when finding full-time employment. Lekena (2006) also indicates that, over time, young people's work experience becomes more important than household income or adult household employment as a predictor of employment, and may even become more important than the quality (but not the quantity) of education accessed. Further, there is an assumption that employers are risk averse and thus prefer to employ people with work experience (Bernstein 2014). However, as is discussed further below, there is limited empirical evidence to support the assumption. Nevertheless, the association between work experience and employment is significant and points to possible policy interventions that focus on ensuring early connections between young people and the labour market, provided this does not interfere with their schooling.

## Limited Social Capital

There is considerable research about the role that social capital plays in the South African labour market, and in turn how it affects the experiences of young people in it. Social capital is defined as the *social networks* that can be leveraged for access to information (Putnam 2001) about the education system, the labour market, job availability or for access to jobs themselves. Both survey and in-depth data have indicated that employment in South Africa is mainly found through informal networks of friends or family who are aware of job openings or who put people in touch with employers. Panel data shows that the information provided via networks is only effective when unemployed youth are actively searching or had previous work experience (Lekena 2006). Furthermore, survey research shows that young men are more likely to be employed if their father lives in the same province as them and if jobs in the father's industry increased (Magruder 2009). In addition, the limited research available on the demand side of the labour market indicates that employers also rely on networks to find suitable candidates for their jobs (Abel et al. 2017; Burger and Von Fintel 2014). Yet, 42% of South African youth aged 15 to 24 live in households with *no* employed adult (Youth Explorer 2018).

## Gender and Care

Women, and young women in particular, are disproportionately affected by unemployment in South Africa. This gender dynamic is clearly indicated in various survey analyses (Ranchhod 2010; Statistics South Africa 2018), but reasons for it remain poorly understood. South Africa has gender parity with respect to education at primary and secondary levels (UNESCO 2017) as well as post-secondary levels (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013). International research demonstrates that equity in education does not necessarily translate into workplace equity, largely due to the motherhood wage penalty (Budig and England 2001)—a point that has been found in South Africa too amongst women generally (Magadla et al. 2019). This research points to wage differentials, not to differences in employment outcomes. Some research suggests that the higher vulnerability of young women to unemployment is either a result of labour market discrimination or a feature of gendered expectations of care for children and other household members (Lekena 2006; Mlatsheni and Rospabe 2002). Schoer and Leibbrandt (2006) indicate that domestic responsibilities were a factor hindering active job search amongst women, but the analysis was not youth-specific. In addition, analyses of the effects of early childbearing on young people's socio-economic outcomes showed that delaying early childbirth had a positive effect on young women's educational outcomes (Ardington et al. 2015), and that early childbearing was associated with unemployment (Nkwini and Naidoo 2017). This research suggests a care burden penalty on employment. Certainly there is ample literature about strong patriarchal norms that shape household inequalities (Ratele et al. 2014; Helman and Ratele 2016); however, this research is rarely linked to employment outcomes. One paper, published outside of the review period, demonstrates how the care burden for young women substantially increases as young people transition from adolescence to young adulthood. It also demonstrates that being employed reduces the care burden but the relationship between the increased care

burden and its effects on employment is not explored (Budlender 2019). There thus remain significant gaps in our understanding of the relationship between gender and employment and what factors explain the gender gap in employment.

### Hiring Preferences and Behaviour of Employers

Our review identified large gaps in the understanding of employer behaviour. Whilst the literature displays a range of assumptions about the nature of employer behaviour with regard to hiring, there is a lack of data to support most of the assumptions listed.

One such assumption is the idea that employers are reluctant to hire young people because of higher training costs and that they are inhibited by labour market regulations that prevent easy hiring and firing (Bernstein 2014; Pauw et al. 2006). They might, therefore, be reluctant to employ people they do not know and whose productivity is not proven. However, there is little evidence to support this assumption. One study showed that in times of economic decline, employers shed jobs and that, as upswings take place, employers are slow to re-employ (Burger and von Fintel 2009). This may suggest that employers are risk averse, but exactly how averse they are and how this affects the employment of youth is not clear.

Some, albeit very limited and inconclusive, evidence points at the fact that hiring practices remain discriminatory (Isdale et al. 2016). However, researchers have pointed out that what may appear to be discrimination on the basis of race may be explained by perceptions of the quality of education accessed by young Black people in the country, both at the basic and higher education level—Black youth are more likely to have attended lower quintile schools which are affected by the quality concerns discussed above, and to attend Historically Black Universities, which are also associated with poorer quality outcomes (Isdale et al. 2016; Mlatsheni and Rospabe 2002).

Limited evidence on the demand side makes it difficult to assess exactly what skills would be required by which type of employers. However, the research that is available suggests that employers place a strong emphasis on soft skills and workplace readiness, including basic (English) literacy and numeracy skills, and communications skills (Horn 2006; Raftopolous et al. 2009).

The lack of clarity on or trust in the quality of education accessed by young people may also influence a range of other hiring practices. For instance, Borhat (2014) suggests that labour market entry requirements are inflated by employers in an effort to sort potential employees. Thus, education levels required for a job may not match the actual requirements of the job but are rather used to better sort potential employees in the absence of any other information. This practice effectively excludes large numbers of young people from jobs that they may in fact be equipped to engage in. For much the same reason, employers rely on social networks to find employees, and prefer to employ people who come through a referral system (Abel et al. 2017; Burger and Von Fintel 2014).

The practices used by employers to sort through potential employees to find the right candidate also point to inefficiencies in the processes of matching potential candidates to the right jobs. In the absence of an education system that is trusted, there are limited indicators that employers can rely on to identify the right candidate, hence the use of networks and higher entry-level requirements. Research on interventions that provide better flags to employers about skills and work experience therefore shows promise.

For instance, a study in labour centres on reference letters shows that work-seekers who received reference letters from previous employers were much more likely to be invited for an interview and to find work, than those who did not. The more individualised the information, the better their chances of finding employment (Abel et al. 2017). This finding suggests that providing reliable information to potential employers may change their employing behaviour.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The key argument that emerges from the review and analysis of the factors that contribute to youth unemployment in South Africa is that multiple dynamics interact to shape young people's access to the labour market. Thus, even in a context of increased demand for young workers, and a better quality education system at the macro-level, many of these barriers are likely to continue to play a role and thus require policy and programmatic attention.

The evidence shows that there is a critical need to address the skills, social capital and information gaps that young people face. This will include ensuring they are equipped with the basic skills required to enter the labour market through bridging programmes, but may include expanding access to higher level technical skills both through expanding access to formalised higher and further education institutions, and delivering training through more accessible, short-term programmes that meet skill needs in the labour market. There is also a need to ensure that skill training is relevant and that young people are gaining work experience that can set them up for future job opportunities. Investing in mechanisms that can facilitate connections between young people and the labour market as early on in their educational and career trajectories as possible (for instance through holiday or weekend work) is important.

However, such training and experience alone is insufficient. Young people also need information and support that can substitute for the individual- and household-level deficits inherited from the country's discriminatory past. Information about what training options are available, how to put a curriculum vitae together and how to effectively search and apply for jobs are some examples of critical information gaps that need to be addressed through local, easily accessible or online platforms. Currently South Africa, unlike many other developing contexts, invests very little in work-seeker support (Bhorat 2012). Some evidence suggest that local not-for-profit organisations do already play a role in addressing many of these deficits (Dieltiens 2015; Kraak 2015), but their impact has not been evaluated. Investing in work-seeker support may therefore well produce dividends. Ensuring that such support is locally accessible is crucial given the evidence on how geography shapes costs of work-seeking.

The evidence also highlights the issue of inefficiencies in the labour market matching process. Investing in mechanisms that can ensure the efficient selection and placement of work-seekers in the labour market is therefore critical. Further research on what 'flags' are important for employers is still required if we are to better understand how to enhance matching processes. Such information also needs to feature in the advice and information provided to young work seekers. Effective information systems that can provide the right advice to youth and address labour market inefficiencies require a good understanding of (a) where there is growth of jobs and where youth

would have a possibility to develop careers; (b) whether or not young people know about such opportunities; and (c) whether the availability of such information would shift their career prospects and planning.

The review also highlights remaining gaps in the evidence base. Further research is required to better understand the role of mental health in discouragement and vice versa in order to inform programmatic interventions. It is very likely that discouraged youth will require additional support over those already seeking work. Further research on why young women continue to be more vulnerable to unemployment, and whether care burdens play a role, is required if we are to develop differentiated strategies for young women. Finally, there remains significant under-investment in research with employers. Such evidence could begin to inform better information and matching systems as well as interventions that can promote job growth, particularly in areas that currently see very little economic growth such as rural areas.

## Conclusion

Economic growth that creates jobs for a range of skills and in a range of sectors is a critical requirement to address youth unemployment, but this alone will not address the fact that too many young people from poor backgrounds will continue to be excluded from the South African labour market. Similarly, the political will to ensure that the country's basic education system produces work-seekers with excellent numeracy and literacy skills, who are able to compete for entry-level positions and/or progress into post-secondary education and training, remains an over-riding priority. But, on its own, this too is insufficient to address the challenge. Additional barriers encountered by young people in their attempt to access the labour market are poverty, spatial segregation, a lack of social and cultural capital and the high cost of job search. An evidence synthesis approach to comprehensively understand the nature of the challenge allows us to design solutions that can adequately address the myriad of intersecting challenges. A key limitation of evidence synthesis is that it does rely on extant literature. In this study, a clear gap in the literature is on demand-side challenges, which require additional research attention in order to inform policy approaches. Nevertheless, the approach does allow a synthesis of evidence that clearly demonstrates the complexities of the challenge. The evidence presented here focuses on the South African case, but similar methods could be used in other middle-income contexts struggling with youth unemployment.

What emerges from the systematic synthesis is the need for a well-coordinated system and commitment on the part of a range of stakeholders including educators, trainers, employers, non-governmental organisations and government officials to reducing youth unemployment rates as a primary societal goal—a long-term commitment to a more equal, inclusive society. Failure to address the challenge will have short- and long-term negative consequences for young people's future employment prospects, income, health and education outcomes and their psychosocial well-being.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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