



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



1976–2026: Advancing Youth Skills for Economic Inclusion in South Africa

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25 June 2026

**PARLIAMENTARY
RESEARCH UNIT (PRU)**

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AfDB:	African Development Bank
ILO:	International Labour Organization
NEET:	Not in Employment, Education, or Training
QLFS:	Quarterly Labour Force Survey
SETAs:	Sector Education and Training Authorities
Stats SA:	Statistics South Africa
TVET:	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
YES:	Youth Employment Service

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2026 marks two major milestones in South Africa's democratic history: the 50th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and 30 years of constitutional democracy. While these reflect progress in political rights, youth unemployment remains a critical structural challenge. Around 46.1 per cent of young people aged 15–34 are unemployed, indicating that inclusive economic participation remains limited. In this context, Parliament plays an important role not only in commemorating these milestones but also in advancing youth economic inclusion through oversight, legislation, and budget processes aimed at addressing persistent labour market exclusion.

This research paper examines the relationship between historical inequality, labour market exclusion, and skills development in shaping youth unemployment outcomes. Drawing on national data and institutional evidence, it argues that youth unemployment in South Africa is structural rather than cyclical, driven by limited job creation, skills mismatches, and systemic barriers to labour market entry.

A key finding is the persistent mismatch between education and labour market requirements. Although access to education has expanded, many young people lack the practical skills and work experience employers require. Work-integrated learning opportunities such as learnerships and internships, supported by institutions such as the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and the Youth Employment Service (YES) programme, demonstrate the value of combining training with workplace exposure but remain insufficient in scale.

The analysis also highlights significant inequalities in labour market outcomes. High levels of youth disengagement are reflected in the large proportion of individuals classified as Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET), signalling a breakdown in the transition from education to employment. These challenges are compounded by gender and spatial disparities, with young women and those in rural or historically disadvantaged areas facing higher levels of exclusion.

At a structural level, youth unemployment is shaped by labour market segmentation, spatial inequality, limited access to networks, and weak economic growth. These factors constrain access to stable and meaningful employment, indicating that skills development alone is insufficient without broader economic reform.

Addressing this crisis requires a comprehensive and coordinated policy approach. Priorities include expanding work-integrated learning, improving alignment between education and labour market demand, addressing inequalities, and strengthening public–private partnerships. Parliament's role is central in this regard, particularly in ensuring effective oversight, enabling legislation, and targeted resource allocation to scale impactful interventions.

Advancing youth employment ultimately requires a shift from fragmented interventions to a systemic strategy that enhances skills, expands opportunities, and dismantles structural barriers. Realising the promise of the Constitution depends on translating commemorative commitments into tangible socio-economic outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The year 2026 marks two significant national milestones: the 50th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and the 30th anniversary of South Africa's democratic Constitution. While these milestones reflect substantial progress in political rights and democratic governance, youth unemployment remains a persistent structural challenge. Given that approximately 46.1 per cent of young people aged 15–34 are unemployed, this policy brief examines the intersection of historical legacy, labour market exclusion, and skills development. Drawing on national datasets and institutional reports, it analyses youth labour market trends through a dual theoretical framework and proposes policy interventions to advance inclusive economic participation.

Youth Month offers a critical opportunity to reflect on both the historical contributions of young South Africans and their current socio-economic realities. While the youth of 1976 were central to political transformation, contemporary youth face a different struggle: economic marginalisation. Although individuals aged 15–34 constitute more than half of the country's working-age population, they remain disproportionately excluded from employment opportunities.¹

These commemorations symbolise South Africa's transition from political oppression to constitutional democracy. However, the promise of that transition remains incomplete without meaningful economic inclusion. The persistence of youth unemployment underscores a fundamental disconnect between democratic gains and socio-economic outcomes. This tension between historical progress and contemporary inequality frames the central question of this brief: how can South Africa translate its democratic achievements into tangible economic opportunities for its youth?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative policy analysis approach based on secondary data to examine youth unemployment and skills development in South Africa. It draws on Statistics South Africa datasets, including the QLFS and related reports, to analyse employment trends, labour participation, and the prevalence of youth classified as NEET.

The study incorporates programme-level evidence from institutional reports, including the YES annual reports and policy documentation from the South African Government on skills development frameworks. This enables a triangulated analysis that integrates macro-level labour market trends with micro-level programme outcomes to assess the effectiveness of institutional interventions.

The methodological approach is interpretive, focusing on identifying structural patterns, policy gaps, and labour market dynamics rather than establishing causal relationships. While reliance on secondary data limits the ability to draw causal inferences or generalise empirically, it provides a robust and policy-relevant evidence base grounded in credible, nationally recognised sources.

¹ Statistics South Africa [Stats SA] (2025a).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of youth unemployment and skills development in South Africa is grounded in two complementary theoretical traditions: human capital theory and labour market segmentation theory. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding both individual-level and structural drivers of youth unemployment.

Human capital theory, as developed by Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961), posits that investment in education, training, and skills enhances individual productivity, employability, and earnings potential. Within this framework, unemployment is often attributed to insufficient or mismatched skills. In the South African context, this perspective underpins policy interventions such as the expansion of formal education, vocational training, and learnership programmes, facilitated by institutions such as the SETAs. These initiatives aim to strengthen the alignment between individual competencies and labour market demands.²

However, the persistence of high youth unemployment despite increased educational attainment highlights the limitations of a purely human capital approach. While education is a key driver of economic productivity, its effectiveness depends on the broader institutional and economic environment in which individuals operate. In South Africa, the coexistence of relatively high levels of education and elevated unemployment suggests a disconnect between skills acquisition and labour market absorption.³

To address these limitations, labour market segmentation theory, as articulated by Doeringer and Piore (1971), provides an essential complementary perspective.⁴ This theory argues that labour markets are divided into distinct segments: a primary sector characterised by stable, well-paying employment, and a secondary sector marked by precarious, low-wage, and insecure work. Structural barriers, including inequality, spatial disparities, limited social networks, and institutional constraints, often constrain access to the primary sector.

In the South African context, these structural barriers are deeply rooted in historical legacies of exclusion, particularly apartheid spatial and economic inequalities. As a result, many young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face significant obstacles in accessing stable employment opportunities, regardless of their level of education or skills. This contributes to persistent labour market segmentation and reinforces patterns of exclusion.

Further reinforcing this structural perspective, Standing (2011) introduces the concept of the “precariat,” a social class characterised by insecure employment, limited job stability, and weak labour protections. A significant proportion of South African youth can be categorized as this, particularly those engaged in informal, temporary, or intermittent work. This highlights the importance of considering not only access to employment but also the quality and sustainability of work.⁵

The integration of human capital and labour market segmentation theories provides a nuanced understanding of youth unemployment in South Africa. While skills development remains a necessary condition for improving employability, it is insufficient without structural reforms that

² Becker (1964); Schultz (1961).

³ Schultz (1961).

⁴ Doeringer and Piore (1971).

⁵ Standing (2011).

address inequality and barriers to labour market access. This combined framework underscores the need for policy interventions that simultaneously enhance skills and dismantle systemic constraints to inclusive economic participation.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth unemployment has been widely examined in both global and South African scholarship, with particular emphasis on its structural, economic, and institutional dimensions. In the South African context, the literature consistently identifies youth unemployment as one of the most severe and persistent socio-economic challenges confronting the democratic state.

4.1 Global and comparative perspectives on youth unemployment

International research demonstrates that youth unemployment is a global phenomenon; however, its scale and persistence vary significantly across contexts. According to the International Labour Organization, young people are consistently more likely to be unemployed than adults, largely due to limited work experience, weaker labour market attachment, and structural barriers in the transition from education to employment.⁶ These challenges are particularly acute in developing economies characterised by inequality, slow economic growth, and limited job creation.

Youth unemployment is shaped not only by macroeconomic conditions but also by institutional inefficiencies, particularly education and training systems that are poorly aligned with labour market needs.⁷ This perspective highlights the dual nature of the challenge, reflecting both demand-side constraints (insufficient job creation) and supply-side factors (skills mismatches).

4.2 Structural dimensions of youth unemployment in South Africa

In South Africa, the literature strongly emphasises the structural nature of youth unemployment. It is noted that the labour market is characterised by high levels of inequality and dualism, which disproportionately affect young entrants.⁸ Limited economic growth and a capital-intensive production structure have further constrained job creation, particularly for low-skilled individuals.

It is further argued that unemployment is not merely a function of individual attributes, such as education, but is deeply rooted in systemic factors, including spatial inequality, labour market rigidities, and historical exclusion.⁹ These dynamics are particularly pronounced for youth, who often lack both work experience and access to professional networks.

Furthermore, the persistence of intergenerational inequality is noted, as young people from disadvantaged households are significantly less likely to access both education and employment opportunities.¹⁰ This reinforces the cyclical nature of poverty and exclusion within the South African context.

⁶ ILO (2020).

⁷ O'Higgins (2017).

⁸ Bhorat et al. (2014).

⁹ Banerjee et al. (2008).

¹⁰ Leibbrandt et al. (2012).

The literature also emphasises the role of structural inequality and labour market segmentation. South Africa's labour market remains highly segmented, consisting of a formal sector characterised by stability and higher wages, and an informal or marginalised sector marked by insecurity and limited opportunities. Moreover, spatial inequality, rooted in apartheid-era geography, continues to constrain access to employment opportunities.¹¹ Many young people reside far from economic centres, facing high transport costs, limited access to information, and weak social networks. These structural constraints reinforce exclusion and limit labour market participation.

4.3 Education, skills, and school-to-work transitions

A central theme in the literature is the role of education and skills in shaping employment outcomes. While human capital theory suggests that increased educational attainment should improve employability, empirical evidence in South Africa presents a more complex picture. Although access to education has expanded, concerns remain about its quality and alignment with labour market demands.¹² Systemic weaknesses identified in the basic education system, including poor learning outcomes in mathematics and literacy, undermine young people's preparedness for further education or employment.¹³ At the post-school level, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions are considered an important pathway for skills development. However, challenges related to quality, funding, and industry alignment limit the TVET sector's effectiveness in addressing youth unemployment.¹⁴

The transition from education to employment is a critical barrier for many young people. A lack of prior work experience is regarded as one of the most significant obstacles to youth employment, often resulting in a "catch-22" situation where employers require experience for entry-level positions.¹⁵ Programmes such as internships, learnerships, and apprenticeships play a crucial role in addressing this gap by providing both skills development and workplace exposure.

The rising proportion of youth classified as NEET is a growing concern. High NEET rates reflect both failures in the education system and the inability of the economy to absorb new labour market entrants.¹⁶ Prolonged disengagement from both education and employment has significant long-term consequences, including lower lifetime earnings, reduced productivity, and increased social vulnerability.¹⁷

4.4 Skills mismatch, structural constraints, and policy gaps

The literature demonstrates that youth unemployment in South Africa is a multidimensional challenge shaped by an interplay of skills deficits, structural inequalities, and limited labour market opportunities. While considerable attention has been given to education and skills development, there is a growing consensus that broader structural reforms must complement these interventions.

¹¹ Bhorat et al. (2016).

¹² Bhorat and Oosthuizen (2016).

¹³ Spaul (2013).

¹⁴ McGrath and Lugg (2012).

¹⁵ Rankin and Roberts (2011).

¹⁶ Cloete (2015).

¹⁷ ILO (2020).

Skills development remains a critical mechanism for addressing youth unemployment. The expansion of education and training programmes reflects the continued relevance of human capital investment. However, evidence indicates that formal education alone is insufficient without practical workplace experience.¹⁸

Institutional mechanisms such as SETAs aim to address this gap by facilitating learnerships that integrate theoretical training with workplace-based experience.¹⁹ Similarly, the YES programme has created over 104,000 work opportunities, with approximately 42 per cent of participants transitioning into employment.²⁰ While these initiatives demonstrate progress in aligning skills development with labour market needs, their overall scale remains limited relative to the magnitude of youth unemployment.

A key gap in the literature lies in the integration of policy interventions with structural transformation. Existing initiatives, although promising, remain insufficient in both scale and coordination. This highlights the need for a more coordinated, systemic, and scalable approach to youth employment policy, one that simultaneously strengthens skills development, improves school-to-work transitions, and addresses underlying structural constraints such as spatial inequality, labour market segmentation, and limited job creation.

5. YOUTH EMPLOYMENT TRENDS AND LABOUR MARKET OUTCOMES²¹

Youth labour market outcomes in South Africa reflect a deeply uneven landscape shaped by persistently high unemployment, widespread disengagement, and entrenched structural inequalities. While some young people access employment or remain in education and training, a substantial proportion remain excluded from both. This section examines key trends in youth employment, including labour market participation, NEET prevalence, and changes in unemployment over time, while also highlighting how gender and geographic disparities reinforce the structural nature of youth exclusion and inform targeted policy responses.

5.1 Youth employment status

South Africa Youth Employment Status (2025)

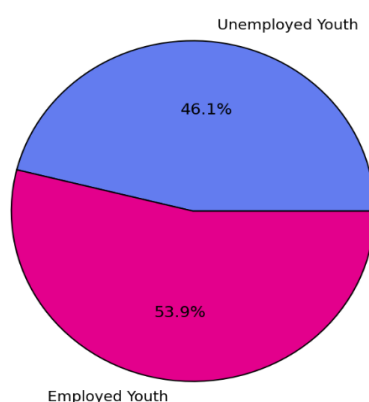


Figure 1: Youth Employment Status

¹⁸ Stats SA (2025a).

¹⁹ South African Government (2026).

²⁰ Youth Employment Service [YES] (2023).

²¹ Stats SA (2025a; 2025b; 2025c).

This pie chart illustrates the proportion of youth (ages 15–34) who are employed versus unemployed. Approximately 46.1 per cent of youth are unemployed, while 53.9 per cent are employed. The chart highlights the severity of youth unemployment, showing that nearly one in every two young people is without work, underscoring the limited absorptive capacity of the labour market.

5.2 The NEET phenomenon and social risk

A critical dimension of youth exclusion in South Africa is the high proportion of individuals classified as NEET. In 2024, approximately 43.2 per cent of young people fell into this category, reflecting a significant failure in the transition from education to employment and a substantial loss of productive potential.²²

The persistence of elevated NEET rates has profound socio-economic implications. It contributes to long-term disengagement from both the labour market and education systems, increases vulnerability to poverty, and constrains economic growth. Moreover, high levels of youth disengagement raise concerns about social cohesion and stability, particularly in contexts characterised by deep structural inequality.

From a democratic perspective, the prevalence of NEET youth also raises important questions about the realisation of constitutional rights related to dignity, equality, and socio-economic participation. The persistence of such disparities suggests that, while political rights have been secured, access to economic opportunities and, therefore, substantive inclusion remains unevenly distributed.

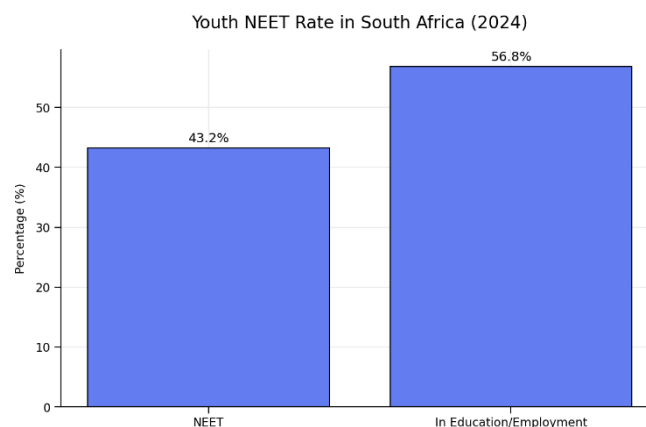


Figure 2: Youth NEET rate

This bar chart compares the percentage of youth who are NEET versus those who are engaged in education or employment. Approximately 43.2 per cent of youth fall into the NEET category, while 56.8 per cent are engaged. The chart demonstrates that nearly half of South Africa's youth are disengaged from both learning and earning opportunities, representing a significant risk to long-term economic growth and social stability.

²² Stats SA (2025c).

5.3 Trend in youth unemployment (2015–2025)

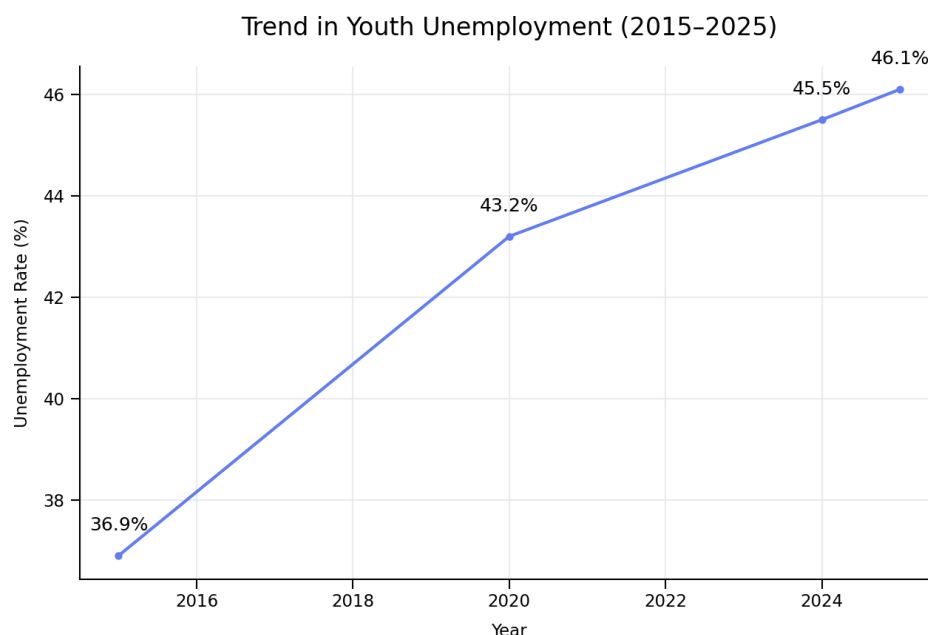


Figure 3: Trend in youth unemployment (2015–2025)

Youth unemployment in South Africa has followed a troubling upward trajectory over the past decade, rising from 36.9 per cent in 2015 to 46.1 per cent in 2025, a 9.2-percentage-point increase. This sustained increase reflects a structural worsening rather than a short-term fluctuation in labour market conditions. The persistence of high unemployment rates among young people suggests that economic growth has not translated into expanded employment opportunities for this group. Instead, it points to deeper systemic constraints within the labour market, including limited job creation and barriers to entry.

From a policy perspective, these trends underscore the urgent need for labour-intensive growth strategies and targeted interventions that prioritise youth employment, particularly to improve the transition from education to work.

5.4 Youth NEET rate by gender (2025)

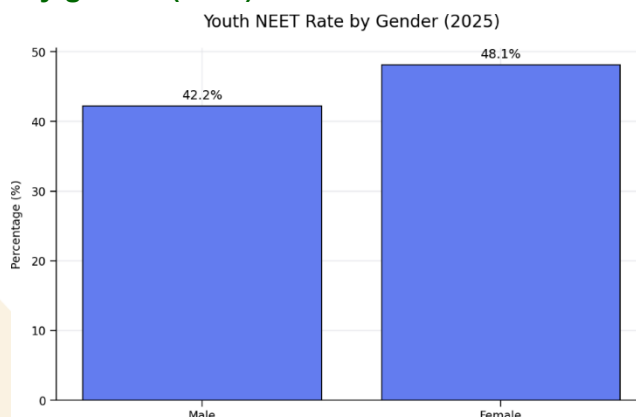


Figure 4: Youth NEET rate by gender (2025)

Young women experience disproportionately higher levels of exclusion from both education and employment compared to their male counterparts. In 2025, approximately 48.1 per cent of young women were classified as NEET, compared to 42.2 per cent of young men. This disparity highlights the gendered nature of youth labour market exclusion in South Africa.

The persistence of higher NEET rates among young women points to underlying structural inequalities, including unequal access to opportunities, gendered labour market dynamics, and the burden of unpaid caregiving responsibilities. These factors collectively limit women's ability to fully participate in both educational and employment pathways.

From a policy perspective, these patterns underscore the need for targeted interventions that address the barriers young women face. This includes promoting inclusive labour market policies, expanding access to skills development and employment opportunities, and addressing structural constraints such as gender inequality and caregiving responsibilities.

5.5 Youth unemployment by province

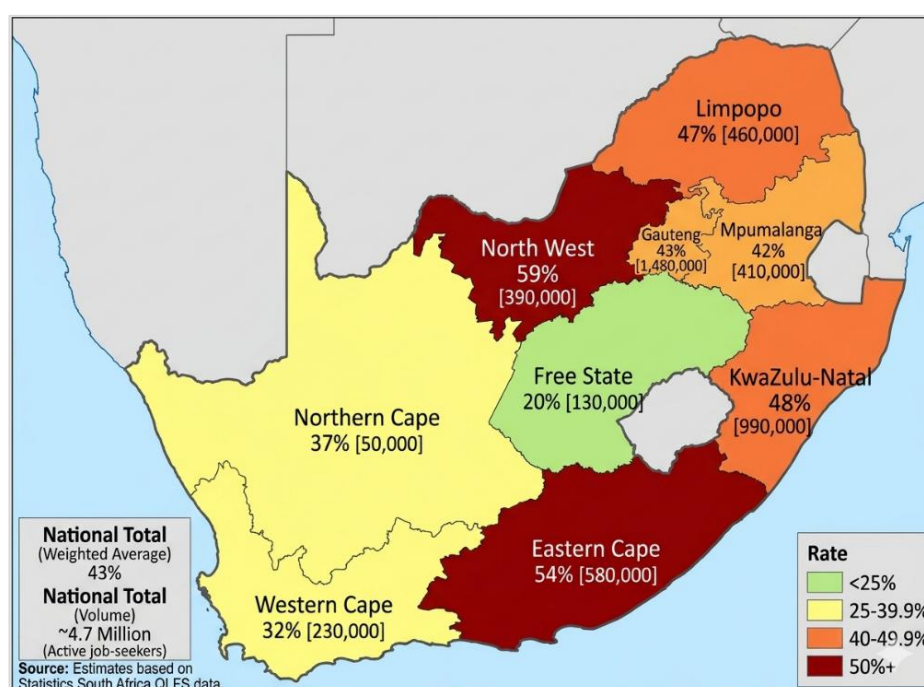


Figure 5: Youth unemployment by province

Youth unemployment in South Africa remains critically high, with a national average of approximately 43 per cent, representing an estimated 4.7 million unemployed young people aged 15–34. The map illustrates not only the intensity of unemployment through provincial rates, but also its absolute scale, highlighting the substantial number of young people affected across the country.

At provincial level, the distribution of youth unemployment reveals pronounced spatial disparities. Provinces such as the North West (59%; 390,000 youth) and the Eastern Cape (54%; 580,000 youths) record the highest unemployment rates, indicating severe and concentrated labour market exclusion. In contrast, provinces such as the Free State (20%; 130,000 youth) and the Western Cape (32%; 230,000 youth) exhibit comparatively lower

unemployment rates, although the absolute number of affected youth remains significant. This contrast demonstrates that youth unemployment is not uniformly distributed but shaped by underlying geographic and economic conditions.

A key feature highlighted by the map is the difference between proportional and absolute measures. While provinces with high unemployment rates reflect deeper structural exclusion, provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal (48%; 990,000 youth) and Gauteng (43%; 1.48 million youth) account for the largest absolute numbers of unemployed youth, due to their larger populations. This distinction underscores the importance of considering both rate and scale when assessing the extent of the youth employment crisis.

The spatial pattern also reflects a clear rural–urban divide. Provinces with the highest unemployment rates, including the Eastern Cape, North West, and Limpopo (47%; 460,000 youths), are predominantly rural and characterised by lower levels of industrialisation, weaker infrastructure, and fewer economic opportunities. In contrast, more urbanised and economically diversified provinces such as Gauteng and the Western Cape demonstrate relatively lower unemployment rates, supported by stronger labour markets and greater access to employment opportunities. However, even in these provinces, the absolute number of unemployed youth remains substantial, reflecting the scale of the challenge.

These provincial variations are indicative of broader structural inequalities in the South African economy. Differences in economic composition, access to education and training institutions, infrastructure development, and historical patterns of spatial inequality continue to shape labour market outcomes. Higher unemployment is strongly associated with regions characterised by limited economic activity, weaker investment, and barriers to labour market entry, particularly in historically disadvantaged areas.

Within this context, the Western Cape emerges as a relative outlier, combining a lower unemployment rate with a comparatively smaller number of unemployed youth. This reflects stronger economic performance, more diversified industry sectors, and more effective integration of young people into the labour market. By contrast, provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng highlight how large populations can translate into a greater overall unemployment burden, even where rates are moderate.

The map shows that youth unemployment in South Africa is both widespread and unevenly distributed. The most severe impacts are concentrated in structurally disadvantaged and rural provinces, while the largest numbers of affected individuals are found in densely populated economic hubs. This reinforces the need for spatially differentiated policy interventions that address both the intensity and scale of youth unemployment.

5.6 Provincial breakdown with higher education institutions

Table 1 compares the distribution of universities and TVET colleges across provinces with youth unemployment rates and the number of unemployed young people. It highlights both the intensity and scale of youth unemployment, providing a basis for assessing how education infrastructure relates to labour market outcomes.

Table 1: Provincial breakdown with higher education institutions

Province	Universities	TVET Colleges	Total Institutions	Unemployment Rate	Unemployed Youth
Gauteng	7	8	14	43%	1,480,000
KwaZulu-Natal	4	9	13	48%	990,000
Western Cape	4	6	10	32%	230,000
Eastern Cape	4	8	12	54%	580,000
Limpopo	2	7	9	47%	460,000
Mpumalanga	1	3	4	42%	410,000
North West	1	3	4	59%	390,000
Free State	2	4	6	20%	130,000
Northern Cape	1	2	3	37%	50,000

A comparison of provincial higher education institutions and youth unemployment outcomes reveals a complex, non-linear relationship. Provinces such as Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, which host the highest concentration of universities and TVET colleges, also account for the largest absolute number of unemployed youth. This suggests that the presence of education and training institutions alone is insufficient to address labour market exclusion at scale.

Conversely, provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Limpopo exhibit both relatively high numbers of training institutions and persistently high unemployment rates, indicating that structural economic constraints, including limited industrial activity and weak labour demand, significantly undermine the effectiveness of skills development systems.

In contrast, the Western Cape demonstrates comparatively lower unemployment despite a moderate number of institutions, reflecting stronger economic performance, better alignment between training and labour market needs, and improved absorption capacity. Provinces with limited institutional infrastructure, such as the North West and Mpumalanga, experience particularly severe labour market challenges, reinforcing the role of access to education and training as an important, though not sufficient, determinant of employment outcomes.

The evidence suggests that youth unemployment in South Africa cannot be explained solely by the availability of universities and colleges. Instead, it reflects the interaction between skills development systems, regional economic structure, and labour market demand. Addressing youth unemployment, therefore, requires not only expanding access to education but also strengthening local economies and aligning training with employment opportunities.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

As South Africa marks 30 years of its Constitution, the imperative to realise socio-economic rights, particularly for young people, has become increasingly urgent. Despite significant democratic gains, the persistence of youth unemployment reflects a critical gap between constitutional promises and lived economic realities. Addressing this challenge requires a comprehensive and coordinated policy approach that integrates education, skills development, and employment creation within a coherent national framework.

A central constraint remains the persistent mismatch between education outcomes and labour market requirements. While access to formal education has expanded, many young people continue to leave the system without the practical, work-ready skills employers demand. Evidence indicates that individuals with prior work experience are significantly more likely to secure employment, underscoring the importance of experiential learning in facilitating the transition from education to work.²³ This highlights the need to move beyond a purely academic model of skills development towards one that combines theoretical knowledge with structured workplace exposure.

Institutional mechanisms such as SETAs play a critical role in bridging this gap by providing industry-aligned training and learnerships that integrate classroom-based learning with workplace experience.²⁴ Similarly, the YES programme has created over 104,000 work opportunities, with approximately 42 per cent of participants transitioning into.²⁵ These initiatives demonstrate the effectiveness of linking skills development directly to employment pathways and illustrate the potential of public–private collaboration in expanding opportunities for young people.

However, the persistence of high youth unemployment suggests that these interventions remain insufficient in both scale and coordination. Expanding work-integrated learning opportunities must therefore become a central policy priority, particularly in strengthening school-to-work transitions. At the same time, skills-focused interventions must be complemented by efforts to address structural barriers to labour market access, including spatial inequality, limited social networks, and unequal access to information and opportunities. Without addressing these systemic constraints, gains in skills development will continue to have a limited impact on employment outcomes.

Strengthening partnerships between government, the private sector, and training institutions will be critical to scaling employment programmes and improving labour market absorption capacity. In addition, targeted interventions are required for youth classified as NEET, who face heightened risks of long-term disengagement and social exclusion. Effective responses should include tailored pathways such as digital and future-oriented skills training, entrepreneurship support, and active labour market programmes designed to reintegrate young people into productive economic activity.

Advancing youth employment in South Africa requires a shift from fragmented interventions to a more systemic and inclusive approach, one that simultaneously enhances skills, expands opportunities, and dismantles structural barriers. Only through such an integrated strategy can the country begin to translate its constitutional commitments into meaningful economic inclusion for its youth.

7. THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT IN ADVANCING YOUTH ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Parliament plays a central role in addressing youth unemployment and advancing economic inclusion in South Africa through its oversight, legislative, budgetary, and representative functions. As the primary institution responsible for law-making and executive accountability,

²³ Stats SA (2025a).

²⁴ South African Government (2026).

²⁵ YES (2023).

it is uniquely positioned to ensure that youth development policies are not only well-conceived but effectively implemented and adequately resourced.

A key aspect of Parliament's mandate is its oversight of government departments and public institutions involved in skills development and employment creation. Through portfolio committees, particularly those focused on higher education, labour, and economic development, Parliament monitors the performance of initiatives such as SETAs and the YES programme. This oversight is essential for assessing whether such interventions are achieving intended outcomes, including improving school-to-work transitions and expanding employment opportunities for young people.

Parliament's legislative function further enables it to shape the policy environment governing education, training, and labour markets. By reviewing and enacting legislation related to skills development, vocational education, and labour market regulation, it can strengthen alignment between education systems and labour market demands. Legislative reforms can also address structural barriers to employment, including inequities affecting youth in rural and disadvantaged communities.

In addition, Parliament exercises an important budgetary role by scrutinising and approving national expenditures. Through this process, it can advocate for increased and more targeted investment in youth employment initiatives, such as work-integrated learning, apprenticeships, and digital skills development. Ensuring efficient allocation and use of resources is critical given the scale of youth unemployment and the limitations of existing programmes.

Parliament also serves as a platform for public participation, enabling young people and stakeholders to contribute to policymaking. Public hearings, stakeholder engagements, and committee consultations provide opportunities to incorporate the perspectives of youth, industry, and civil society into policy design. This participatory function is key to ensuring that interventions are responsive and contextually relevant.

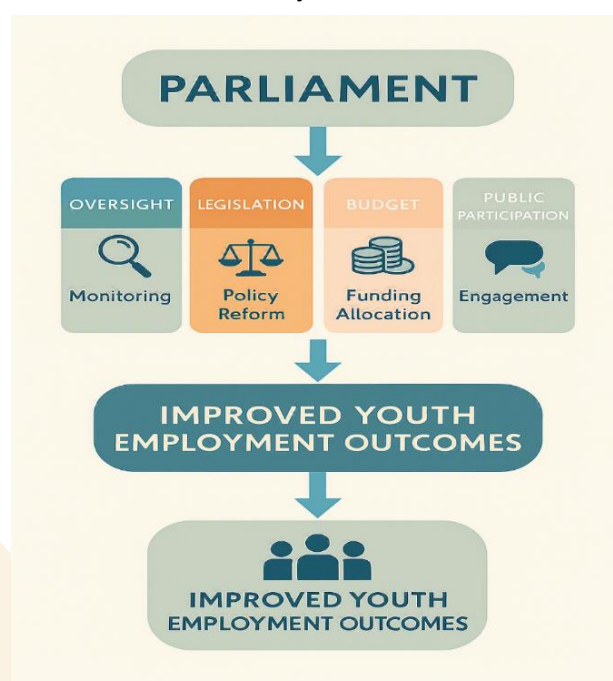


Figure 6: Parliament's role in advancing youth economic inclusion

Beyond these formal roles, Parliament can act as a catalyst for improved policy coordination. Given the fragmentation of current interventions, greater alignment across government departments, the private sector, and training institutions is essential. Parliament can promote integrated strategies that link education, skills development, and economic policy to strengthen labour market absorption.

In the context of persistently high youth unemployment and structural inequality, Parliament's role extends beyond its formal functions to that of a strategic driver of accountability, coordination, and inclusive development. Strengthening these roles is essential to translating policy commitments into tangible employment outcomes for young people.

Parliament has also played a visible role in commemorating national milestones, including the 50th anniversary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising and 30 years of constitutional democracy in 2026. These commemorations through special sittings, heritage events, Youth Month activities, and public engagements serve as platforms to reflect on South Africa's democratic trajectory and the role of youth within it.

Debates and commemorative sessions in both the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces have honoured the legacy of the 1976 generation while reaffirming constitutional values. Importantly, these platforms also create space for policy reflection on ongoing socio-economic challenges, particularly youth unemployment and inequality.

Through its public participation mandate, Parliament has engaged young people via Youth Parliament programmes, outreach initiatives, and stakeholder dialogues. These efforts strengthen participatory democracy and foreground the lived experiences of economic exclusion, ensuring that youth perspectives inform national discourse.

Moreover, Parliament has used these commemorative moments to intensify oversight of youth-focused programmes. Portfolio committees have increasingly scrutinised the effectiveness of skills development initiatives, work-integrated learning programmes, and employment schemes, linking historical reflection with accountability and forward-looking policy action.

This evolving approach reflects a growing recognition that commemoration must extend beyond symbolism. By aligning heritage reflection with legislative priorities and budget oversight, Parliament contributes to reframing Youth Month as a platform for renewed commitment to economic inclusion and structural transformation. In this way, the legacy of 1976 and the Constitution is measured not only in political freedom but in the expansion of meaningful economic opportunities for the current generation of youth.

8. CONCLUSION

Youth unemployment in South Africa remains a complex and deeply entrenched structural challenge shaped by the intersection of skills deficits, inequality, and limited labour market opportunities. While investments in education and skills development are necessary, they are insufficient in isolation. Without addressing systemic barriers such as spatial inequality, labour market segmentation, and unequal access to opportunity, these interventions will continue to yield limited outcomes.

The analysis highlights a persistent disconnect between South Africa's democratic achievements and the lived socio-economic realities of its youth. Despite expanded access to education and policy innovation, youth unemployment remains high, with pronounced disparities across gender and geography. These patterns confirm that youth exclusion is structural rather than cyclical, requiring coordinated interventions that improve employability, expand job creation, and dismantle barriers to labour market entry.

As South Africa commemorates 50 years since the 1976 Soweto Uprising and 30 years of constitutional democracy, this moment calls for renewed commitment. While the youth of 1976 secured political freedom, the transition to meaningful economic inclusion remains incomplete. Realising the promise of the Constitution requires translating rights into tangible opportunities. Youth Month must therefore serve as both remembrance and a catalyst for action. Advancing youth economic inclusion is not only a policy priority but a democratic imperative. South Africa's future depends on its ability to create inclusive pathways for young people to participate fully in the economy through bold, coordinated, and systemic reform.

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