



Structural Changes of the NEET Youth Group

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ABSTRACT

Young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) may face an increased risk of poverty, social exclusion, scars on the labour force market and negative consequences on health. Knowing the size and structure of this youth group, the factors that lead to the statute of NEET, is a major political priority in each EU-27 member state. In this paper, structural changes in the 21st century NEET group are analysed, mainly due to the economic and financial crisis and the health crisis.

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1. Introduction

Analyses of labour markets at the level of both EU and member states have shown that they are increasingly insecure, with a higher share of temporary, part-time or occasional employment contracts (so-called "zero-hour" contracts). Most of the employees who have this type of contract are often relatively young. Most of the time it could be the first job for a person trying to transition from education or vocational training to labour force. However, as the business cycle is changing, these persons are often particularly vulnerable because they can be the first to leave the job (competing with other more experienced job seekers).

The still fairly large share of young people not in employment, education or training in the EU-27 can mean that employers recruiting on the member states' labour markets have a wide range of potential candidates, although the high share may reflect misfits on the labour market (either in terms of skills or geographically). In addition to this, some employers criticize the lack of basic skills that some young people have when they leave the education system, as well as their underdeveloped life skills (communication and presentation skills, ability to work in a team, ability to solve problems) or lack of work experience and knowledge about the chosen profession.

In the debates on diagnosing the problems of integration on labour market and of marginalization faced by young Europeans and the policies to be implemented, the concept of NEET has become increasingly popular (Eurofound, 2012; Serracant 2013; ILO, 2015; Mussida and Sciulli, 2018). The phenomenon is characterized by a relevant heterogeneity, as the NEET concept includes young people in different conditions and states.

The concept of NEET has been widely used as an indicator, including in research carried out by Eurofound (2016) to develop youth-oriented policies in the 27 EU Member States.

The NEET category has a high level of heterogeneity and includes young workers who are both short-term and long-term unemployed, those who return to work after a period of education or training, people with long-term diseases or disabled and young people who are discouraged on the labour market (Bardak et al., 2015).

A characteristic of the COVID-19 crisis as compared to previous crises was that there were several transitions from employment to inactivity than to unemployment for all age groups, which means that the values recorded by unemployment reflect only a smaller part of the lost jobs. This phenomenon is also reflected in the young NEETs' activity status.

At the end of 2020, the average rate of young NEETs aged between 15-29 was 13.7% (up by one percentage point from 2019), which means that in the 10 months of the pandemic, almost 725,000 youths in the EU-27 were in this category of vulnerable people.

For the 15-24-year-old age group, the share of inactive NEETS (who are not looking for work and/or who are not available to start work within two weeks) increased twice as much (+0.8 percentage points) that that of unemployed NEETs (+0.4 percentage points) in 2020. Eurostat statistics analysis shows that the number

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of young NEETs who wanted to work (but did not actively seek jobs) increased by 0.9 percentage points, indicating that the new NEETs in 2020 were mainly short-term unemployed.

The causes and factors that lead to the status of NEET for many young people are multiple and often interrelated. In turn, these factors are affected by various contextual elements and policies, such as education and training curriculum options, active labour market policies, education funding, student grants and health systems.

The paper presents a brief analysis on the structure, size and characteristics of the NEET population in the EU-27 Member States, as well as on the effects of economic, financial and health crises on the size and composition of the NEET population.

2. Specialized literature

NEET concept made possible the acknowledgement of the number of young people who have become discouraged in any job search, as well as of inactive people that were able to work or that were unwilling to work, recognizing the difficulties they have faced and the need for specific measures. Considering the importance and size of this population category, the European Commission has developed indicators and a specific methodology for collecting data and calculating the number of NEETs in Europe since 2010. This methodology used the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to place young people from different age groups according to educational levels. The adoption of this methodology resulted from the need for the EU to not only focus on unemployed young people, but to also accept the concept of NEET as target for its political actions. Young people who fall into this category have different features and needs, which makes it more difficult to design and to implement effective policy measures.

The chosen perspective is motivated by the fact that the applicability of the NEET concept is not simple, in part because the concept as such has been criticized as ambiguous or as incapable of capturing the challenges in the real life of young people, because it is assumed that “it was born out of administrative convenience rather than out of sociological consistency” (Ralston et al. 2022, p. 59).

NEET concept originated in the United Kingdom (Furlong, 2006; Mascherini, 2019; Ralston et al. 2022), however, given the ambiguity of the concept and the fact that it is prone to criticism, it is interesting to analyse how NEETs are perceived in the specialized literature.

In most European countries, the rise and fall of the NEET phenomenon has been a consequence of the increasing unemployment rates among the young (rather than inactivity), following the segmentation of labour market, lack of aggregate demand and poor education and training (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2019). In some countries, especially in Southern Europe, the evolution of NEET rate is determined by youth unemployment, rising and falling as a result of the economic cycle.

NEET status is generally associated with disadvantaged opportunities at the edge of the labour market, a relatively high risk of poverty and social exclusion (Görllich et al. 2013; Salvà-mut et al. 2016; Papadakis et al. 2020).

The deterioration of the conditions on the labour market for youths was particularly serious during the Great Recession, given that youth unemployment (Choudhry et al. 2012; Pastore, 2019) is more sensitive to cyclic conditions than the unemployment among adults (this is due to the gap in work experience and due to weaker employment contracts among young employees). Also, the worsening of the work outlook for youth has been exacerbated by the COVID-19-related shock, the likelihood of becoming a NEET growing significantly across Europe during the pandemic (Aina et al. 2021).

The segmentation of youth on the labour market and their possible marginalization to the NEET status are determined by a complex set of mechanisms that could also be associated with both difficulties in transitioning from school to labour, as well as with structural inequalities and with household characteristics (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2019).

The specialized literature comprises a significant number of studies that analyse the determinant factors of the NEET status and its possible persistence. Thus, some studies show that the persistence in the NEET status is more likely to occur among the youth coming from more socio-economically disadvantaged family backgrounds, with poor housing or a poor economic situation (Salvà-Mut et al. 2017), involving poverty and socio-economic inequality (O'Reilly et al. 2017; Papadakis et al. 2017).

Other papers conclude that the probability of being NEET is positively associated with a low educational level (Carcillo et al. 2015), sometimes with early leaving of school (Vallejo and Dooly, 2013) and with people who perceive their health status as bad or very bad, but also with the existence of some forms of disability (Mascherini 2019).

Other studies in the literature, although fewer, analyse the consequences on poverty (and inequality) resulting from the individual's status on the labour market (especially taking into account the unemployed), both at macro and at micro level. If at macro level the unemployment increases the poverty risk and contributes to inequality, at micro level, it gives rise to a number of negative social effects on the unemployed themselves, their families and on the communities they live in (Saunders, 2002). At individual level, being NEET predisposes individuals to social exclusion and to poverty (Gregg and Tominey, 2004; Mroz and Savage, 2006;

Luijkx and Wolbers, 2009), which can have psychological, material and behavioural consequences (e.g., self-destructive behaviour).

As mentioned above, some authors have studied in their works the characteristics of young NEET and thus, three main dimensions can be identified: the age groups to which the NEET concept applies, their employment status and the subgroups of young people that fall into this category.

As for the age group, initially, the EU considered that the NEET category should include a group of young people aged between 15 and 24, but then extended the limit to include those aged between 15 and 29 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022). The broadening of the age range resulted following consultations regarding the NEET status between the International Labour Organization and other international organizations.

However, the academic literature provides various definitions of the age range of young people who would fall under the NEET category (Sergi et al. 2018). Some works refer to small age groups, such as young people aged between 14 and 24 (Cabasés Piqué et al. 2016; Raghupathi V. și Raghupathi WW., 2020), 15-24 years old (Abayasekara and Gunasekara, 2019; Cefalo et al. 2020; Mauro and Mitra, 2020; Raileanu and Simionescu, 2022), 15-25 years old (Smoter, 2022), or 16-24 years old (Bradley et al. 2020; Maguire, 2015; Mellberg et al. 2023; Tamesberger and Bacher et al. 2014).

Holmes et al. (2021), Rodríguez-Modroño (2019) and Zuccotti and O'Reilly (2019) focus on young people aged between 15 and 29. Other studies largely observe this definition, but adjust the upper or lower age limits, usually because of the availability of data and, therefore, use groups such as 16-29 years (Serracant, 2013), 16-24 years (Mawn et al. 2017; Palmer and Small, 2021) or 15-27 years old (Wilson et al. 2008). Other analyses include young people aged 18-24 (Lőrinc et al. 2020; Scandurra et al. 2021), 18-30 years old (Juberg and Skjstad, 2019) and 15-34 years (Luke et al. 2020; Serracant, 2013).

Malo et al. (2023) claim that the extension of the upper limit from 24 to 29 has the advantage of including young people with a late transition from school to work, which reflects the key argument discussed by Arnett (2007) about delays and detours in maturing.

The construction of age groups depends on the historical and cultural context (Thompson, 2011), but also on other factors, such as the decision of young people who simply choose to take a sabbatical year (for example, to travel, (Maguire, 2015)) before entering the labour market or to continue their studies. What is noteworthy is that the age range covered in studies is not based on theoretical considerations or at least not motivated by theoretical arguments.

In terms of employment status, the statistical definition of NEET status is based on a total of six months (or a quarter of the last 24 months) without work, education or vocational training (Yates et al. 2011).

Furlong (2006) suggests a more nuanced definition of NEET, which includes "young people who are long-term unemployed, temporary unemployed, who take care of children or relatives in the homes, who are temporarily ill or disabled, and long-term, making efforts to develop artistic or musical talents or simply taking a short break from work or education."

In addition, in the literature there is a difference between those who are looking for a job, who are considered as "active" NEETs and those who are "inactive" (Holmes et al. 2021).

Some authors include, in the NEET definition, for example, women with caregiving responsibilities, young people who cannot work because of illness or disability, those discouraged from seeking work, and those who are volunteer in a NEET status (Yeung and Yang, 2020). Therefore, as an alternative to the NEET youth standard classifications, Serracant (2013) develops a restricted indicator for them, which refers to persons who are inactive, not studying, not sick or with no disabilities, that don't have caregiving responsibilities and do not wish to work or study.

André and Crosby (2022) distinguish between two groups of NEETs: those in "discontinuous", unstable work situations and NEETs who are "out of the system", i.e. individuals who do not seek help from service institutes.

Some young people are labelled as "NEET out of the cluster" when they do not participate in the programs offered by the public employment services and do not claim the allowance for jobseekers or other benefits related to their state of unemployment (van Parys and Struyven, 2013).

By assigning people to the category of "inactive" NEETs, they are removed from the unemployment statistics. This may mean, depending on the social protection regime in their country of residence, that they miss the interventions on the labour market that only target active NEETs (Maguire 2015, p. 124).

Another criterion, although rarely used, associates NEET status with the lack of young people's desire to receive education or vocational training or to find a job (Mauro and Mitra, 2020). Other studies refer to people with precarious jobs as NEET (Lawy et al. 2010).

Some young people are unavailable for work due to a state of health or self-perceived limitations in activities such as personal care and school, home and leisure activities, which are the statistical criteria used for the assessment of disability in young people. Out of these, some are in a vulnerable position, because they waive care services because of their insufficient availability and/or accessibility and are therefore forced to withdraw from the labour market.

Long-term unemployment is, in fact, one of the main structural factors of the NEET status (Eurofound, 2017; Caroleo et al., 2020) and, in turn, can further affect the chances of young people with health issues or disabilities who already face an increased risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Young mothers are also a vulnerable group, on average at a higher risk of becoming NEETs than young women without children (Levels et al, 2022). Recent research suggests that higher childcare costs are associated with a higher likelihood of becoming NEETs for young mothers, and that the relationship becomes insignificant for countries with longer maternal and parental leave, so that the costs of early education and care are lower (van Vugt, 2023).

The NEET rate is an indicator that aims to estimate the prevalence and vulnerability of the labour market among the young (Eurofound 2012) and, consequently, supports public policies and government actions.

This indicator takes on different meanings depending on the cultural specificity of each country and produces a moral judgment, because it presents NEET as being in social deficit: they do not meet the standard youth social integration model – either at school or at the job – and they do not fall into the dichotomic statistical category of the unemployed or inactive people. Therefore, research has systematically revealed the shortcomings of this indicator and many studies in the literature have highlighted its weaknesses (Cuzzocrea 2014; Follesø 2015; Holte 2017).

3. Characteristics of young NEETs in the first decades of the 21st century

At EU level, the NEET rate among young people aged 15 to 29 was the highest after the financial downturn of 2008-2009, peaking at 16.1% in 2013, while in 2023, after the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, it reached 11.2%.

Existing statistics show that the share of young NEETs falling into the different categories – characteristic of these groups of people – is closely linked to the economic cycle (Figure 1): during the economic crisis, about half of all the young NEETs were unemployed, either in the short term (25%) or in the long term (24%), while only 7% were re-entrants. In 2019, a year before the health crisis, only 35% of young NEETs were unemployed and 10% were re-entrants. The share of discouraged workers (those who do not actively seek employment because they feel there are no opportunities for them) also dropped between 2013 (7%) and 2019 (5%). During the pandemic, in 2020, a temporary growth of the number and share of short-term young unemployed was recorded, as compared to 2019. The share of discouraged workers appears to have increased with the onset of the pandemic (6%) (Figure 1).

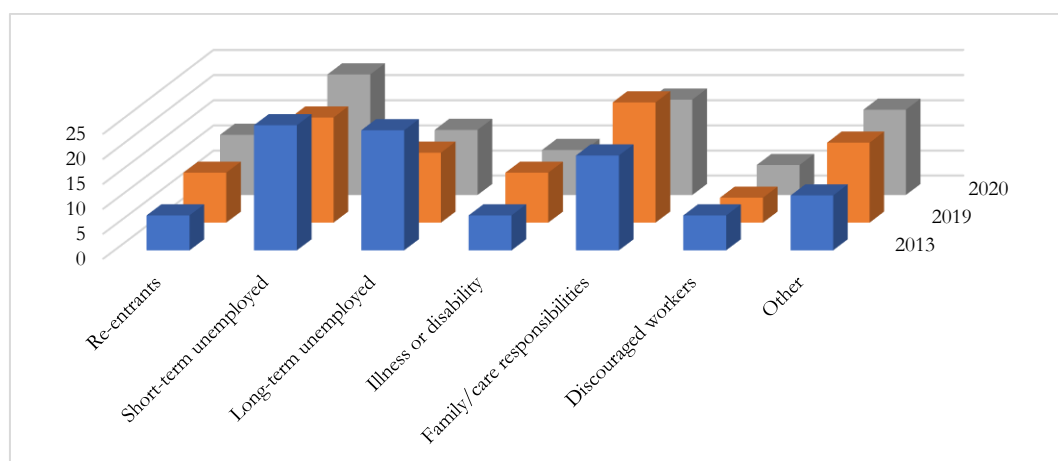


Figure 1. Structure of the NEET youth group in the EU-27 (%)

Source: produced by the author based on Eurofound statistics, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/data>

The EU Labour Force Survey New Methodology from 2021 onwards included important changes in the structure of the NEET group. Thus, a new variable was introduced, regarding the reasons why a young person does not want to work and the option “personal reasons” was added for not wanting, not seeking or not being available to work.

Changes have also been made in how participation in education and training is measured. In this context, the composition of the NEET youth group (depending on the reasons why they did not participate in employment, education or training) in the new EU-LFS structure is shown in Figure 2.

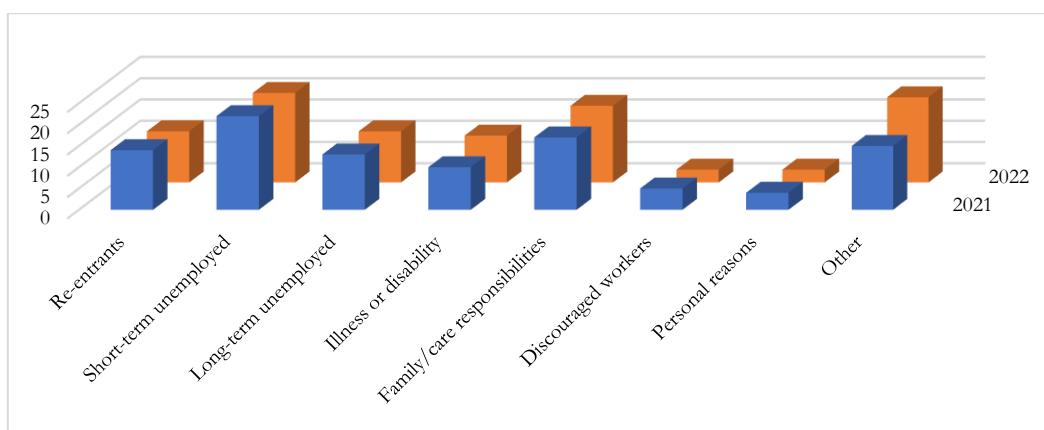


Figure 2. Structure of NEET youth group based on the new EU-LFS methodology in the EU-27 in 2021 and 2022 (%)

Source: produced by the author based on Eurofound statistics, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/data>

As the NEET rate fell considerably between 2021 and 2022 and the youth employment rate continued to rise, the short- and long-term unemployment share, as well as the share of discouraged workers among those who are NEETs, have dropped since 2021. Nevertheless, the high rates of young people with “other reasons” and “personal reasons” in the NEET category may include those with certain vulnerabilities and who are currently not quantified by statistics.

Also, among re-entrants, young people with an unstable attachment towards the labour market (workers fired and those waiting to start temporary seasonal work or informal contracts) may also be at risk of social exclusion. Many studies have found that temporary employment can increase the risk of poverty in labour, due to job precariousness and gaps. The growth of temporary employment is often an active policy of integrating young people into the labour market (Harsløf, 2003; Lilla and Staffolani, 2012), but this policy may have the unintended consequence of creating precarious working conditions, especially for female workers and migrants.

According to recent statistics and research, young people living in villages and rural areas are among the most likely to be NEETs, especially in southern and eastern European countries (Caroleo et al., 2022; Rocca et al., 2022). Due to the fact that studies examining their situation are recent and still rare, their vulnerability is not yet fully acknowledged (Mascherini, 2018; Simões et al, 2022). However, Eurostat statistics show the significant differences between NEET rates by urbanization levels, especially in the years after the Great Recession (Figure 3).

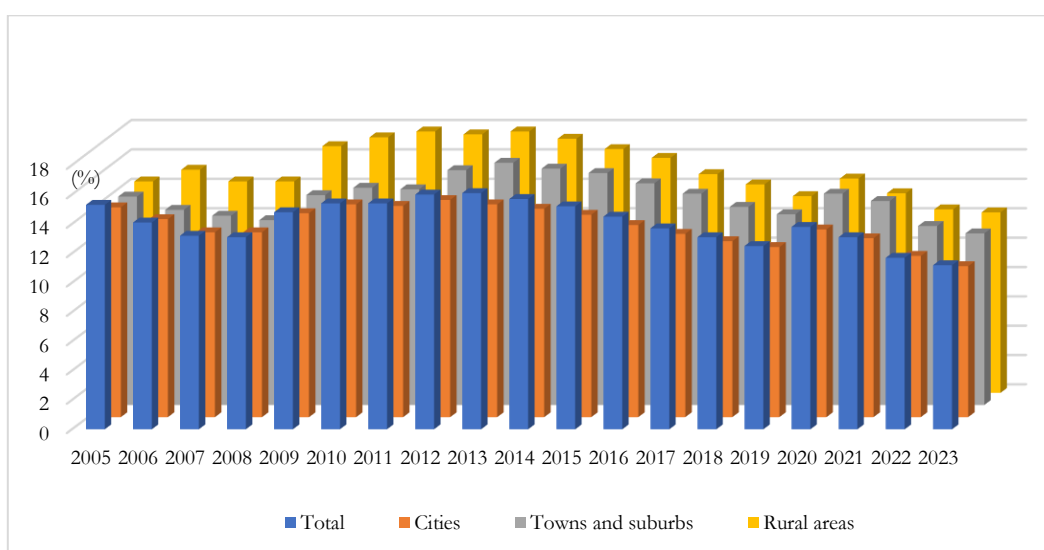


Figure 3. Evolution of NEET rate in the EU-27, in the period 2005-2023, by degrees of urbanization

Source: produced by the author based on Eurostat [edat_lfse_29] statistics

Young people living in hard-to-reach areas have a 1.5 times higher risk of becoming NEETs than young people living in medium-sized and large cities. Also, they are much more exposed to the risk of social marginalization than those in the urban area.

Young NEETs in rural areas face additional challenges from those in urban areas due to: lack of adequate infrastructure; high rates of school abandonment; high unemployment rates and, last but not least,

the depopulation process caused by the youth migration from rural areas (Mujčinović, et al. 2021; Simões, et al. 2021).

Also, young NEETs in rural areas face greater uncertainty in transitioning to adulthood. Compared to young people in urban areas, they live in areas that are economically disadvantaged and have less educational resources and fewer jobs. Therefore, they enter the labour market earlier and the likelihood of accepting precarious or informal job offers is high (Almeida and Simões, 2020), jobs that tend to be widely available during deep recessions. On the other hand, young people who were NEETs before the economic/health crisis are vulnerable to becoming NEETs again, especially if they are women living in rural areas.

One of the factors leading to NEET status is the level of education of young people, which can be an important element of the structural changes of this group of young people. Thus, in 2023, the NEET rate for young people aged 15 to 29 in the EU-27 was 12.9% among those with low education levels, compared to 11.6% among those with medium education levels and 7.8% among those with high education levels.

NEET rates in the EU-27 Member States for people aged 15-29 with low education ranged from 5.8% in Sweden to 31.5% in Romania in 2023. As a result, 10 countries had NEET rates higher than the EU average, and these countries were: Austria (13.3 %), Lithuania (13.9 %), Cyprus (14.0 %), Hungary (14.4 %), Italy (14.9 %), Spain (16.5 %), Malta (18.2 %), Bulgaria (18.6 %) and Romania (31.5 %).

Among young people aged 15 to 29 with a medium education level, NEET rates ranged from 4.3% in the Netherlands to 19.0% in Greece. For this level of education, three countries recorded a NEET rate of over 17 % (Lithuania, Italy and Greece), while the only country with less than 5 % was the Netherlands.

As for people aged 15 to 29 with higher education, their NEET rates were generally considerably lower than for other levels of education. The lowest share was recorded in Sweden (3.5%), however a value of 20.2% was recorded in Greece.

At both EU and country level, the percentage of NEET women is significantly higher than that of men (with an annual average of about 6 pp., considering the period 2012-2023). These differences are also generated by the socio-cultural climate, professional counselling and specificity of labour market in each of the EU-27 Member States.

In 2023, 12.5% of young women aged 15 to 29 in the EU-27 were NEETs, while the corresponding share among young men was 2.4 percentage points lower (10.1%). This phenomenon is due to some factors, of which we can mention: social conventions or pressures (which tend to grant greater importance to the role of women in the family and to the role of men in ensuring the family's welfare through work), the risks of insertion in the labour market (employers prefer to hire young men than young women), the difficulties of assimilation when returning to work after childbirth, etc.

The statistical analysis of the NEET youth group structure by the three age groups (15–19 years old, 20–24 years old and 25–29 years old) shows that the gender gap in the EU-27 for them has registered a growth in relation to age for 2023, as well. For the youngest age group, men recorded a higher share of NEET than women, the difference being 0.8 pp. The NEET rate for young women aged 20-25 was about the same as that for men, just 0.1 pp higher than that of young men. The gender gap increased to 7.5 pp among people aged between 25 and 29.

4. Conclusions

The negative consequences of NEET status are numerous and affect not only the individual and his family, but also society as a whole. The exclusion of young people, both from the labour market and from the education or training systems, increases the risk of social exclusion of the individual and reduces the likelihood of reemployment.

The low level or even the lack of an income among NEETs does not allow them to participate in various activities and purchase various consumer goods. NEETs are individuals who, by their status, are excluded from social relationships/networks created at work or in the educational environment.

The lack of a job or the failure to fit into an educational or vocational system seriously affects a young person, both materially and emotionally. The characteristics of a young NEET are feelings of stress, panic, anxiety, at which point frustration, anger, pronounced irritability occur. All these emotional states that the young person goes through because of a low income or lack of it have consequences both for himself and in his relationship with the surrounding world. Interpersonal relationships are threatened by the behaviour of the young NEET, who can seek refuge in many harmful activities.

A special role belongs to the moral and mental state, which affects the young that became NEET more than the economic side. Complexes of futility for society and the family emerge. At the same time, the extension of the NEET period, which generates the poverty of a large group of young people, can lead to profound social conflicts.

The monetary and non-monetary barriers that NEETs face every day make them more susceptible to traumatic experiences, and these, in turn, can turn into a general and resentful dissatisfaction with the whole society and government, either national and regional/local, or even perceived as "invasive" of regional or international superstructures.

The Great Recession and the health crisis have had a visibly disproportionate impact on the mental well-being of young people in general and NEETs in particular, compared to those in other age groups.

Also, the crises of the 21st century have had a special impact on NEETs in general, but especially on those living in rural areas, disadvantaged environments or marginalized communities. In this context, it is necessary to make them become a priority as soon as possible in the supporting projects and aid schemes for NEET youth.

As young NEETs face a higher risk of exclusion and tend to be more fragile in relation to economic and social changes, their school abandonment rate, as well as their unemployment rate would grow.

In order to avoid a “lost” or blocked generation, it is important to know the real size and structure of this group of young people in order for policy makers to pay particular attention to them, to monitor whether the currently-implemented policies are sufficient and to take appropriate measures where needed and, last but not least, to adopt cross-sectoral measures to integrate mental health policies into educational environments, workplaces and welfare systems.

Guaranteeing adequate and sustainable measures, coupled with adequate financing and adapted social services, represent the only chance for these young people to a fair integration next to the other members of society.

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