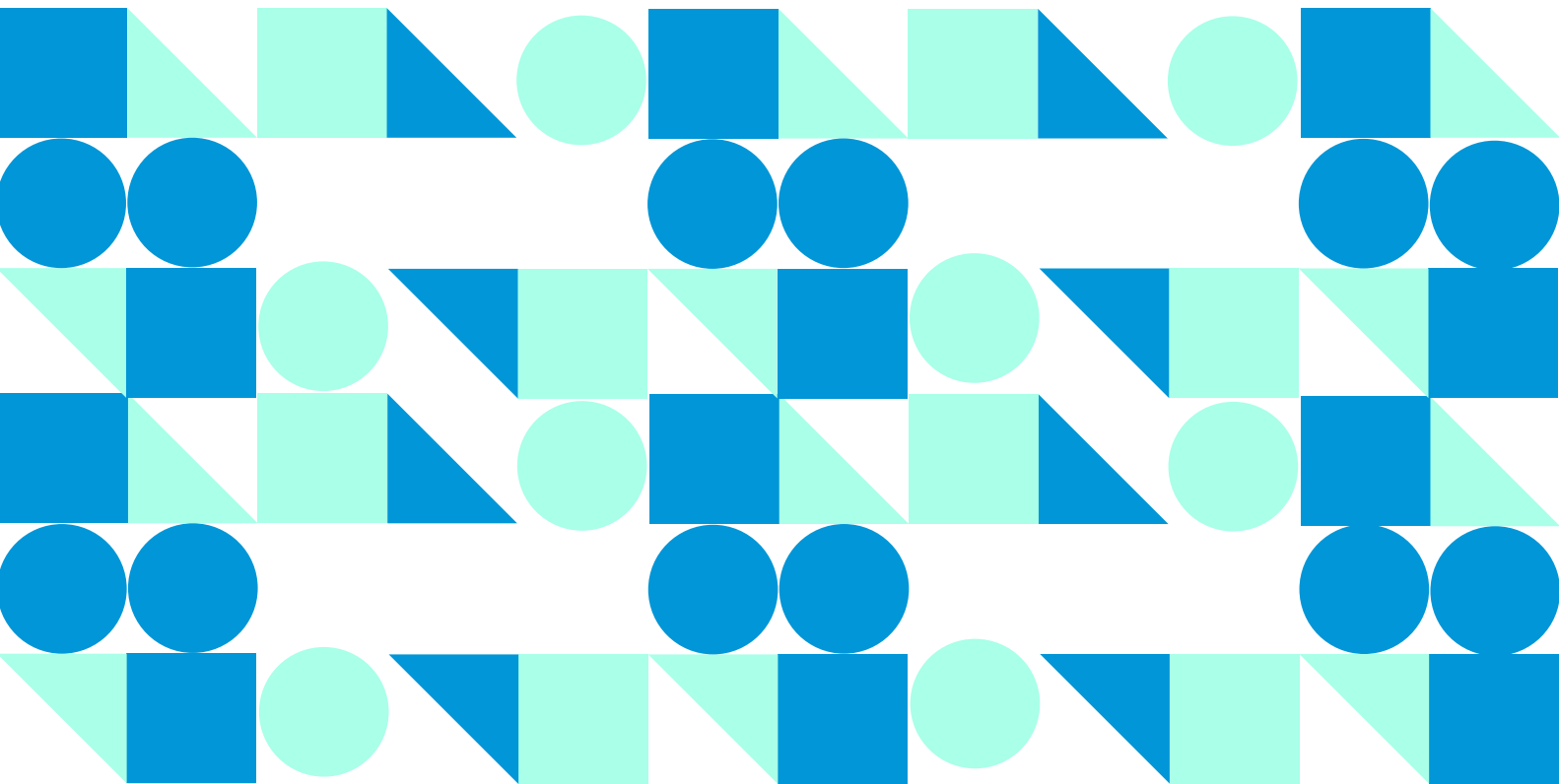




Research paper

Building inclusive futures for NEETs

VET solutions for Europe's young people
not in employment, education or training





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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications. We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policymaking in the EU Member States.

Cedefop was originally established in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75. This decision was repealed in 2019 by Regulation (EU) 2019/128 establishing Cedefop as a European Union Agency with a renewed mandate.

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Foreword

Young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) face persistent barriers to acquiring skills, building confidence and finding direction in their professional – and often personal – lives. In the context of Europe’s green, digital and demographic transitions, this loss of potential undermines both social cohesion and competitiveness. Vocational education and training (VET) is a critical lever in this regard: it creates pathways into meaningful work, aligns skills with evolving labour market needs and promotes social inclusion, as research by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has consistently shown.

Progress has been made. Youth labour market outcomes have improved in many European Union Member States, and the EU NEET rate fell to about 11% in 2024, down from 16.1% in 2013. However, achieving the European Pillar of Social Rights target of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030 – and sustaining progress thereafter – will require persistent disparities between Member States, genders and regions to be addressed.

Cedefop has steadily built up the evidence base on how VET supports the social and professional reintegration of vulnerable youth. Its research on [early leaving from education and training](#), NEETs and inclusive VET systems, alongside the practical tools and guidance it offers, helps policymakers and practitioners design and deliver effective measures that reconnect young people to learning and work.

This report contributes new insights into VET’s strategic role in empowering young people. Cedefop’s [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) – a unique, continuously updated knowledge hub – has become a reference point for policymakers and practitioners across Europe. By combining evidence-based guidance, practical tools and curated good practices, the toolkit offers actionable solutions to complex challenges. Its comprehensive approach helps stakeholders design outreach, activation and reintegration measures that are both effective and sustainable, making it one of the most influential instruments for supporting vulnerable young people in Europe today.

The evidence is clear: meaningful change demands coherent, long-term approaches rather than short-term fixes. By turning knowledge into action – and by leveraging tools such as the VET toolkit for empowering NEETs – Europe can ensure that every young person has a real opportunity to participate, contribute and thrive.

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The report also draws on the insights and contributions of participants in Cedefop's 18th Brussels seminar, [Youth in Education, Youth in Employment – Boosting European policies for social inclusion](#), organised in cooperation with the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and held on 23 June 2025.

Table of contents

Foreword.....	1
Acknowledgements.....	2
Executive summary.....	7
Chapter 1. Introduction	14
1.1. Who are NEETs?	15
1.2. Why being NEET matters	17
1.3. Spotlight on NEETs on the EU agenda: how policy has developed over time	19
1.4. Research scope and methods	22
Chapter 2. The magnitude of the neet phenomenon in Europe	24
2.1. The evolution of the NEET rate: trends and territorial patterns across Europe.....	24
2.2. Projected NEET rate trajectories to 2035	30
Chapter 3. The role of vet in supporting neets	36
3.1. Embedding VET in holistic approaches	37
3.2. Cedefop’s VET toolkit for empowering NEETs	38
3.2.1. Purpose and added value of the toolkit.....	39
3.2.2. Structure and functionality of the toolkit	39
3.2.3. Risk factors for becoming NEET	40
3.2.4. Understanding NEET diversity: profiles and policy implications	43
3.2.5. From evidence to practice: intervention approaches	44
3.2.6. Assessing the impact of intervention approaches.....	46
3.2.7. A community of practice and ongoing development	47
Chapter 4. The gender dimension of the neet phenomenon	49
4.1. Female NEETs and the challenges they face.....	49
4.2. Data and trends	52
4.3. Holistic intervention approaches for female NEETs.....	56
4.3.1. Using data to categorise NEETs and tailor interventions.....	57
4.3.2. Systematically addressing childcare needs	58
4.3.3. Improving access to flexible learning and employment opportunities	58

4.3.4. Investing in mentoring and empowerment initiatives	59
4.3.5. Enhancing outreach through trusted channels	59
4.4. Good practices	60
Chapter 5. The urban–rural dimension of the neet phenomenon	63
5.1. NEETs living in remote areas and the challenges they face.....	63
5.2. Data and trends	66
5.3. The link between gender and degree of urbanisation.....	68
5.4. Holistic interventions to support NEETs in remote areas.....	76
5.4.1. Supporting local VET and guidance ecosystems.....	77
5.4.2. Strengthening digital access and skills	78
5.4.3. Investing in local coordination and partnerships	78
5.4.4. Improving infrastructure and transport connectivity	79
5.4.5. Fostering rural youth entrepreneurship.....	79
5.4.6. Engaging NEETs in programme design.....	80
5.5. Good practices	81
Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy messages.....	83
6.1. Overall conclusions.....	83
6.2. Conclusions on female NEETs	84
6.3. Conclusions on rural NEETs.....	85
6.4. Looking ahead: priorities for policy and research	86
Abbreviations.....	90
References.....	91
Cedefop online databases and toolkits	97

Boxes, figures and maps

Boxes

1. NEETs as a global phenomenon.....	22
2. Overview of risk factors for becoming NEET identified by Cedefop.....	40
3. Risk factors associated with becoming NEET: further insights.....	40
4. Overview of six NEET profiles.....	44
5. Overview of Cedefop’s intervention approaches to NEETs.....	45
6. Intervention approach: preparing NEETs to access green jobs.....	46
7. Cedefop’s network of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET.....	48
8. Intervention approach: helping female NEETs (re)integrate into education, employment or training.....	57
9. Example of good practice: Polish Outdoor Learning.....	61
10. Example of good practice: DigitHer.....	62
11. Intervention approach: NEETs living in remote areas – bridging the geographic divide.....	77
12. Example of good practice: Back on Track.....	81
13. Example of good practice: Go Remote.....	82
14. Policy suggestions to help ensure inclusive transitions for Europe’s NEETs.....	87

Figures

1. Trends in NEET rates over two decades, EU-27, 2004-2024 (%).....	28
2. NEET rate trajectories using a non-linear diminishing returns model to reach the set target of 6% by 2035, EU-27.....	32
3. NEET rate trajectories using a direct recursive model, EU-27, 2005-2035..	33
4. Two decades of NEET rates in the EU-27 (2004-2024) – average, male and female rates (%).....	54
5. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates by gender, 2024 (%).....	55
6. NEET rates by degree of urbanisation, EU-27, 2024 (%).....	67
7. Comparison of EU-27 urban NEET rates by gender, 2024 (%).....	69
8. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates in towns and suburbs by gender, 2024 (%).....	71
9. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates in rural areas by gender, 2024 (%).....	73

Maps

1. NEET rates, EU-27, 2024 (%).....	25
2. NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%).....	26
3. Male NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%).....	74
4. Female NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%).....	75

Executive summary

This research is an expansion of pioneering work to support policymakers and vocational education and training (VET) practitioners in empowering young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and tackling early leaving from VET in Europe, conducted by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) within the team [VET for Youth – Teachers and Trainers](#). For more than two decades, Cedefop has led research, promoted peer learning through its policy learning forums and developed and managed online toolkits to promote inclusion in and through VET by supporting learners at risk of dropping out, early leavers from VET and NEETs.

Cedefop's online knowledge hub on inclusion, available through the [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) and the [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#), offers a platform built on intervention approaches, good practices and interactive tools that is designed for both policymakers and VET teachers and trainers. This knowledge hub is supported by Cedefop's [network of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET](#), which has played a vital role in enriching and disseminating the toolkits since 2017.

This report draws largely on the wealth of information available in Cedefop's [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#), which contains a wide range of resources specifically targeting NEETs. The toolkit includes effective intervention approaches grounded in analytical work and tailored to the diverse profiles and needs of NEETs, as well as evaluation methods and guidelines to help policymakers and practitioners assess the impact of their measures and practices. It also provides an up-to-date collection of good practices inspired by VET initiatives, along with topical publications covering the latest research on NEETs. Furthermore, the toolkit sheds light on the risk factors associated with becoming NEET and offers guidance for working effectively with this group.

In addition to the abovementioned resources, this report draws on recent data from Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union, to provide a secondary analysis of the evolution of NEET rates over time, over more than a decade, and to project possible future trends. It offers an important contribution to understanding the magnitude and dynamics of the NEET issue and the policy responses to it across Europe. The report examines the mechanisms and support measures employed to address this phenomenon at the EU, national and regional levels, with a particular focus on two cross-cutting dimensions affecting all NEET profiles: gender and the urban–rural divide. By thoroughly exploring how these factors heighten the risk of social exclusion and shape the distinct needs of different groups, the research highlights innovative and holistic policies and

practices that may help NEETs and those working with this target group to navigate the green, digital and demographic transitions.

The findings and policy messages presented in this report, which focuses on empowering NEETs, directly support Cedefop's ongoing work on promoting inclusion and lifelong learning. They contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021), and particularly to efforts to achieve the headline target of reducing the share of NEETs to 9% by 2030. By identifying effective outreach, guidance and re-engagement strategies, this research provides evidence-based insights to assist EU Member States and EU-level actors in monitoring progress and designing targeted interventions under this framework.

Beyond this, the results provide strategic intelligence for implementing the Council of the European Union's Recommendation on pathways to school success (2022), identifying high-impact measures that reduce early leaving and strengthen mechanisms for educational re-engagement. They directly support progress towards the objectives of the 2030 strategic framework for education and training by advancing inclusion, quality and equity in learning outcomes across systems.

Moreover, the findings reinforce the ambitions of the Union of Skills strategy – including the forthcoming EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda – and respond to the priorities of the Herning Declaration. Taken together, they offer actionable guidance for policymakers on how to steer education and training systems to better equip young people with the skills, confidence and opportunities required for successful transitions into work and for sustained participation in lifelong learning.

Highlights on key findings

Eight million at risk: why addressing NEET disparities requires targeted, territorial and gender-sensitive strategies

This report's analysis confirms that the inclusion of NEETs remains a central challenge for Europe. Although the overall share of NEETs in the EU has declined substantially over the past decade – from a post-financial crisis peak of 16.1% in 2013 to around 11% in 2024 – there is still reason for concern. The current NEET rate corresponds to approximately eight million young people. Significant disparities persist among Member States and among regions, as do differences among subgroups of NEETs. For example, NEET levels range from about 5% in the Netherlands to around 19% in Romania, and in several regions at NUTS 2 level (the second level of the nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) within Member States the share of young people in this situation exceeds 15% or even 30%. These territorial imbalances underline that the NEET phenomenon cannot

be addressed through one-size-fits-all policy solutions. Instead, place-sensitive strategies are required to tackle structural barriers deeply rooted in regional economic and social contexts.

Two cross-cutting risk dimensions emerge as particularly influential in shaping both entry into and persistence within NEET status: gender and location. Young women remain over-represented among the NEET population, largely due to caregiving responsibilities, early motherhood and systemic barriers to their labour market participation. Limited access to affordable childcare and flexible training opportunities, combined with gendered expectations around family roles, often results in extended periods of inactivity that can lead to lasting disengagement from the labour market. At the same time, young people living in rural and remote areas face heightened risks of exclusion due to limited access to education and training institutions, weaker transport links and fewer employment opportunities. These factors often reinforce one another, making disengagement more persistent and difficult to reverse. The evidence confirms that effective responses must integrate both gender-sensitive and place-based perspectives to ensure equitable opportunities for all young people in Europe.

One group, many realities: why NEET policies must reflect different needs and risks

The heterogeneity of NEETs is illustrated through Cedefop's NEET profiles, which differentiate among NEETs according to their distance from the world of work and learning, distinguishing between those still seeking employment or training opportunities and those who, for various reasons, are not. This typology demonstrates that the design and intensity of policy responses must correspond to the different levels of vulnerability among NEETs. Within this broad spectrum, active NEETs, such as recent jobseekers or re-entrants to the job market, may require short-term interventions to strengthen their employability. In contrast, inactive NEETs, including discouraged young people, individuals with caregiving responsibilities or those facing health challenges, are often in need of longer-term, multidimensional support to rebuild their motivation, skills and trust in institutions. The report also highlights the crucial role of early identification and prevention mechanisms, which can help detect young people at risk before they fully disengage from education or the labour market.

Holistic approaches: why coordinated VET interventions deliver lasting results

The findings further demonstrate that VET can play a decisive role when embedded in holistic, individualised pathways that combine outreach, guidance and mentoring, skills development, work-based learning and systematic follow-up. Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs provides concrete examples of such

approaches and shows that re-engagement and progression outcomes are strongest when interventions are tailored to specific NEET profiles. Evidence from these practices indicates that combining employability measures with social support services, such as counselling or access to childcare, increases the sustainability of reintegration. Coordination across institutions, including public employment services, VET providers and other organisations working with young people, also emerges as a critical success factor. Integrated delivery ensures that young people receive continuous and coherent support rather than fragmented or one-off assistance that only partly addresses their situation.

Beyond business as usual: what it will take to reach Europe's NEET targets for 2030

The report's forward-looking analysis, which extends to 2035, highlights two contrasting trajectories for the evolution of NEET rates in the EU. The policy-driven, diminishing-returns scenario assumes a coordinated and sustained effort by Member States to reach the European Pillar of Social Rights target of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030 and to continue converging towards a more ambitious hypothetical target, adopted in this research for analytical purposes, of 6% by 2035. This trajectory indicates that the marginal outreach effort required to engage the hardest-to-reach NEETs will increase over time and that continued investment will be necessary to maintain momentum. The alternative, business-as-usual scenario assumes a continuation of current trends without new policy acceleration and shows that several Member States risk stagnation or divergence from the abovementioned objectives. Achieving the European Pillar of Social Rights target, and reducing the share of NEETs even further, will therefore require coherent strategies and adequate investment that go beyond maintaining current levels of policy attention and intervention.

The analysis identifies gender, place sensitivity and policy precision as key drivers of success. Achieving lasting progress will require adapting measures to the diverse realities of young people and consistently monitoring outcomes, particularly in terms of employment and learning, social inclusion and employability, and participation and retention, to turn the pillar's ambition into tangible inclusion and ensure that no young people are left behind.

Key policy messages

Reducing the share of NEETs to 9% by 2030 will require coordinated policy efforts from all sides. VET should become the backbone of inclusive policy design across the EU. VET policies must be embedded in holistic pathways that accompany young people from initial contact and guidance, through upskilling and work-based learning, to long-term follow-up. Continuity across these stages is vital for sustainable reintegration into society and the labour market. Evidence from

Cedefop's [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) shows that programmes combining skills acquisition with personalised mentoring, psychosocial support and access to social services deliver consistently better results. Such approaches help young people rebuild their self-esteem, regain trust in institutions and move from short-term participation to sustained (re-)engagement. Embedding these approaches into national and regional youth strategies is therefore a key success factor. The following policy messages draw on the main findings of this report and outline priority areas for targeted action to achieve sustainable progress towards reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030.

- (a) **Bridging the gender gap.** Young women remain at higher risk of prolonged inactivity. Policy measures should therefore include childcare provision, flexible and modular VET, mentoring for young mothers and supported re-entry or second-chance schemes. Facilitating access to affordable childcare and encouraging employers to provide family-friendly working and training arrangements are essential to enable young mothers to participate in the world of work or education. The gender dimension should also be systematically integrated into data collection and into programme design and evaluation. Without gender-sensitive monitoring, significant inequalities risk remaining invisible and therefore unaddressed. Promoting gender balance in VET participation, especially in traditionally male-dominated fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics, will help reduce structural barriers and align training opportunities with emerging labour market needs.
- (b) **Reducing territorial inequalities and making welfare policies more inclusive. Addressing existing territorial disparities among NEETs is critical.** Place-based strategies are required to reach young people in rural and remote areas, as well as those in urban or suburban settings where opportunities are limited. These strategies should consider local labour market structures, demographics and infrastructure gaps such as limited transport. Online training, targeted transport support, improved digital connectivity and strong local partnerships can help close territorial divides. Municipalities, regional authorities and VET providers must cooperate closely to bring opportunities closer to young people and avoid further geographic exclusion. Programmes should remain flexible enough to adapt to local conditions while maintaining coherence with national and European frameworks, such as the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme. Supporting young people disadvantaged by geography also contributes to territorial cohesion and the upward convergence of EU regions.

- (c) **Tailoring support to specific NEET profiles.** Interventions should be customised to NEET profiles so that the intensity and combination of support measures match the individual's distance from the labour market or education. Individuals actively seeking employment or training may benefit from short-term, targeted measures such as job matching or career guidance. In contrast, discouraged or long-term-inactive young people require longer-term, multi-layered assistance to build their confidence and address social barriers. Scaling up high-quality apprenticeships and traineeships, supported by employer engagement and mentoring, remains one of the most effective ways to facilitate transitions into work. Work-based learning not only provides skills but also fosters belonging and purpose, helping to prevent repeated cycles of disengagement.
- (d) **Building future-ready skills.** Green and digital skills should be systematically mainstreamed into all VET offers to ensure that ongoing economic transitions strengthen rather than further marginalise vulnerable young people. Linking NEET reintegration measures to green and digital sectors can create new pathways into growing areas of employment while contributing to Europe's broader sustainability agenda. Achieving these objectives requires stronger coordination between public employment services, VET providers and social and healthcare services to ensure coherent referral pathways and consistent case management. Sustained outreach and trust building, particularly through community intermediaries such as local youth workers and mentoring networks, are essential to connect with inactive and hidden NEETs who risk falling off the radar.
- (e) **Measuring what works for NEETs and providing continuous, holistic and multidisciplinary support.** Monitoring frameworks must measure what truly matters. This includes disaggregating data by gender, age group and degree of urbanisation and tracking participation and retention outcomes over time, not only immediate placements. Monitoring should, for example, assess whether young people remain in education, training or employment six to twelve months after completing a NEET-targeted programme. The implementation of these measures should continue to be supported through EU funding instruments. To consolidate progress and foster a more inclusive and resilient Europe, successful interventions identified through Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs, together with its accompanying tools and evaluation guidelines, should be scaled up and tailored to the specific contexts of Member States.

Achieving the EU's 9% NEET target by 2030 will require a transformation in how Europe supports its youth: strategies must move from reactive to preventive, from fragmented to holistic and from one-size-fits-all to inclusive and targeted. Investing in gender equality, territorial fairness and systemic collaboration through VET is not only a moral imperative but also has the potential to become a cornerstone of Europe's social and economic resilience.

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

In the years following the global financial crisis, the concept of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) became emblematic of the persistent challenge of youth unemployment and inactivity – a challenge that many European Union Member States continue to face to varying degrees. Since then, numerous policies, measures, programmes and initiatives have been implemented to address this issue. Yet, despite notable progress and a broad array of interventions, important questions remain. Which approaches have proven most effective? How can their impact be sustained over time? And are there gaps or emerging challenges that still need to be tackled?

Understanding the profiles, needs and risk factors associated with NEETs is therefore essential for designing holistic, tailored and effective policies. This report aims to provide evidence to support the development of such policies, ones that genuinely work for NEETs.

Considering the evolving dynamics of youth employment is especially critical in the context of the three transitions that are currently under way: demographic change, the green transition and digitalisation (including the growth of artificial intelligence). Demographic trends are leading to an ageing population and growing difficulties for many sectors in recruiting suitable workers. This reality calls for a resilient and adaptable young workforce capable of replacing those retiring. At the same time, as industries move towards more sustainable models and embrace advanced digital technologies, the demand for skilled and flexible labour is increasing.

Ensuring employment opportunities are accessible to vulnerable young people, particularly NEETs, is therefore not only an economic imperative but also a strategic necessity for safeguarding the long-term resilience and competitiveness of European economies.

This first chapter outlines the conceptual framework and definitions used, reviews the policy background and explains the methodological approach and rationale behind conducting this research. It also explores who NEETs are, why their inclusion matters and how this concern has evolved within the EU policy agenda over the years.

1.1. Who are NEETs?

Past economic crises have repeatedly shown that youth employment is especially vulnerable during economic downturns. This was evident in Europe after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and again during the COVID-19 pandemic, periods when young people were disproportionately affected by job losses. Although European labour markets recovered relatively quickly after the pandemic, the stability and quality of youth employment remain of concern.

This vulnerability stems, in part, from the weaker attachment of young people to the labour market compared with other age groups. Many start their careers in temporary or part-time jobs to gain initial experience and are over-represented in sectors that react more quickly to economic fluctuations, such as hospitality, retail and personal services. When labour markets tighten, new entrants must also compete with more experienced candidates. This often results in a vicious cycle where young people need work experience to secure a job but cannot gain that experience without employment.

An in-depth understanding of who NEETs are, including their needs and characteristics, can inform the development of effective policies that strengthen the sustainable integration of these young people into the labour market and into society. This not only enhances their employment prospects but also contributes to broader economic stability, competitiveness and social inclusion in Europe. Policy responses have, especially in recent years, tried to address the challenge of the diversity of NEETs. Under the umbrella of the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme, Member States are committing to offer employment, continued education or training to every young person within four months of them leaving education or becoming unemployed. As past research has shown, the success of measures created under the Youth Guarantee, as well as other policy measures, depends heavily on whether these measures are tailored to different subgroups of NEETs, as no one-size-fits-all approach does justice to the complex reality of NEETs across Europe (Eurofound, 2015, 2024).

According to Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union), the NEET indicator measures the percentage of individuals aged 15 to 29 who are not employed and not participating in any formal or informal education or training activity. More specifically, the indicator refers to persons who meet both of the following conditions: (a) they are not employed, meaning they are either unemployed or inactive, according to the International Labour Organization

classification ⁽¹⁾, and (b) they have not received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS). This statistical definition, which is used by Eurostat, measures the share of young people who are disengaged from both the labour market and education. As such, the NEET indicator captures a broader dimension of youth disengagement than youth unemployment alone and serves as a proxy for the proportion of young people disconnected from both learning and work. Although the main indicator typically covers the 15-29 age group, it can be disaggregated by age group.

It is crucial to take note that this statistical definition of NEETs does not capture the high heterogeneity of this group of young people, which encompasses individuals with different skill levels, activity statuses and personal backgrounds. It includes young people who are short- or long-term unemployed or inactive; those who are low-skilled, low-qualified or highly qualified; young people with physical, cognitive or geographic limitations; as well as migrants and refugees. To better understand their needs, Cedefop has further developed specific NEET profiles by determining the distance of each profile from participation in employment, education or training. Cedefop divides NEET profiles into two main categories: those who are still actively seeking work or an education and training pathway and those who are not (see Section 3.2.1 'Purpose and added value of the toolkit' for more details on NEET profiles). The latter are the most hard-to-reach and -support profiles as they are young people who are likely to have become discouraged in their job search, are not actively looking for employment and are typically facing multiple challenges in reintegrating into the world of work or education.

A crucial consideration remains the question of who is at higher risk of either becoming NEET or remaining in this category. Patterns and dynamics vary strongly both across the EU and, to some extent, within Member States. Factors such as age, gender and educational attainment are important determinants of becoming NEET, as are having a migrant background, caring responsibilities or disabilities, along with socioeconomic background more generally (Eurofound, 2012). NEET rates are higher among those in their mid-to-late twenties as some struggle to complete the transition into stable work. Lower educational attainment is also associated with a higher likelihood of NEET status; in EU data from 2024, NEET rates were notably higher among those with lower education levels than among those with tertiary education. Around 12.6% of those with only lower secondary education were NEETs, compared with 11.3% of those with upper secondary or

⁽¹⁾ According to the [ILO classification](#), individuals are considered *employed* if they have performed any work for pay or profit during the reference week, *unemployed* if they are without work, available for work and actively seeking employment and *inactive* if they are neither employed nor unemployed.

post-secondary non-tertiary education and just 7.9% of those with tertiary qualifications (Eurostat, 2025). This is also where the link between NEETs and early leaving comes in; generally speaking, lower educational attainment is an important indicator of the likelihood of young people becoming NEET. In terms of gender, it is interesting to note that the gender gap widens in the 25-29-year-old cohort, reflecting the weight of care responsibilities: in 2024, 12.1% of young women aged 15-29 were NEET versus 10.0% of young men (EU average). Evidence consistently links motherhood and unpaid care to a higher risk of becoming NEET.

All the different dimensions and characteristics of NEETs need to be carefully separated to build a foundation for efficient policy responses that enable their reintegration into the world of work or education. The present research takes into account these different NEET profiles when proposing holistic and targeted intervention approaches (see Section 4.3 'Holistic intervention approaches for female NEETs' and Section 5.4 'Holistic interventions to support NEETs in remote areas' for more information) and analyses the two dimensions present across the different profiles that constitute important risk factors for becoming and remaining NEET: gender and the rural–urban divide.

1.2. Why being NEET matters

At the individual level, being NEET can have profound, long-lasting consequences for young people's personal and professional development and social inclusion. Beyond the immediate loss of income and career prospects, prolonged inactivity can erode self-esteem, motivation and sense of purpose. In contemporary society, employment and education provide not only income and future opportunities but also identity, direction and belonging. Without them, many young people face social isolation, reduced trust in institutions and growing feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Research shows that, while young people often cope well with short periods of disengagement, extended inactivity poses a much greater challenge (Eurofound, 2014). Over time, it can reinforce a cycle of discouragement and detachment, making re-entry into education or employment increasingly difficult and more costly from a policy perspective (Psifidou & Livanos, 2023).

Studies also indicate that NEETs face heightened risks of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, driven by uncertainty about the future and the stigma attached to inactivity (Cedefop, 2025a). Limited access to role models, support structures and social networks can further worsen their situation. Conversely, supportive workplaces and inclusive educational settings significantly enhance young people's chances of a successful transition into adulthood. A lack

of daily structure can encourage unhealthy lifestyles or even anti-social behaviour, amplifying its negative effects on well-being. These challenges are particularly acute for long-term NEETs, as the cumulative effects of inactivity often lead to deeper discouragement and a diminished sense of agency.

From an economic perspective, being NEET reduces a person's immediate and lifetime earning potential. Early detachment from the labour market often results in lower lifetime income and weaker career progression, as opportunities to build experience and human capital are lost (Psifidou & Livanos, 2023). This scarring effect means that even after re-entering employment, former NEETs are more likely to face unstable jobs and lower wages than their peers (Eurofound, 2012). The associated risks of poverty and social exclusion increase over time and may even extend to the next generation (Danner et al., 2021).

The consequences are even more severe for certain subgroups within the NEET population. Young women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, face compounded barriers due to gender stereotypes, interrupted education and limited access to childcare (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021; Cedefop, 2025b). Similarly, young people with disabilities or chronic health conditions also encounter structural barriers that hinder their access to mainstream education and employment opportunities (Cedefop, 2023a, 2025b). Migrant young people and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to social networks credential recognition or do not have sufficient language skills to compete equally with their peers (European Commission, 2016; Cedefop, 2025b). Without targeted support, these groups are at risk of long-term exclusion from both education and the labour market.

At a broader level, the experience of being NEET can erode trust in public institutions. Repeated encounters with ineffective activation measures or administrative hurdles may reinforce perceptions that systems are unresponsive to young people's needs (Simões & Marta, 2024). In contrast, effective outreach, tailored vocational training and flexible learning pathways can help rebuild trust and a sense of agency (Cedefop, 2025c). Mentoring, career guidance and second-chance learning opportunities are key to fostering resilience and re-engagement (Drobne et al., 2022; Cedefop, 2025c).

In short, being NEET can be devastating on an individual level. It risks becoming not merely a temporary phase but a critical turning point in a person's life with deep social, psychological and economic repercussions. Early intervention through preventive and reintegrative measures is therefore essential, not only to improve employability but also to safeguard the well-being, dignity and social inclusion of young people across Europe (Cedefop, 2017).

At the collective level, the NEET phenomenon also entails substantial societal and economic costs. In 2008, the annual cost of NEETs in the EU was estimated at EUR 119 billion, or nearly 1% of the EU's gross domestic product (GDP), which reflects lost output and increased public expenditure (Eurofound, 2012). According to the 2025 employment and social developments in Europe report (European Commission, 2025), updated calculations using Eurofound's framework show that in 2023, each young person excluded from work and education represented an annual economic loss of EUR 14 625. The overall loss amounted to EUR 99.6 billion, which is equivalent to 0.62% of the EU's GDP in 2023. Although this is lower than it was during the peak of the youth unemployment crisis, the burden remains significant, underscoring the need for sustained and adaptive policy action, particularly amid the ongoing triple transition.

1.3. **Spotlight on NEETs on the EU agenda: how policy has developed over time**

EU policy attention to NEETs has developed over more than a decade, shaped by successive economic, social and labour market challenges. The 2008-2009 global financial crisis marked a turning point: youth unemployment surged to unprecedented levels, exceeding 40% in several Member States by 2010 (European Commission, 2010). This exposed structural weaknesses in labour markets, education systems and social protection, particularly in their limited capacity to integrate young people during economic shocks.

2010-2012: Recognition of a growing challenge

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, youth employment became an urgent political priority. Council of the European Union conclusions from 2010 and 2011 called for stronger school-to-work transitions, more apprenticeship placements and reinforced active labour market measures (Council of the European Union, 2010, 2011). During this period, the NEET concept gained prominence as an indicator of youth vulnerability. Eurofound's 2012 landmark report demonstrated that NEETs encompass a broader group than unemployed young people, capturing discouraged, inactive and marginalised young people as well, and highlighted the economic and social costs of their disengagement. This report significantly shaped EU monitoring frameworks and policymaking.

2013: The Youth Guarantee and targeted EU funding

This momentum culminated in the 2013 Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee (Council of the European Union, 2013). Member States committed to ensuring that all young people under 25 receive a good-quality offer of employment, education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of unemployment or leaving school. The Youth Employment Initiative and the European Social Fund provided targeted funding to regions with persistently high youth unemployment, making NEETs a central focus of EU employment policy.

2014-2017: Institutionalisation and skills-oriented reforms

In 2014, the NEET indicator was formally incorporated into the EU-LFS carried out by Eurostat, enabling systematic monitoring and cross-country comparison. The 2016 new Skills Agenda reinforced the need to equip young people – particularly low-skilled NEETs – with labour-market-relevant skills and modernised qualification tools such as the European qualifications framework (European Commission, 2016).

The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 marked a further milestone, setting out 20 principles for fair labour markets and welfare systems (European Commission, 2017). The principles on active employment support and equal access to education and lifelong learning explicitly strengthened the EU's commitment to addressing NEETs as part of its vision of social inclusion.

2020: The Reinforced Youth Guarantee and a modernised VET agenda

In 2020, at the onset of the twin green and digital transitions, two major policy developments reinforced the EU's approach to NEETs:

- (a) **the Reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme** (Council of the European Union, 2020a) extended support to young people up to the age of 29, with an emphasis on outreach to vulnerable groups, the quality and sustainability of job and training offers and systematic follow-up measures;
- (b) **the Council Recommendation on VET** (2020) linked high-quality, inclusive and flexible VET systems to NEET prevention and reintegration. It stressed the importance of work-based learning, green and digital skills and modernised quality assurance (Council of the European Union, 2020b).

Evaluations confirm the Youth Guarantee's significant reach, while highlighting persistent challenges in engaging the most disadvantaged young people and ensuring positive long-term outcomes (European Commission, 2025).

2021-2025: Consolidation within the EU's strategic framework

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) set a concrete target: reducing the NEET rate among 15-29-year-olds to 9% by

2030. This places NEET reduction at the centre of the EU's social inclusion and employment agenda.

Meanwhile, broader structural transformations – environmental, technological and demographic – have been reshaping the EU's cohesion landscape. This triple transition is expected to define policymaking in the decade ahead (European Commission, 2025). Ensuring that green and digital progress supports rather than undermines social inclusion has become a guiding principle.

2025 and beyond: VET as a strategic driver

Recent initiatives have further integrated NEET and VET policies into the European education area and the European Skills Agenda. The 2025 Herning Declaration on Attractive and Inclusive VET (2026-2030) (Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2025). renewed commitments to the Council's 2020 VET Recommendation and the Osnabrück Declaration (German Osnabrück Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2020). It has positioned VET as a central mechanism for preventing and reducing the share of NEETs by promoting employability, mobility and lifelong learning opportunities. This alignment between youth and VET policies aims to ensure that Europe's transition to a sustainable, digital and fair economy is accompanied by inclusive pathways that leave no young person behind. The Herning Declaration aligns with the Union of Skills strategy and underscores VET's role in addressing demographic and technological change, including the opportunities and risks associated with artificial intelligence.

Strategic shift: From crisis response to preventive, skills-based inclusion

Taken together, the evolution of EU policies demonstrates a clear shift from reactive crisis management after 2008 to proactive, skills-oriented, preventative strategies that combine employment, education and social inclusion.

Within this, VET is positioned as a central mechanism for preventing and reducing the share of NEETs by increasing employability and mobility and creating lifelong learning pathways.

Today, NEETs are no longer viewed solely as a statistical category but as a diverse group requiring tailored, coordinated interventions. As Europe navigates the green, digital and demographic transitions, ensuring there are inclusive pathways that leave no young person behind remains a core strategic priority.

While the EU's approach to NEETs has evolved over the past decade – from crisis response to a more integrated, preventative and forward-looking strategy – persistently high NEET numbers remain a major policy challenge globally (see Box 1), underscoring the need for continued vigilance and coordinated action.

Box 1. **NEETs as a global phenomenon**

The NEET challenge is not just a European phenomenon. Globally, more than one in five young people aged 15 to 24 were NEET in 2023. This is equal to more than 256 million individuals, which is a global NEET rate of 20.4% (ILO, 2024). This signals persistent labour market challenges for young people on a global scale, despite the overall positive recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The importance of the NEET issue is also reflected in the sustainable development goals adopted by all United Nations member states as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal 8 seeks to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Within this goal, Target 8.6 calls on countries to substantially reduce their share of NEETs. Ten years after the sustainable development goals were launched, progress in terms of reducing the number of NEETs globally remains uneven among regions. According to the International Labour Organization (2024), 33% of the world's young people live in countries that are not on track to meet this target, and the global monitoring dashboard confirms large disparities in outcomes.

Source: ILO, 2024.

1.4. Research scope and methods

This report explores how VET can empower NEETs by providing a current, multidimensional analysis of the NEET phenomenon in Europe and identifying where VET can have the greatest impact. It examines the diverse profiles and needs of NEETs, with a particular focus on two cross-cutting risk factors that heighten vulnerability to social exclusion. The aim is to support the development of holistic and tailored interventions that foster NEETs' integration into education, training or the labour market.

Building on the analytical framework of Cedefop's [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#), the report emphasises the importance of coordinating VET measures with employment services, social support and other interventions to address NEETs' complex needs. Guided by this framework and previous Cedefop analyses, this study investigates the following key questions.

- (a) **What is the role of VET in supporting NEETs?** How can VET programmes and qualifications directly enhance NEETs' employability by providing relevant skills, second-chance learning opportunities and smoother transitions into employment or education?
- (b) **How can VET be embedded in innovative and holistic approaches to deliver sustainable solutions for NEETs?** How can VET be combined with complementary services – such as guidance, mentoring and social and community support – to promote the lasting reintegration of NEETs into learning and work?

- (c) **How has the scale and territorial distribution of the NEET phenomenon evolved across Europe over the past two decades and what do forward-looking scenarios reveal about Member States' progress towards the EU's NEET target?** This question analyses long-term trends, regional disparities and forward-looking scenarios to assess convergence, identify gaps and gauge the policy effort required for further progress.
- (d) **How do gender disparities shape the prevalence and experience of NEETs in Europe?** This includes examining how life transitions, family responsibilities and social norms interact with labour market structures to affect young women's experiences.
- (e) **How does geography influence NEET status?** This explores the urban-rural divide and how spatial inequalities in infrastructure, labour markets and service provision shape young people's opportunities.

Together, these research questions form the analytical framework of the report, aiming to deliver an up-to-date and comprehensive perspective on the NEET phenomenon in Europe and pinpoint where VET can contribute most effectively.

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. The quantitative component draws extensively on EU-LFS data to track NEET rates over time and across groups. Indicators are disaggregated by age, gender and degree of urbanisation to highlight differences among regions and among Member States. The analysis includes the latest available data (data up to 2024) and develops projections for up to 2035 using two complementary models: a linear convergence model and a non-linear S-curve model. While these scenarios are not forecasts, they illustrate potential trajectories towards the EU's 2030 targets under varying policy and structural conditions.

The qualitative component complements these findings, with a comprehensive literature review and case studies highlighting effective practices from Member States. These examples – collected through Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs – demonstrate innovative, integrated approaches to re-engaging young people in education, training and employment.

By combining data-driven analysis with practical insights, this study ensures that its conclusions are both evidence-based and grounded in real-world experience. This integrated methodology captures broad structural dynamics and bottom-up perspectives, providing a nuanced understanding of the NEET phenomenon and informing actionable, evidence-based policy recommendations.

CHAPTER 2.

The magnitude of the NEET phenomenon in Europe

This chapter explores the overall scale of and patterns in the NEET phenomenon across Europe, forming the quantitative foundation of the report's analysis. It traces the evolution of NEET rates over time, showcasing both the progress achieved and the persistent disparities among Member States, regions and NEET subgroups. By integrating EU-level trends with territorial and demographic insights, the chapter reveals that although the overall share of NEETs has declined, deep-rooted structural differences remain. Understanding the magnitude and distribution of this policy challenge is crucial for identifying where targeted interventions are most needed to achieve the EU's 2030 NEET objective.

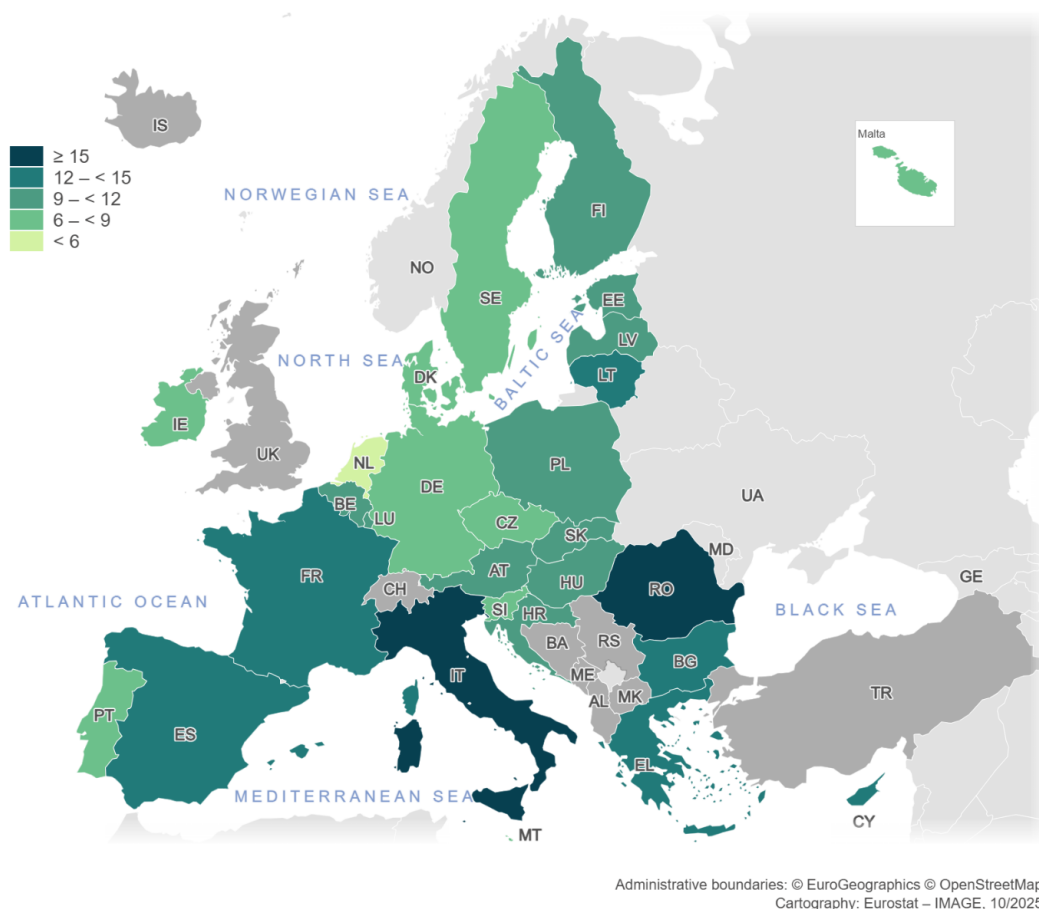
2.1. The evolution of the NEET rate: trends and territorial patterns across Europe

At the EU level, the NEET rate has fallen from its record high in 2013 following the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which was 16.1%, and then fallen again from its COVID-19 pandemic peak, where it stood at around 11% of 15-29-year-olds in 2024 (European Commission, 2023). Significant differences among Member States, however, continue to persist, with NEET rates ranging from roughly 5% in the Netherlands to 19% in Romania. In absolute terms, the EU average NEET rate of around 11% means that approximately eight million young people are currently socially excluded (European Commission, 2024).

Map 1 provides a snapshot of NEET prevalence in the EU-27 in 2024, revealing territorial clusters and persistent disparities. Member States in northern and western Europe, such as Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, record the lowest NEET levels, typically below 6%. In contrast, southern and parts of eastern Europe, notably Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania, continue to face the highest rates, in some cases exceeding 15%. These contrasts illustrate that factors such as structural labour market characteristics, education systems and welfare arrangements shape youth labour market outcomes across the EU. Importantly, these figures illustrate that, while the EU average stood at around 11% in 2024, substantial variations among Member States continued to persist. Such variations highlight the importance of analysing NEETs not only as a European-

wide phenomenon but also in their national and regional contexts. It also points to the need for tailored interventions: while some Member States focus on sustaining their already low NEET rates through prevention and skills development or focusing on the hardest-to-reach subgroups of NEETs, others must prioritise structural reforms to address entrenched barriers to youth participation in employment, education and training.

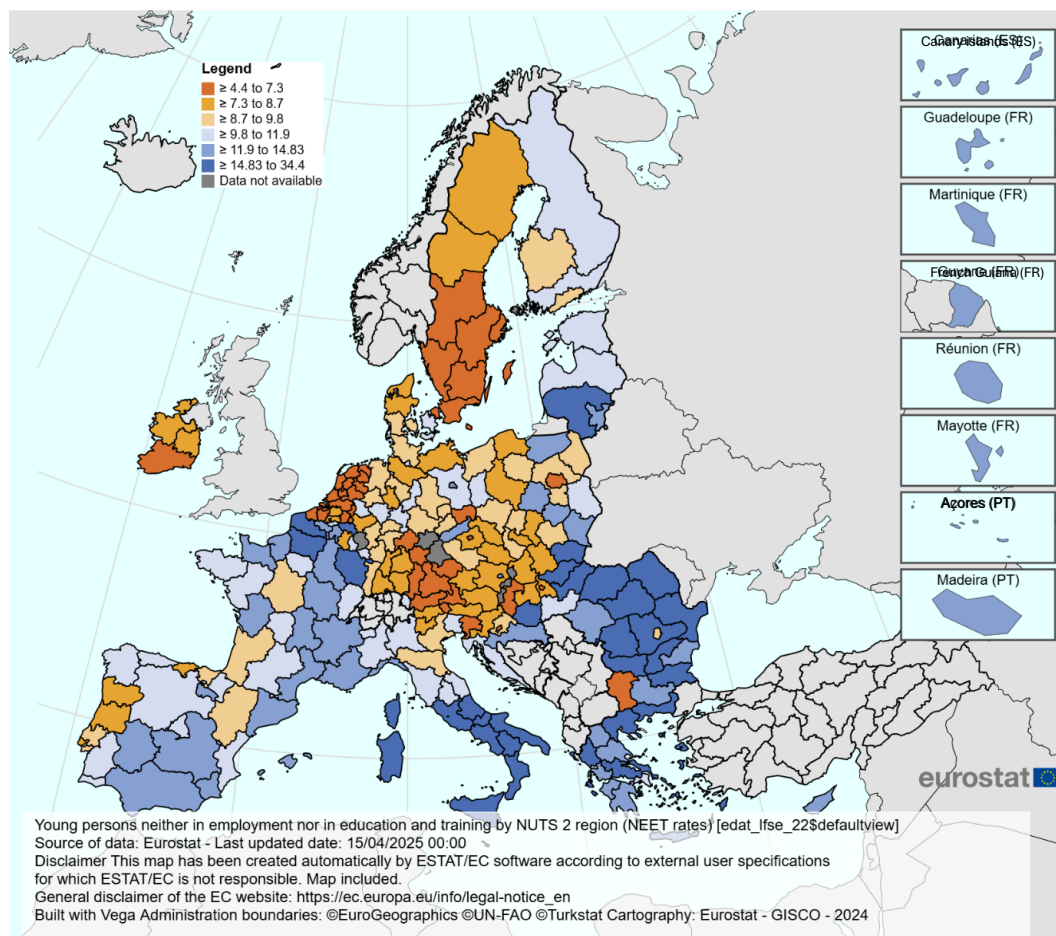
Map 1. NEET rates, EU-27, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

While national-level averages (Map 1) provide a useful overview of national disparities, they conceal substantial variation within Member States. Disaggregating the data at the regional level (i.e. at NUTS 2 level, the second level of the nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) reveals even sharper contrasts, highlighting the importance of looking at the issue through a regional lens when analysing the NEET phenomenon (see Map 2).

Map 2. NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat_lfse_22](#)).

The regional distribution of NEET rates, shown in Map 2, illustrates that national averages often mask areas of concentrated disadvantage. Many capital regions and economically dynamic areas in northern and western Europe report NEET shares below 7%, likely reflecting stronger labour markets, dense education infrastructures and more comprehensive youth services. In contrast, several regions in southern and eastern Europe exceed 15%, with some registering NEET rates as high as above 30%, underscoring persistent structural challenges. In Member States such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania, the map highlights a stark internal divide: urbanised and often wealthier regions tend to record significantly lower NEET levels, while peripheral and rural regions face an entrenched disadvantage. Nordic countries and parts of central Europe, however, display more balanced territorial patterns, with fewer extreme outliers among regions in the same Member State.

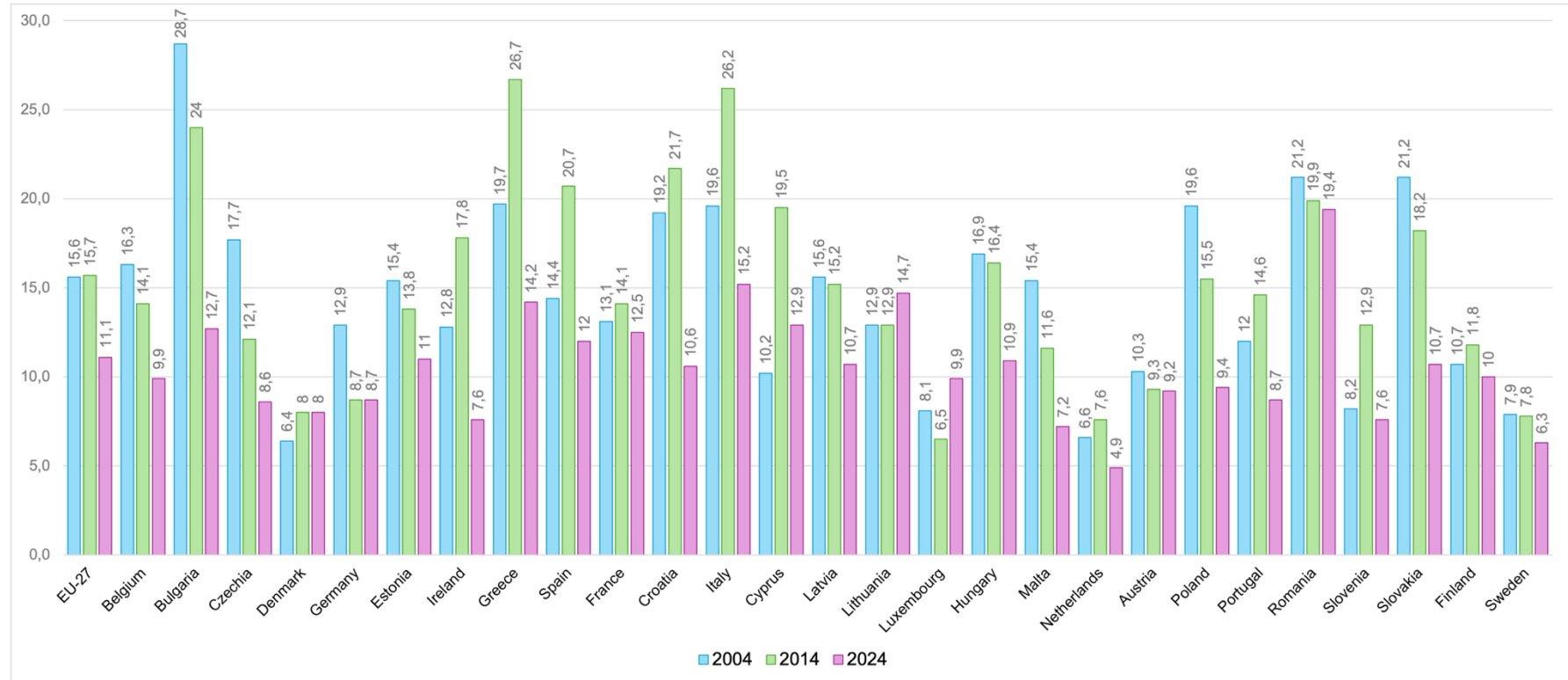
These findings emphasise that the NEET phenomenon is not merely a national challenge but also a regional one: local labour market opportunities, education and training infrastructures, transport systems and social services are likely to all play a role in shaping the opportunities available to young people. Moreover, regions with high NEET shares often coincide with areas experiencing demographic decline, weaker economic systems and limited institutional capacity, further reinforcing cycles of exclusion.

From a policy perspective, this heterogeneity reinforces the need for place-based strategies. EU cohesion policy, European Social Fund Plus funding and national youth strategies need to better align with regional needs, ensuring that outreach, training and activation measures are not designed to work only at the national level, but adapted and targeted to areas where disengagement is most prevalent.

To place these territorial differences in perspective, Figure 1 illustrates the long-term trend in NEET rates in the EU-27 between 2004 and 2024, providing important insights into both the progress made and persistent challenges. In 2004, the average NEET rate for the EU stood at around 14%, reflecting structural difficulties with the labour market and limited policy support for young people at the time. A decade later, in 2014, the rate had risen to more than 16%, following the global financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis, which particularly affected southern European Member States.

Building inclusive futures for NEETs
 VET solutions for Europe's young people not in employment, education or training

Figure 1. Trends in NEET rates over two decades, EU-27, 2004-2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

Since then, substantial improvements have been recorded. From 2014 onwards, the introduction of the Youth Guarantee scheme and the expansion of VET opportunities contributed to a steady reduction in NEET rates. By 2024, the EU-27 average had declined to approximately 11%, the lowest level recorded in two decades. This progress demonstrates both the resilience of youth employment outcomes and the impact of sustained policy attention, despite setbacks during the COVID-19 pandemic, which briefly disrupted these overall positive trends and raised fears of a 'lockdown generation' (Varvaressos-Drossos, 2021).

Despite the overall positive direction, both Maps 1 and 2 as well as Figure 1 also highlights persistent disparities between Member States. While some, particularly northern and western, Member States have consistently maintained NEET rates below the EU average, others, particularly in southern and eastern Europe, continue to face levels substantially above the average. This uneven progress underscores the need for tailored and context-sensitive policy responses alongside common European frameworks.

The evidence from Figure 1 indicates that the EU's target of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021), is within reach. However, achieving it will require more than a continuation of current efforts. Sustained investment in high-quality, inclusive VET systems offering personalised and flexible learning options such as part-time, online and modular programmes will be essential to help young people re-enter education and training at their own pace.

Upskilling and reskilling pathways must be closely aligned with labour market needs, particularly in emerging sectors with strong employment potential, while ensuring equitable access for disadvantaged groups who face structural barriers to participation. At the same time, skills-based measures must be complemented by comprehensive support services, including career counselling, mental-health assistance, transport subsidies and access to childcare. Such integrated interventions are critical to addressing the complex challenges faced by vulnerable young people and ensuring their sustained reintegration into learning and employment. Only by combining economic recovery with structural reforms can Member States ensure that young people are equipped to meet the demands of the triple transition while avoiding long-term social exclusion.

The following section presents two forward-looking scenarios developed by Cedefop using current data to arrive at projections of the trajectories of NEET rates towards 2030 and 2035.

2.2. Projected NEET rate trajectories to 2035

To better understand the scale of the challenge ahead, for this report a forward-looking approach of NEET rates for all EU Member States to 2035 was adopted. Two complementary scenarios were developed to capture both policy ambitions and the persistence of the structural challenges that continue to affect young people's employment and participation in training across the EU.

The first, a policy-driven scenario, assumes gradual convergence towards the EU-level objective of a NEET rate of 9% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021) and the achievement of a hypothetical objective of a NEET rate of 6% by 2035. This report introduces the hypothetical target of 6% by 2035 as an analytical benchmark to compare possible future NEET rate trajectories. A diminishing return assumption is included in the scenario, so the closer systems move towards the inclusion of all NEETs in education, training or employment, the harder it becomes to achieve additional reductions in NEET rates. From this perspective, while early gains can be achieved through standard activation measures, further progress requires deep-rooted barriers that are less responsive to short-term interventions, such as discouragement, health issues, skills deficits or regional disparities in opportunities, to be tackled. The resulting trajectories therefore depict a non-linear, asymptotic decline: rapid improvements initially, followed by slower progress, which is limited by structural and institutional capacities. The projection clearly presents a policy-target scenario: it assumes that every Member State will take all necessary actions to reach the 9% target by 2030 – although this does not imply that every country will achieve it following the current trajectory.

The second scenario is a business-as-usual (BaU) scenario, which has a more conservative, data-driven perspective. Through a Direct Recursive (DirRec) approach, it uses the trend in each Member State's historical NEET rate to estimate yearly regressions and extends them up to 2035. This produces a scenario in which national trajectories evolve in line with past dynamics, without assuming new policy acceleration or systemic reforms. In Member States where NEET rates have been falling steadily, this model estimates a continuation of the downward trend; in others, where progress has stalled or reversed, it signals potential stagnation or divergence from EU-level objectives.

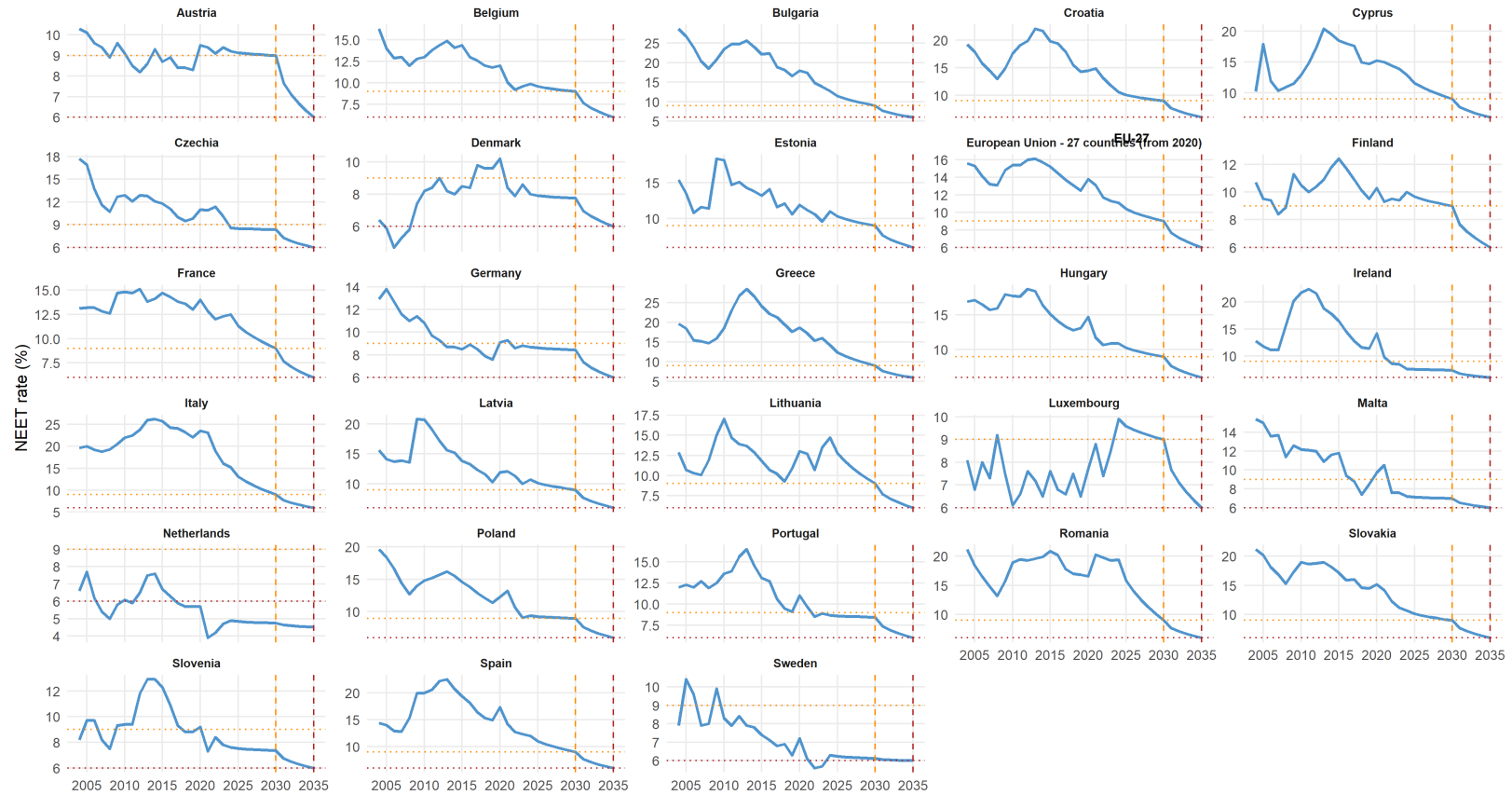
Taken together, the two approaches offer complementary insights. The policy-driven scenario illustrates the policy effort necessary in terms of coordination across education, employment and social systems to achieve the EU target. The BaU scenario highlights the implications of relying solely on incremental improvements, which may not be sufficient to close the gap. Comparing these two scenarios helps identify the scale of the challenge for Member States to align with the 2030 objective of 9% with a hypothetical further reduction to 6% and pinpoint

where structural barriers are most likely to persist and hinder upward convergence. Figure 2 illustrates the results of the policy-driven scenario, in which each Member State follows a coordinated path consistent with achieving the EU-wide target of a NEET rate of 9% by 2030 and a hypothetical target of 6% by 2035. The model assumes that Member States take all necessary measures to sustain a rapid but progressively slowing reduction in NEET rates. The S-curve shape reflects the principle of diminishing returns: as the NEET population becomes smaller and more concentrated among harder-to-reach groups, achieving additional reductions requires enhanced effort and targeted policy interventions. Differences in the steepness of the curves stem from each Member State's starting point, namely their NEET rate in 2005; those with higher initial NEET rates must progress faster in the early years to converge by 2035, while those already near the target follow flatter, stabilising paths. The scenario offers a visual benchmark of the comparative policy effort necessary for each Member State to meet the European Pillar of Social Rights NEET objective.

Figure 3 illustrates the results of the BaU scenario, which extrapolates each Member State's historical trend without assuming new policy impetus. Here, the diversity of national trajectories becomes more pronounced. Several Member States, such as Croatia, Poland and Portugal, show a gradual continuation of their pre-existing downward trends, while others, like Greece, Lithuania and Luxembourg, plateau or even display slight upward fluctuations. This dispersion reveals that historical progress alone may not be sufficient to achieve the 2030 and 2035 objectives, particularly where NEET levels have stabilised at relatively high values. The variability between Member States reflects deeper structural differences: labour market resilience, institutional capacity, demographic composition and the maturity of youth support systems may explain some of these differences; however, they were not considered during this exercise. Figure 3 thus shows a widening of the gap across the EU, where, without renewed policy effort, some Member States could see a stagnation or reversal of their progress, undermining collective progress on the EU's social inclusion agenda.

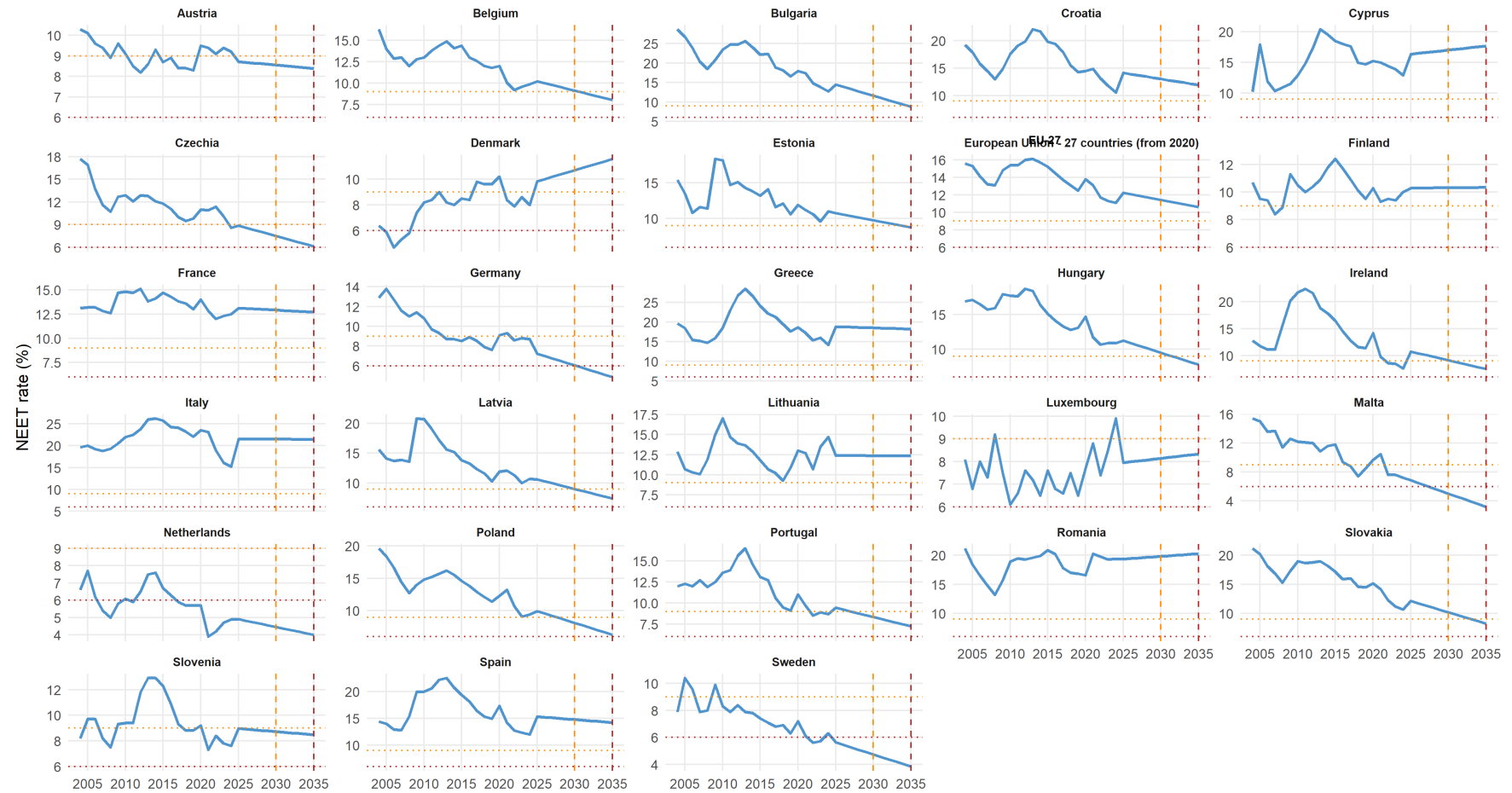
Figure 2. **NEET rate trajectories using a non-linear diminishing returns model to reach the set target of 6% by 2035, EU-27**

Each country follows a decelerating reduction path: 9% by 2030, 6% by 2035



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

Figure 3. NEET rate trajectories using a direct recursive model, EU-27, 2005-2035



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

These scenarios have been developed for illustrative purposes, as a tool to frame the discussion on NEET policy, rather than to predict specific outcomes.

Both approaches rely exclusively on historical NEET data and do not integrate broader macroeconomic or policy determinants that are likely to strongly influence youth transitions, including GDP growth and labour market performance, or policy efforts in the active labour market and education and training. The models also do not capture the effects of structural reforms or new policy instruments introduced after 2020, such as the reinforcement of the Youth Guarantee scheme, targeted VET modernisation or the implementation of AI-driven labour market services. In addition, neither model contains gender, age or regional subgroups, although it has been shown that NEET rates differ markedly between young men and women, urban and rural areas, and regions with varying access to education, transport or childcare ⁽²⁾.

From a methodological perspective, both models have simple functional forms (one linear-recursive and one non-linear convergence) that do not account for potential feedback mechanisms between policy measures and behavioural responses. The first model assumes a uniform rate of convergence across all Member States, disregarding heterogeneity in institutional capacity, fiscal space and social infrastructure. The second model assumes that past trends are a reliable basis for extrapolation, which may understate the effects of policy discontinuities or demographic changes such as declining youth cohorts and migration flows. Finally, neither approach incorporates the possible influence of emerging megatrends, such as digitalisation, automation, the green transition or remote work, which could reshape youth employment structures and training opportunities in ways that differ significantly from historical experience.

Despite these constraints, the comparison between the two models conveys a clear message: achieving a lasting reduction in NEET rates will require coordinated, sustained and holistic action well beyond the continuation of past trends. The optimal policy-driven scenario illustrates the trajectory that could be achieved if Member States fully mobilise education, employment and social policies in a coherent and coordinated manner, while the BaU scenario shows where the continuation of the current momentum alone would lead. Member States starting with higher NEET levels face a steeper path to convergence and will need to implement intensive, multidimensional measures combining outreach, training, guidance and social support. Even in Member States already near the EU average,

⁽³⁾ A further constraint lies in the series break introduced into Eurostat data due to changes in the definitions or terms employed at the national level, which may generate small discontinuities in national time series and affect comparability with pre-break trends. For more on the series breaks see [here](#).

reaching and maintaining the 6% hypothetical benchmark will demand continued investment in targeted, person-centred initiatives and adaptable policies that address emerging structural and territorial disparities.

The contrasting trajectories shown in Figures 2 and 3 reinforce that achieving the EU's 2030 NEET reduction target and a hypothetical, more ambitious, target of a 6% share of NEETs by 2035 cannot rely on economic growth alone. The gap between these two paths highlights the importance of effective implementation models capable of translating policy ambition into concrete, sustained change on the ground. This is precisely where innovative and holistic practices become critical, as discussed in the following chapter: they are the operational mode through which structural objectives are realised.

CHAPTER 3.

The role of VET in supporting NEETs

VET provides opportunities for young people to develop, enrich and upgrade their skills while acquiring qualifications that enhance their employability. Tailored VET pathways can address skills mismatches and foster active participation in society.

According to research by Cedefop, high-quality, inclusive and flexible VET systems play a crucial role in preventing early leaving and promoting inclusion. When VET programmes are responsive to individual needs, they help learners who might otherwise disengage by offering practical relevance, clearer transitions and stronger links to employment (Cedefop, 2016, 2023b). Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving highlights the importance of monitoring learners at risk, designing tailored interventions and mobilising the entire VET community – schools, companies and local stakeholders – to re-engage students.

Beyond prevention, VET also provides valuable second-chance opportunities for young people who have already left education or who are NEET. Through re-entry pathways, work-based learning and guidance services, VET helps rebuild confidence and reconnect learners with both education and employment. In this way, VET acts as a bridge across the learning–work divide that promotes inclusion (Cedefop, 2022).

Transitions remain critical junctures in young people's lives (ILO, n.d.; Rahmani et al., 2024). The school-to-work transition, in particular, is challenging for those with low qualifications or limited networks. VET can ease this process by equipping learners with hands-on, occupation-specific skills aligned with labour market needs. Work-based components of VET such as apprenticeships and traineeships foster both technical skills and soft skills – teamwork, communication and self-organisation – providing a competitive advantage (European Commission, 2015).

However, the impact of VET depends on its framework conditions: programme quality, employer engagement and alignment with labour market demand. Where these are strong, VET can significantly reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET (Redmond & McFadden, 2023). Conversely, in contexts where VET remains a second choice or lacks close links to employers, its protective effect is limited. Structural factors – including gender, geography and socioeconomic background – continue to shape outcomes, regardless of pathway (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021).

In sum, evidence shows that VET can prevent disengagement and promote re-engagement when it is inclusive, well-coordinated and supported by complementary measures such as guidance and counselling. The next chapter explores these complementarities more deeply, arguing that, while VET and labour market activation are necessary, they are not sufficient to meet the EU's 2030 target for NEETs. Effective support for NEETs requires holistic, multi-dimensional approaches that integrate education, employment and social inclusion.

3.1. Embedding VET in holistic approaches

While VET and active labour market policies are essential components of youth inclusion strategies, they cannot, on their own, resolve the multifaceted challenges faced by NEETs. The future of work – which is being shaped by technological innovation, the green transition and demographic shifts – demands approaches that address not only skills and employability but also the broader social and personal dimensions of exclusion. Effective and sustainable NEET programmes require not only sound design but also the creation of positive systemic conditions, including political commitment, institutional capacity and long-term investment (Psifidou & Kyriakopoulou, 2023).

The journey to adulthood involves a series of transitions – from learning to working, from dependence to self-reliance and from family support to independent living. For NEETs, these steps are often precarious or delayed, reflecting the compounded effects of social, economic and institutional barriers. While the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme has strengthened support at key transition points, the growing complexity of youth trajectories calls for more integrated, person-centred strategies (ILO, 2017).

Cedefop's research on green skills and digital inclusion underscores the need to adapt support mechanisms to new labour market realities. Post-pandemic evidence shows that NEETs face not only employment barriers but also housing insecurity, mental health challenges and precarious jobs (Eurofound, 2024). Although the EU youth employment rate has reached a 15-year high, young people remain under-represented in stable and high-quality occupations and continue to experience mismatches between their aspirations and reality.

At the same time, demographic ageing and skills shortages make the inclusion of NEETs a social and economic necessity (European Commission, 2025). Holistic practices that combine outreach, skills development, mentoring and comprehensive support have proven more effective than traditional activation measures (European Commission, 2018). They view employability not as a narrow

labour market issue but as part of young people's broader capability to lead fulfilling lives.

Across Europe, innovative initiatives integrate digital access, mental health support and personalised guidance into youth employment portfolios. However, gaps remain in scaling up these approaches and adapting them to regional contexts. In parts of southern and eastern Europe, delays in access to support and misalignments between training and career aspirations persist (O'Higgins & Brockie, 2024).

Moreover, as the green and digital transformations create new job opportunities, unequal access risks leaving behind those without prior work experience or digital and AI literacy (Cedefop, 2025a). Poor cross-sector coordination further undermines mainstream measures.

For these reasons, holistic approaches – which combine education, employment and social inclusion policies – are gaining prominence in European discourse (European School Education Platform, 2023). Community-based lifelong learning centres are seen as a gateway to the multidisciplinary support teams implementing a holistic approach to lifelong learning (Cedefop & LLLP, 2019). Rather than focusing solely on unemployment, they aim to build agency, resilience and life skills while connecting young people to services that promote well-being, mobility and stability. Within this context, in 2019 Cedefop launched its VET toolkit for empowering NEETs, which operationalises many of these principles by linking VET provision to integrated support networks. The toolkit is constantly updated and has been enriched since then. It is presented in detail in the next section.

3.2. Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs

Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs is the principal reference framework informing the qualitative analysis underpinning this report. Developed and maintained by Cedefop, the toolkit serves as an evidence-based and interactive resource designed to support researchers, policymakers and practitioners in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by NEETs.

Drawing upon a decade of research and field practice, the toolkit consolidates analytical frameworks, the profiles of NEET subgroups, identified risk factors and intervention approaches that have been validated across diverse European contexts. It adopts a holistic perspective, capturing the full continuum of reintegration – from early identification and outreach to guidance, skills development and the transition into education, training or employment.

The toolkit has been developed through a bottom-up process, incorporating evidence from local, regional and national initiatives that have achieved

demonstrable success in youth activation. Regular updates, informed by the contributions of [Cedefop's network of VET ambassadors](#), ensure that the toolkit remains a dynamic and evolving resource, reflecting emerging evidence, innovative practices and the changing realities of youth inclusion and skills development in Europe.

3.2.1. Purpose and added value of the toolkit

Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs is more than a repository of information; it functions as a strategic instrument for evidence-informed policymaking. By combining typologies, risk analyses and empirically tested interventions, the toolkit provides a structured methodology to assist authorities at the national and regional levels in designing inclusive, responsive and sustainable youth policies. Specifically, the toolkit enables policymakers to:

- (a) align national VET and activation systems with the needs of distinct NEET profiles;
- (b) integrate gender equality and territorial cohesion into youth strategies;
- (c) strengthen cooperation between education, employment and social services;
- (d) utilise Cedefop's evaluation instruments to assess the effectiveness, efficiency and transferability of interventions;
- (e) engage in peer learning and capacity building through Cedefop's ambassador and practitioner networks.

Through these mechanisms, the toolkit supports the coherence and complementarity of policy initiatives targeting young people, enhancing the overall governance and quality of VET-related activation measures.

3.2.2. Structure and functionality of the toolkit

The toolkit's architecture is based on a comprehensive intervention logic that encompasses the entire NEET re-engagement pathway. Its main components include:

- (a) the identification and profiling of NEETs using evidence-based typologies to understand underlying causes of disengagement;
- (b) outreach and guidance methodologies that foster trust and engagement among hard-to-reach young people;
- (c) skills development and learning opportunities, particularly through work-based learning and flexible VET pathways;
- (d) reintegration measures that facilitate transitions to sustainable employment or further education and training;
- (e) monitoring and evaluation tools supporting the assessment of outcomes and continuous policy improvement.

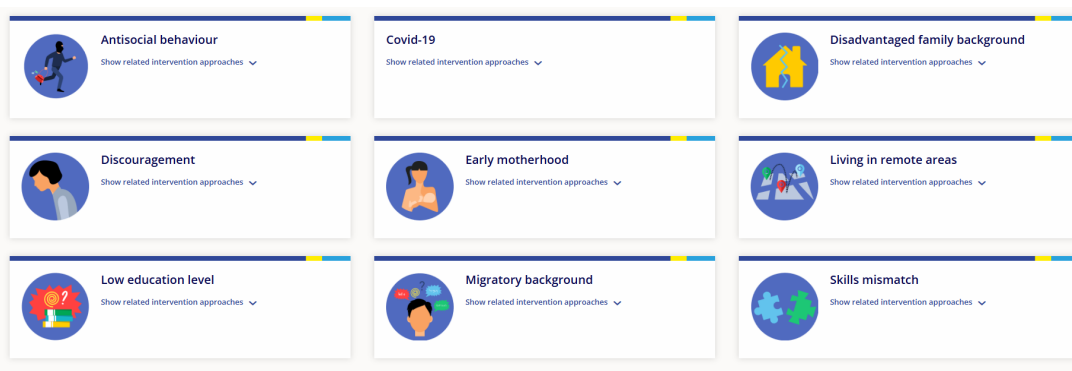
This integrated structure enables stakeholders to design interventions that are both targeted and holistic, balancing individualised support with systemic coordination across policy domains.

3.2.3. Risk factors for becoming NEET

While profiling identifies who NEETs are, analysing risk factors reveals why young people become NEET. Cedefop's research points to a range of interrelated determinants – including low educational attainment, poverty, having a migrant background, early parenthood, health issues and regional disparities.

Cedefop's [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) identifies a total of nine major risk factors that increase the likelihood that a young person will fall into the NEET category; see Boxes 2 and 3 for an overview. Each of these risk factors is linked to specific NEET profiles and intervention approaches.

Box 2. Overview of risk factors for becoming NEET identified by Cedefop



Source: Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Risk factors](#)'.

Box 3. Risk factors associated with becoming NEET: further insights

Low education level

Young people with a low level of education are much more likely to become NEET. For example, they are about three times more likely than those with tertiary education and two times more likely than those with secondary education to become NEET.

This points to the importance of tackling early leaving from education and training and ensuring young people complete at least upper secondary education and/or obtain higher qualifications.

Disadvantaged family background

Features such as parental unemployment, low household income and low parental education increase the risk. For example, having a parent with unemployment history raises a person's probability of being NEET by approximately 17%. Also, young people whose parents have only basic education are up to 1.5 times (vs secondary) or 2 times (vs tertiary) more likely to become NEET.

Socioeconomic deprivation, less parental engagement in education, etc., are also key.

Migrant background

Young people with a migrant background face specific challenges (language, cultural barriers, interrupted education) that make them more likely to be NEET. Young people with a migrant background are approximately 70% more likely to be NEET than others. This highlights that the risk is not only about 'lack of entry' but also 'barriers faced'.

Living in remote areas

Young people in remote or small towns/cities face higher NEET risks that are up to 1.5 times higher (Eurofound, 2012) than those in larger or medium-sized cities. The geographic dimension matters, as more remote areas come with fewer opportunities, more limited transport links and overall infrastructure, less access to services and higher local unemployment.

Skills mismatches

Even young people who may have qualifications or previous experience can be at risk if their skills do not align with the labour market (or if their qualifications are very specific). This emphasises that having an education is not enough if it does not match demand.

Early motherhood

Becoming a mother at a young age is flagged as a risk factor. Family responsibilities can disrupt education/training and make entry into employment harder.

Discouragement

Young people who become discouraged (e.g. by repeated unsuccessful job searches or training attempts) risk drifting into inactivity rather than being registered as unemployed. The psychological/motivational dimension matters.

Antisocial behaviour

Behavioural problems (e.g. antisocial conduct) are also identified as a risk factor for becoming NEET. This indicates that risk factors are not purely structural but also personal/social.

COVID-19

External shocks (e.g. health or economic disturbances) can push young people into NEET status. This highlights that emerging macrotrends also affect the risk of becoming NEET.

Source: Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: ['Risk factors'](#).

It becomes evident that the risk of becoming NEET is multifactorial: it involves structural factors (education, geography, family background), personal/social factors (skills mismatches, discouragement, behaviour) and external events (COVID-19). Some risk factors overlap or reinforce each other (e.g. low education plus disadvantaged family background plus remote area). Because of this complexity, interventions need to be targeted, multidimensional and early (ideally before young people become NEET or early in this process). For example, the low-education-level risk suggests the importance of keeping young people engaged in school/VET and combating early leaving, while the migrant background risk highlights the importance of language/cultural support.

Among these risk factors, gender and geography emerge as particularly critical cross-cutting dimensions shaping NEET experiences across Europe.

3.2.3.1. *Gender-related factors*

Gender continues to be a significant determinant of NEET status. Across the EU, young women are more likely to be NEET than young men, primarily due to economic inactivity linked to family responsibilities. Early motherhood, a lack of affordable childcare and the unequal distribution of caregiving duties are major barriers preventing young women from returning to work or training.

Cultural norms in some regions may further reinforce traditional gender roles, compounding the challenge. As a result, many female NEETs remain outside the labour force not from a lack of motivation but as a result of systemic obstacles.

Addressing these gender gaps requires policies that promote work–life balance, including through the provision of childcare, mentoring for young mothers and reskilling programmes for women returning to work. Gender-sensitive VET policies are thus essential to reducing female NEET rates and ensuring equitable access to opportunities.

3.2.3.2. *The urban–rural divide*

Geographic location also exerts a strong influence on NEET prevalence. In many Member States, rural and remote areas show higher NEET rates than urban centres due to their limited access to education, training and quality employment opportunities. Poor transport infrastructure, reduced service provision and low demands for local labour exacerbate these disparities.

Young people in rural regions, even when motivated, often encounter structural barriers that restrict their choices. The situation can be particularly challenging for rural NEETs with low qualifications or for young women in areas where traditional gender expectations persist.

Bridging this divide calls for place-based approaches, such as:

- (a) expanding access to VET and guidance services in remote communities;
- (b) improving digital and physical connectivity;
- (c) promoting local employment and entrepreneurship initiatives;
- (d) developing partnerships that integrate VET with regional development strategies.

Addressing these two cross-cutting risk factors – gender and geography – is fundamental to achieving inclusive VET and ensuring that all young people, regardless of background or location, can access opportunities to learn and work.

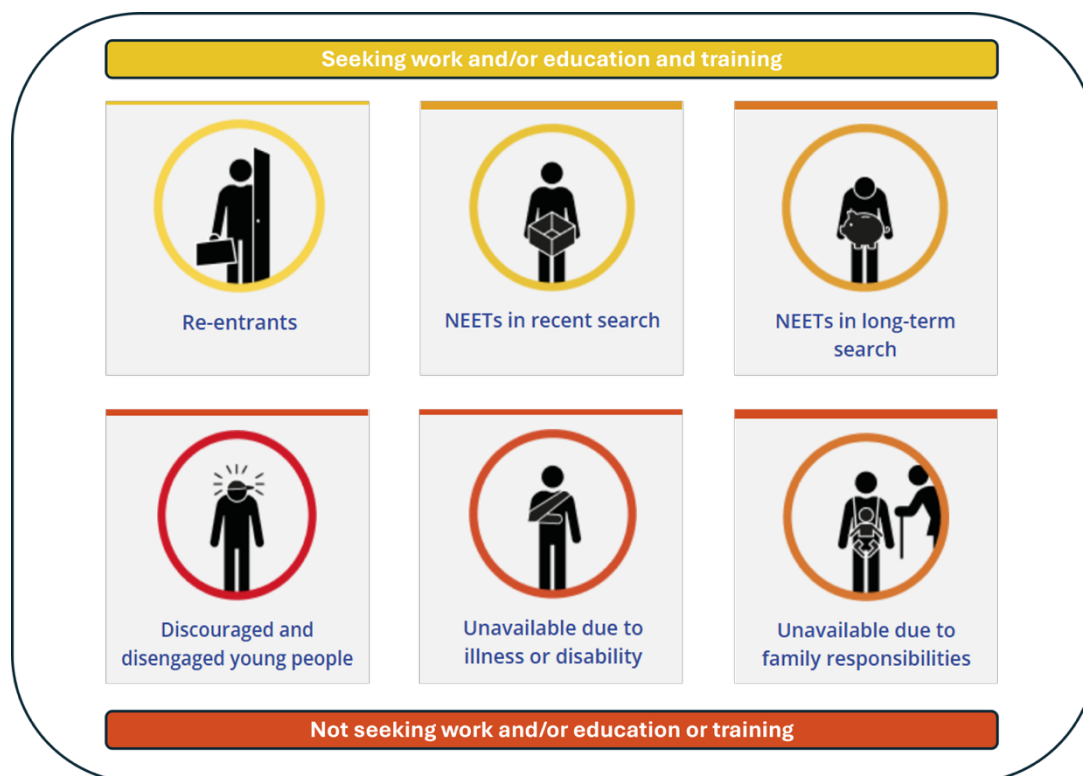
3.2.4. Understanding NEET diversity: profiles and policy implications

The success of any policy or programme targeting NEETs depends on the extent to which it recognises the diversity of the NEET subgroups and addresses their distinct needs. Cedefop's toolkit therefore proposes, based on Cedefop's research, a typology of six NEET profiles, according to which NEETs can be identified based on their proximity to the labour market and education system (see also Eurofound, 2016).

These profiles fall into two broad categories – active NEETs, who are seeking work or education opportunities, and inactive NEETs, who are not currently engaged in such activities. Understanding these profiles enables practitioners and policymakers to match interventions with the right level of intensity and type of support.

- (a) **Re-entrants.** These are young people temporarily out of education or employment, often between opportunities, such as those awaiting the start of a job or training placement. They typically face minimal barriers and require limited transitional support.
- (b) **NEETs in recent search.** Individuals who have been actively seeking employment, education or training for less than a year. These are often recent school-leavers or graduates facing difficulties in the school-to-work transition. Support for this group centres on career guidance, short-term upskilling and job matching.
- (c) **NEETs in long-term search.** These are young people who have been unemployed or out of education for more than a year. They may experience declining motivation, skill erosion or social exclusion. Intensive interventions combining retraining, counselling and work-based learning are most effective.
- (d) **Unavailable due to family responsibilities.** These are predominantly young women who are inactive because of caregiving duties. Flexible learning arrangements, childcare and family-friendly workplace policies are key enablers of their reactivation.
- (e) **Unavailable due to illness or disability.** Young people who face health barriers to participation fall into this group. Their reintegration requires coordinated rehabilitation, adapted training programmes and long-term support tailored to their individual needs.
- (f) **Discouraged and disengaged young people.** Those who have ceased seeking opportunities due to repeated failure or marginalisation. Outreach, mentoring, the validation of informal skills and trust-building initiatives are critical to their re-engagement.

Box 4. **Overview of six NEET profiles**



Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Identify](#)'.

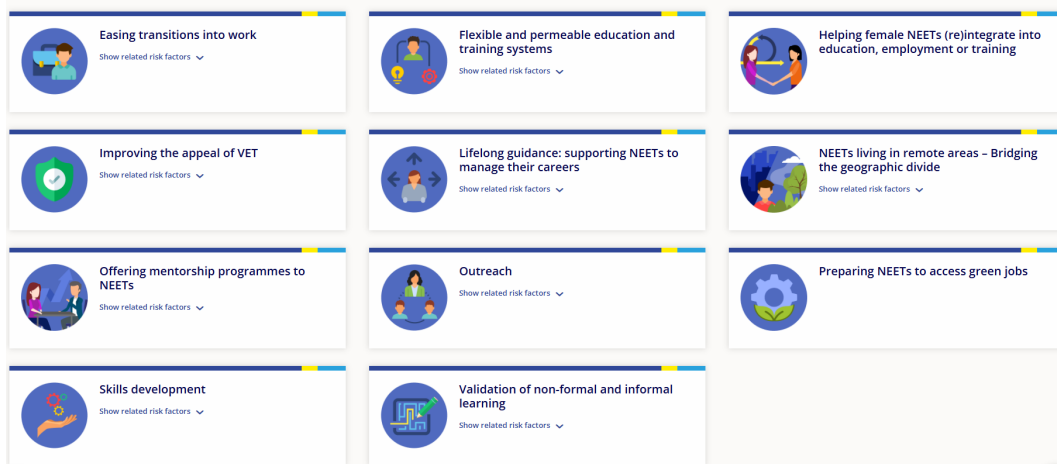
This typology reveals that NEETs occupy a continuum of vulnerability: some are close to re-entry into work or study, while others are deeply disengaged. Recognising these distinctions has clear policy implications. It underscores the need for different strategies – from light-touch guidance for re-entrants to intensive, multisectoral interventions for discouraged or health-challenged NEETs.

3.2.5. **From evidence to practice: intervention approaches**

The VET toolkit for empowering NEETs translates extensive research and data into practical intervention approaches that guide stakeholders in supporting young people in their re-engagement. Each approach is tailored to the specific profile(s) of NEETs and the risk factors at play and is based on a combination of successful initiatives from different governance levels, structured to ensure transferability and adaptability across contexts.

Cedefop's intervention models combine analytical depth with operational guidance. They identify the key features of success, the conditions for implementation and expected outcomes at the individual, institutional and systemic levels.

Box 5. **Overview of Cedefop's intervention approaches to NEETs**



Source: Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Intervene](#)'.

To give an example of how these intervention approaches are presented within the toolkit, we focus here on the intervention [preparing NEETs to access green jobs](#). This initiative illustrates how inclusive upskilling programmes designed with NEETs in mind can act as both an entry point into the labour market and a means of enhancing resilience during economic and technological transitions.

The intervention approach presents a problem statement and then provides step-by-step guidance organised around four interlinked pillars:

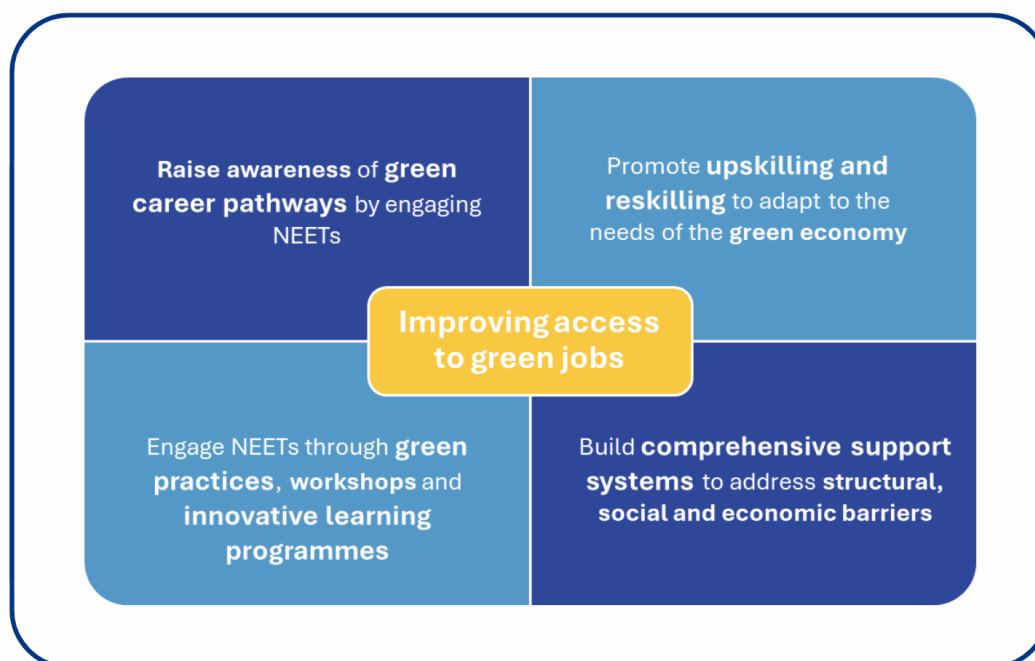
- (a) identifying target NEET profiles and local green labour market needs;
- (b) designing flexible, inclusive training pathways aligned with the demands for green skills;
- (c) supporting learners through mentoring, guidance and the validation of prior learning;
- (d) establishing partnerships among VET providers, employers and community actors.

The intervention concludes with the outcomes expected at three levels:

- (a) at the **individual level** we should see enhanced employability, confidence and labour market readiness;
- (b) at the **institutional level** we should see the improved capacity of VET providers to design inclusive and responsive programmes;
- (c) at the **system level** we should see stronger coordination between education, employment and social policy actors.

These are complemented by illustrations of good practices from Member States, showcasing how these approaches can be adapted to national or regional contexts.

Box 6. **Intervention approach: preparing NEETs to access green jobs**



Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Preparing NEETs to access green jobs](#)'.

3.2.6. **Assessing the impact of intervention approaches**

Evaluating initiatives that address the NEET challenge is a complex and demanding task. Youth unemployment and inactivity are persistent issues with multiple, interconnected causes. Supporting young people in returning to education, training or employment requires tackling both individual-level barriers – such as the need for upskilling, access to apprenticeships or childcare – and broader structural factors, including high unemployment, skills mismatches in the labour market and gender or racial discrimination.

In such a multifaceted and evolving context, a policy or programme may positively influence NEETs without immediately resulting in their re-engagement in education or employment. For example, an initiative might bring young people closer to finding work by encouraging them to register with public employment services, or closer to re-entering formal education by building up their self-esteem and confidence in their learning abilities. Evaluations enable policymakers and practitioners to measure these outcomes, assess the overall impact of the intervention and identify the conditions under which that impact can be strengthened.

However, allocating resources to evaluation activities can itself be a challenge. Funding bodies may prefer to direct all available funds towards direct

support rather than what may be perceived as administrative overheads. Demonstrating the link between evaluation and evidence-based policymaking underscores the value of the knowledge and transparency such assessments generate.

The [‘Evaluate’](#) section of Cedefop’s VET toolkit for empowering NEETs is a highly useful resource for researchers, policymakers and practitioners seeking to understand and improve the effectiveness of interventions targeting NEETs. It provides a clear and structured framework for assessing whether such policies and programmes achieve their intended outcomes and under what conditions they work best. It offers practical guidance organised into four steps – deciding what to evaluate, selecting indicators, measuring impact and judging overall effectiveness – that is supported by dedicated tools for policymakers and learning providers. By combining conceptual clarity with hands-on evaluation templates and tools, this part of the toolkit enhances transparency and accountability and enables continuous improvement in NEET-related initiatives, making it a valuable component of this Cedefop resource.

3.2.7. A community of practice and ongoing development

An essential feature of Cedefop’s [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) is its role as a community platform that fosters collaboration, peer exchange and mutual learning among practitioners and policymakers. Cedefop’s ambassador network, dedicated to tackling early leaving and youth exclusion, acts as a multiplier of knowledge, facilitating the dissemination of successful practices and reinforcing cooperation among countries.

Regular updates and practitioner inputs ensure that the toolkit remains aligned with emerging trends in youth employment, digitalisation and inclusive VET provision. As such, it functions not only as a repository of knowledge but as a living instrument for policy innovation.

The VET toolkit for empowering NEETs embodies Cedefop’s commitment to advancing evidence-based and practice-oriented VET policymaking. By translating research insights into actionable policy and practical instruments, it enables Member States and other stakeholders to develop coherent strategies that promote social inclusion and enhance the employability of young people.

Box 7. Cedefop's network of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET

Established in 2017, [Cedefop's network of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET](#) brings together a diverse group of stakeholders from across Europe – including policymakers, learning providers, experts and VET practitioners – involved in promoting inclusion through VET. Their varied profiles and disciplinary backgrounds ensure a broad range of perspectives and expertise.

The ambassadors play a vital role in disseminating and enriching Cedefop's two interlinked resources:

- (a) the [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#),
- (b) the [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#).

Members of the network, of which there are currently more than one hundred, continuously contribute to peer learning through participating in Cedefop's webinars, policy learning forums and knowledge exchanges, fostering dialogue and collaboration among European and Member State level stakeholders committed to inclusive VET.

Source: Cedefop's ['Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET'](#) and Cedefop's web page [Become an ambassador on tackling early leaving from VET](#).

CHAPTER 4.

The gender dimension of the NEET phenomenon

Recent research highlights gender as one of the most striking factors influencing the likelihood of falling into NEET status. Across studies, young women are consistently over-represented among NEETs compared with their male peers (Assmann & Broschinski, 2021; ILO, 2019; Intercept, 2022). While many variables shape young people's labour market outcomes, gender stands out as a defining element in shaping pathways into – and out of – NEET status.

Disaggregated data reveal that young women face a unique set of barriers and risks related to disengagement from education and work. These differences underscore the need for policy responses that explicitly address gender-specific challenges and create tailored support mechanisms.

This chapter explores the gender dimension of the NEET phenomenon. It delves into the structural and social factors that place young women at a higher risk of becoming NEET and presents comparative data and trends to illustrate how gender disparities in NEET rates have evolved across Member States. Finally, it highlights two examples of good practice from selected Member States that demonstrate effective, gender-responsive strategies for reducing NEET rates.

4.1. Female NEETs and the challenges they face

The policy relevance of the gender dimension of the NEET phenomenon is connected to its implications for economic performance and social inclusion, as highlighted in Section 1.2. Addressing the gender dimension of the NEET issue is moreover a question of fairness and gender equality, values at the core of the EU's social agenda and enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017, 2025), as well as the more recent [Herning Declaration on Attractive and Inclusive Vocational Education and Training for Increased Competitiveness and Quality Jobs 2026-2030](#), which was adopted in 2025. Higher female NEET rates undermine progress towards equal opportunities as envisaged in the EU's social agenda, which are reflected in national policy frameworks. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) reinforces this commitment with concrete targets, calling on Member States to 'strive to at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019'. Ensuring that young women have the same opportunities as young men to participate in the

world of work and learning is essential for inclusive and sustainable growth. An important starting point for any policy response is the recognition that young women encounter specific barriers that differ from those faced by their male peers. Without this acknowledgement, well-intended policy interventions risk overlooking the very factors that keep women in the NEET status.

As Cedefop (2025c) highlights, [closing the gender gap in VET](#) is essential to achieving inclusive growth. Promoting gender balance in VET not only broadens opportunities for young women but also helps to address skill shortages in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Gender mainstreaming across all VET pathways and targeted outreach to girls and women can make VET a driver of inclusion, not a reproducer of inequality.

For many young women, a mix of factors results in them falling into NEET status. Caregiving responsibilities, limited access to (affordable) childcare and cultural expectations around women's roles are the decisive barriers that most frequently lead to economic inactivity in this group. Young mothers are frequently confronted with a trade-off decision between caregiving and labour market participation. Studies confirm that early motherhood and associated care duties are among the primary reasons young women exit or do not enter the labour market in the first place, or delay or suspend their participation in training and education (Danner et al., 2021; van Vugt, 2023).

These patterns are further reinforced by the gendered segmentation of the labour market, with women still being over-represented in sectors with lower pay, less stability and fewer opportunities for professional advancement (Eurofound, 2022). Such sectors, for example the care, retail and hospitality sectors, tend to offer less flexibility and job security, which makes it even harder for women to balance their work and family obligations. Eurofound (2025) highlights that insufficient access to affordable, high-quality childcare remains one of the main structural barriers to women's participation in the labour market across the EU. When care costs absorb a large share of potential earnings, the financial incentive to accept employment is significantly reduced, particularly for women in low-wage sectors. The Eurofound report underlines that gaps in childcare provision and affordability continue to 'limit the employment potential of parents, especially mothers, and reinforce gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work' (Eurofound, 2025, p. 18).

These structural shortcomings in the care infrastructure not only constrain individual choices but also perpetuate gendered employment patterns and the higher likelihood of women becoming or remaining NEET. For these reasons, recent EU-level research explicitly highlights that young mothers are now the

demographic that is most likely to be NEETs across the EU and suggests that targeted support for young mothers should be a policy priority moving forward (Eurofound, 2024).

In contrast to women's NEET status, which is more structurally persistent, young men are more likely to experience spells of being NEET as a result of unemployment linked to the volatile and cyclical nature of the labour market, as young people are generally more affected by economic downturns (European Commission, 2022). Their trajectories often reflect exposure to economic downturns and layoffs or the precarious nature of entry-level jobs, with periods of joblessness alternating with work that can either or both precarious and temporary. In other words, structural inactivity, driven by social roles and systemic barriers, is far more common among female NEETs, whereas frictional or cyclical unemployment is more common among male NEETs (Danner et al., 2021).

The availability, or absence, of support networks further determines these gendered experiences. In contexts where the state or market does not provide sufficient childcare options, families often become the fallback option for young mothers – a phenomenon sometimes described as 'familialism by default' (Dicks et al., 2022). For example, in the Netherlands, which has historically had gaps in formal childcare for infants, many young mothers rely on kin networks. Research shows that having a cohabiting partner or nearby grandparents can significantly reduce the likelihood that a young mother becomes or remains NEET through income support and the sharing of childcare (Dicks et al., 2022). On the other hand, women without such family support, for instance single mothers or those whose own family is working or living far away, find it much more difficult to stay in or return to employment. Moreover, if a young woman comes from a disadvantaged background (e.g. has parents who are unemployed or economically inactive), she faces compounding challenges and a higher risk of entering NEET status due to intergenerational disadvantages (Dicks et al., 2022). In short, family support can be a critical buffer, but it is unevenly available; those lacking it are especially vulnerable to falling into long-term inactivity.

It is also important to recognise the psychological and motivational barriers that often accompany these structural challenges. Prolonged detachment from work or education can erode a young woman's confidence, sense of identity and mental well-being. Many female NEETs struggle with low self-esteem and feel discouraged about their prospects. In the United Kingdom, interviews with economically inactive young women found that depression and anxiety were common, in part due to isolation and the stress of making ends meet without stable employment (Danner et al., 2021). Such mental health issues create additional hurdles to re-engagement, for example by undermining motivation or making it

harder to participate in training. The combination of care responsibilities, social expectations and psychological barriers can thus create a self-reinforcing cycle that keeps young women out of the labour force. Physical and emotional well-being are also emphasised in the Herning Declaration as national objectives for improving the VET on offer.

These gender-specific dynamics underline why it is essential to look beyond aggregate youth indicators and apply a gender lens when analysing NEETs. Without doing so, significant inequalities remain hidden and policy responses risk being less effective and less equitable. Disaggregating NEET data and examining the experiences of subgroups (young mothers, female carers, etc.) make visible the different entry points into NEET status, the varying durations and persistence of disengagement and the contrasting prospects for reintegration. If policies are designed only around the 'average' NEET, often implicitly a male unemployed school-leaver, they will fail to reach many young women who became NEET for very different reasons. For instance, a training programme that requires full-time attendance will not suit a single mother with an infant, and a job-search scheme that assumes that geographic mobility is a possibility will not help a young woman who cannot relocate because she is caring for an elderly relative. As researchers have argued, NEETs have often been treated synonymously with unemployed youth, leading to the neglect of inactive NEETs (Danner et al., 2021). Only by recognising and addressing the different pathways of young women and men can policy ensure more inclusive and sustainable outcomes for all NEETs.

4.2. Data and trends

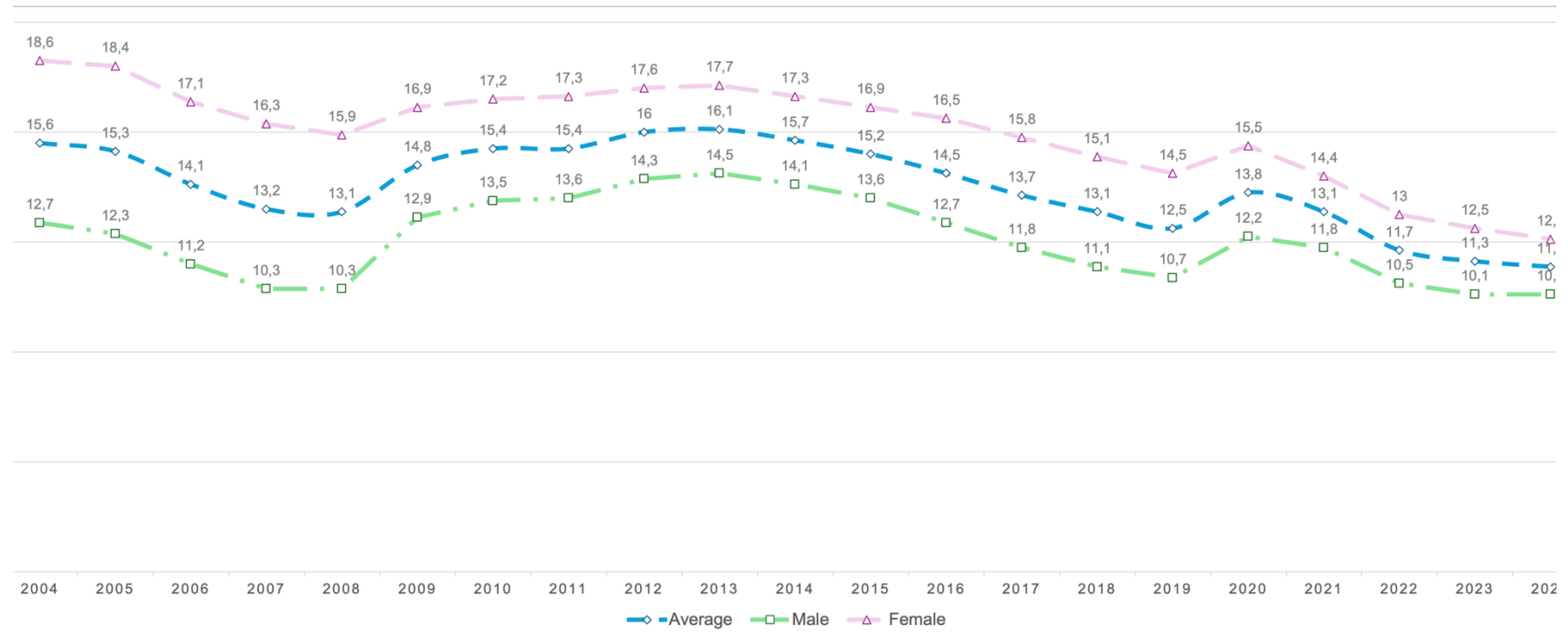
Understanding the gender dimension of the NEET phenomenon requires taking a closer look at long-term trends, variations among Member States and the structural barriers that shape young women and men's transitions into education, training and work.

Statistical evidence shows that, although the overall share of NEETs in the EU has declined over the past two decades, gender disparities remain pronounced and tend to widen during periods of economic or social crisis. These differences are not uniform across Europe. They reflect variations in national labour market structures, the availability of childcare and family support, cultural expectations and the inclusiveness of VET and activation systems.

The long-term evolution of NEET rates in the EU-27, illustrated in Figure 4, highlights both this overall progress and persistent gender disparities. As discussed earlier (see Section 2.1), between 2004 and 2024, the overall share of young people outside employment, education and training fell steadily, supported

by EU-level youth employment measures, the expansion of VET opportunities and strengthened labour market integration. Yet throughout this period, female NEET rates remained consistently higher than those of men. The gap widened significantly after the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and remained significant up until 2014, owing to a sharp rise in female NEET rates in several southern and eastern Member States. Despite improvements in the post-crisis years, in 2024 the female NEET rate was still 2-3 percentage points higher than the male NEET rate at the EU level.

Figure 4. Two decades of NEET rates in the EU-27 (2004-2024) – average, male and female rates (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

The picture becomes more nuanced when comparing Member States. NEET data disaggregated by gender, as presented in Figure 5, show persistent and often striking disparities at the national level. In several Member States, such as Portugal, Croatia and Spain, male and female NEET rates are relatively balanced, suggesting more even participation in both education and the labour market. In contrast, in Romania, Italy and Lithuania female NEET rates are particularly high, often linked to the limited provision of childcare, entrenched cultural norms around family responsibilities and insufficient institutional support for women’s labour market participation. At the other end of the spectrum, Nordic countries such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark record both the lowest overall NEET levels in Europe and some of the narrowest gender gaps. This reflects the combined impact of inclusive education systems, robust welfare policies and well-developed VET structures that support balanced participation across genders.

Figure 5. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates by gender, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

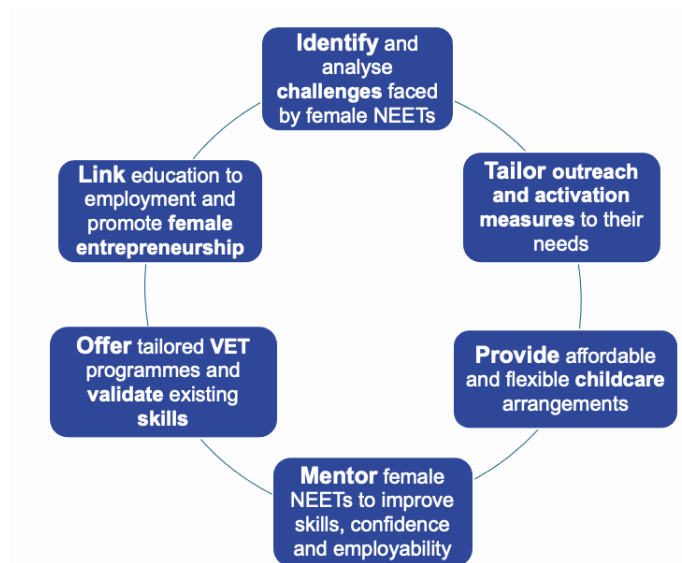
Looking at these patterns, further dimensions of inequality emerge. Female NEETs are more likely to be inactive than unemployed, a difference that is especially pronounced among young mothers. In some Member States, such as Italy and France, more than 10% of women aged 15-29 are classified as NEET and economically inactive, compared with only 3-5% of men in the same age group (Danner et al., 2021). Family care responsibilities remain a decisive factor, with recent research showing that young women with children are several times more likely to be NEET than their childless peers (van Vugt, 2023).

Importantly, female inactivity often becomes long term. Contini et al. (2019) show that women aged 24-29 are more likely than men to fall into the 'always NEET' category, with inactivity rather than unemployment being the dominant reason for their NEET status. For women, the protective effect of higher education is weaker than it is for men, suggesting that systemic barriers, rather than educational attainment alone, prevent young mothers from re-entering the labour market or undertaking further training. The persistence of these patterns is further confirmed by policy evaluations. A recent assessment in southern Europe found that female NEETs with care responsibilities were the least likely to register with public employment services, despite being among those the most vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion (O'Higgins & Brockie, 2024). This limited engagement is linked not only to structural access barriers but also to the low perceived relevance of the measures available and a lack of trust in public institutions. Overall, the evidence from cross-country research underscores a key policy challenge. Gender disparities in NEET status are deeply entrenched and shaped by both cyclical shocks and structural barriers. Addressing them requires tailored strategies that move beyond employment activation alone and integrate childcare provision, flexible training formats and outreach designed to overcome social and cultural constraints.

4.3. Holistic intervention approaches for female NEETs

To tackle the gender-specific barriers faced by young female NEETs, a differentiated and inclusive policy approach is required. Through analysing existing policies and practices in place to support female NEETs across the EU, Cedefop identified that successful interventions are those with holistic approaches addressing all the aspects listed in Box 8. These aspects recognise that empowering female NEETs calls for a multidimensional strategy combining labour market tools with social support services.

Box 8. **Intervention approach: helping female NEETs (re)integrate into education, employment or training**



Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Helping female NEETs \(re\)integrate into education, employment or training](#)'.

4.3.1. Using data to categorise NEETs and tailor interventions

Collecting and analysing NEET data disaggregated by gender, age subgroup, parental status, education level, region and socioeconomic background remains essential for designing tailored interventions to support female NEETs. A granular understanding of who NEETs are enables more targeted solutions. For example, data might reveal a high concentration of young women who are NEET due to family responsibilities in specific regions or among specific communities, suggesting that resources should be directed there. Profiling tools can help identify which young women are at risk of becoming long-term NEET (e.g. those with low qualifications who have a child before the age of 20), so that preventive support can be offered to them (van Vugt, 2023). At the local level, social workers and trainers should be able to differentiate between, for example, an unemployed graduate and a 25-year-old single mother with no work experience, since their needs and distance from the labour market differ vastly. Tailoring services might mean developing dedicated return-to-work programmes for young mothers that include childcare and life-skills training or creating specific tracks within Youth Guarantee schemes for those not immediately ready for work. Additionally, monitoring and evaluation should always examine gendered outcomes to show whether young women are benefiting equally from a given measure. By using data to continually refine their approaches, services can improve their relevance and

uptake. In sum, a data-driven, segmented approach helps avoid the homogeneous treatment of NEETs and instead aligns support with the diverse realities of young people, ensuring that female NEETs are not overlooked.

4.3.2. Systematically addressing childcare needs

Care responsibilities are the most cited reason for young women's economic inactivity and therefore a major driver of the prevalence of NEETs among women. Ensuring accessible and affordable childcare is therefore a cornerstone of any solution. This can include expanding public childcare placements, providing subsidies or vouchers for private childcare and encouraging employer-supported childcare arrangements (e.g. workplace crèches or flexible childcare accounts). The goal is that having a young child should not automatically preclude a mother from enrolling in training or taking up work. Research demonstrates the importance of this: high childcare costs and a lack of childcare coverage directly increase the likelihood that a young mother becomes NEET (van Vugt, 2023). Conversely, countries that invest in early childhood education and childcare enable young mothers to return to employment or education much more quickly (Danner et al., 2021). For example, France's policy of universal free preschool from the age of three, coupled with state support for childcare expenses, has been credited with helping young mothers re-enter work faster than their counterparts in countries with scarce childcare provision (Danner et al., 2021). Childcare is an important social service that should be embedded in any intervention aiming to support female NEETs in (re)engaging with the world of work or education.

4.3.3. Improving access to flexible learning and employment opportunities

Traditional full-time, inflexible education or job placements often do not suit young women who are balancing other responsibilities or who are trying to re-enter the labour market after a break. Education and training providers and employers who offer flexible and modular pathways make participation feasible for young women. This may include part-time vocational courses, evening or online classes, modular training curricula that allow intermittent attendance and offering the option to pause and resume programmes without penalty. In the labour market, more part-time or job-sharing roles with progression opportunities can help young women transition back into work gradually. Apprenticeships and traineeships could be adapted to run over longer periods on a part-time basis for young parents. Importantly, flexibility should not come at the expense of quality or security: young women need pathways that lead to sustainable, decent employment, not just marginal part-time jobs with no progression. Integrating work-based learning with childcare support can be particularly effective. For instance, some local initiatives pair vocational training for young mothers with on-site childcare or coordinated childminder

schedules, so that participants can focus on skills during part of the day. By making learning and earning compatible with family life, these approaches reduce the opportunity cost of engaging for young women. They also encourage women who left school early (often due to pregnancy or family care) to return to education and upskill by providing second-chance routes that accommodate their life situation.

4.3.4. Investing in mentoring and empowerment initiatives

Beyond structural issues like childcare and flexibility, many female NEETs grapple with low self-confidence, limited professional networks or simply a lack of exposure to opportunities outside the home. [Mentoring and targeted empowerment programmes](#) can play a critical role in rebuilding motivation and agency. Mentoring could take the form of pairing young women with experienced female role models in their community or industry of interest. These mentors can provide guidance on career planning, moral support and help navigating practical challenges such as securing childcare or preparing for job interviews. Peer support groups are another effective model: bringing together young women in similar situations so that they can share experiences and solutions can combat the isolation many feel. Evidence suggests that ‘soft’ support measures like coaching, confidence-building workshops and peer mentoring boost the efficacy of training/employment programmes by keeping participants engaged and resilient. For example, in some successful programmes, trained counsellors or social workers regularly meet with young mothers to help them set achievable goals and tackle personal obstacles (like time management as a parent or handling employer biases). Such holistic empowerment measures acknowledge that many young female NEETs have internalised a sense of failure or exclusion. By strengthening their self-esteem, communication skills and aspirations, mentoring programmes make subsequent steps (e.g. as enrolling in a course or starting a job) far more attainable.

4.3.5. Enhancing outreach through trusted channels

Reaching inactive young women who are detached from school and work requires proactive and tailored outreach. Traditional employment services often fail to connect with this group, either because these women do not register with these services or because the services are not designed with them in mind. It is therefore important to meet young women where they are, using intermediaries and channels they trust. Community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focused on women’s issues, motherhood or community health can be effective entry points. For instance, a local women’s association or a family resource centre may have established relationships with young mothers in a neighbourhood and can refer them to training or support programmes. Home visits or mobile units can be used for outreach in rural areas or deprived urban

districts. Outreach workers should be trained in cultural sensitivity and an awareness of gender dynamics; in some contexts, involving family members (e.g. the partners or parents of the young woman) in discussions can help cultivate support for her participation in a program. In addition, digital outreach via social media and online forums frequented by young mothers can spread awareness of the support available. The key is to design outreach and communication in a way that acknowledges the realities of these women's lives, especially since many may feel alienated from institutions or sceptical due to past negative experiences.

4.4. Good practices

In some Member States, public employment services, VET providers or social partners have taken initiative and implemented pilot programmes to cater specifically to female NEETs' complex profiles and needs. Inspiring practices implemented in this context are informed by recent data and research on the challenges female NEETs face when it comes to continuing or reintegrating into education or training. They are inspired by holistic approaches encompassing the aspects presented above and focus on providing young women with tools and skills to face the green and digital transitions.

In this section, two examples of good practice featured in Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs are presented that focus particularly on empowering female NEETs.

First, **Polish Outdoor Learning** is a project implemented in Poland that aims to strengthen women's employability through an innovative, work-based outdoor learning approach. By offering alternative and inclusive learning methods, the project supports female NEETs in developing motivation, confidence and practical experience, while equipping them with modern skills and competences that are highly valued in today's labour market.

Box 9. **Example of good practice: Polish Outdoor Learning**

Polish Outdoor Learning 

Good Practice

The Polish Outdoor Learning project **aims** to facilitate the **entry of young women into the labour market** and improve young women's employability and work skills, **through an outdoor learning approach**.

It **offers** NEETs, especially women, aged 18–35 a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills, and social competences through **experiential learning methods and outdoor development and learning processes**.



Of 67 NEET women participants:

-  15 returned to education;
-  18 found employment;
-  11 retrained and began working in new fields;
-  3 went abroad in search of work.

Over 89 % of the participants significantly changed their lives



89%

Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Polish Outdoor Learning – POL](#)'.

The second example is **DigitHer**, a project implemented in Italy that aims to strengthen the digital literacy and employability of young women. It provides a series of programming and digital-skills classes tailored to women who are currently not in employment, education or training, thereby opening up pathways into a sector traditionally dominated by men. The courses are delivered fully online, which is essential for reaching young women who must balance multiple responsibilities and require flexible learning arrangements.

Box 10. **Example of good practice: DigitHer**

DigitHer 

Good Practice

DigitHer **aims** to increase the participation of **young women in the tech industry** by providing them with the skills and support needed to launch digital careers.

Developed by the Italian government's Department for Digital Transformation, DigitHer targets **unemployed women aged 18 to 34** and provides them with 14-week-long **online training programmes for Java developer and data engineering roles**.

Programme effectiveness:

- 💡 2 378 applications received.
- 💡 174 learners enrolled, exceeding the initial target.
- 💡 150 women successfully completed the programme.
- 💡 108 participants placed in digital roles.



100 % of the placement goal in digital roles was achieved

Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[DigitHer](#)'.

Both examples of good practice illustrate how training programmes can adopt a holistic approach to the specific needs of and challenges faced by young women. They do so by providing flexible online learning opportunities, targeting digital and technology-intensive sectors that remain male-dominated and offering alternative learning methods that are often absent from formal education and training systems.

CHAPTER 5.

The urban-rural dimension of the NEET phenomenon

This chapter addresses the geographic dimension of the NEET phenomenon, recognising that location plays a decisive role in shaping young people's access to learning, training and work. Evidence across the EU consistently shows that youth outcomes are unevenly distributed between cities, towns and rural areas. In particular, living in rural areas and remoteness intersect with social, economic and institutional factors and increase young people's vulnerability to becoming and remaining NEET. Addressing these place-based challenges is essential not only for achieving more equitable outcomes but also for advancing territorial cohesion and fulfilling the European Pillar of Social Rights. Two examples of good practice are presented to illustrate the holistic solutions developed in different contexts to support NEETs in remote areas.

5.1. NEETs living in remote areas and the challenges they face

Geographic disadvantages compound young people's risk of exclusion and disengagement, particularly in rural and remote territories. These areas, often marked by demographic decline, lower investment levels, weaker infrastructure and limited institutional reach, present specific and often under-addressed challenges for NEET prevention and re-engagement.

NEETs in such contexts are more likely (Simões & Erdogan, 2024) to face compounded disadvantages resulting from the intersection of spatial, social and economic exclusion. Many live in communities experiencing population shrinkage, limited job creation and ageing infrastructure. Public services, when available, are often under-resourced or difficult to access without private transport. Under these conditions, the school-to-work transition becomes particularly difficult, especially for young people with lower levels of formal education. A recurring issue is invisibility: rural NEETs are less likely to appear on the radar of policy or service provision, leading to their low participation in Youth Guarantee schemes, upskilling programmes or activation measures.

The result is often a cycle of disengagement that is more difficult to detect, reach and reverse without context-sensitive interventions. NEETs in rural settings

are not only harder to identify but also less likely to access individualised support or to benefit from activation policies designed with urban contexts in mind. Geographic isolation is compounded by administrative invisibility, as many rural NEETs are not in regular contact with institutions and may not be captured in official outreach or monitoring systems. This reality calls for a policy response that goes beyond inclusion 'by design' and actively recognises the role of place in shaping opportunities and barriers.

Sociocultural dynamics add another layer of complexity as in many rural areas young people are less exposed to diverse educational and career pathways, and role models in higher education or non-traditional professions are scarce. This can restrict aspirations and reinforce traditional patterns of employment. Family expectations and informal caregiving roles can also limit mobility and independence, particularly for young women for whom the cultural norm is that caregiving is prioritised over their participation in education or paid work. Addressing these structural and relational dimensions of exclusion requires a more granular understanding of the lived experiences of NEETs in remote areas and of the social ecosystems that shape their decisions. In addition to these social and institutional dynamics, structural territorial disadvantages further limit the range of opportunities for engagement that are available for young people living in rural areas.

Rural areas often face structural disadvantages that limit young people's opportunities to remain engaged in education or employment. Compared with cities, they typically provide fewer chances to pursue post-secondary education or transition into skilled employment, as their labour markets tend to be less diversified and more seasonal. These challenges may be further compounded by persistent infrastructure deficits: transport links are weaker, digital connectivity is uneven and public services may be under-resourced. For young people already at risk of exclusion, these conditions reduce the feasibility of local training and job search, creating a dependency on mobility and financial resources that many NEETs do not possess. As a result, early disengagement in rural contexts can quickly turn into prolonged inactivity.

Research confirms that these territorial constraints have systemic roots and are not temporary or incidental. Remote areas tend to attract less investment in post-secondary education and generally have lower VET provisions relative to population needs. According to Simões and Erdogan (2024), access to second-chance education and work-based learning opportunities is notably more limited in non-urban settings, contributing to reduced mobility and lower professional aspirations. Career guidance services are also less developed. Where they exist, they are rarely embedded in the local institutional landscape or adapted to the

specific realities of rural life. As a result, young people's awareness of potential pathways is often diminished.

Territorial inequalities in education also intersect with gender and socioeconomic background. Female NEETs in rural areas are more likely to be inactive due to care responsibilities and entrenched gender norms, which restrict their mobility and decision-making. For rural men, challenges are more often linked to underemployment or informal labour, with seasonal or precarious work offering little long-term security. As Simões & Erdogan (2024) observe, such patterns risk normalising instability and generating intergenerational cycles of marginalisation. These structural disadvantages are often hidden in national averages, leading to the under-representation of rural youth in policy debates and limiting the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all responses.

Digital exclusion adds another layer of inequality. Reliable internet and access to digital tools remain uneven in remote regions, and, even where infrastructure is present, the support for developing digital literacy is often insufficient. In a labour market where digital competences are increasingly essential, this divide exacerbates the NEET risk. The synthesis report on the project 'Lost millennials – Transnational research network for the evaluation of initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs' (Tschank et al., 2023) stresses that digital transitions must be accompanied by targeted support to help remote young people acquire practical ICT skills and navigate digital work and learning environments. Without this, digitalisation risks reinforcing territorial and social inequalities rather than alleviating them.

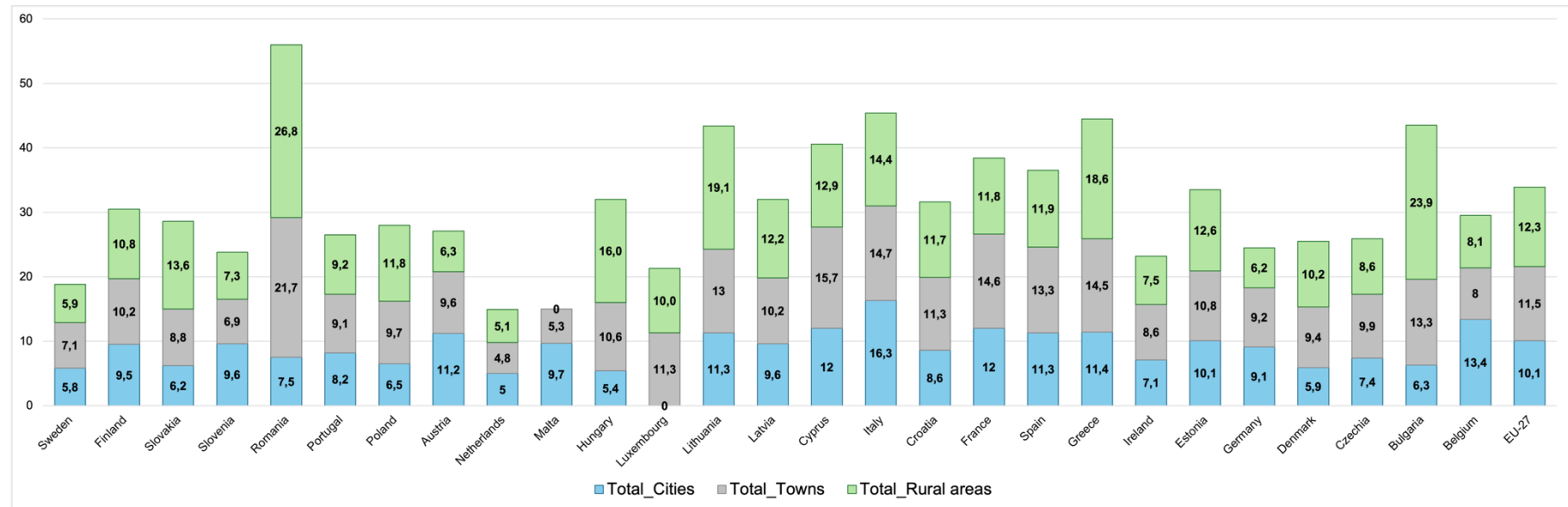
These barriers may be further reinforced by limited institutional reach, which limits access to consistent guidance, outreach and follow-up for young people. Rural NEETs are often overlooked by mainstream services, especially when outreach is centralised or delivered primarily through digital platforms. As a result, the take-up of Youth Guarantee schemes, upskilling programmes and activation measures tends to be lower, and follow-up also tends to be less effective. Limited local capacity and fragmented service provision exacerbate the problem. Many programmes are designed for contexts with a minimum level of institutional infrastructure that rural areas may not meet, leaving significant gaps in provision. Overall, these interlinked challenges show that the barriers facing rural NEETs are multidimensional, typically spanning infrastructure, institutions and social norms, and must therefore be tackled through holistic, place-based policy responses.

5.2. Data and trends

Eurostat data (Figure 6) confirm the persistence of rural–urban disparities across the EU. While the average NEET rate stands at around 11%, this masks substantial variation by degree of urbanisation. In many Member States, NEET rates in rural regions exceed those in cities by several percentage points. In Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary, the divide reaches more than ten percentage points. These differences are structural, rooted in long-standing inequalities in infrastructure, institutional access and service provision.

As shown in Figure 6, a clear territorial gradient emerges: young people in cities record the lowest NEET rates, followed by those in towns and suburbs, while rural areas consistently show the highest shares. This pattern holds across nearly all Member States. The divide is especially pronounced in southern and eastern Europe, where rural NEET rates are often double those observed in cities, as in Romania and Bulgaria. In contrast, Nordic and western Member States such as the Netherlands and Sweden show smaller gaps, reflecting more balanced regional development and stronger welfare systems. Gender disparities intersect with this divide: rural young women are much more likely to be NEET than rural young men, whereas in cities the gender gap is narrower (see Figures 7 and 9).

Figure 6. NEET rates by degree of urbanisation, EU-27, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat_lfse_29](#)).

While territorial trends provide an essential understanding of where NEET rates are highest, disaggregated data reveal that the risk is shaped by more than geography alone. Analysing NEETs only through aggregate national- or EU-level indicators provides an incomplete picture of the phenomenon. Research on social exclusion and youth transitions consistently shows that risks of disengagement are not uniformly distributed but shaped by structural, spatial and social factors that intersect in complex ways. Two of the most influential dimensions are territory and gender.

From a territorial perspective, the concept of spatial inequality highlights how geography influences life chances. Opportunities tend to be concentrated in cities: they offer more diverse labour markets, denser education and training systems and stronger social and transport infrastructure. Towns and suburbs occupy a more ambiguous position, often described as 'in-between spaces': they provide more opportunities than rural areas but lack the critical mass of institutions and services found in metropolitan centres. In contrast, rural regions are typically characterised by structural disadvantages: fewer employment options, fewer training offers, limited institutional presence and higher barriers to mobility. These dynamics resonate with theories of territorial cohesion in EU policy, which emphasise that unequal access to services and opportunities undermines both economic growth and social inclusion.

5.3. The link between gender and degree of urbanisation

Bringing these two dimensions together, gender and degree of urbanisation, offers a richer analytical lens for understanding the NEET phenomenon.

From a gender perspective, labour market segmentation, the persistence of traditional gender roles and gendered life transitions continue to influence youth trajectories. These gendered dynamics do not operate in isolation but are intensified by territorial context. In rural areas, where institutional support is weaker and cultural norms more traditional, the barriers facing young women compound the disadvantages associated with place, which may produce distinct experiences of disadvantage. A young man and a young woman may both live in a rural area, but their risk of becoming NEET is shaped not only by territorial exclusion but also by gendered expectations and responsibilities. Similarly, while urban environments may narrow the gender gap by providing greater access to services and opportunities, they rarely eliminate it. This persistence of inequalities, even in more favourable contexts, highlights the need for gender-sensitive, place-based policies.

Figures 7 to 9 bring further analytical depth by combining two dimensions: gender and degree of urbanisation. They show how NEET rates vary not only between young men and young women but also among degrees of urbanisation, in cities, towns and suburbs, and rural areas. This combined analysis reveals patterns that national averages conceal: a persistent but narrower gender gap in cities, heightened risks for young women in semi-urban settings and a concentration of disadvantage in rural territories.

Figure 7. Comparison of EU-27 urban NEET rates by gender, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

Focusing first on urban areas, the evidence indicates that NEET rates in cities tend to be lower than national average NEET rates for both men and women (Figures 6 and 7). This reflects the comparative advantages of metropolitan environments: greater access to education and training opportunities, more diversified labour markets and stronger institutional presence. Yet, while urban settings reduce the overall scale of disengagement, they do not eliminate gender disparities.

In most Member States, female NEET rates in cities remain higher than those for men, although the gap is narrower than at the national level. Italy, Czechia and Romania, are illustrative cases: young women in the urban centres continue to face elevated risks of being NEET, but the differences compared with the rates for men are smaller than in rural or suburban locations. This suggests that, while urban environments create more inclusive opportunities, structural inequalities persist beneath the surface.

The Nordic and western European Member States, including the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark stand out for having some of the lowest city-based NEET rates for both genders in the EU. These results reflect the impact of strong local labour markets and inclusive education systems embedded within comprehensive welfare states. In contrast, in southern and several eastern European Member States, urban NEET rates remain high, pointing to persistent socioeconomic divides even within cities.

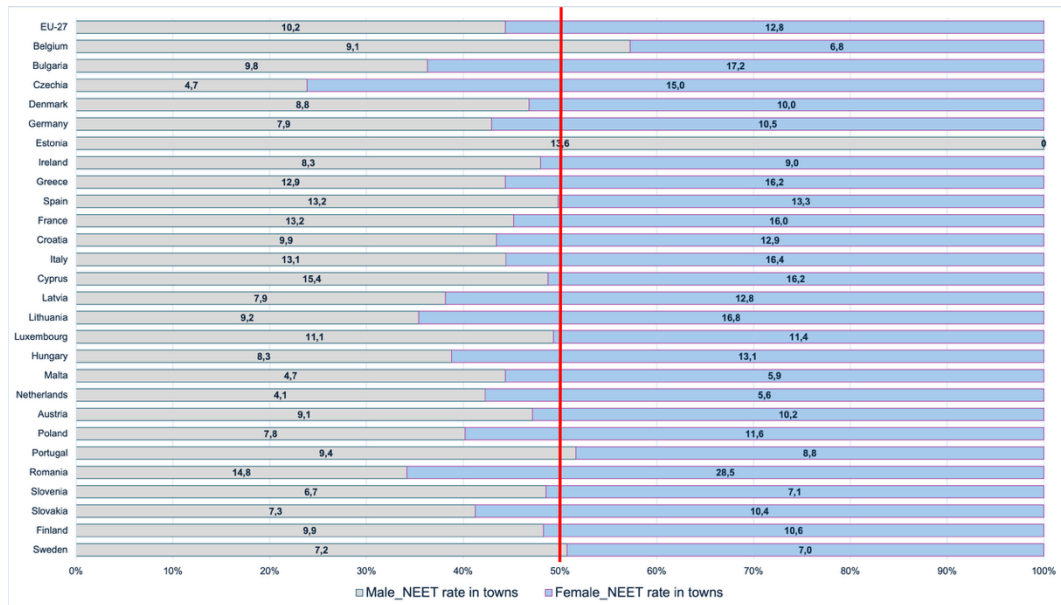
Taken together, the evidence confirms that, while urban settings offer comparative advantages for youth transitions, they cannot by themselves ensure equality. Policy responses should therefore build on the strengths of urban environments – concentrated training provision, diverse labour markets and accessible services – while addressing persistent gender barriers through targeted outreach, guidance and tailored support measures.

While the urban–rural divide has received considerable attention in research and policy debates, an often-overlooked dimension of the NEET phenomenon lies in semi-urban areas – the towns and suburbs where a large share of Europe's young people live. These areas cannot easily be categorised as either opportunity-rich metropolitan centres or structurally disadvantaged rural regions. Instead, they are in-between spaces where transitions into education, training and employment are shaped by a combination of relative advantages and persistent constraints.

From the perspective of social geography, semi-urban areas provide partial access to labour markets and training systems but often lack the sheer number of institutions and opportunities available in cities. At the same time, they do not face the extreme isolation that characterises remote rural communities. This intermediate position creates specific risks and opportunities for young people.

Figure 8 explores these dynamics by comparing NEET rates in towns and suburbs across the EU, disaggregated by gender.

Figure 8. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates in towns and suburbs by gender, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat_lfse_29](#)).

Young people living in towns and suburbs face a distinct set of challenges from those in large cities. Figure 6 shows that NEET rates in these areas are consistently higher than in urban centres, reflecting weaker labour markets, fewer training opportunities and limited transport or mobility options. Semi-urban young people often find themselves in a precarious position: local opportunities are too limited to sustain smooth school-to-work transitions, yet their access to metropolitan services and jobs is constrained by distance, cost and connectivity.

Gender disparities are particularly marked in these settings. In several Member States, including Romania, Czechia and Lithuania, female NEET rates in towns and suburbs are considerably higher than those of young men. This reflects the combined impact of labour market constraints and family-related responsibilities, which weigh more heavily on young women in environments where public childcare is scarce and social norms remain traditional.

In contrast, in Member States such as Spain, Slovenia and Luxembourg, male and female NEET rates in towns and suburbs are more balanced, while in Belgium, Portugal and Sweden the male NEET rates are higher than the female ones. This suggests that inclusive education and training systems, together with stronger institutional support, can partly offset the risks of semi-urban disadvantages. Nevertheless, even in these cases, overall NEET levels remain higher than in major cities, pointing to the structural vulnerabilities of semi-urban locations.

The evidence therefore positions towns and suburbs as in-between spaces, often overlooked by VET and labour market inclusion policies. Policy responses

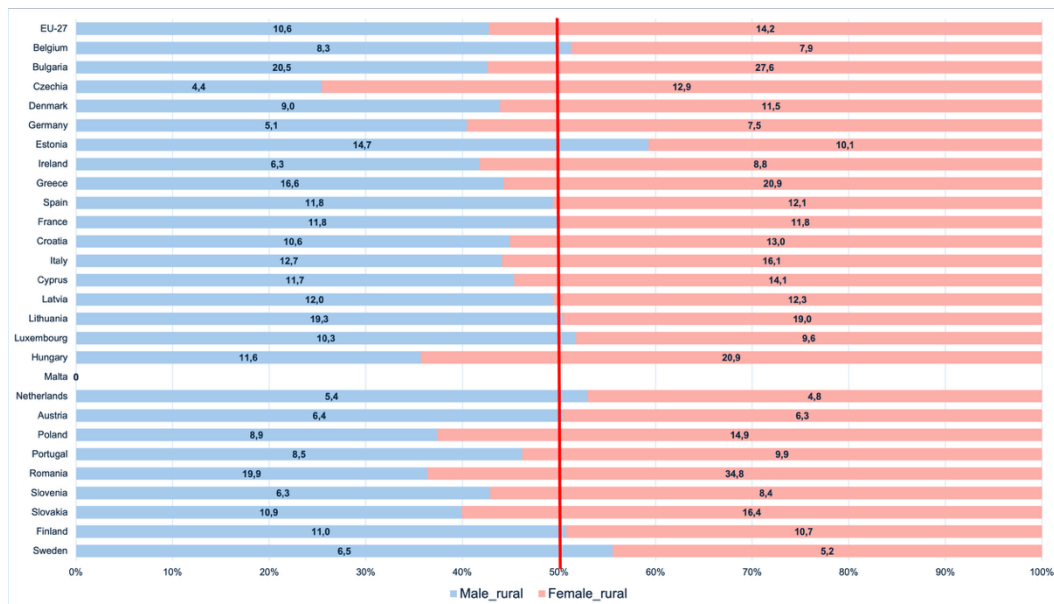
for these areas need to address their specific conditions by improving transport and digital connectivity, expanding training offers in local centres and ensuring that gender-sensitive support services are available to prevent disengagement. Strengthening cooperation between municipalities, schools, employers and civil society is also critical to ensure that semi-urban young people do not fall through the cracks between urban and rural strategies aiming to reduce the rate of NEETs.

At the other end of the territorial spectrum, rural areas stand out as the most challenging environments for youth inclusion. Research on territorial cohesion and youth employment emphasises that rurality is not only a matter of geography but also of compounded disadvantage, where economic opportunities, social norms and service provision intersect to limit life chances (Simões & Erdogan, 2024).

As shown in Figure 9, rural areas consistently have the highest NEET rates across the EU-27, with striking gender disparities. In 2024, young women in rural settings were systematically more likely than young men to not be in employment, education or training. Member States such as Romania, Greece, Italy and Bulgaria stand out, with their female NEET rates in rural areas exceeding 20% in some cases, pointing to the persistence of deep-rooted socioeconomic and cultural barriers.

Compared with their peers in cities and towns, rural young people face a combination of disadvantages that magnify their risk of disengagement. Access to post-secondary education is more limited, local training opportunities are scarcer and the supply of quality jobs is restricted by less diversified, often seasonal, labour markets. Transport and mobility constraints further reduce young people's ability to reach services and opportunities located outside of their immediate communities. For women, these disadvantages are compounded by traditional gender roles, gaps in childcare provision and limited access to social services, which collectively reinforce economic inactivity.

Figure 9. Comparison of EU-27 NEET rates in rural areas by gender, 2024 (%)



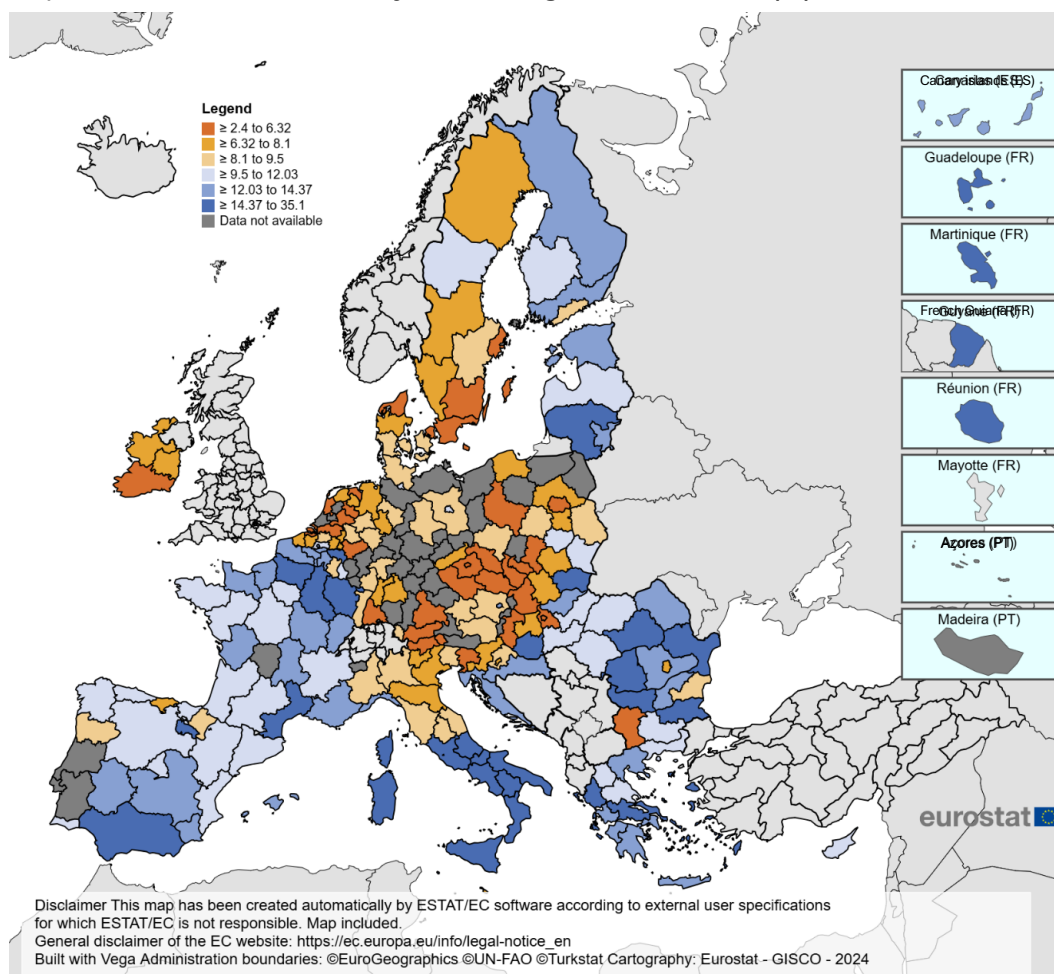
Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 29](#)).

Rural NEET rates are significantly lower in Nordic and some western European Member States, such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. In these areas, strong welfare systems, active labour market policies and more balanced regional development strategies mitigate the risks of exclusion. This variation demonstrates that rural disadvantage is not inevitable and instead depends on the balance between territorial conditions and institutional support.

The evidence underscores the urgent need for targeted rural strategies within national youth employment and training policies. Expanding the provision of mobile and digital training can help overcome geographic barriers, while supporting rural enterprises can create local opportunities for young people who cannot easily relocate. At the same time, addressing structural gender inequalities – through investment in childcare, flexible training formats and outreach tailored to young women – is essential for closing the gap.

Without such interventions, rural young people, and particularly rural young women, are at risk of being left even further behind. This not only threatens progress towards the EU's social targets for 2030 but also undermines its broader objectives of territorial cohesion and demographic resilience. Rural disengagement is not merely a local issue; it has long-term implications for social inclusion, the labour supply and regional sustainability across Europe.

Map 3. Male NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%)

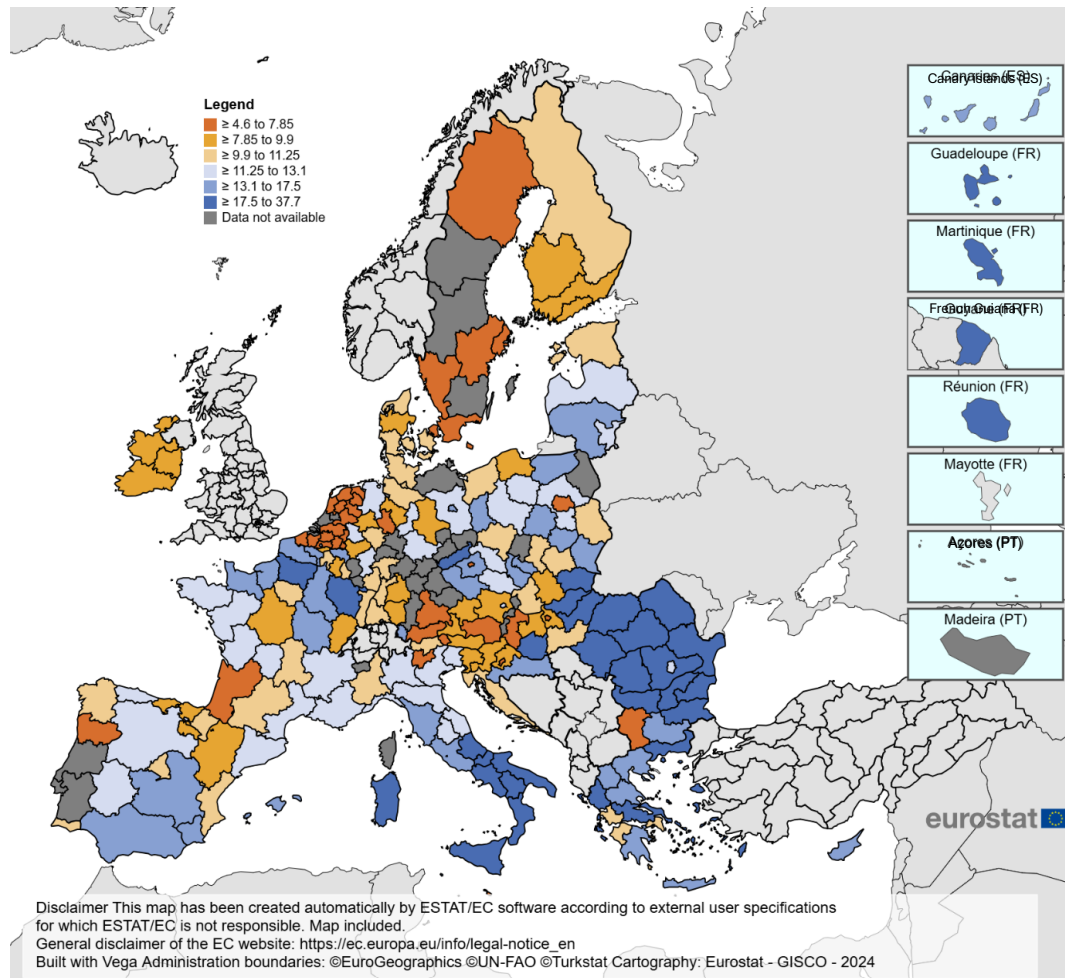


Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat_lfse_33](#)).

Disaggregating NEET rates by gender at the regional (NUTS 2) level reveals striking differences in both scale and geography. While the overall territorial patterns are broadly similar to the aggregate picture, the intensity and concentration of disadvantage diverge significantly between young men and young women.

For men, as is evident from Map 3, NEET rates are highest in parts of southern and eastern Europe, and the regional variation is somewhat less extreme. In many Member States, male NEET rates cluster around 8-12%, with fewer regions exceeding 15%. Peaks appear in certain industrially declining regions or those heavily affected by cyclical unemployment, reflecting men's greater exposure to labour market volatility. Northern and western European regions generally report male NEET rates below 10%, underscoring the protective effect of more diversified labour markets and inclusive VET systems.

Map 4. Female NEET rates by NUTS 2 region, EU-27, 2024 (%)



Source: Authors, based on Eurostat data ([edat lfse 33](#)).

For women, however, Map 4 reveals a markedly different regional picture. Large swathes of southern and eastern Europe report female NEET rates well above 15%, with some regions surpassing 25% and even 30%. These hotspots are concentrated in rural or peripheral areas of Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Romania, where limited childcare provision, persistent gender norms and weak local labour markets severely restrict young women's options. Even within relatively prosperous Member States, strong territorial divides can be observed: for example, female NEET rates are significantly higher in peripheral or rural regions than in capital or metropolitan areas.

Comparing the two maps highlights how gender and geography intersect. While young men tend to be affected by cyclical labour market shocks (e.g. economic crises or industrial restructuring), young women are more persistently excluded due to structural barriers linked to care responsibilities and unequal

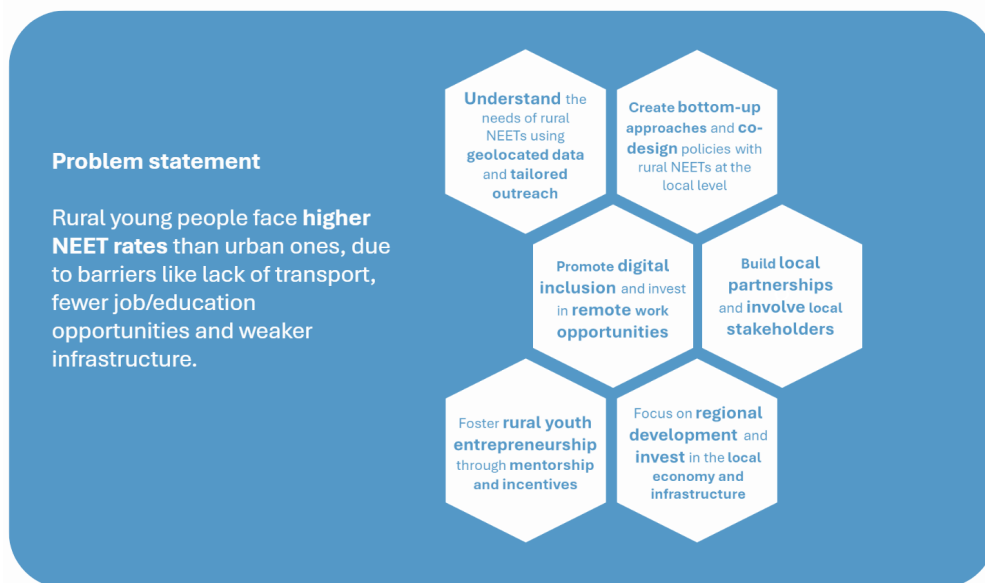
access to education and employment. The persistence of pockets of female NEETs in certain regions suggests that EU and national averages may underestimate the scale of the gender disadvantage when viewed through a territorial lens.

From a policy standpoint, these regional gender gaps underscore the importance of integrated, gender-sensitive and place-based strategies. Measures to reduce NEET rates must go beyond general activation policies and explicitly address the constraints young women face in disadvantaged regions – for instance by investing in affordable childcare, expanding local VET opportunities, supporting flexible learning pathways and challenging gender stereotypes in training and work. Without such targeted interventions, structural inequalities are at risk of persisting, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions where support systems are weakest.

5.4. **Holistic interventions to support NEETs in remote areas**

To tackle the geographically specific barriers faced by NEETs, a differentiated and inclusive policy approach is required. Through analysing the work of existing policies and practices that support NEETs in the remote areas of different Member States, this report emphasises that successful interventions are those that take a holistic approach, addressing all the factors laid out in the following subsections. These factors reveal that empowering NEETs in remote areas calls for a multidimensional strategy, combining labour market tools with social support services.

Box 11. **Intervention approach: NEETs living in remote areas – bridging the geographic divide**



Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[NEETs living in remote areas – Bridging the geographic divide](#)'.

5.4.1. Supporting local VET and guidance ecosystems

Evidence points to limited institutional reach in sparsely populated areas: remote regions often have fewer training providers, scarce career services and limited access to public employment offices (Simões & Erdogan, 2024). Holistic approaches invest in rebuilding these local guidance and training ecosystems so that NEETs in remote areas can find support on their doorstep. Decentralising services may be a key way forward; this can take the form of mobile counselling services, youth-friendly contact points in community centres or libraries and partnerships with local schools, NGOs and other stakeholders working with young people to enable them to host advisers on a rotating basis. The goal is to create multiple entry points through which disengaged young people can receive guidance, advice on career and education pathways and referrals to programmes. Maintaining continuity is also important: one-off job fairs have a limited impact; rural NEETs benefit more from ongoing mentorship and follow-up, which can be provided by local youth workers or VET trainers. For example, in some Nordic countries, outreach workers regularly visit remote communities to identify inactive young people and connect them with nearby training opportunities or apprenticeships. Where physical infrastructure is hard to establish, digital solutions are used creatively, such as scheduling video counselling sessions at a local library with a career adviser based in the nearest town. Strengthening local VET and guidance ecosystems in these ways increases the visibility of and trust in support

services, which is a prerequisite for uptake in remote areas. A holistic intervention ensures that, no matter where a young person lives, they have accessible guidance to help them navigate education and employment pathways.

5.4.2. Strengthening digital access and skills

Digital exclusion is a compounding risk for NEETs in remote areas. In the era of online learning and remote work, a lack of reliable internet or low digital literacy risks further isolating rural young people. Holistic interventions therefore emphasise closing the rural digital divide, for example by extending broadband infrastructure and creating local internet access points so that young people can connect to online resources. Just as crucial is providing digital skills training and pathways into digitally enabled jobs. Remote work or training programmes can open up employment opportunities that are not tied to the local labour market. The Go Remote project (see Box 13) is one example of such efforts; it offers disadvantaged rural young people tailored training, mentoring and job matching for remote and hybrid jobs in multiple sectors. Such projects demonstrate that with the right support, rural NEETs can acquire in-demand ICT skills and access jobs online from their home towns. Additionally, setting up co-working spaces or digital innovation hubs in small towns can give young people a place to collaborate, learn and engage with mentors, mirroring some of the networking advantages of urban areas. Strengthening digital access and skills thus expands the horizons of rural NEETs, enabling them to participate in education and work irrespective of geographic distance. It transforms isolation into connectivity – a critical step in making remote areas viable places for young people to study and earn a living.

5.4.3. Investing in local coordination and partnerships

The integrated delivery of services through cross-sector collaboration is crucial to maximise impact in remote areas. The fragmentation of services can certainly limit the effectiveness of any single policy measure. Holistic interventions therefore invest in structured cooperation between municipalities, education and training providers, public employment services, youth organisations and civil society. By forming local partnership platforms, stakeholders can share information, align their objectives and create referral pathways so that no NEET falls through the net. Such coordination improves targeting, the sequencing of support and follow-up (e.g. it ensures that after a training programme, the young person is handed over to a mentor for the next step). In practice, this might mean establishing a rural youth employment task force that meets regularly or a network of community 'NEET coaches' who liaise with families and services. Partnerships also enable resource-pooling in areas with scarce funding; for example, a municipality could co-fund a youth counsellor position together with the local school and an NGO, improving

their outreach capacity. An illustration of this collaborative ethos is the Back on Track project in the Danube region, which created a transnational stakeholder network uniting NGOs, VET centres, youth clubs and public services to develop solutions for rural NEETs. By fostering horizontal and vertical cooperation (local–regional–national), Back on Track (see Box 12) shows how partners can amplify each other’s efforts and sustain outcomes beyond a single project. Overall, investing in local coordination builds an ecosystem of support around the young person: education, employment, health and social actors are working in concert. This integrated approach is particularly important for remote areas, where institutional capacity is thin; different services joining forces can compensate for their individual limitations and create a more resilient support structure for disengaged young people.

5.4.4. Improving infrastructure and transport connectivity

The physical distance to education, training and employment opportunities is a constraint in many rural areas. Limited public transport, long travel times or costly commutes can prevent NEETs from accessing programmes even when they are available. Holistic approaches should therefore start with reducing these practical barriers. This can include investment in rural public transport (e.g. expanding bus routes or on-demand shuttles), regional mobility schemes and targeted support such as travel vouchers or fuel subsidies for young people. For example, some rural communities have introduced youth mobility initiatives that offer free or subsidised transport for NEETs to reach training centres or work placements. In Spain’s Galicia region, a mobile information bus toured remote villages to raise awareness of the Youth Guarantee scheme, illustrating how bringing services closer to people can improve outreach. By improving connectivity, whether through better transport links or by bringing services to the community, such measures ensure that distance and isolation do not leave rural NEETs without support. These investments not only facilitate access to education and jobs but also signal to rural young people that they have not been left behind in terms of policy priorities.

5.4.5. Fostering rural youth entrepreneurship

Place-specific pathways that build on local strengths are essential to support NEETs in remote areas. In regions where formal job openings are few, youth entrepreneurship can provide an alternative route into economic activity. Holistic interventions often include training and incentives for young people to develop small businesses or social enterprises that are rooted in local needs, turning rural challenges into opportunities. This might involve entrepreneurship courses tailored to rural contexts (e.g. developing agribusinesses, sustainable tourism or crafts), paired with coaching, mentoring and start-up support. Access to microfinance or

seed funding is also critical, as many rural NEETs lack collateral or the networks to secure capital. Supportive measures can remove practical barriers – for instance, helping with business plan development, simplifying registration procedures or providing shared workspaces and equipment. An example of good practice is the [rural action for innovative and sustainable entrepreneurship for youth \(RAISE\) initiative](#) in eastern Europe, which empowers rural NEETs (aged 25-29) by training them in sustainable agriculture and eco-tourism and providing them with mentorship and digital tools for marketing. Initiatives like this not only equip young people with skills to start their own ventures but also foster value chains that link young entrepreneurs with local markets and supply networks. By tapping into a region's unique assets, which could be nature, culture or any other niche, rural entrepreneurship pathways can create rooted opportunities that keep talent in the area. Such efforts have a dual benefit: they offer NEETs a chance to earn income and build their confidence as business owners, while revitalising the local economy and community. However, it must be stressed that entrepreneurship is not a panacea for all NEETs; it tends to suit a minority with specific aptitudes. Therefore, holistic approaches couple entrepreneurship support with continued guidance and a safety net of social protection, ensuring that taking a risk on a new venture does not leave vulnerable young people worse off. When fostered within a supportive ecosystem, rural youth entrepreneurship can be a powerful tool to combat both unemployment and depopulation.

5.4.6. Engaging NEETs in programme design

An often overlooked but vital element of holistic support is the active involvement of NEETs themselves in designing and implementing interventions. The participation of young people in shaping the services they use is a cross-cutting condition for effectiveness. In remote areas especially, engaging NEETs in programme design can improve the fit of initiatives to real needs, reduce dropout rates and strengthen young people's sense of agency. Mechanisms for this involvement range from youth advisory councils that provide input to local authorities to participatory planning workshops where NEETs help co-create outreach strategies or training content. Such bottom-up approaches give a voice to those normally absent from policy discussions, and they foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among young people. Likewise, involving NEETs as peer mentors or community volunteers (with appropriate training) can further boost their confidence and social ties. Good practices suggest that when young people help shape interventions the outcomes are more relevant and sustainable. In sum, treating NEETs as partners in their reintegration, rather than passive beneficiaries, is an important cornerstone of holistic practice. By empowering rural young people


to contribute their ideas and feedback, programmes become more innovative and locally attuned. This also enables NEETs to build soft skills such as communication skills, which aid their long-term inclusion.

5.5. Good practices

Having examined holistic intervention approaches that are suitable for supporting NEETs in rural areas, it is also important to highlight concrete examples of projects implemented across Europe that focus specifically on this target group.

Back on Track (Box 12), implemented in 10 European countries, promotes the integration of rural NEETs into VET or the labour market through skills development and digital inclusion. Its holistic approach combines learning modules with mentoring, career guidance and outreach activities. The project is also innovative in ensuring direct engagement with social partners – including employers and companies – thereby strengthening young people’s transition pathways and local labour market connections.

Box 12. Example of good practice: Back on Track




Back on Track – support for young NEETs in rural areas 


(Re)integrating rural NEETs through skills development and digital inclusion

Good Practice

Back on Track aims to integrate **young NEETs in rural areas into VET** through a **transnational stakeholder network** and **digital training and mentoring programme**.

The project adopts a **holistic approach** to helping rural NEETs, featuring:

-  a **mentoring programme**, with personalised guidance for disadvantaged NEETs;
-  **digital learning modules**, to build digital literacy, communication, and problem-solving skills;
-  **outreach and engagement strategies**, to understand local needs and build stakeholder networks.



EUR 2.47 million
has been invested in the project

Source: Authors, based on Cedefop’s VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: [‘Back on Track – support for young NEETs in rural areas’](#).

Go Remote (see Box 13) is another example of good practice that leverages digital skills and online tools to engage rural NEETs and support their integration into the labour market. The project places cooperation with social partners at the centre of its approach, establishing strong connections with local employers to help

disadvantaged young people access employment opportunities quickly and sustainably.

Box 13. **Example of good practice: Go Remote**

Go Remote 
Unlocking the potential of remote job opportunities
Good Practice

Go Remote aims to provide **targeted training**, mentoring and employment support to **young people from disadvantaged backgrounds**, particularly NEETs, young mothers and rural youth.

It offers **remote work training programmes**, **job speed-dating events**, and soft and technical skills training and facilitates access to job openings across Europe through a **dedicated job-seeking platform**.

Programme effectiveness

-  3 941 young individuals trained in remote work skills.
-  318 small and medium-sized enterprises engaged in remote work practices.
-  74 mentors trained to support young jobseekers.

Over 7 000
people involved in the programme.

Source: Authors, based on Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs: '[Go Remote](#)'.

CHAPTER 6.

Conclusions and policy messages

This chapter brings together the main findings of the report and reflects on their implications for policymakers and practitioners working with NEETs. It synthesises the evidence on the drivers shaping NEET status across Europe and the conditions under which VET can foster more inclusive youth transitions. While clear progress has been achieved in reducing NEET rates from their post-crisis peak, persistent disparities – by gender, geography and the compounded effect of those and other systemic factors – continue to limit opportunities for many young Europeans. Achieving the EU goal of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030 will require not only targeted interventions but a transformation in how education, labour market and social systems support youth inclusion.

6.1. Overall conclusions

Progress in reducing NEET rates has been uneven, with particular groups – especially young women and those in rural areas – remaining disproportionately affected. These gaps reflect deep-rooted structural socioeconomic inequalities and stereotypes that undermine Europe’s ambitions for inclusive growth and resilience.

The evidence presented in this report underscores that young people’s transitions from school to work are still strongly conditioned by structural, institutional and social barriers. Many NEETs face overlapping challenges: care responsibilities, poor transport, limited digital access and mental health difficulties. Short-term or generic activation measures cannot address these complex realities. Instead, sustained, tailored, coordinated and multidimensional support – integrating skills development with counselling, childcare, transport and social services – delivers better results. The challenge now is to scale up and mainstream such holistic approaches, moving beyond isolated pilot projects, such as the ones showcased in the examples of good practice presented in this study, and embedding them within systemic youth and VET policies.

Ultimately, tackling the NEET challenge is about much more than just having an impact on statistics – it is about expanding opportunity, equity and participation for all young Europeans. VET can be a powerful engine for inclusion, helping to rebuild pathways for young people at the margins of work and learning. Findings in this report show how VET may play a unique role as a bridge between education, work and social inclusion, but it cannot succeed in isolation. Integrated, gender-

sensitive and place-aware strategies are needed to ensure that no young person is left behind.

6.2. Conclusions on female NEETs

Gender remains a defining factor in youth exclusion. In 2024, 12.1% of young women aged 15-29 were NEET, compared with 10% of young men (Eurostat, 2025). Women are also more likely to be inactive NEETs, out of the labour force and disengaged for longer periods, largely due to caring responsibilities and insufficient institutional support. These outcomes do not necessarily reflect individual preferences; rather, they indicate structural inequalities. If unaddressed, they risk entrenching gender gaps in employment, earnings and well-being for decades to come.

A gender-blind approach to youth policy will not deliver equality. Generic activation or VET measures, while necessary, are insufficient unless they are accompanied by accessible childcare, flexible learning opportunities and supportive welfare systems. Policymakers must embed gender sensitivity in all stages of the design, implementation and evaluation of policy.

High female NEET rates should be interpreted as a strong warning signal indicating that education, labour market and social protection systems are failing to deliver equal opportunities. Policy priorities should therefore consider the points listed below.

- (a) **Gender-sensitive monitoring and targets.** It is advisable for the EU's 9% NEET target for 2030 to integrate gender equality considerations. Member States could monitor male and female NEET rates separately, set sub-targets for closing the gender gap and request all EU-funded youth programmes to monitor gender equality indicators.
- (b) **Holistic support for inactive NEETs.** Suggestions include expanding integrated packages combining training, counselling and childcare; and adjusting Youth Guarantee schemes to explicitly target inactive women, not just jobseekers.
- (c) **Inclusive welfare design.** Policies could reform benefit systems so that participation in part-time work or training does not penalise young mothers financially. They could also review conditionality rules to promote smooth transitions from benefits into employment or education.
- (d) **Breaking intergenerational disadvantages.** This could be achieved by providing early childhood education and care, parenting support and community outreach to prevent the transmission of exclusion. Promoting

positive narratives around gender equality and work–life balance is also crucial.

Reducing the over-representation of women among NEETs is both a social justice imperative and an economic necessity. Gender-responsive NEET policies will expand the active workforce, enhance productivity and strengthen Europe’s human capital base. No inclusive recovery is possible without the full participation of young women.

6.3. Conclusions on rural NEETs

Rural NEETs face compounded disadvantages arising from geography, infrastructure and opportunity gaps. NEET rates are consistently higher in rural areas – 12.3% in rural areas compared with 10% in urban areas in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025) – and the divide is particularly stark in southern and eastern Europe. These disparities are not merely about service availability; they reflect structural differences in connectivity, labour market composition and access to quality education and training.

Simply replicating urban youth policies in rural areas is ineffective. Territorial inequalities require place-based solutions. Strengthening local ecosystems of support – through partnerships between VET providers, local employers, municipalities and community organisations – can help reach young people who are often invisible in official systems.

Policy priorities should therefore consider the points listed below.

- (a) **Place-based VET and youth services.** Programmes could adapt to local realities by introducing mobile or one-stop services, local mentors and flexible training delivery models. The governance and provision of VET could be decentralised to ensure that decisions reflect local needs and engage young NEETs directly in the design of VET programmes so that training content and delivery are better aligned with their specific circumstances, challenges and aspirations.
- (b) **Investment in connectivity and mobility.** Suggestions include expanding broadband, transport and digital learning infrastructure to ensure equal access to education, training and employment.
- (c) **Integration with the green and digital transitions.** Rural youth policies could be linked with investments in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy and digital entrepreneurship. Rural NEETs can be key actors in Europe’s twin transitions if given the right tools and opportunities.

- (d) **Data and visibility.** The disaggregated monitoring of NEETs could be improved by degree of urbanisation to inform targeted interventions and funding allocation.

Ensuring that location does not determine life chances is essential for Europe's cohesion. Supporting rural NEETs means investing in the vitality and resilience of all Europe's regions.

6.4. Looking ahead: priorities for policy and research

The report highlights five cross-cutting lessons for the future of youth inclusion policies.

- (a) **NEETs are diverse; policies about them must therefore be targeted.** The NEET category includes multiple subgroups requiring different responses. Tailored interventions are essential for effectiveness. To this, Cedefop's VET toolkit for empowering NEETs is a unique source of support to policy makers and practitioners.
- (b) **Intersectionality matters.** Gender, geography, socioeconomic background and migration status interact to create layered vulnerabilities. Policies should account for these intersections to reach those most at risk.
- (c) **Structural barriers need to be removed.** Skills programmes alone cannot succeed without addressing childcare, transport, housing and digital access.
- (d) **Holistic approaches work best.** Integrating VET with social, psychological and economic support yields sustainable engagement and progression.
- (e) **Partnerships are key for success.** VET providers should work hand-in-hand with employment services, employers and local actors to build coherent pathways for youth inclusion.

Looking forward, reaching the EU's 2030 NEET target remains achievable but requires intensified effort. Achieving it will demand renewed investment in inclusive VET, structural reforms to address persistent inequalities and robust data to monitor progress, alongside targeted, effective and inclusive policies. Europe cannot afford to lose a generation's potential; the human and economic costs are too high. Box 14 offers an overview of the policy recommendations of this research, proposing concrete actions and assessing their potential impact.

Box 14. **Policy suggestions to help ensure inclusive transitions for Europe's NEETs**

(a) Make gender equality explicit in the 2030 NEET target

- Action: integrate gender-specific monitoring, sub-targets, and indicators into EU and national youth employment strategies.
- Rationale: women remain 20% more likely to be NEET than men; without focused action, gender gaps will continue to persist.
- Potential impact: the increased labour market participation of young women; progress towards social fairness and human capital goals.

(b) Embed a place-based approach in youth and VET policies

- Action: tailor programmes to rural and remote realities through local partnerships, mobile services and flexible delivery.
- Rationale: rural NEETs face the highest exclusion risks due to poor connectivity, limited job opportunities and low institutional presence.
- Potential impact: more balanced territorial development and strengthened social cohesion across Europe's regions.

(c) Institutionalise holistic, wrap-around support

- Action: integrate training, counselling, mental health, childcare and transport assistance into youth initiatives (e.g. Youth Guarantee scheme, initiatives funded by the European Social Fund Plus).
- Rationale: single-focus interventions fail to address multiple overlapping barriers.
- Potential impact: higher re-engagement rates, more sustainable transitions and reduced long-term inactivity.

(d) Reform welfare and benefit systems to enable participation

- Action: adjust benefit conditionalities and income thresholds to ensure that young parents and part-time learners are not penalised for engaging in work or training.
- Rationale: many young mothers remain inactive due to financial disincentives and rigid welfare rules.
- Potential impact: smoother transitions into work or education and reduced risk of long-term exclusion.

(e) Invest in enablers of participation

- Action: expand affordable childcare, improve rural transport and ensure universal digital connectivity.
- Rationale: structural barriers, not just personal ones, limit youth participation in VET and employment.
- Potential impact: greater access, retention and success for vulnerable groups when it comes to VET.

(f) Mainstream intersectionality in NEET policies

- Action: design interventions that consider overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g. gender, geography, migration, disability).
- Rationale: the most disadvantaged NEETs face multiple barriers simultaneously, requiring integrated responses.
- Potential impact: increased reach and effectiveness of youth policies for those furthest from the labour market.

(g) Strengthen cross-sector partnerships

- Action: foster collaboration between VET providers, employers, employment services, social workers and community organisations.
- Rationale: effective youth inclusion requires coherent pathways across education, work and social support systems.
- Potential impact: stronger local ecosystems that enable young people to move seamlessly from training to employment.

(h) Reinforce evidence and monitoring systems

- Action: collect and use data that are disaggregated by gender, geography and socioeconomic status; evaluate the impact of holistic models.
- Rationale: data gaps obscure the most excluded young people and limit accountability for outcomes.
- Potential impact: smarter, data-driven policy design and the more efficient allocation of EU and national resources.

Source: Authors.

Cedefop will continue working in this research field, enriching its VET toolkit for empowering NEETs and bringing new evidence on how to support socially excluded young people best. Future research may deepen our understanding of the following areas.

- (a) **The long-term trajectories of female and rural NEETs.** For example, more detailed longitudinal studies are needed to track periods of being NEET over time, particularly to understand the long-term outcomes for young women who are inactive due to caregiving roles or for rural NEETs who may move to another Member State in search of suitable opportunities.
- (b) **The most effective combinations of support in holistic NEET interventions.** For example, which combinations of services yield the best results for different NEET subgroups and what success factors can be identified and transferred to other settings. In many ways, this is provided by the VET toolkit for empowering NEETs, which seeks to gather what works in which settings and for what reasons. More in-depth studies may further encourage peer learning in different regions across Europe.

- (c) **The impact of the green and digital transitions on youth engagement and disengagement patterns.** For example, how these transformations create new risks for youth disengagement but also opportunities for youth engagement, ensuring that the current understanding of NEETs evolves in line with societal changes. This will in turn support policymakers in refining interventions and closing the remaining gaps so that all young people can successfully re-engage in education, employment or training.

By continuously refining the evidence and sharing good practice, Cedefop and its stakeholders can help ensure that Europe's VET systems remain at the heart of a fair and future-ready youth policy.

Abbreviations

BaU	business as usual
Cedefop	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EU-LFS	European Union Labour Force Survey
GDP	gross domestic product
NEET	not in employment, education or training
NEETs	young people not in employment, education or training
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NUTS	nomenclature of territorial units for statistics
VET	vocational education and training

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Cedefop online databases and toolkits

[VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) – source of support for policymakers and practitioners working with young people not in employment, education or training.

[VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) – source of support for policymakers and education and training providers working on the topic of early leaving from training.

[Timeline of VET policies in Europe, target groups: NEETs](#) – set the target group to NEETs for easy access to VET policies affecting this group.’ or similar.

[Skills intelligence. Young persons neither in employment nor education or training \(NEET\)](#) – EU-LFS data collected by the survey’s skills intelligence team on NEET rates in Europe’ or similar.

Building inclusive futures for NEETs

This research advances long-standing work by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) to support policymakers and vocational education and training (VET) practitioners in empowering young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and tackling early leaving from VET. It draws extensively on Cedefop's VET toolkits for tackling early leaving and the VET toolkit for empowering NEETs, which serve as online knowledge hubs offering intervention approaches, good practices and practical tools for policy and practice.

Using recent Eurostat data, the report analyses trends in NEET rates over the past decade and explores gender gaps and the urban–rural divide, highlighting how these factors shape young people's risk of exclusion. It showcases holistic, personalised and VET-centred measures that support re-engagement, skills development and smoother transitions to work.

The findings contribute to EU priorities, including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the goal of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030, offering clear, actionable guidance for more inclusive VET systems.



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