

The Youth Not in Education, Employment, or Training in Romania: A Structural Analysis

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This article examines the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth in Romania, employing the secondary analysis of quantitative data and focusing on the socio-economic, cultural and systemic factors contributing to this phenomenon. The analysis highlights how economic instability, poverty and limited access to education exacerbate the challenges faced by this demographic group. Gender disparities, driven by traditional roles and labour market discrimination, further limit opportunities for young women. Additionally, structural deficiencies in the labour market, such as job shortages and mismatches between skills and demand, hinder employment prospects. Cultural expectations and societal norms also play a significant role in influencing youth participation in education and employment. Young citizens of Romania, particularly women and members of the Roma community, face significant barriers to employment, with low wages, poor working conditions and inadequate investment in education and vocational training contributing to high NEET youth rates. Patriarchal norms, especially within the Roma community, further exacerbate cycles of poverty and marginalisation by limiting educational and economic opportunities.

Keywords: NEET, labour market, gender, ethnicity, education

INTRODUCTION

Young people classified as NEET, particularly those aged between 15 and 29, have increasingly come under scrutiny in employment policies. This heightened focus is a response to the growing heterogeneity among NEET populations in developed countries since the term was first introduced in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s (Akister, Burch 2014).

The issue of NEET youth in Romania is not merely a result of individual choices or educational paths but rather a multifaceted socio-economic challenge, deeply rooted in gender inequality and systemic flaws within the labour market. Several factors contribute to making the job market particularly unattractive for young people, including low wages, difficult working conditions and insufficient investment in both education and vocational training. These elements create a discouraging environment that pushes many young individuals into states of inactivity and limits their prospects for long-term career development.

This problem is further aggravated by a significant gender disparity, with young women being disproportionately affected by Romania's socio-economic conditions. Cultural expectations, the lack of flexible working arrangements and fewer opportunities for advancement in certain sectors make it more difficult for young women to enter and remain in the workforce. As a result, many women face higher rates of marginalisation, which often traps them in a cycle of inactivity and limits their economic and professional growth.

While young men also face challenges within the labour market, they tend to navigate these obstacles with slightly more ease, reflecting the persistence of entrenched gender inequalities in Romania's economy. This gender divide underscores the urgent need for targeted policies that address the specific barriers that women face in accessing education, training and employment. Tackling the NEET problem in Romania will require more than general labour market reforms – it will demand focused efforts to create inclusive, equitable opportunities that address the gendered dimensions of economic exclusion. Only by investing in education, improving working conditions and fostering an inclusive labour market can Romania hope to break the cycle of inactivity among its young population and create a more dynamic, equitable workforce.

This study examines the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth population in Romania through secondary quantitative data, focusing on socio-economic and gendered factors contributing to youth inactivity. The analysis will rely on data from government reports, national statistics (such as those from Romania's National Institute of Statistics), international organisations (including the European Union, the International Labour Organization and the OECD) and academic research. The primary data sources will include labour market statistics, educational attainment rates and reports on youth unemployment, with a specific focus on identifying trends related to gender disparity, low wages, poor working conditions and limited access to vocational training. Descriptive statistical methods will be used to analyse NEET rates by age, gender and geographic region, as well as to assess the structural barriers to employment faced by young people, particularly young women. While this study is based on secondary data, its findings aim to offer a comprehensive understanding of the NEET issue and provide a solid evidence base for addressing the challenges that the Romanian youth face.

THE STRUCTURE OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN ROMANIA

Across Europe and other advanced economies, there has been a troubling shift towards unstable employment arrangements and low wages, which is affecting even those with graduate degrees. This pattern, marked by an increase in temporary, freelance and part-time jobs, as well as zero-hour contracts that offer no guarantee of minimum working hours, began to surface before the 2008 Great Recession but has significantly intensified in the years following (Holliman et al. 2023).

Young people, particularly those aged 16 to 24, have been disproportionately impacted by these developments compared to older workers. The percentage of youth classified as NEET has surged, highlighting a growing disconnection from both educational pathways and job opportunities (Holliman et al. 2023).

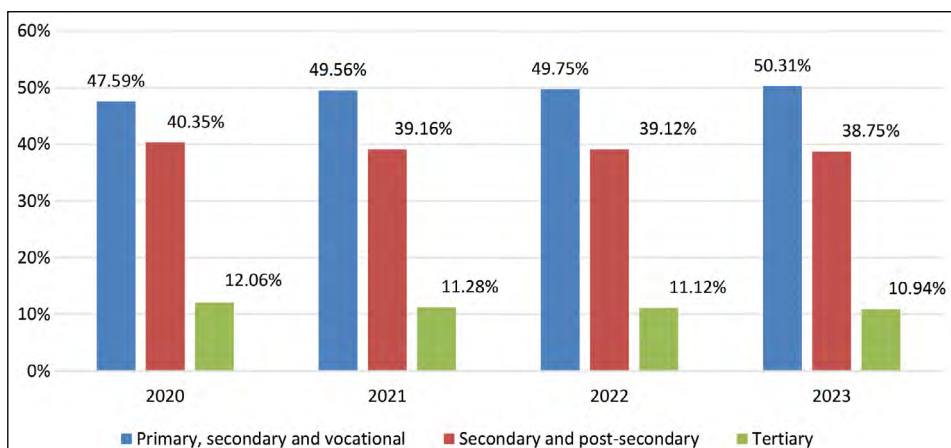
In Romania, the labour market has shown a growing disparity in unemployment rates based on educational attainment, with those who have completed only primary, secondary, or vocational education facing the highest levels of joblessness. This trend, which has been concerning for years, has intensified recently. In 2020, nearly half of the unemployed individuals aged 25–29 (47.59%) had ISCED levels 1–2. By 2023, the situation worsened significantly, rising to 50.31%.

At the same time, those with at least a high school diploma or higher educational qualifications have seen a much more favourable trend in employment opportunities. As industries increasingly prioritise specialised skills and higher education, the gap between different educational groups has become more pronounced. In 2023, the difference in the share of unemployed people aged 25–29 between college graduates and high school graduates reached a stark divide, with the share for those holding a college degree, master's degree, or Ph. D. being 3.54 times lower than for those who only completed high school.

This widening gap reflects the growing importance of advanced education in securing stable employment in Romania. The shift suggests that individuals with higher education benefit from greater adaptability and relevance in the labour market, particularly in sectors demanding technical expertise, innovation and problem-solving skills. In contrast, those with minimal formal education are increasingly marginalised in the face of evolving market demands, making it more difficult for them to find stable, well-paying jobs. Consequently, the labour market is increasingly favouring individuals with higher educational attainment, further emphasising the critical role of education in determining employment prospects in Romania (Fig. 1).

In 2020, employment rates for young people aged 15–29 with a low educational attainment (ISCED levels 0–2) in Romania were notably higher than the EU average. However, this initial advantage has since deteriorated. While the employment rate for Romanian youth with only a school diploma has stagnated just below one in four (19.9%), the EU has seen a gradual improvement, with the corresponding employment rate rising to 25.0%. This widening gap highlights the increasing challenges faced by Romanian youth with the limited formal education as they struggle to integrate into a more competitive and evolving labour market.

A similar, and even more concerning, trend can be observed among Romanian high school graduates (ISCED levels 3–4). In 2020, the employment rate for this group in Romania was already lagging behind the EU average by 6.1% for individuals aged 15–29. Rather than



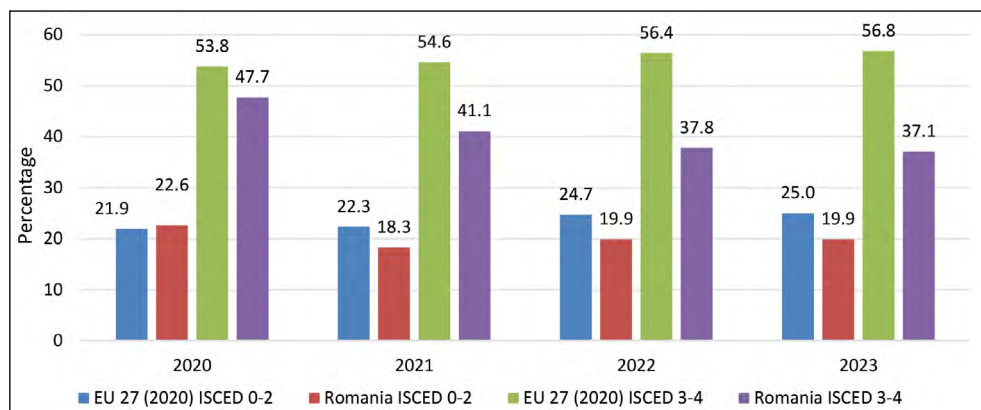
Source: National Institute of Statistics, 2024, percentage calculated by author out of the total unemployed population in the 25–29 age group.

Fig. 1. Share of unemployed persons by educational attainment out of the total unemployed persons, Romania, 2020–2023

closing, this gap has only widened over time. By 2023, the difference in employment rates between Romanian high school graduates and their EU counterparts had ballooned to 19.7%. This sharp divergence reveals a troubling reality: Romanian high school graduates are increasingly being left behind, as their employment prospects continue to weaken relative to those in other European countries (Fig. 2).

The decline in employment rates for Romanian high school graduates is especially alarming when considering its broader implications. As these young people struggle to secure stable employment, social and economic inequalities deepen. Those who fail to advance beyond secondary education are becoming progressively more marginalised, as the labour market places a greater value on higher education and specialised skills. Without targeted interventions, this trend risks reinforcing a cycle of poverty and exclusion, particularly for those unable to enroll in or complete higher education.

The growing disparity between Romania and the EU in terms of labour market integration for young people with lower educational qualifications signals an urgent need for policy reforms. Addressing this issue will require a multi-faceted approach, including improving access to vocational training, increasing investment in education and creating more pathways for young people to transition from school to work. As van Vugt et al. (2022) found in education systems with a strong vocational focus, young people are less likely to become long-term NEET. This supports the idea that in countries with a higher emphasis on vocational training, young people with vocational qualifications are better protected in the labour market (van Vugt et al. 2022). This effect is particularly noticeable among females and those with medium to high levels of education, as their chances of becoming long-term NEET are lower in countries with a strong vocational orientation. Without these measures, Romania's youth, particularly those with only a high school diploma, will continue to face diminished opportunities, further widening the gap between them and their peers in the rest of Europe. This escalating trend should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers to prioritise educational and labour market reforms, ensuring that all young people have a fair chance to succeed in an increasingly competitive economy.



Source: Eurostat 2024c.

Fig. 2. Employment rate of young people aged 15–29, by educational attainment, Romania and EU, 2020–2023

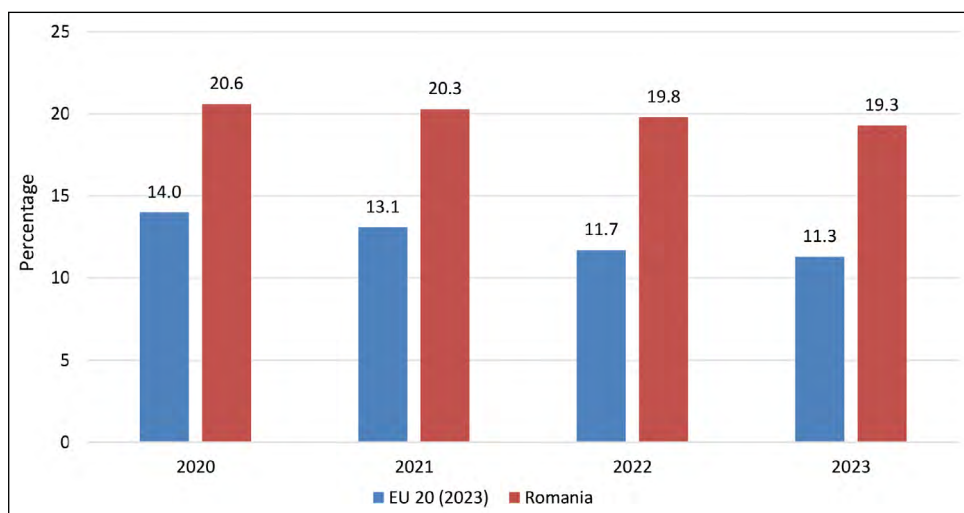
ROMANIAN NEETS

Since 2020, both the EU average and Romanian NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates for individuals aged 15–29 have been steadily declining. However, despite this positive trend, the gap between Romania's NEET rate and the EU average has widened over time. In 2020, the difference between the two stood at 6.6%, but by 2023, it had increased to 8%. While this suggests some progress in reducing youth disengagement, it also highlights Romania's slower pace of improvement compared to the broader European trend.

Unlike employment rates, which reveal a stark divergence between Romania and the EU based on educational attainment, the NEET rates in Romania have followed a broadly similar trajectory to those in the EU. However, the Romanian NEET rate has declined at a more gradual pace. The widening gap between Romania and the EU in terms of NEET rates is particularly concerning because it underscores the persistence of youth inactivity in the country. While the overall numbers are improving, the fact that Romania's rate is declining more slowly suggests that systemic barriers are still preventing many young people from re-entering the workforce or continuing their education.

The slower reduction in Romania's NEET rate also signals potential long-term socio-economic consequences. Youth who remain disconnected from education and employment for prolonged periods are at a higher risk of social exclusion, poverty and reduced life prospects. Without targeted interventions to accelerate progress, Romania may find itself grappling with a generation of young people who are unable to fully participate in the economy, exacerbating inequalities and limiting the country's overall growth potential (Fig. 3).

When comparing NEET rates by gender between the EU average and Romania, a significant disparity emerges, particularly for young Romanian women. In 2020, the NEET rate for women in Romania stood at 25.9%, the highest among all EU member states and by 10.9 % higher than the EU average. While there has been a gradual decline in this indicator



Source: Eurostat 2024b.

Fig. 3. Rate of NEET young people aged 15–29, Romania and EU, 2020–2023

since 2021, the progress for young women has been notably slower than that observed for young men in Romania.

In Romania, gender disparities are pronounced, with women more likely to be classified as NEET compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, the gender gap in NEET rates is smaller when considering the EU20 average. Among European countries, the Mediterranean states exhibit the most significant gender inequalities, consistently disadvantaging women.

This trend underscores the notion that women's participation in the labour market is notably lower in these regions, largely due to the traditional familial roles that often require women to assume primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic duties. In many Mediterranean countries, families play a crucial role in supplementing the state's responsibilities in providing welfare and social assistance services, including care for children, the elderly and individuals with disabilities (Ferrera 2010).

This pronounced gender gap highlights the need to view the NEET issue in Romania as a fundamentally gendered problem. Cultural conservatism plays a key role in shaping this dynamic, reinforcing traditional gender roles that often limit opportunities for young women. However, this is not the sole factor driving the disparity. Structural inequalities within the labour market, a limited access to childcare, an insufficient support for work-life balance and an unequal educational and vocational training opportunities further exacerbate the challenge, making it more difficult for young women to break free from inactivity and marginalisation.

In our assessment, the labour market is a primary driver of gender inequality in Romania, having evolved in a chaotic manner, particularly in major cities that serve as regional capitals. This disordered development has led to a situation where men frequently engage in circular economic migration throughout the year, while their partners remain at home to manage domestic responsibilities.

Moreover, the scarcity of job opportunities in rural areas, marginalised communities and small to medium-sized towns present significant challenges for women seeking a consistent participation in the labour market. The limited availability of employment options restricts women's ability to secure stable jobs, forcing many to navigate a landscape where economic opportunities are often out of reach. The report 'Labour Market Analysis in Romania' highlights one of the main problems that Romanian youths and adults face from a structural and cultural point of view regarding occupation rates, '62% of the inactive population are women.' An atypical evolution of the labour market in Romania compared to the rest of Central and Eastern European countries, especially considering the socialist history of Romania (AMCHAM 2023).

As the economy evolves, the traditional working class is being reshaped, leading to significant disparities in wealth and opportunity. The rise of a new urban middle class reflects changes in employment, education, and economic stability, highlighting both the potential for upward mobility and the challenges posed by entrenched inequalities.

Salaries constitute another factor that contributes to high rates of NEET women. Not only the salaries in Romania have the third lowest payrolls in the EU after Bulgaria and Hungary, but the wage gap only deepens the gap between a wage that could ensure a decent living and the lowest quintiles of income (Eurostat 2024).

In Romania, the minimum wage, which stands at approximately 474 euros after taxes, constitutes just over half of the 'minimum consumption basket for a decent living' (Ebert 2023). This reality raises serious concerns regarding its effectiveness in lifting individuals out of poverty, as the current minimum wage does not provide a sufficient financial support for a decent standard of living.

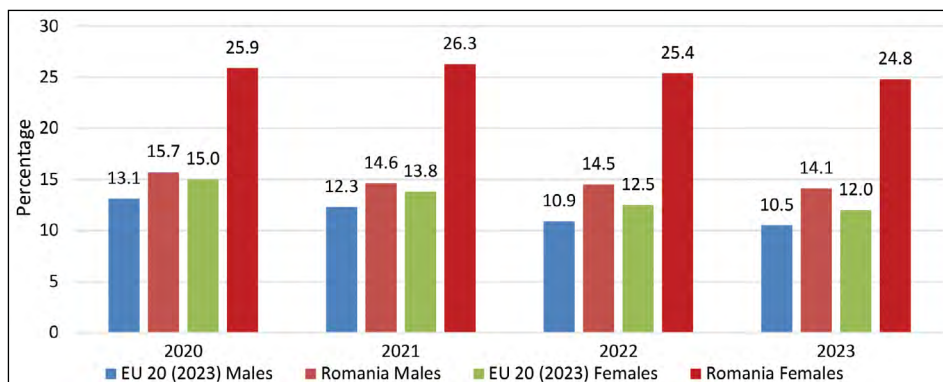
Romania also faces the highest rate of in-work poverty in the European Union, a situation that exacerbates the problem of youth disengagement from education and employment, reflected in rising NEET rates. The inadequate income from minimum wage jobs limits economic mobility and prevents many individuals from achieving financial stability, which in turn drives some young people to disengage from the labour market entirely (Eurostat 2024).

A study worth mentioning is the research conducted by CRPE (CRPE 2019). The main findings of this study regarding the difficulties of young Roma NEETs are as follows: 'Low education and schooling levels, mainly determined by high school dropout, which creates major difficulties in dealing with employers; Limited support for further studies or accessing the labor market – both from family and community, and discontinuous institutional support; Poverty and lack of financial resources for further studies; Lack of interest in employment (lack of work culture) and low job mobility; Existence of some forms of discrimination; Limited access to information and employment opportunities' (CRPE 2019).

Another significant factor contributing to the highest NEET rate among women in the EU is the patriarchal culture prevalent within the Roma minority. Roma women often find themselves restricted to domestic roles from a young age, with limited opportunities for personal and educational development. Many do not receive an adequate familial support to pursue a prolonged educational attainment, which further hampers their ability to engage in the labour market effectively.

Additionally, discrimination against the Roma community exacerbates this unfortunate reality, creating further barriers to education and employment for Roma women. The societal stigma and inequalities that they face can limit their access to resources, training programs and job opportunities, effectively marginalising them within both the educational system and the labour market.

Marriages and pregnancies among Roma minors significantly contribute to school dropout rates and subsequently increase unemployability. Young Roma girls are particularly affected by the pressure to start families at an early age, often facing familial expectations that compel them to adopt predominantly domestic roles (Valentza 2020). This cultural norm not only hinders their educational aspirations but also limits their opportunities for personal and professional development (Fig. 4.)



Source: Eurostat 2024b.

Fig. 4. Rate of NEET young people aged 15–29 by gender, Romania and EU, 2020–2023

YOUTH EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

The transition from school to work represents a critical developmental milestone in the lives of young people. This pivotal period can significantly influence various future outcomes, including employment opportunities, patterns of family formation, and overall health and well-being.

During this transitional phase, young individuals face numerous challenges as they navigate the complexities of the labour market and strive to establish their identities and career paths. Successfully securing stable employment can enhance their sense of autonomy and financial independence, while difficulties in this transition can lead to prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment, which may have lasting repercussions.

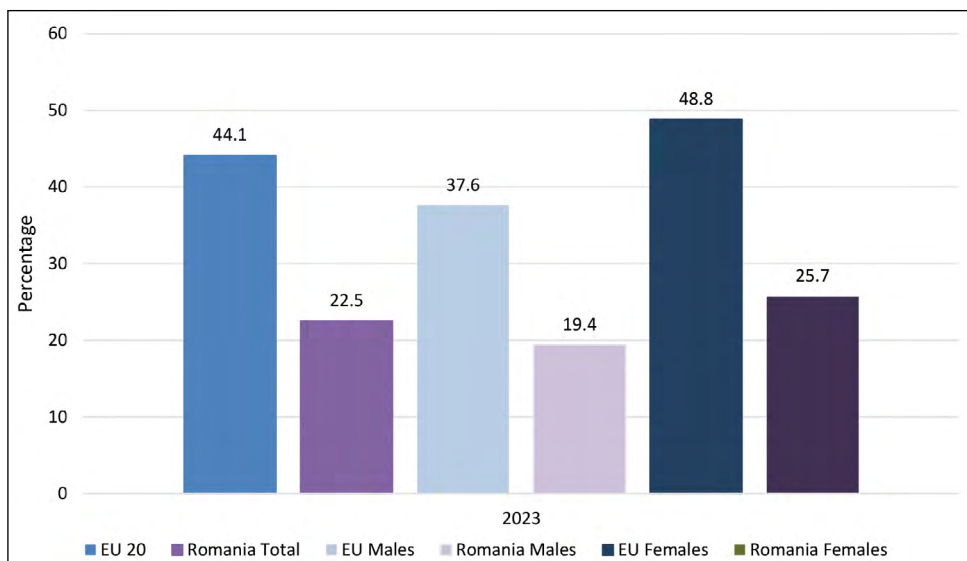
Young people living in rural areas, especially in villages affected by marginalisation, tend to have a higher rate of early leaving the schools they attend. 'In Romania <...> there is a tendency for a higher level of early leavers from the education system, specifically young people from rural areas, compared to the cities' (Caroleo 2021: 6).

Since the early 2000s, sociologist Vladimir Pasti has raised concerns about what he characterises as an 'educational scam'. His critique centres on the argument that, in certain instances, the extension of formal education serves primarily as a mechanism to circumvent the challenges of unemployment and unproductive activity. For example, some bachelor's degree graduates opt to pursue further studies, such as a master's degree, rather than entering the labour market. This choice, according to Pasti, may reflect a reluctance to assume professional responsibilities or a preference to avoid employment opportunities perceived as below their aspirations.

Moreover, Pasti (2003: 171) emphasises that a broad access to education among children and young adults does not necessarily translate into its effective use by all graduates. He asserts that the application of educational attainment is shaped by gender, suggesting that female graduates, despite receiving quality education, are less likely to fully leverage their qualifications in the public sphere or in the development of professional careers.

Țoc (2020) identifies the following reasons for the high rate of youth vulnerability as a result of the Romanian educational system: 'high early school drop-out rates; lack of basic skills at the end of system; educational inequalities, to the disadvantage of those with low educational status socio-economic status of the family, which leads to intergenerational reproduction of poverty'. Romania has a very high rate of young people who do not graduate the mandatory educational 10 grades. In 2022, the indicator for how many people do not attend the mandatory school out of the total population of the corresponding age was at 21.9% (Eurostat 2024). The quality of the educational act is also a factor that decreases general interest for a long educational trajectory (Țoc 2020).

In the Romanian society as well as in the rest of the EU, females generally exhibit higher educational attainment than their male counterparts. This trend is evidenced by lower school dropout rates across most countries at all educational levels, coupled with better performance in the baccalaureate exam, and a higher rate of tertiary education graduation (Fig. 5).



Source: Eurostat 2024a.

Fig. 5. Population by educational attainment level, gender and age (%), tertiary education graduates, ISCED 5–8 for people aged 25–34 in 2023, Romania and EU

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, young people in Romania navigate a labour market that compels them to engage in circular migration as a means of securing a decent income. This trend underscores the inadequacies of local employment opportunities and highlights the challenges faced by the youth in achieving economic stability.

Moreover, the patriarchal culture prevalent within the Roma community significantly contributes to the elevated NEET rates among young individuals. This cultural context restricts educational and economic opportunities for young Roma, further entrenching cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

The issue of NEET status among young people in Romania is significantly influenced by gender dynamics. Young women, in particular, face unique challenges that contribute to their elevated NEET rates compared to their male counterparts. This issue requires a more nuanced understanding of the gender-specific barriers that contribute to this social problem. Tailored interventions that focus on increasing female participation in the labour market, improving access to education, and challenging entrenched cultural norms are essential for bridging the gap and ensuring more equitable outcomes for young Romanian women.

Finally, the Romania's country-specific economic strategy carries detrimental social costs, particularly for youth who find themselves trapped in a labour market characterised by unattractive wages and challenging working conditions. Addressing these interconnected issues is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable labour environment that enables all young people in Romania to thrive.

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Nedirbantys ir nesimokantys jaunuoliai Rumunijoje: struktūrinė analizė

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas nedirbantis ir nesimokantis (NN) jaunimas Rumunijoje panaudojant antrinę kiekybinių duomenų analizę, daugiausia dėmesio skiriant socialiniams ir ekonominiams, kultūriniais ir sisteminiams veiksniams, prisidedantiems prie šio reiškinio. Analizė parodo, kaip ekonominis nestabilumas, skurdas ir ribotos galimybės gauti išsilavinimą dar labiau apsunkina šios demografinės grupės iššūkius. Lyčių skirtumai, kuriuos lemia tradiciniai vaidmenys ir diskriminacija darbo rinkoje, dar labiau riboja jaunų moterų galimybes. Be to, struktūriniai darbo rinkos trūkumai, pavyzdžiui, darbo vietų stygius bei įgūdžių ir paklausos neatitikimas, trukdo įsidarbinimo perspektyvoms. Kultūriniai lūkesčiai ir visuomenės normos taip pat vaidina svarbų vaidmenį veikdami jaunimo dalyvavimą švietimo ir užimtumo srityse. Jauni Rumunijos piliečiai, ypač moterys ir romų bendruomenės nariai, susiduria su didelėmis kliūtimis įsidarbinti, nes mažas atlyginimas, prastos darbo sąlygos ir nepakankamos investicijos į švietimą ir profesinį mokymą lemia aukštą NN jaunuolių proporciją. Patriarchalinės normos, ypač romų bendruomenėje, dar labiau paaštrina skurdo ir marginalizacijos ciklus, ribodamos edukacines ir ekonomines galimybes.

Raktažodžiai: nedirbantys ir nesimokantys (NN) jaunuoliai, darbo rinka, lytis, etninė priklausomybė, išsilavinimas