Young people dropping out of education and labour market participation

Statistics Explained

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Highlights

14.2% of young people aged 15-34 in the EU left formal education or training at least once in their lifetime, with men tending to leave at a slightly higher rate (15.2%) than women (13.1%).

42.6% of young people who left education did so due to reasons related to their education programme, such as the courses not meeting their expectations, being too difficult or not aligning with their interests.

The rate of young people aged 15-34 not in employment, education or training (NEET rate) in 2024 was higher among those who had left formal education at least once (17.3%) compared to those who had not (11.2%).

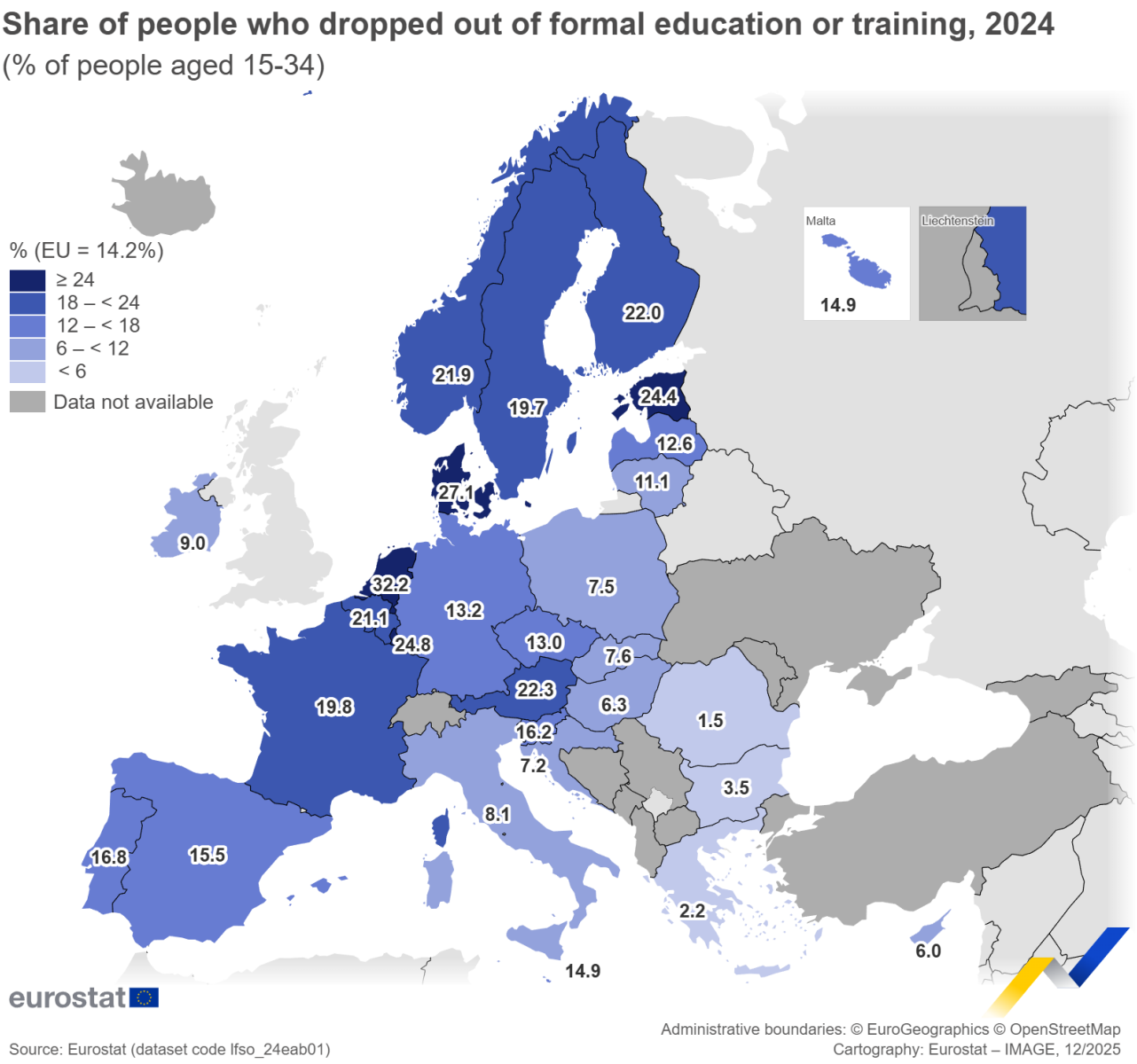
This article explores the phenomenon of young people dropping out of formal education in the European Union (EU) , examining its prevalence, reasons and consequences. It delves into the demographic and geographic disparities in education dropout rates and the main reasons why people leave their formal education. The article also investigates the outcomes of dropping out of education, including the likelihood of returning to education and the risk of becoming not in employment, education or training (NEET).

Education dropout rates and levels

In the EU, a significant proportion of young people have dropped out of formal education or training at some point. 14.2% of people aged 15-34 left formal education or training at least once in their lifetime (12.5% left once and 1.7% left several times) (see Figure 1). This phenomenon affected both young men and women, although men were slightly more likely to leave education, with 15.2% (13.2% once and 2.0% several times) compared to 13.1% of women (11.7% once and 1.4% several times). Given the relatively small proportion of people dropping out several times, these 2 groups are considered together in this article.

Figure 1There were significant differences in education dropout rates across EU countries. As illustrated in Map 1, over 20% of young people left formal education at least once in their lifetime in countries such as the Netherlands (32.2%), Denmark (27.1%), Luxembourg (24.8%), Estonia (24.4%), Austria (22.3%), Finland (22.0%) and Belgium (21.1%). By contrast, less than 5% of young people reported dropping out in Bulgaria (3.5%), Greece (2.2%) and Romania (1.5%).

Map 1: Share of people aged 15-34 who dropped out of formal education or training, 2024
Source: Eurostat (lfso_24eab01)



Map 1: Share of people aged 15-34 who dropped out of formal education or training, 2024 Source: Eurostat (lfso_24eab01)

Dropout rates by education level

Figure 2 gives an insight into the education levels at which young people most often dropped out in their lifetime. The level of the formal education or training activity refers to the programme that the student or apprentice started but did not successfully complete. The level of the formal education or training activity is defined according to the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED 2011).

The data show that around one third of young people who left education in the EU dropped out of upper secondary education (36.2%) and around another third dropped out of bachelor or equivalent education (35.0%). The cumulative dropout rate at all other levels was less than 30%. For those who left education more than once, only the highest level is considered.

Figure 2This article looks at the 3 broader groups of education levels:

- low education level: primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 1-2)

- medium education level: upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3 and 4)
- high education level: tertiary education (levels 5-8)

Medium education level is divided into 2 groups: programmes with the general orientation (general path) and programmes with the vocational orientation (vocational path).

The data reveal that dropouts were distributed as follows: 8.2% at the low education level, 10.2% on the general path of medium education level (including unknown programme orientation), 29.9% on the vocational path of medium education and 51.7% at the high education level.

An examination of country-specific trends reveals 2 distinct patterns described below.

- In 9 EU countries, medium education was the level at which most young people dropped out, with Hungary (65.0%), Finland (54.8%), Denmark (53.5%), and Malta (53.2%) having the highest rates.
- In 18 EU countries, high education was the level at which most young people dropped out, with Cyprus (74.8%) and Croatia (73.7%) having the highest rates.

Figure 3

Main reasons for dropping out

Dropping out of education is a complex issue, and understanding the underlying reasons is crucial for developing effective policies to support young people in completing their formal education or training.

The most common reason in the EU for leaving formal education was related to the education programme itself (42.6% of all people who left formal education or training). This includes situations where the courses did not meet expectations or were too difficult; the studies did not align with the person's interests; the perceived quality of teaching was low; and the expected outcomes were not met both in terms of educational content and expected labour market opportunities. Other reasons include perceiving the studies as too difficult, failing exams and deciding that another course was more suitable.

Personal or family reasons also played a significant role (26.3%): 7.8% of people left education due to their own illness or disability, and 18.5% due to other family or personal reasons. These include care responsibilities for children or disabled relatives, pregnancy, marriage and the desire to spend more time with family. In addition, other factors are influential, such as family disapproval of educational choices, the need to relocate for personal relationships, conflicts with faculty or peers, and a general lack of motivation or interest in the programme.

A significant portion of young people left education because they preferred to work (13.8%). This decision often hinges more on personal fulfilment rather than financial need, as people either found a job or wanted to look for one.

Financial challenges also contributed to dropping out of education (5.3%). This broad category encompasses issues with fees, learning materials, living costs and a general lack of financial resources.

Differences by education level and sex Reasons related to the education programme itself varied across different education levels: they accounted for 28.7% at the low education level, 35.9% at the medium level and a significant 50.2% at the high level. Personal or family reasons, however, were more prominent at lower educational levels and became less significant as education levels increased. Differences by sex were negligible for most of the reasons, except for the preference to work and other family or personal reasons. Young men more frequently reported a preference to work as their main reason for leaving education (16.5% for men and 10.6% for women). By contrast, young women reported other family or personal reasons more than men (20.3% and 16.9% respectively).

Figure 4

Country-specific trends For country-level analysis, some reasons are combined: financial reasons with the preference to work, and own illness or disability with other family or personal reasons (see Figure 5).

In Belgium, France, Austria, Denmark and Slovakia, over 50% of people reported leaving education due to issues with the education programme. Except for Slovakia, these countries had high overall education dropout rates.

In Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, Cyprus, Poland and Germany, family or personal reasons were the most prevalent causes for dropping out.

In Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Hungary and Italy, over one third of people reported a preference to work or financial reasons. Interestingly, these countries had a lower overall education dropout rate.

Figure 5

Returning to education after dropping out

Although leaving education can have significant consequences, it is encouraging to note that many young people who initially left education were able to continue their educational journey later: about one third of young people who left education were able to attain the same or even higher levels of education.

37.7% of people aged 15-34 who dropped out of primary or lower secondary education later attained medium or high education levels. Among those who left upper secondary education, 35.5% reached medium education, while 5.6% progressed to high education. Around 29.2% of those who dropped out at bachelor level eventually completed a bachelor's, master's or PhD. These findings suggest that leaving education is not always a permanent setback as many young people are able to overcome initial obstacles and achieve their educational goals.

Dropping out of education and NEET rates Leaving education is also closely linked to NEET rates, which measure the share of young people not in employment, education or training. The NEET rate was higher among those who left formal education at least once - 17.3% compared to 11.2% for those who did not (see Figure 6). Particularly high NEET rates were seen among those who dropped out at a low education level (32.4%) and a medium level (23.1%). Dropping out at a high education level did not significantly impact NEET rates, with figures remaining low at 10.5%.

The data also reveal significant differences in NEET rates among countries.

- Romania, Slovakia and Hungary showed significant gaps in NEET rates between people who left education and those who did not, with gaps of 25.5, 21.3 and 20.5 percentage points , respectively.
- By contrast, dropping out of education had little influence on NEET rates in Greece, Malta and Slovenia, which all had gaps below 3 percentage points.

Figure 6

Impact of simultaneous participation in formal education and the labour force The data also suggest that participating in the labour force and formal education or training at the same time can hinder successful educational attainment. Across the EU, the correlation coefficient between the education dropout rate and the rate of simultaneous participation in formal education and the labour force is 0.77, indicating a strong positive link. This means that countries with higher rate of simultaneous participation in formal education and the labour force tend to also have higher education dropout rates, and vice versa.

Countries with a high number of people in both education and the labour force also reported high dropout rates. In the Netherlands (36.4% simultaneous participation rate), Denmark (28.1%) and Finland (25.4%), education dropout rates were particularly high at 32.2%, 27.1%, and 22.0% respectively. By contrast, countries with simultaneous participation rates below 4% had low dropout rates, generally under 10%.

The overlaps between participation in education and the labour force reflect a wide range of situations. For some

young people, employment plays a secondary role to education, for example, students who work just a few hours a week, such as at weekends or in the evenings after classes. Others combine work and formal education at the same time. In some cases, education is secondary to employment, for example, when people take classes after work to obtain a qualification.

There are also situations where the same activity counts as both education and employment, e.g. apprenticeships, paid traineeships (when part of a formal education programme) or specific vocational training phases integrated into some higher education study programmes. In line with the EU-LFS definitions, paid trainees are classified as employed, but unpaid trainees are not.

Figure 7

Grouping countries by dropout indicators

A cluster analysis was conducted to group countries based on their dropout indicators. The analysis looked at several characteristics, including:

- the education dropout rate
- the education level at which people dropped out
- the reason for dropping out
- the NEET rate among people who left education and those who did not ,
- the rate of simultaneous participation in education and the labour force.

The analysis revealed 5 distinct groups of countries (Figure 7), each with unique characteristics.

Group 1: Hungary and Romania

These 2 countries had the lowest share of people who left formal education or training. More than two thirds of those who left dropped out at low or medium education levels. This group reported the lowest percentage of people citing the programme not meeting expectations or being too difficult as the main reason for leaving. The NEET rate was the highest in this group for both those who left education and those who did not. The average rate of people in both education and the labour force was the lowest in this group.

Group 2: Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland

This group of countries had a low share of people who dropped out of formal education or training. About two thirds of people in this group dropped out of high education, except Italy and Bulgaria. The NEET rate in this group was above average for both those who left formal education and those who did not. The rate of people in both education and the labour force was relatively low in this group.

Group 3: Belgium, Ireland, France, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Slovakia and Sweden

This group of countries had the highest share of people who dropped out of high education. The main reason for leaving was problems related to the programme: it was too difficult or did not meet expectations. The rate of people citing financial reasons or preferring to work was low. The NEET rate of those who left education and those who did not is below the EU average, except France and Slovakia.

Group 4: Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Malta, Austria and Portugal

This group of countries had a higher share of people who left formal education or training than EU average, except Czechia and Germany. The NEET rate in this group was lower than the EU average for both those who left formal education and those who did not.

Group 5: Denmark, the Netherlands and Finland

This group of countries had the highest share of people who left formal education or training. The shares of people who dropped out of medium and high education were similar. The rate of people citing preferring to work or financial reasons was the lowest rate among all groups. The NEET rate in this group was low among both those who left formal education and those who did not. The rate of people in both education and the labour force was the

highest in this group.

Data sources

The EU-LFS is the largest European household sample survey providing quarterly and annual results on labour market characteristics of people. The EU-LFS covers the resident population, defined as all people usually residing in private households.

Since 1999, modules have been an integral part of the EU-LFS. These were called 'ad hoc modules' until 2020. From 2021 onwards, they are called either '8-yearly modules' for variables with an 8-year cycle or 'modules on an ad hoc subject' for variables not included in the 8-year datasets. In 2024, the EU-LFS included an 8-yearly module on young people in the labour market. Similar ad hoc modules were conducted in 2000, 2009 and 2016. The next time the same 8-yearly module will be carried out will be in 2032.

For further information on the EU-LFS modules, please refer to the article EU labour force survey - modules .

Coverage. The 2024 EU-LFS module on young people in the labour market covers all EU countries, 1 EFTA country and 1 candidate country . For Cyprus, the survey covers only the areas of Cyprus controlled by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. Only people aged 15-34 were covered by the module.

European aggregates. EU aggregates in absolute values are calculated by aggregating the estimated values (i.e. weighted population totals) of the respective EU countries. For EU aggregates expressed as rates or ratios, the absolute values are first calculated for both the numerator and the denominator, and then the rates or ratios are derived from those results.

Calculation of percentages. All the figures in this article are percentages of a total. The calculation of percentages used in this article is based on a total excluding the number of people classified in the non-response category. As such, all exhaustive breakdowns presented in the figures should amount to 100% (allowing for rounding errors).

Definitions

Formal education and training Formal education and training is defined according to the International Standard Classification of Education 2011 (ISCED 2011) as 'education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognised private bodies and - in their totality - constitute the formal education system of a country. Formal education programmes are thus recognised as such by the relevant national education authorities or equivalent authorities, e.g. any other institution in cooperation with the national or sub-national education authorities. Formal education consists mostly of initial education. Vocational education, special needs education and some parts of adult education are often recognised as being part of the formal education system.' (ISCED 2011 glossary). The ISCED definition of (formal) education includes (formal) training.

Dropping out of (or 'abandoning') formal education or training means that a person has started a formal education programme but has not successfully completed it. According to the ISCED 2011, 'a common characteristic of an education programme is that, upon fulfilment of learning objectives or educational tasks, successful completion is certified.' Accordingly, dropping out of formal education is defined as leaving formal education without certification or without obtaining the final credential associated with this formal education. The variable covers all formal education activities abandoned during the life of the person.

Education levels
The level of the formal education or training activity is defined according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011).

Data on dropout levels are presented in 3 aggregates:

- low education - primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 1-2)

- medium education - upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED levels 3 and 4)
- high education - tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-8).

The indicator on **young people neither in employment nor in education and training** (NEET) corresponds to the percentage of the population of a given age group and sex that is not employed and not involved in education or training.

NEET rates estimated based on the EU-LFS module differ slightly from the NEET rates available in the dataset 'Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training by citizenship (NEET rates) (edat_lfse_23) ' due to sub-sampling for the module.

Employed person is a person who, during the reference week, was in one of the following categories:

- people who, during the reference week, worked for at least 1 hour for pay or profit, including contributing family workers
- people with a job or business who were temporarily not at work during the reference week but had an attachment to their job.

Unemployed person is a person who, during the reference week, were in all 3 of the following categories:

- not employed during the reference week according to the definition of employed above
- currently available for work, i.e. available to start working for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the 2 weeks following the reference week
- actively seeking work, i.e. had either carried out activities in the 4-week period ending with the reference week to find paid employment or self-employment, or already found a job expected to start within a period of at most 3 months from the end of the reference week.

Labour force comprises people who were either employed or unemployed during the reference week.

Context

The European Pillar of Social Rights sets out 20 key principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. Principle 4 ('Active support to employment') states that 'young people have the right to continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship or a job offer of good standing within 4 months of becoming unemployed or leaving education'.

An overall commitment to an inclusive high employment rate is made by setting an EU-level target : the overall goal is that at least 78% of the EU population aged 20-64 should be in employment by 2030. To reach this goal, the target is to improve employment prospects for people aged 15-29 and so reduce the share of this group who are not in employment, education or training to 9%.

In 2020, all EU countries committed to implementing the improved Youth guarantee in a Council Recommendation which steps up the comprehensive job support available to young people across the EU and makes it more targeted and inclusive.

In 2022, the ministers of education of the EU adopted a Council Recommendation on pathways to school success . The Recommendation aims to promote better educational outcomes for all learners, by improving basic skills performance, reducing early leaving from education and training and promoting well-being at school. Key recommendations include the following described below.

- Systemic approach. Simultaneously address underachievement in basic skills and early leaving from education and training, take action to promote students' and teachers' well-being, prevent bullying and favour a positive learning climate.
- Integrated and comprehensive strategies. Develop or strengthen strategies that include prevention, intervention and compensation measures (but with a stronger emphasis on preventative actions) through all levels of school education.

- Attention for groups at risk. Complement universal action with targeted and tailored support for learners requiring extra help in inclusive settings.
- Data collection. Develop or improve data collection and monitoring systems at national, regional and local levels.

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- Employment and unemployment (Labour Force Survey) (employ) , see:

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2024. Young people on the labour market (lfso_24)

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- EU labour force survey publications
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- EU labour force survey - online publication
- Labour force survey (LFS) - Main concepts
- Quality report of the European Union Labour Force Survey 2021 & 2022 - 2025 edition
- Labour force survey in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries - Main characteristics of national surveys, 2021 - 2024 edition

ESMS metadata files and EU-LFS methodology

- Employment and unemployment (Labour Force Survey) (ESMS metadata file - employ_esms)
- LFS ad-hoc modules (ESMS metadata file - lfso_esms)
- Young people on the labour market (ESMS metadata file - lfso_24_esms)

External links

- European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion - Policies and activities

Legislation

- Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 of the European Parliament and of the Council
- Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/256
- Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2022/2312