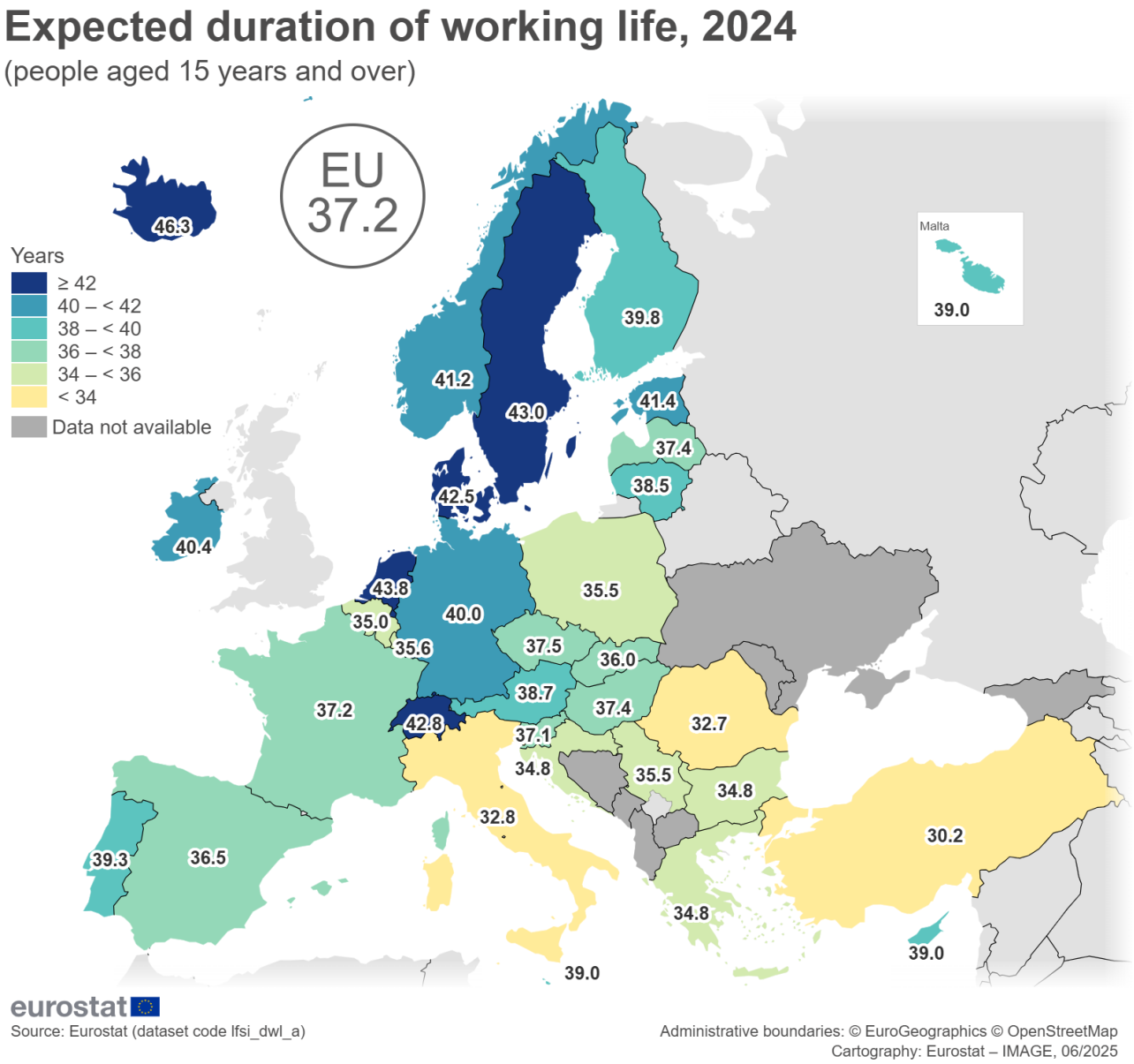
Duration of working life - statistics

Statistics Explained

Data extracted in June 2025
Planned article update: July 2026

Highlights

In 2024, the average expected working life in the EU was 37.2 years.The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia and Ireland had the longest expected duration of working life in 2024, each with more than 40 years.With the expected duration of working life of 39.2 years for men and 35.0 years for women, the gender gap in the EU in 2024 was 4.2 years.Over the last 10 years, the expected duration of working life has increased, from 34.9 years in 2015 to 37.2 years in 2024.



Expected duration of working life, 2024. Source: Eurostat (lfsi_dwl_a)

In this article, the expected duration of working life is described:

- for the European Union (EU) as a whole
- for the 27 EU countries individually
- for 3 EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland)
- for 2 EU candidate countries (Serbia and Türkiye).

Steady increase in the expected duration of working life in the EU

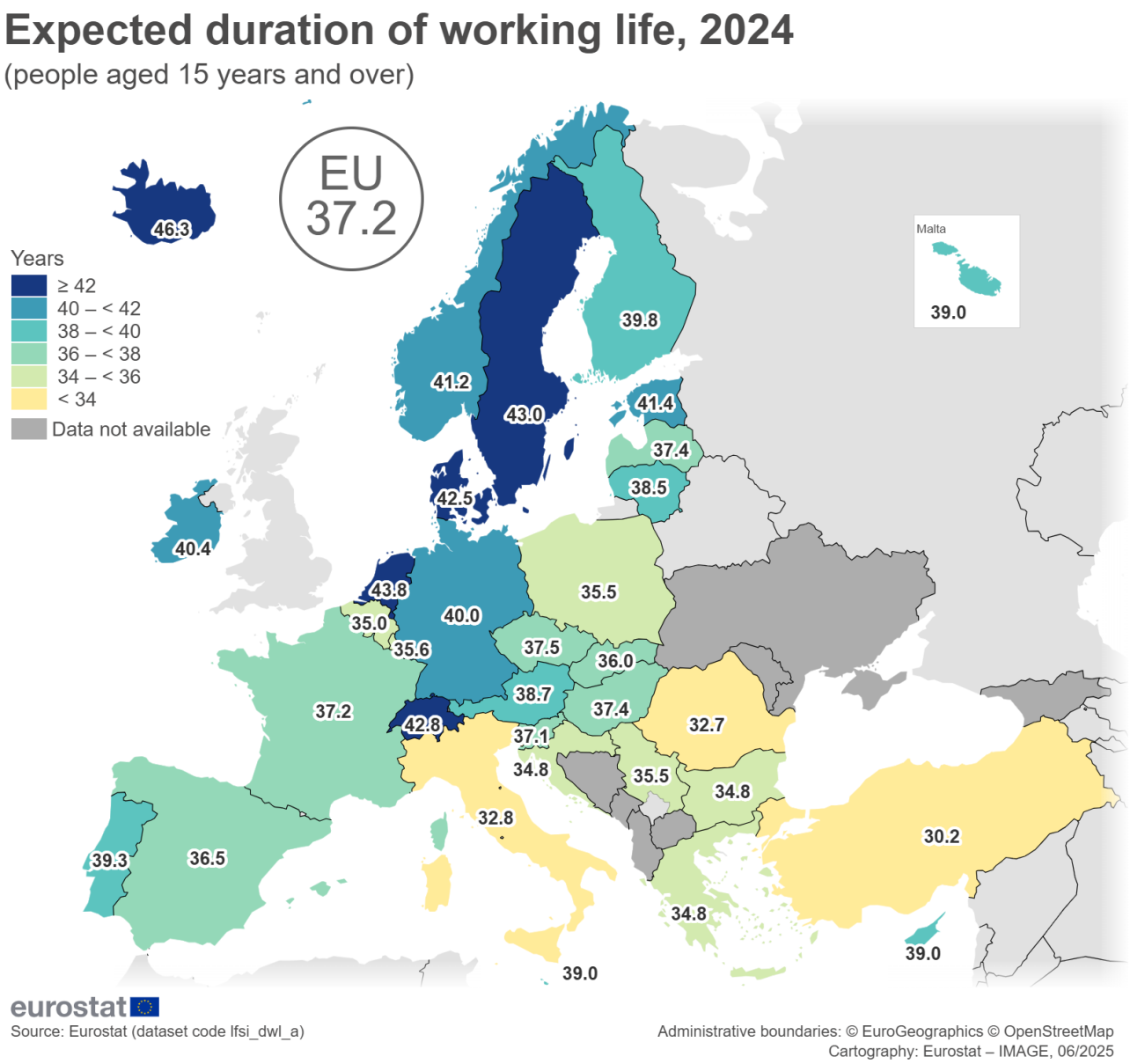
The expected duration of working life was on average 37.2 years in the EU in 2024, 39.2 years for men and 35.0 years for women (see Figure 1). Since 2015, the expected duration of working life in the EU has increased steadily, from 34.9 years in 2015 to 35.9 years in 2019. In 2020, linked to the COVID-19 health crisis, the expected duration of working life decreased to 35.6 years.

Despite the small decline in 2020, over the past 10 years, the indicator has witnessed continual growth in the years of working life for both sexes. Although men are expected to work longer than women, the gender gap has fallen with increasing female participation in the labour market. Indeed, the estimated expected duration of working life for men was 37.4 years in 2015, while for women it was 32.3 years. As a result, the gender gap of the expected duration of working life was narrower in 2024 than in 2015 (i.e. 4.2 years compared with 5.1 years).

Figure 1

Northern European countries have the longest working life

In the EU, the expected duration of working life has varied broadly among countries and geographical locations. The Netherlands had the longest duration of working life, 43.8 years. Countries in northern Europe followed, all with durations exceeding 40 years, with Sweden (43.0 years), Denmark (42.5 years), Estonia (41.4 years) and Ireland (40.4 years) ranking highest. The shortest durations of working life were recorded in Romania (32.7 years) and several southern European countries, including Italy (32.8 years), plus Croatia, Greece and Bulgaria, each at 34.8 years (see Map 1).



Map 1: Expected duration of working life, 2024. Source: Eurostat (lfsi_dwl_a)

Gender gap in 2024

In 2024, differences in the average number of years of working life between men and women were observed in all countries. In general men are expected to work longer than women, with northern European countries showing a gender gap below the EU average of 4.2 years. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia were the only EU countries where the gender gap was negative, as women are expected to work there for 1.6 years, 0.3 years and 0.2 years more than men, respectively. Among the other countries, the smallest gender gap was recorded in Finland with only 0.6 years. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the countries with the largest gender gap in 2024, were Italy (9.0 years), Greece (7.1 years), Malta (6.9 years) and Romania (6.7 years).

As Figure 2 shows, when comparing EU countries, we find that men are likely to work the longest in the Netherlands (45.7 years), Denmark (44.2 years), Sweden (44.0 years), Ireland (43.0 years), Malta (42.3 years) and Germany (41.7 years). Conversely, the countries where men are likely to work the least are Romania (35.9 years), Croatia and Bulgaria (both 36.0 years) and Belgium (36.9 years).

Concurrently, the EU countries where women are likely to work less than 30 years in their lifespan are Italy (28.2

years) and Romania (29.2 years). These are followed by Greece (31.1 years), Belgium (32.9 years), Poland (33.4 years), Bulgaria (33.5 years) and Croatia (33.6 years), all with less than 34 years.

By contrast, the longest durations of working life for women, i.e. more than 38 years, were in Estonia (42.2 years), Sweden (42.0 years), the Netherlands (41.8 years), Denmark (40.7 years), Finland (39.5 years), Lithuania (38.7 years), Portugal (38.3 years) and Germany (38.1 years).

Figure 2

Different trends among countries

Between 2015 and 2024, the expected duration of working life increased in all EU countries except Romania (see Figure 3). Four countries, in particular, experienced a significant increase of 4 or more years: Malta (5.2 years), Hungary (4.8 years), Estonia and Ireland (both 4.4 years). Malta and Hungary, which had below-average expected duration of working life in 2015, had seen sharp increases that brought them above the EU average in 2024. The main reason for Malta's exceptional growth was the significant increase in expected working life among women (8.3 years), the largest gain in any EU country.

By contrast, Spain, Sweden, Latvia and Austria experienced relatively stable expected duration of working life, with increases equal to or less than 2 years. Romania was the only country to experience a decline (0.1 years), primarily because of a decrease among women.

A notable trend in most EU countries was that the duration of women's working life increased more than that for men, the exceptions being Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania. In Malta, Estonia, Ireland, Slovakia, Hungary and Luxembourg, the increase was indeed significantly higher for women than for men. In Bulgaria, Sweden, Slovenia and Denmark, the increases for men and women were roughly the same.

Figure 3

Source data for tables and graphs

- Duration of working life: 2024 data and figures

Methods and definitions

The duration of working life is calculated using the labour force participation rates (previously called 'activity rates') from the EU labour force survey and life tables from demography statistics. Both the participation rates (in 5-year bands) and the complete life tables (per single year) are published by Eurostat.

Data sources

Source: The European Union labour force survey (EU-LFS) is the largest European household sample survey providing quarterly and annual results on labour participation of people aged 15 years and over as well as on people outside the labour force. It covers residents in private households. Conscripts in military or compulsory community service are not included in the results. The EU-LFS is based on the same target populations, and uses the same definitions, in all countries, which means that the results are comparable among the countries. It is an

important source of information about situations and trends in national and EU labour markets. Each quarter, around 1.2 million interviews are conducted throughout the participating countries to obtain statistical information for some 100 variables. Because of the variety of information and the large sample size, the EU-LFS is also an important source for other European statistics such as education statistics or regional statistics.

Reference period: Yearly results are obtained as averages of the 4 quarters in the year.

Coverage: The results from the survey currently cover all European Union countries, the EFTA countries Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, as well as the candidate countries Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye. For Cyprus, the survey covers only the areas of Cyprus controlled by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

European aggregates: EU refers to the totality of the EU of 27 countries. If data are unavailable for a country, the calculation of the corresponding aggregates takes into account the data for the same country for the most recent period available. Such cases are indicated.

Country notes

In **Germany** , from the first quarter of 2020 onwards, the labour force survey (LFS) is part of a new system of integrated household surveys. Technical issues and the COVID-19 crisis have had a great impact on data collection processes in 2020, resulting in low response rates and a possibly biased sample. For more information, see here .

In **the Netherlands** , since 2021 LFS data has been collected by using a rolling reference week instead of a fixed reference week, i.e. those interviewed are asked about the situation of the week before the interview rather than a pre-selected week.

Definitions

The indicator on duration of working life is an estimation of the number of years a person, currently aged 15 years, is expected to be in the labour force (i.e. to be employed or unemployed) throughout their life. It aims to provide a different point of view on the labour market, looking at the entire life cycle of people in the labour force rather than on specific states in the life cycle, such as youth unemployment or early withdrawal from the labour force.

The concepts and definitions used in the EU-LFS follow the resolutions of the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (the ICLS, organised by the International Labour Organization, the ILO). In particular, employed people comprise:

(a) people who during the reference week worked for at least one hour for pay or profit or family gain;

(b) people who were not at work during the reference week but had a job or business from which they were temporarily absent.

The LFS employment concept differs from national accounts domestic employment, as the latter sets no limit on type of household, includes the non-resident population contributing to national GDP and excludes resident population contributing to the GDP of a different country.

Time series

Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 came into force on 1 January 2021 and induced a break in the LFS time series for several EU countries. In order to monitor the evolution of employment and unemployment despite of the break in the time series, EU countries assessed the impact of the break in their country and computed impact factors or break corrected data for a set of indicators. Break-corrected data are published for the EU-LFS main indicators.

More information

More information on the EU-LFS can be found via the online publication EU labour force survey , which includes eight articles on the technical and methodological aspects of the survey. The EU-LFS methodology in force from the 2021 data collection onwards is described in methodology from 2021 onwards . Detailed information on coding lists, explanatory notes and classifications used over time can be found under documentation .

Context

The expected duration of working life indicator was developed at the request of the Employment Committee indicators group under the EU 2020 strategy . It uses life expectancy tables and participation rates as input for the calculation. The methodology was developed be Finland's Ministry of Labour and published, in a report by Helka Hytti and Ilkka Nio entitled Monitoring the employment strategy and the duration of active working life .

A common misunderstanding in the public debate on this indicator is that it shows how long people must or should work. This is not the case. The indicator is purely descriptive and shows what is happening, not what should happen.

As the indicator is an average computed over*all adults in the country* , it is heavily influenced by the number of people outside the labour force in a country. In other words, it does not make any claims about how many years the people who are in employment , work. It rather shows the combined effect of:

- what proportion of the adult population is in the labour force (being employed or unemployed) in each year of their life;
- and the life expectancy .

Most of the duration of working life can be explained by the labour force participation rate. An illustration for the total population, comparing the expected duration working life with the labour force participation rate in each country, is presented in Figure 4. Based on the given linear regression model, the labour force participation rate explains around 81.5% of the variance in the expected duration of working life suggesting a fairly good fit, as indicated by the coefficient of determination (R2) in Figure 4.

Figure 4
View this article online at
http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Article_name

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- All articles on employment
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Database

- Employment and activity - LFS adjusted series (lfsi_emp)) , see:

Duration of working life - annual data (lfsi_dwl_a)

Thematic section

- Labour market (including Labour force survey)

Publications

- Labour force survey in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries — Main characteristics of national surveys, 2021 , 2024 edition
- Quality report of the European Union Labour Force Survey 2020 , 2022 edition
- EU labour force survey — online publication

Methodology

Publications

- Labour force survey in the EU, EFTA and candidate countries — Main characteristics of national surveys, 2021 , 2024 edition
- Quality report of the European Union Labour Force Survey 2020 , 2022 edition
- EU labour force survey — online publication

ESMS metadata files and EU-LFS methodology

- Employment and unemployment (Labour Force Survey) (ESMS metadata file — employ_esms)
- LFS main indicators (ESMS metadata file — lfsi_esms)
- LFS series - detailed annual survey results (ESMS metadata file — lfsa_esms)

Legislation

EU-LFS main features and legal basis