This article presents statistics on early leavers from education and training in the European Union (EU) and forms part of an online publication on education and training in the EU. Early leavers from education and training may face considerable difficulties in the labour market: for example, they can find it difficult to obtain a secure foothold as employers may be more reluctant to take them on with their limited education.

The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (known as ET 2020) adopted a benchmark to be achieved by 2020, namely, that the share of early leavers from education and training in the EU should be not more than 10%.

### Overview

In 2018, an average of 10.6% of young people (aged 18-24) in the EU were early leavers from education and training, in other words, they had completed at most a lower secondary education and were not in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey. In this article, the terms 'early leavers' and 'early leavers from education and training' are used interchangeably.

Among the EU Member States, the proportion of early leavers in 2018 ranged from 3.3% in Croatia to 17.9% in Spain (see Figure 1).
The overall share of early leavers from education and training fell in the EU by 1.3 percentage points between 2013 and 2018. It should be noted that there is a break in series for all countries shown in Figure 1 due to changes in the ISCED classification; nevertheless, at this broad level, the latest figures remain comparable with those for previous years. Among the EU Member States, the largest reductions (in percentage point terms) between 2013 and 2018 in the proportion of early leavers were in Portugal, Spain and Greece, each reporting a fall in excess of 5.0 points; this was also the case for Turkey among the non-member countries. There was an increase between 2013 and 2018 in the proportion of early leavers in ten Member States. The largest increases were recorded for Slovakia, Sweden and Denmark (up 2.2 percentage points each) and Estonia (1.6 points). The other six Member States (Czechia, Hungary, Germany, Slovenia, Luxembourg and Bulgaria) reported increases of less than 1.0 points.

As part of the Europe 2020 strategy, nearly all of the EU Member States have adopted national targets for this indicator, and these are also shown in Figure 1. By 2018, the proportion of early leavers was already below the national target in 13 of the Member States, but remained above the national target for 14 of the Member States; there is no national target for the United Kingdom.

The gap between the latest rate for early leavers from education and training and the national target for 2020 was particularly pronounced in Romania (where the latest rate for 2018 was 5.1 percentage points higher than the target), and peaked in Malta where the difference was 7.5 percentage points; note that these two Member States together with Spain also recorded the highest rates of early leavers in 2018.

### Analysis by sex

The proportion of early leavers from education and training in 2018 in the EU was 3.3 percentage points higher for young men (12.2 %) than for young women (8.9 %). Nearly all EU Member States reported a higher proportion of early leavers for young men than for young women, with particularly large differences — of at least...
5.0 percentage points — in Estonia, Spain, Latvia and Portugal; this was also the case in Iceland and Norway among the non-member countries. There were two exceptions among the Member States, as the proportion of early leavers was lower for young men than for young women in Slovakia (0.5 percentage points difference) and Bulgaria (0.2 points). Among the non-member countries shown in Figures 2 and 3 North Macedonia, Turkey and Montenegro reported lower proportions of early leavers among young men than among young women.

In the EU, the proportion of early leavers fell between 2008 and 2018: the overall proportion fell by 4.1 percentage points, while the proportions for young men and for young women fell by 4.7 and 3.8 points respectively. Although, the proportion of early leavers fell more for young men than for young women in percentage point terms, the relation between the two proportions remained stable, with the proportion of early leavers among young men some 31-33 % higher than among young women throughout the period 2008-2016, increasing to 36-37 % higher in the period 2017-2018.

Between 2008 and 2018, nearly all EU Member States reported a fall in the proportion of early leavers among young men, with increases of 0.2 percentage points in Hungary, 0.6 points in Czechia, 0.8 points in Romania, 1.2 points in Slovakia and 1.4 points in Sweden. Elsewhere the proportion fell: in 2018 the share of young men who were early leavers was at least 10.0 percentage points lower than in 2008 in Malta, Greece and Spain, while in Portugal the proportion fell by 26.7 points between these two years.

Among young women, a broadly similar situation was observed. Six EU Member States — Romania, Slovenia, Czechia, Sweden, Hungary and Slovakia — reported a higher proportion of young women who were early leavers in 2018 than they had in 2008. Portugal again recorded the largest fall in the proportion of early school leavers, down 19.5 percentage points between 2008 and 2018 for young women. Except for Spain (down 11.1 percentage points), none of the other Member States recorded a fall in excess of 10.0 points; double-digit reductions were also recorded in North Macedonia and Turkey.

Figure 2: Early leavers from education and training, young men, 2008 and 2018 (% of young men aged 18-24)

Note: ranked on overall share of early leavers (young men and women); breaks in series.

(*) 2018 young men, low reliability.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_lfse_14)
Early leavers from education and training may face heightened difficulties in the labour market. Figure 4 ranks the EU Member States according to the share of early leavers in the population aged 18-24 and presents an analysis of whether these early leavers are employed or not: those not in employment may or may not want to work. In 2018, the 10.6% of early leavers from education and training were composed as such: a 4.9% share of the EU’s population aged 18-24 were early leavers in employment, while 3.5% were early leavers not employed but wanting to work, and the remaining early leavers (2.2% of the population aged 18-24) were not employed and did not want to work.

In 2018, six EU Member States reported more early leavers not employed but wanting to work than early leavers that were employed. The biggest gap — 2.2 percentage points — was recorded in Italy, where the share of early leavers who were employed stood at 4.9%, compared with a 7.1% share of early leavers who were not employed but wanted to work; Greece, Slovakia, France and Ireland recorded a gap between these two shares that was around 0.5 percentage points, while Croatia was the remaining Member State where there were more early leavers who were wanting to work than early leavers who were employed. The same was true for North Macedonia and Serbia. In 22 Member States the reverse was true, namely that there were more early leavers that were employed than early leavers not employed but wanting to work, the most notable cases being Malta, Romania and Estonia; this was also the case for four of the non-member countries shown in Figure 4, most notably for Iceland, Turkey and Norway.

Note: ranked on overall share of early leavers (young men and women); breaks in series.
(*) low reliability.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_lfse_14)
As noted above, early leavers not employed and not wanting to work accounted for 2.2% of the population aged 18-24 in the EU in 2018, but this proportion was 1.7% among young men and nearly twice as high, 2.7% among young women (see Table 1). In all but six of the 22 EU Member States for which data are available (in six of the Member States the data are of low reliability and therefore are not published for one or both sexes), the proportion of young women who were early leavers and not wanting to work was higher than the equivalent proportion of young men: the exceptions where this proportion was higher among young men were Denmark, Cyprus, Finland, Belgium, Ireland and Lithuania. The largest gender differences among the proportion of young people who were early leavers and not wanting to work were recorded in Romania (5.5 percentage points higher for young women than young men), Bulgaria (5.1 points) and Hungary (4.5 points); very high gender differences were also recorded in Turkey (where the share of female early leavers not wanting to work was 17.5 percentage points higher than among young male early leavers).

In 13 EU Member States, both for young men and young women, more early leavers were employed than were not employed but wanted to work. In five other Member States — Ireland, France, Croatia, Italy and Slovakia — the reverse was true. Greece, Hungary and Poland were special cases insofar as for each of these the proportion of early leavers among young women who were employed was lower than the share of early leavers who were not employed but wanted to work, while the opposite was true for young men (where the proportion of those who were employed was higher than those who were not employed but wanted to work). In Bulgaria, there were more employed men than not employed but wanted to work while the two shares were identical for women. In the remaining six Member States there were no data available for this comparison.
Early leavers from education and training 6

Table 1: Distribution of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 by labour status, 2018 (% of population aged 18-24)

Source: Eurostat (edat_lfse_14)

Analysis by degree of urbanisation

Figure 5 presents an analysis of the proportion of early leavers from education and training according to the degree of urbanisation, with regions classified as cities, towns and suburbs, or rural areas. In 2018, the lowest proportion of early leavers in the EU was reported in cities (just under 1 in 10 young people); this share is in line with the benchmark set in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (which foresees lowering the share of early leavers to not more than 10 % by 2020). In the towns and suburbs of the EU the proportion of early leavers rose to 11.3 %, while it was lower in rural areas, at 11.0 %.

Among the 26 EU Member States with a complete set of data for all three degrees of urbanisation (incomplete data for Luxembourg and Malta), six reported a similar pattern to that observed for the EU as a whole, in other words a higher proportion of early leavers in towns and suburbs and a lower proportion in cities (see Figure 5). In Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, France, Croatia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Finland and Sweden, the highest proportion of early leavers was reported in rural areas, as was also the case in Iceland, Norway and Serbia; while Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Cyprus, Austria and the United Kingdom had lowest proportion of early leavers in rural areas; among the non-member countries this pattern was repeated in Switzerland and North Macedonia. Italy and Portugal reported the opposite pattern, with towns and suburbs recording the lowest proportion of early leavers and the cities reporting highest proportion of early leavers for Italy while rural areas had the highest shares in Portugal.
Figure 5: Early leavers from education and training by degree of urbanisation, 2018 (% of population aged 18-24)

Source: Eurostat (edat_lfse_30)

Source data for tables and graphs

- Early leavers from education and training statistics: tables and figures

Data sources

Data on early leavers are derived from the EU’s labour force survey (LFS); the data shown are calculated as annual averages of quarterly data.

Classification

The International standard classification of education (ISCED) is the basis for international education statistics, describing different levels of education; it was first developed in 1976 by UNESCO and revised in 1997 and again in 2011. ISCED 2011 distinguishes nine levels of education: early childhood education (level 0); primary education (level 1); lower secondary education (level 2); upper secondary education (level 3); post-secondary non-tertiary education (level 4); short-cycle tertiary education (level 5); bachelor’s or equivalent level (level 6); master’s or equivalent level (level 7); doctoral or equivalent level (level 8).

The first results based on ISCED 2011 were published in 2015 starting with data for the 2014 reference period;
data up to 2013 are based on ISCED 1997.

**Key concepts** Early leavers from education and training denotes the percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education or training.

- The numerator of the indicator refers to persons aged 18-24 who meet the following two conditions: (a) the highest level of education or training they have completed is ISCED 2011 levels 0, 1 or 2 (ISCED 1997 levels 0, 1, 2 or 3C short) and (b) they have not received any education or training (in other words neither formal nor non-formal) in the four weeks preceding the survey.

- The denominator is the total population of the same age group, excluding respondents who did not answer the questions 'highest level of education or training successfully completed' and 'participation in education and training'.

Tables in this article use the following notation: ':' not available, confidential or unreliable value.

**Context**

**Tackling early leaving** Most Europeans spend significantly more time in education than the legal minimum requirement. This reflects the choice to enrol in higher education, as well as increased enrolment in pre-primary education and wider participation in lifelong learning initiatives, such as adults returning to education (see the adult education survey) — often in order to retrain or equip themselves for a career change. Nevertheless, around one in ten young adults leave school or training early and this has an impact on individuals, society and economies.

In January 2011, the European Commission adopted a Communication titled 'Tackling early school leaving: a key contribution to the Europe 2020 agenda' (COM(2011) 18 final). This outlined the reasons why pupils decide to leave school early — including for example, learning difficulties, social factors, or a lack of motivation, guidance or support — and gave an overview of existing and planned measures to tackle this issue across the EU.

In 2014, the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) jointly released a report on Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures.

More recently CEDEFOP launched an online VET toolkit for tackling early leaving which offers support to policy makers and practitioners in order to design and implement policies to prevent and remedy early leaving from education and training.

**ET 2020 strategic framework** The strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training was adopted by the Council in May 2009. It sets out four strategic objectives for education and training in the EU: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equality, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation (including entrepreneurship) at all levels of education and training. This strategy set a number of benchmarks to be achieved by 2020, including that the EU share of early leavers from education and training should be not more than 10%. This benchmark is also one of the Europe 2020 strategy targets and previously formed part of the European employment strategy (subsequently incorporated into the Europe 2020 strategy), which specifies that the share should be below 10%.

**Other articles**

- EU labour force survey statistics — online publication
• Education and training in the EU — facts and figures
• Being young in Europe today — education
• The EU in the world — education and training

Publications
• The EU has reached its target for share of persons aged 30 to 34 with tertiary education, News release April 2019

Main tables
• Education and training (t_edtr)

Database
• Education and training (edtr), see:

Education and training outcomes (educ_outc)
  Transition from education to work (edatt)
  Early leavers from education and training (edatt1)

Dedicated section
• Education and training
• Employment and social inclusion indicators
• Youth

Methodology
Metadata
• Educational attainment level and transition from education to work (ESMS metadata file — edat1_esms)

Manuals and other methodological information
• Further methodological information on early leavers

Legislation
• EU labour force survey — main features and legal basis

External links
• European Commission — Education and training — Early school leaving
• European Commission — Education and training — Strategic framework — Education & Training 2020
• CEDEFOP — VET toolkit for tackling early leaving
• Eurydice — Better knowledge for better policies
• OECD — Early childhood and schools
• UNESCO — Education for the 21st century

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