This Eurostat article describes the methodology of the European Union labour force survey (EU-LFS). It gives specific information on the concept of the labour force status, the definitions of the variables and the classifications used in the EU-LFS. Furthermore, the article provides information on the national questionnaires used to collect the EU-LFS data.

This article is part of a set of online articles on the EU-LFS.

EU-LFS concept of labour force status

Definition of the labour force status

Labour force status is the cornerstone concept for labour market statistics. Accordingly, individuals are classified in three categories as employed, unemployed or economically inactive. These definitions are explained below. The definitions used in the EU-LFS follow the Resolution of the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, convened in 1982 by the International Labour Organisation (hereafter referred as the 'ILO guidelines'). To further improve comparability within the EU, while remaining fully compatible with the ILO guidelines, Regulation 1897/2000, gives a more precise definition of unemployment.

Employment (persons in employment):

Employed persons comprise persons aged 15 years and more who were in one of the following categories:

- (a) persons who during the reference week worked for at least one hour for pay or profit or family gain.
- (b) persons who were not at work during the reference week but had a job or business from which they were temporarily absent.

This definition is applicable to employees, self-employed persons and family workers. Pay includes cash payments or ‘payment in kind’ (payment in goods or services rather than money), whether payment was received in the week the work was done or not.

Exceptions to the standard age group 15 years and more are: 16 years and more in Spain, Italy, Sweden (until 2001) and United Kingdom; 15 to 74 years in Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Finland, Sweden (2001 onwards) and Norway (2006 onwards); 16-74 in Iceland and Norway (until 2005).

For further details and treatment of borderline cases (like seasonal workers, lay-offs, unpaid family workers, employment in activities for own-consumption, vocational training, absences, etc.) see variable WSTATOR in the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Unemployment:

Unemployed persons comprise persons aged 15 to 74 years who were:

- (1) not employed according to the definition of employment above;
• (2) currently available for work, i.e. were available for paid employment or self-employment before the end of the two weeks following the reference week;

• (3) actively seeking work, i.e. had taken specific steps in the four week period ending with the reference week to seek paid employment or self-employment or who found a job to start later, i.e. within a period of at most three months from the end of the reference week.

For the purposes of point (3), the following are considered as specific steps:

  • a) Having been in contact with a public employment office to find work, whoever took the initiative (renewing registration for administrative reasons only is not an active step),
  • b) having been in contact with a private agency (temporary work agency, firm specialising in recruitment, etc.) to find work,
  • c) applying to employers directly,
  • d) asking among friends, relatives, unions, etc., to find work,
  • e) placing or answering job advertisements,
  • f) studying job advertisements,
  • g) taking a recruitment test or examination or being interviewed,
  • h) looking for land, premises or equipment,
  • i) applying for permits, licenses or financial resources.

Education and training are considered as ways of improving employability but not as methods of seeking work.

• Persons without work and in education or training will only be classified as unemployed if they are 'currently available for work' and 'seeking work', as defined in points (2) and (3).

• During the off-season, seasonal workers cannot be considered as having a formal attachment to their high-season job because they do not continue to receive a wage or salary from their employer although they may have an assurance of return to work. If they are not at work during the off-season, they are classified as unemployed only if they are 'currently available for work' and 'seeking work', as defined in points (2) and (3).

Exceptions to the standard age group 15 to 74 are: 16 to 74 years in Spain, Italy, Sweden (until 2000), United Kingdom, Norway (until 2005) and Iceland.

Before 2001 unemployment results used to refer to persons aged 15 years and more.

For further details see variables WSTATOR, SEEKWORK, AVAILABLE and METHODA to METHODM in the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Active population:

The active population, also called labour force, is the population employed or unemployed.

Economically inactive persons:

Economically inactive persons are those who are neither employed nor unemployed.

Derivation of the labour force status in the European Union labour force survey:

Given the complexity of the definitions of employment and unemployment above, and in order to achieve a measurement as objective as possible, EU-LFS respondents are not asked directly if they are employed, unemployed or economically inactive. Instead, they are asked about their labour market behaviour in a certain reference week and then their labour status is derived according to the following derivation chart.
Labour force classification in the EU-LFS

For further details see derivation of the variable ILOSTAT in the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Indicators to supplement the unemployment rate

In addition to the 3 labour statuses explained above (employment, unemployment, economic inactivity), there are three other important indicators of the labour situation:

- **Underemployed part-time workers** are persons aged 15-74 working part-time who wish to work additional hours and are available to do so. Part-time work is recorded as self-reported by individuals. Persons seeking work but not immediately available are the sum of persons aged 15-74 neither employed nor unemployed who: Are actively seeking work during the last 4 weeks but not available for work in the next 2 weeks; found a job to start in less than 3 months and are not available for work in the next 2 weeks; found a job to start in 3 months or more; are passively seeking work during the last 4 weeks and are available for work in the next 2 weeks.

- **Persons available to work but not seeking** are persons aged 15-74 neither employed nor unemployed who want to work, are available for work in the next 2 weeks but are not seeking work.

- **Persons seeking work but not immediately available** are persons aged 15-74 neither employed nor unemployed who are actively seeking work during the last 4 weeks but not available for work in the next 2 weeks; found a job to start in less than 3 months and are not available for work in the next 2 weeks; found a job to start in 3 months or more; are passively seeking work during the last 4 weeks and are available for work in the next 2 weeks.

Other concepts and definitions

The following list gives a short overview of other important concepts and definitions besides the labour force status used in the EU-LFS. The reference document for the definitions of these variables is the Core variables
(user guide) and explanatory notes. They contain detailed information on the definition of each variable.

Socio-demographic and geographic characteristics

- **Nationality**: Nationality is interpreted as citizenship. Citizenship is defined according to national legislation of each country. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable NATIONAL.

- **Country of birth**: For the purpose of this variable, current national boundaries should be considered rather than the boundaries at the time of the respondent’s birth. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable COUNTRYB.

- **Marital status**: Marital status is the conjugal status of each individual in relation to the marriage laws of the country (i.e. de jure status). For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable MARSTAT.

- **Dependent child**: A child is defined as a household member aged less than 25 years and in full social and economic dependence from other household member/-s (parents/adults). All household members aged below 15 are by default considered dependent, and hence ‘children’, whereas an additional check on the social and economic dependence is required for the household members aged between 15 and 24. For details, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable HHCOMP.

- **Recent immigrants**: Foreign born persons or persons with a nationality different to the country of residence who have been resident five years or less in the reporting country. For details, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable YARESID.

- **Degree of urbanisation**: This is to classify the place of residence by 3 types of area: densely-populated, intermediate and thinly-populated. For reference, please consult classifications.

Educational attainment and participation in education and training

- The **educational attainment level** of an individual is the highest ISCED (International standard classification of education) level successfully completed, the successful completion of an education programme being validated by a recognised qualification, i.e. a qualification officially recognised by the relevant national education authorities or recognised as equivalent to another qualification of formal education. In countries where education programmes, in particular those belonging to ISCED levels 1 and 2, do not lead to a qualification the criterion of full attendance of the programme and normally gaining access to a higher level of education may have to be used instead. When determining the highest level, both general and vocational education should be taken into consideration. For more detailed information see the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes and the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes for the variables HATLEVEL, HATFIELD, HATYEAR.

- **Participation in education and training** covers participation in formal and non-formal education and training. The reference period for the participation in education and training is the four weeks prior to the interview. For more detailed information see the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes and the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes for the variables EDUCSTAT and COURATT as well as the classifications ISCED and CLA.

Employment - principal activities and professional status

- **Economic activity**: This is the economic activity of the establishment where the work is performed. For reference, please consult classifications (NACE).

- **Occupation**: For reference, please consult classifications (ISCO).

- **Professional status**: This is the classification of employed persons into employees, self-employed and unpaid family workers. For the reference definitions please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variables STAPRO as well as classifications (ICSE).
• **Employees with fixed-term contracts:** The concept of fixed-term contract is only applicable to employees, not to self-employed. In most of the EU Member States, a majority of jobs are based on written labour contracts. In some countries, however, contracts of this type are settled only in specific cases e.g. for public-sector jobs, apprentices or other trainees within an enterprise. Given these institutional discrepancies, the concepts of ‘temporary employment’ and ‘work contract of limited duration’ (or ‘permanent employment’ and ‘work contract of unlimited duration’) describe situations which, in different institutional contexts, may be considered similar. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable STAPRO as well as classifications(ICSE).

**Employment - Working time**

• **Working time:** The EU-LFS collects data on "number of hours usually worked per week" and "number of hours actually worked during the reference week". The number of hours usually worked per week comprises all hours including extra hours, either paid or unpaid, which the person normally works, but excludes the travelling time between home and workplace and the time taken for the main meal break (usually at lunchtime) are excluded. The number of hours actually worked during the reference week covers all hours including extra hours regardless of whether they were paid or not. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variables HWUSUAL and HWACTUAL.

• **Atypical working time:** The atypical work distinguishes between "evening or night work, "Saturday or Sunday working" and "shift work".

• Evening and night work: Since the definitions of evening and night differ widely, it is not easy to establish a strictly uniform basis for all Member States. In general, however, ‘evening work’ is considered to be work done after usual working hours but before the usual hours of sleep in the Member State concerned. It implies the opportunity to sleep at normal times. ‘Night work’ is generally be regarded as work done during usual sleeping hours and implies abnormal sleeping times.

• Saturday and Sunday working: This concept is interpreted strictly on the basis of formal agreements concluded with the employer.

• Shift-work: The question of shift work applies only to employees. Shift work is a regular work schedule during which an enterprise is operational or provides services beyond the normal working hours from 8 am to 6 pm on weekdays (evening closing hours may be later in the case of a longer break at noon in some Member states).

For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variables SHIFTWK, EVENWK, NIGHTWK, SATWK and SUNWK.

• **Full-time/part-time:** This variable refers to the main job. The distinction between full-time and part-time work is generally based on a spontaneous response by the respondent. The main exceptions are the Netherlands and Iceland where a 35 hours threshold is applied, Sweden where a threshold is applied to the self-employed, and Norway where persons working between 32 and 36 hours are asked whether this is a full- or part-time position.

• **Involuntary part-time employment:** This is when respondents report that they work part-time because they are unable to find full-time work. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variables FTPT and FTPTREAS.

• **Total duration of temporary job or work contract of limited duration:** This refers to the total of the time already elapsed plus the time remaining until the end of the contract. For the reference definitions, please consult the Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes variable TEMPDUR.

**Unemployment**

• **Long-term unemployment** consists of unemployed persons aged 15-74 who are looking for a job for one year or more.
Classifications in the EU-LFS

The EU-LFS uses international classifications and nomenclatures. Actual coding in the EU-LFS may deviate to some extent from those general standards; for details, see user guide and explanatory notes.

Countries

Country codes are based on the ISO 3166 (International Organisation of Standardisation – alpha-2 format), with two main exceptions for the EU countries Greece and the United Kingdom which are coded as EL and UK respectively. For more details on the classification, please consult: Country codes. For more detailed information on the codification of LFS variables using country codes over time, please consult Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Regions

The EU-LFS uses the Eurostat Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) to code regions. Regional variables collect information at NUTS 2 level.

For more details on the classification, please consult: Eurostat-Metadata (NUTS). For more detailed information on the codification of LFS variables using NUTS 2 over time, please consult Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes. Due to back data revisions and adaptations to NUTS updates, available codes in the data can differ from the original coding (currently used NUTS codes by country - Excel file).

Degree of urbanisation

The EU-LFS also uses a classification of degree of urbanisation. This classification maps geographical areas into three categories low, medium or high degree of urbanisation. This is done using a criterion of geographical contiguity in combination with a minimum population threshold based on population grid square cells of 1 km². The classification has been revised several times, most recently in 2012.

Education

The International standard classification of education (ISCED) developed by UNESCO is used to measure the level and the field of completed and current education. The classification was last revised in 2011.

For the educational level attained, the LFS uses the revised classification (ISCED 2011) since 2014; ISCED 1997 was used from 1998 until 2013. For more details on the classification, please consult: UNESCO (ISCED) and for an explanation of the changes: Comparability between ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997.

For the fields of education and training, the classification according to ISCED 1997 was used up to 2015; detailed field descriptions are available in the 1999 manual on fields of education and training. The ISCED-F 2013 classification of fields of education and training is in use since 2016, replacing the former ISCED 1997 codes.

For more detailed information on the codification of LFS variables using ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997 over time, the comparability with the codification before 1998, and the ISCED-F 2013 codes, please consult Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes and for a complete overview see the ISCED glossary page.

The Classification of learning activities (CLA, 2016 edition) is used for measuring participation in formal and non-formal education and training in the EU-LFS. The CLA (2016 edition) is aligned with ISCED 2011. The CLA provides a set of definitions and criteria to ensure international comparability of statistics on learning activities. According to the CLA, learning activities can be classified in three broad categories.

- Formal education
- Non-formal education and training
- Informal learning

Occupation

The International standard classification of occupations (ISCO) developed by the International Labour Organisation is used to measure the occupational status of employed persons. The LFS uses ISCO on 4 digit level for the main job and on 3 digit level for the previous occupation (the last digit being voluntary in both cases).
The classification was last revised in 2008 (ISCO 08). The LFS uses the revised classification (ISCO-08) since 2011; ISCO-88 (COM) was used until 2010. For more details on the classification, please consult: Eurostat-Metadata (ISCO) and for an explanation of the changes: Comparability between ISCO-08 and ISCO-88. For more detailed information on the codification of LFS variables using ISCO over time, please consult Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Economic activity

The EU-LFS uses the Eurostat Statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community (NACE) to code the economic activity. The classification of economic activity uses NACE on 3 digit level for the current main job and on 2 digit level for information on other jobs. Over time, the LFS used NACE 1970 until 1992, NACE Rev. 1 from 1993 to 2004, NACE Rev. 1.1 from 2005 to 2007, NACE Rev. 2 from 2008. For more details on the classification, please consult: Eurostat-Metadata (NACE). For more detailed information on the codification of LFS variables using NACE over time, please consult Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes.

Professional status

The International Standard Classification of Status in Employment (ISCE) developed by the International Labour Organisation is used to measure the professional status of employed persons. For more details, please consult: ILO Guidelines on ISCE.

European Socio-economic Groups (ESeG)

ESeG is a derived classification which allows the grouping of individuals with similar economic, social and cultural characteristics throughout the European Union, based only on core social variables to ensure comparable use in all social surveys providing comparable results. The main core social variables used are "ILO working status", “Status in employment”, “Occupation in employment” (according to ISCO-08) and “Self-declared labour status”. For the detailed classification and explanatory notes, please consult the EseG page on the Eurostat classification server RAMON.

Core variables (user guide) and explanatory notes

Important reference material is found in the two documents 'LFS user guide' and 'explanatory notes'.

LFS user guide

The "EU-LFS user guide" assists users of LFS data in defining requests and analysing the received data. It aims at informing users of both tailor-made extractions and anonymised LFS microdata. It presents the structure of the LFS, the available variables (directly surveyed or derived), and the rules for dissemination. The document provides an overview of the variables available in the LFS data sets and presents details on their codification. It gives information regarding both coding principles for core variables and the derivation of further variables for standard labour market analyses and refers as well to ad-hoc-modules. It describes also the classifications and addresses the general structure of the LFS database, and deals with the anonymisation criteria used for anonymised microdata.

LFS explanatory notes

The "explanatory notes" provide detailed information on the surveyed variables of the LFS. For each variable, it informs the user about the periodicity, gives a short description and the purpose. Furthermore definition and implementation rules are presented.

LFS coding lists and explanatory notes over time

An overview of present and past coding lists and explanatory notes is given in the following table.
An entry "previous" means that the information in the document for the previous year is also valid for the year in question. The document "Methods and Definitions 2001" contains the relevant information for all individual topics in 2001 and 2002; from 2003 onwards the information was updated in separate documents, so that since 2005 individual documents for all six coding topics exist.

* The years in the column "NUTS" indicate the initial first year of reporting according to a new version of the classification. For instance, "from 2015" refers to NUTS 2013, according to which data were first reported in 2015. However, the countries affected by changes have afterwards reported data also on previous years according to NUTS 2013, in this case covering 2010 to 2014. In addition, a new NUTS version usually affects only a few countries at NUTS 2 level. This means in practice that it is valid for an even longer time series in the unaffected countries. As a result, the latest NUTS version always covers time series of different length by country. The detail on the validity of the NUTS versions is documented in an Excel file.

For methods and definitions prior to 2001 please see the list below. The table gives an overview of publications in the past, including a description for Candidate countries in 2002.

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No electronic documentation is available for 1977 and 1985.

Core questionnaires
The national questionnaires used by the countries to collect the EU-LFS data as well as specific instructions and other documents for the data collection are available from 2005 onwards.

• National questionnaires 2020
• National questionnaires 2019
• National questionnaires 2018
• National questionnaires 2017
• National questionnaires 2016
• National questionnaires 2015
• National questionnaires 2014
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• National questionnaires 2007
• National questionnaires 2006
• National questionnaires 2005

The information can be downloaded as zip file by clicking on the year. The ZIP files contain the country questionnaires in the national language(s) and English (if available) and the instructions (if available) for the participating countries.

See also
• All articles on labour market
• European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS)

Dedicated section
• Labour market (including Labour Force Survey)