

NEET YOUTH IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: VULNERABILITY PROFILES AND POLICY RESPONSES

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Received 8 August 2025; Accepted 13 November 2025

Abstract:

This paper explores the phenomenon of NEET youth (Not in Employment, Education or Training) in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting it as a pressing socio-economic issue in the regional context. The study adopts a differentiated approach based on the economic activity classification of NEET youth, distinguishing between economically active (unemployed job seekers) and economically inactive subgroups (not seeking employment, often due to health conditions, care responsibilities, or demotivation). Using a statistical and comparative methodology, the research analyses national and international datasets from 2019–2024 to assess demographic, educational, employment, and health-related dimensions of youth vulnerability. The findings reveal that Moldova records one of the highest NEET rates among European countries, with pronounced gender disparities and a high concentration of economically inactive young women. Despite a positive trend in the expansion of educational coverage, youth employment rates, especially for those aged 15–24, remain critically low. Health indicators further underscore structural vulnerabilities, particularly among non-working and non-studying youth with chronic conditions. The paper identifies education, gender-sensitive employment policies, and intersectoral strategies (including volunteerism and health support) as key levers for reducing NEET vulnerability. It also emphasizes the importance of adopting integrated national strategies and drawing on best practices from low-NEET countries. The study contributes to understanding NEET youth as a heterogeneous and dynamic group, requiring nuanced, data-driven policy responses aligned with sustainable development goals.

Key words: Youth vulnerability, economic inactivity, gender disparities, professional integration, social policy.

JEL classification: J13, I24, I28.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of NEET youth (Not in Employment, Education or Training) has gained particular relevance in the Republic of Moldova. According to the definition provided by the National Bureau of Statistics, NEET refers to young people who are not engaged in employment, are not enrolled in formal education, and do not participate in any type of course or training outside the formal education system [1]. This status reflects not only individual difficulties but also points to systemic problems in the fields of education, employment, and social integration of youth.

The motivation for conducting this study stems from the need for an in-depth analysis of the factors contributing to the formation of the NEET group in Moldova, as well as the search for effective strategies to mitigate the associated risks. Particular attention is paid to the economic and social vulnerability of youth, which is shaped by various circumstances, including low levels of education, limited opportunities in the labor market, gender disparities, and health conditions.

The objective of this paper is to carry out a comprehensive examination of the NEET phenomenon in Moldova, with a focus on classification based on economic activity, which allows for a differentiated approach to addressing the problem. The study analyzes statistical data reflecting demographic, educational, employment-related, and medical-social aspects, and also considers international practices and recommendations applicable to the Moldovan context. Specific measures and strategies are proposed to reduce the level of NEET youth and to increase their social and economic participation in the country.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern research emphasizes that the NEET status (youth not in education, employment, or training) is shaped by a wide range of factors - from individual characteristics and social background to the effectiveness of state support [2, 3]. According to a systematic review, the main predictors of falling into the NEET category include a low level of education, lack of professional experience, physical and mental health problems, poverty, and social inequality [4]. Conversely, having higher education significantly reduces the risk of exclusion from the systems of education and employment. Moreover, the importance of accounting for gender and age differences in the development of targeted policies is underlined [2, 5].

Current studies highlight the particular vulnerability of certain subgroups, primarily young women with family responsibilities, whose participation in public employment programs remains extremely low [6, 7]. Women are more often involved in informal employment or perform unpaid care work, which limits their participation in the formal economy and increases the risk of becoming NEET due to the lack of conditions for combining work and family responsibilities [8].

Additional barriers are also characteristic of other categories, particularly young migrant women, who face difficulties in adaptation, lack of social networks, motherhood, and language limitations. These aspects are rarely taken into account in existing approaches, which calls for more flexible and context-specific policy [9, 10].

A comprehensive and structured response to the problem is seen as a prerequisite for a sustainable reduction in the share of NEET [11]. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of coordinated intersectoral measures combining the improvement of working conditions, increasing access to education, including those that meet the new requirements of the digital economy [12] and providing psychological support for young people [2, 11].

Alongside individual and social factors, the conditions created at the national level play a significant role [13, 14, 15]. In the context of weak childcare infrastructure and limited support mechanisms for persons with disabilities, the share of youth excluded from employment and education increases [16]. Furthermore, economic instability and the inefficiency of vocational training policies lead to growing unemployment and demotivation among young people [17, 18, 19].

In order to achieve a more accurate analysis and targeted response to the problem, this study uses the classification of NEET youth based on economic activity (figure no.1). This structure distinguishes between economically active youth seeking employment and economically inactive youth — those who are temporarily or permanently excluded from labor activities due to health conditions, caregiving responsibilities, demotivation, or dependence on support. Such an approach makes it possible to account for the heterogeneity of reasons for exclusion from social and economic life and to adapt policy measures in accordance with the typology of vulnerability [20, 21].

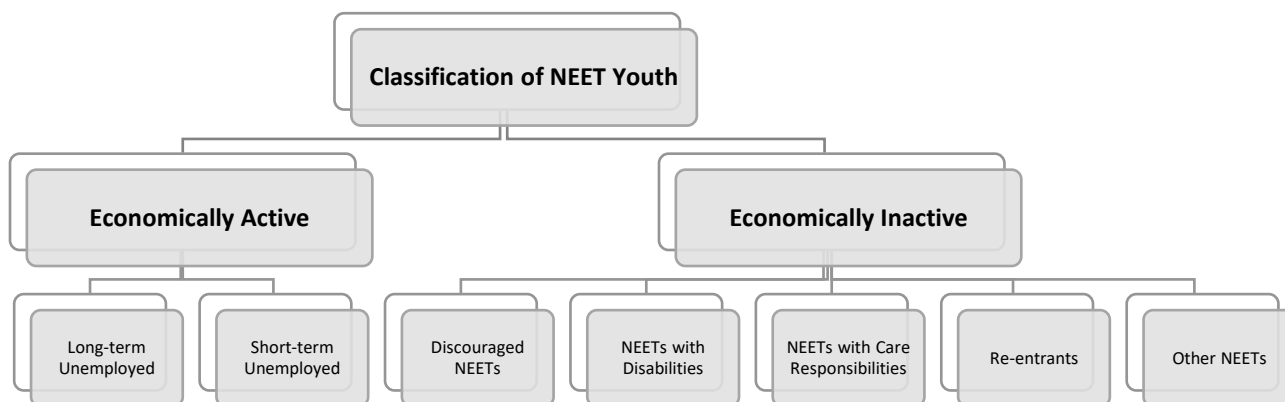


Figure no. 1. Classification of NEET youth by economic activity

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [20].

The application of this classification allows for a more accurate identification of risks, the development of differentiated interventions, and the promotion of social reintegration of youth. This is particularly important in the context of countries with a high level of NEET, where social isolation and economic dependency of the younger generation become a serious challenge to sustainable development.

Thus, the phenomenon of NEET youth represents a complex and multilayered issue shaped at the intersection of individual, institutional, and macroeconomic factors. Its analysis requires a targeted approach combining quantitative methods, international comparisons, and structural differentiation of the target group. Considering the high degree of vulnerability of various NEET subcategories and the heterogeneity of reasons for their exclusion from active life, the aim of this study is to identify the key factors of this vulnerability and to develop approaches for risk reduction that support a more sustainable and inclusive integration of youth into society and the economy.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies a quantitative approach based on the analysis of official statistical data for the period 2019–2024, with the aim of identifying the factors contributing to the economic and social vulnerability of NEET youth in the Republic of Moldova.

The analysis includes an assessment of the dynamics in the number of NEET individuals and the calculation of their share within the youth structure by age and gender. The study employs a comparative approach by benchmarking Moldova's indicators against those of European Union countries.

An important element of the analysis is the classification of NEET youth according to economic activity (economically active and inactive NEETs), which allowed for structuring the sample and adapting the data interpretation to different types of vulnerability.

The data were visualized using graphs and charts. The main sources of information included the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, Eurostat, CISSTAT, as well as analytical reports and scientific publications on the topic.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of youth provides an essential foundation for assessing the scale and specific features of the NEET phenomenon in the Republic of Moldova. This section examines key quantitative and structural changes affecting the young population in order to identify the factors influencing its economic and social vulnerability. Particular attention is paid to the dynamics of youth numbers and age composition, as well as gender proportions, which, in combination with other indicators, form the context for a deeper understanding of the processes of exclusion from employment and education.

As of January 1, 2024, the number of residents with permanent residence in the Republic of Moldova was 2,423.3 thousand people, of whom 567.7 thousand, or 23.4%, were young people aged 14–34. The gender distribution among youth was as follows: 49.0% male and 51.0% female [22].

The age structure of youth in the Republic of Moldova has undergone certain changes between 2020 and 2024. The most noticeable shifts are observed in the proportion of youth in the 14–19 and 25–29 age groups. Thus, the share of young people aged 14–19 increased from 23.4% in 2020 to 29.1% in 2024, indicating a certain growth in the number of adolescents and early-career individuals at the beginning of their educational and professional paths. At the same time, a significant decrease was recorded among those aged 25–29 — from 26.1% to 22.5% [22].

Changes in the age structure of the youth population may indicate demographic shifts, including a decline in birth rates in the early 2000s, as well as the possible influence of external migration, particularly in the segment of the active working-age population. The dynamics of youth age structure are of great importance for planning educational, social, and labor policies, as well as for assessing the prospects of youth integration into economic activity (figure no.2).

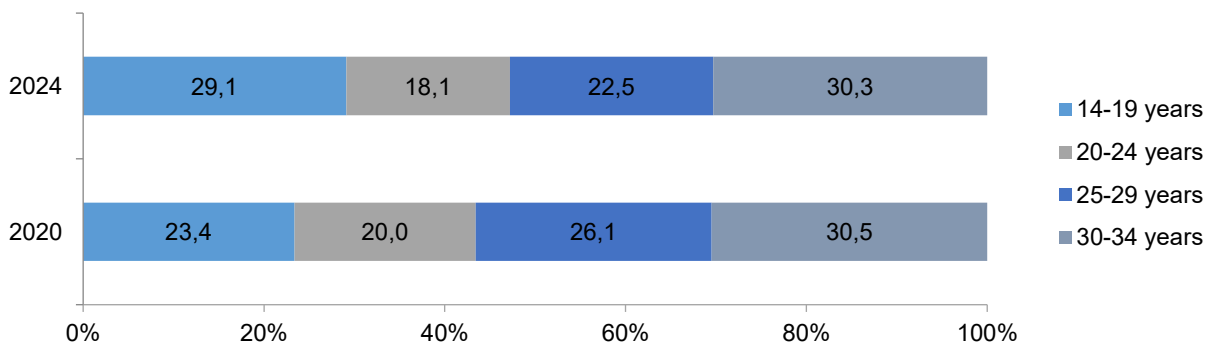


Figure no. 2. Structure of the youth population by age groups, as of January 1, 2020 and 2024
 Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [22].

From a vulnerability perspective, the growing share of adolescents aged 14–19 combined with the shrinking 25–29 cohort suggests that a larger proportion of young people may pass through the “critical window” for NEET risk with accumulated disadvantages in education and early work experience.

Gender differences in the demographic behavior of young people in the Republic of Moldova reflect significant characteristics that are important for assessing their social vulnerability. Young women generally enter marriage and become mothers at an earlier age compared to men. Moreover, they are more frequently exposed to risks associated with early motherhood, particularly in rural areas, as well as to a higher share of births outside of marriage [22]. At the same time, young men tend to marry later and exhibit a higher rate of non-involvement in family life at a young age. These differences exacerbate gender inequality in access to education, employment, and participation in social programs, which should be taken into account when formulating strategies for the integration of NEET youth and for reducing their vulnerability (figure no.3).

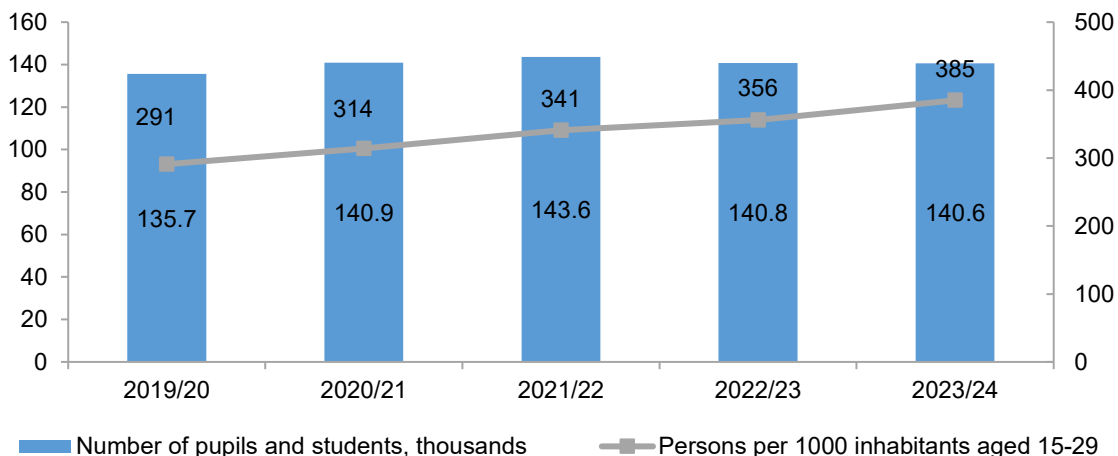


Figure no. 3. Number of pupils (secondary and technical vocational) and students, 2019/20-2023/24

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [22, 23].

As shown in figure no. 3, during the period 2019/20–2023/24, the number of young people enrolled in both lyceum and vocational education, as well as in higher education institutions, increased in Moldova. Specifically, in the 2023/2024 academic year, this number reached 385 thousand, which is 94 thousand more compared to 2019/2020 — an increase of 32.3%. Alongside the absolute increase, the relative indicator of educational participation also improved: the number of enrolled students per 1000 inhabitants aged 15–29 rose from 135.7 in 2019/20 to 140.6 in 2023/24, indicating a higher proportion of young people engaged in formal education. The expansion of educational coverage may serve as a factor in reducing NEET youth risks, primarily by decreasing

the proportion of economically inactive young people in this category. Accordingly, when more young individuals continue their studies within the formal education system or vocational training, the share of those remaining outside the spheres of work and learning is reduced. Thus, the education system functions as an important protective mechanism, preventing youth from falling out of active social and economic life [24].

This trend is also confirmed by regional analytical data. According to the report "Youth in the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Sustainable Development Goals", education plays a key role in integrating youth into the labor market and public life. Increasing educational coverage contributes to the reduction of the NEET group, as it broadens the professional and social opportunities of the younger generation and enhances their readiness for economic activity. This further reinforces the importance of investing in the education system as one of the strategic directions for reducing the economic and social vulnerability of youth [25].

Figure no. 4 presents the share of NEET young people by age groups and gender in 2023.

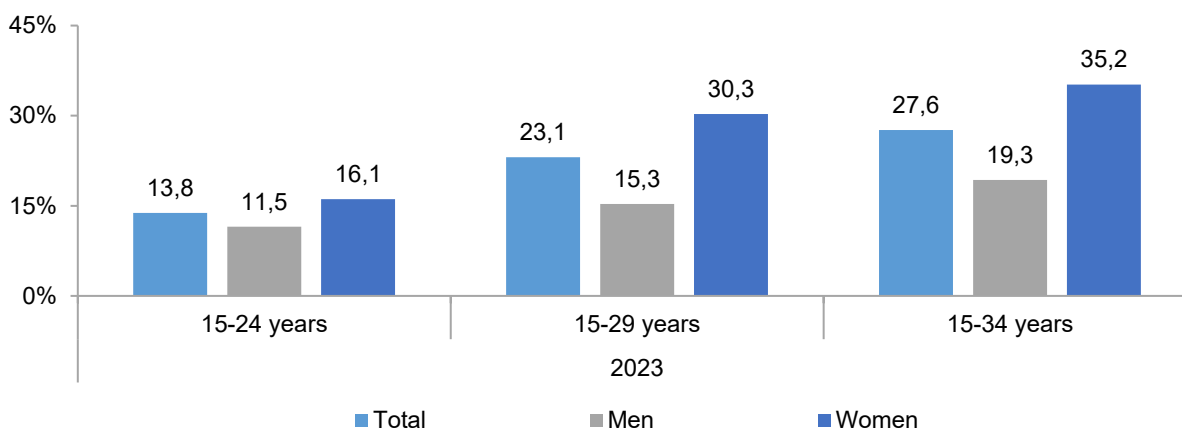


Figure no.4. Share of NEET young people by age groups and gender, 2023

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [22, 26].

Data for 2023 indicate a persistently high proportion of young people who are outside the spheres of employment and education. Approximately one in four individuals aged 15 - 34 (27.6%) was not engaged in either formal or non-formal education, nor in employment. The situation is particularly alarming among women, for whom the risk of non-participation in economic and educational activities is significantly higher: the share of NEET among women aged 15 - 34 reached 35.2%, compared to 19.3% among men. This gender asymmetry highlights the need for a differentiated approach to assessing and reducing the vulnerability of various subgroups of youth.

From a dynamic perspective, labor force survey data indicate that the NEET situation in Moldova has improved only modestly in recent years. In 2019, when the indicator for the extended 15–34 age group began to be calculated on the basis of the revised survey methodology, NEET youth accounted for about 30.8 percent of all young people in this age interval; by 2023 this share had decreased to 27.6 percent, that is, by 3.2 percentage points. For the core youth group aged 15–29, the rate declined from 27.4 percent in 2019 to 23.1 percent in 2023 [22, 26]. These changes are broadly consistent with the gradual expansion of participation in upper-secondary, vocational and higher education described above, as well as with the partial post-pandemic recovery of the labor market, after the temporary surge in NEET levels in 2020–2021 caused by job losses in sectors with a high concentration of young workers (HORECA, tourism, trade). At the same time, the reduction in NEET has been slower among young women, who remain over-represented among economically inactive youth due to childcare responsibilities, unpaid household work and health limitations, which confirms the persistence of gender-based vulnerability despite the overall downward trend.

In this context, an important direction of research is the assessment of current youth employment levels, which makes it possible to better understand the structural differences by gender and age (figure no.5).

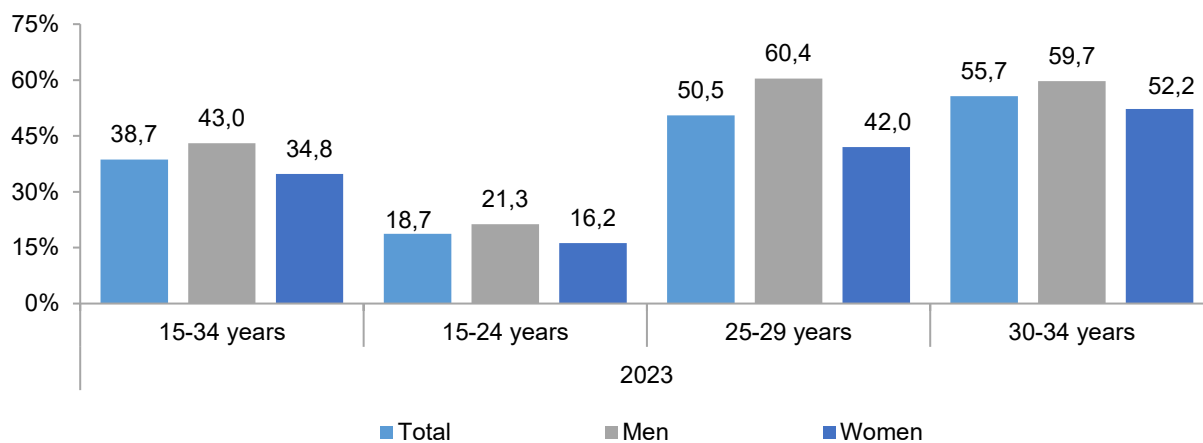


Figure no. 5. Youth employment rates by age groups and gender, 2023

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [22, 27].

The comparison between figures 4 and 5 shows that the groups with the lowest employment rates – particularly women aged 25 - 29 and youth aged 15 - 24 - largely coincide with those with the highest NEET shares, which confirms that limited access to decent jobs is a key transmission channel through which age and gender differences translate into NEET vulnerability.

In 2023, the employment rate among youth aged 15 - 34 demonstrates a clear age and gender differentiation, which directly affects the structure and volume of the NEET group. Thus, the overall youth employment rate stood at 48.4%, while for the 15 - 24 age group, it was recorded at only 21.3%, indicating extremely limited engagement of younger cohorts in the formal labor market. The employment rate increases significantly in the subsequent age groups, reaching 50.5% for young people aged 25 - 29 and 55.7% for those aged 30 - 34. At the same time, a significant gender gap persists: men show a higher level of employment across all age categories, particularly in the 25 - 29 age segment (60.4% compared to 42.0% among women).

This employment structure highlights the high share of economically inactive youth, especially among women and the younger age subgroups. According to the NEET classification, it is precisely the economically inactive young people - those who are neither working nor seeking employment - who constitute the most vulnerable part of this group. Weak participation in the labor market, especially when combined with a lack of access to education, increases the risks of social marginalization and economic dependency. Gender differences in employment levels point to structural barriers faced by young women, including limited employment opportunities, family responsibilities, and insufficient flexibility in working conditions. These factors must be taken into account when formulating policy directions aimed at reducing the vulnerability of NEET youth and activating their economic potential.

It is also important to recognize that exclusion from employment is often caused not only by economic but also by medical and social factors. The health status of youth acts as one of the key barriers to their active integration into the labor market and the education system. In this regard, the analysis of morbidity patterns among the young population helps to identify additional aspects of vulnerability within the NEET group and to refine possible directions for policy intervention (Figure no.6).

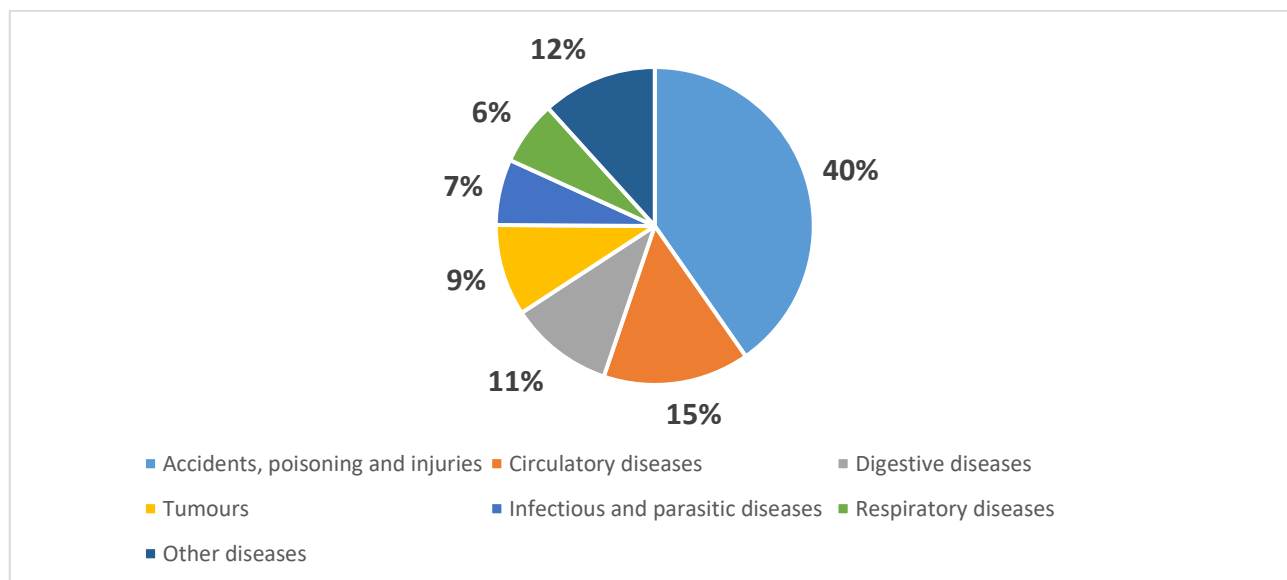


Figure no. 6. Structure of morbidity among youth by main groups of diseases in 2023 (% of total cases)

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [22].

The presented data on the morbidity structure of the young population indicate that the largest share is represented by cases related to injuries, poisoning, and accidents - 40% of the total number of registered diseases. This category is especially characteristic of youth in transitional age, associated with increased behavioral and social risks.

The second most common are diseases of the circulatory system (15%), which may indicate the early development of chronic conditions related to lifestyle, stress factors, and unstable working conditions. Digestive system diseases account for 11%, tumors - 9%, infectious and parasitic diseases - 7%, and respiratory diseases - 6%. Other diseases make up about 12%.

Taking into account the NEET classification based on economic activity, it can be assumed that a significant portion of young people with chronic or acute illnesses belong to the economically inactive group. These individuals typically do not participate in employment and are not seeking work due to health reasons, which reduces their social integration and increases their dependence on external support. Thus, health problems become both a consequence and a cause of youth exclusion from economically active life.

In terms of the proposed classification, this means that chronic and recurrent health problems disproportionately push young people into the economically inactive NEET subgroup and make their return to education or employment significantly more difficult.

These data highlight the need for intersectoral strategies that combine disease prevention, access to medical services, and measures to support employment and education for youth with health limitations. Improving the health status of young people is a key direction in reducing NEET risks and strengthening their economic potential.

For a more comprehensive assessment of the scale of the problem, it is important to consider the situation in an international context. A comparative analysis of the NEET indicator among youth in the Republic of Moldova and in European Union countries allows for identifying Moldova's position relative to other states and determining the directions for potentially transferring effective solutions into national policy (figure no.7).

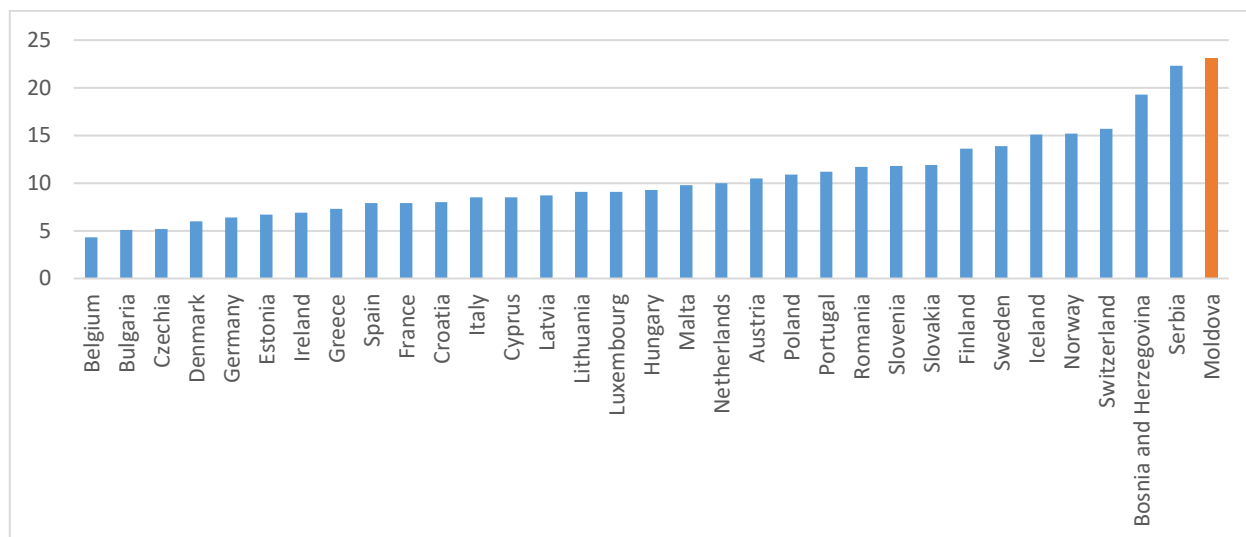


Figure no. 7. NEET rate among youth in selected EU countries and Moldova in 2023

Source: compiled by the authors on the basis of [26, 28].

Based on the graph, it is evident that the NEET rate among youth in Moldova in 2023 is the highest among all the countries presented. The high share of youth not involved in either education or employment points to serious structural problems in the national systems of workforce training, employment, and social integration of the younger generation.

Comparative international analysis not only reveals negative trends but also helps identify the potential for adopting effective solutions. Countries with low NEET rates, such as Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, demonstrate sustainable models of youth integration through active employment policies, dual education programs, and early career guidance. Thus, the experience of these countries may prove useful in developing national strategies to reduce the NEET level in Moldova, including through differentiated approaches to economically active and inactive youth.

Alongside institutional measures aimed at reforming the employment and education systems, youth activation can also be effectively supported through civic engagement and non-formal activities. One such mechanism is volunteering.

According to the report on volunteering in Moldova [29], in 2015 about 10% of the population aged 15 and older participated in volunteer activities. Among youth aged 15–24, this figure was approximately 15%, indicating a significant level of youth engagement in voluntary activities. Volunteering provides young people with opportunities to acquire skills, expand social networks, and enhance self-esteem, which may contribute to their subsequent integration into the labor market and educational programs.

For those who are not working and not looking for work, participation in volunteer projects can be the first step toward activation and reintegration into education or employment. Thus, volunteering may serve as an effective tool for reducing social isolation and increasing motivation among NEET youth.

Despite the positive aspects of volunteering, the report also highlights several barriers that young people face when trying to participate in voluntary activities, including lack of information, limited resources, and absence of institutional support [29]. To effectively use volunteering as a tool to reduce NEET-related risks, it is necessary to develop strategies aimed at overcoming these barriers, including information campaigns, training programs, and the creation of infrastructure to support volunteer initiatives.

Taken together, the analysis of demographic trends, educational participation, employment rates, NEET structure and morbidity patterns shows that youth vulnerability in Moldova does not stem from a single factor. It emerges at the intersection of early family formation, gendered care responsibilities, persistent gaps in youth employment and the high prevalence of health problems among economically inactive youth. These interlinked mechanisms should be explicitly considered when designing targeted measures for both economically active and inactive NEET subgroups.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of statistical data for 2023–2024 confirms that the share of youth not included in the systems of education, employment, and vocational training remains one of the highest in Europe. This indicates not only the social vulnerability of young people but also structural problems in the national system of workforce training and integration. The NEET phenomenon must be regarded as a priority socio-economic challenge.

The distinction between economically active and inactive NEET youth forms the basis for a more precise understanding of the causes of exclusion from employment and education. Economically inactive NEETs require activation measures, as well as social and psychological support, while active NEETs require an adapted employment policy, including internships, retraining, and the creation of accessible jobs.

Despite the positive trend of expanding access to education, a significant share of young people still remains outside the system of formal or vocational training. Considering that education serves as a protective mechanism against social marginalization, government support is needed to ensure the transition from compulsory education to higher and vocational levels.

Young women are more likely to fall into NEET status due to early marriage, motherhood, and the lack of opportunities to combine family and professional roles. In the current context of 2025, it is necessary to expand gender-sensitive policies, including childcare subsidies, flexible work schedules, and the prioritization of women's participation in retraining and employment programs.

Youth from younger age cohorts are underrepresented in the labor market, which increases the risk of prolonged NEET status. Under the conditions of the Republic of Moldova, the development of dual education programs, internships, and state-supported entrepreneurial initiatives is relevant.

The high prevalence of illness and injury among young people, including chronic conditions, reduces their capacity to participate in economic life. Young people with health limitations are more often part of the economically inactive NEET category. To reduce their vulnerability, the integration of medical support, prevention, and rehabilitation programs into social policy is required.

Volunteering can serve as a mechanism for involving economically inactive youth in public life and preparing them for employment. In the current context, it is necessary to support volunteering infrastructure, create platforms for registering initiatives, and provide motivational incentives for young people.

The experience of EU countries with low NEET levels (e.g., Germany, Ireland) shows that systematic investments in early career guidance, dual education, and active youth employment deliver sustainable results. These practices can be adapted and implemented in Moldova, taking into account national specificities.

Fragmentation and insufficient coordination between the sectors of education, labor, and health limit the effectiveness of policies targeting NEET youth. In 2025, a pressing task remains the development of a unified intersectoral strategy aimed at reducing NEET levels, with clearly defined implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

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