ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS AND ANALYSIS OF THE PROFILE OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE NOT IN EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION OR TRAINING (NEETS)

Summary
Assessment of the Status and Analysis of the Profile of Adolescents and Young People not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs)

Summary

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Foreword

The global crisis in the early 21st century caused disruptions in all sectors and had an impact on the destiny and life chances of many people. The effects of the crisis painfully affected also young people, making them face new challenges, including greater risk for early school leaving, long-term unemployment, marginalisation and social exclusion. A growing number of young people are not involved in education, employment or training and fall into the category of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training).

For UNICEF Bulgaria the topic of NEETs is particularly important in the context of the goals of the organisation: improving the access to education, employment and training of adolescents, developing opportunities for "a second chance" for early school-leavers, and of innovative models for reintegration of adolescents and young people in employment, education or training. The adolescents and young people aged 15-24 not engaged in any form of education or employment were in the focus of the study: NEETs in Bulgaria: Assessment of the Status and Analysis of the Profile of Adolescents and Young People not in Employment, Education or Training. It outlined their status and profile and analysed the factors which increase the risk of falling into the group of NEETs.

The study had another objective as well: to mobilise and pool the efforts of central and regional institutions, local authorities, social partners and NGOs for creating a supportive environment for young people, so that they could meaningfully participate in public life and reach their full potential. Because overcoming the challenges faced by the young people who are not working or involved in education or training, in the long term, is possible only in case it becomes a cause commonly shared by all stakeholders. NEETs have names and faces, personal destiny and history. Their chance for development and better future depends on all of us, as their success is the key for the prosperity of the entire society.

Tanja Radocaj
UNICEF Representative for Bulgaria
1. Introduction

The research agency ESTAT was engaged by UNICEF Bulgaria to assess the status and analyse the profile of adolescents and young people not in employment, education or training (the so-called NEET group). The purpose of the assessment is to formulate concrete recommendations to effectively tackle the NEET phenomenon.

**Definition:** The NEET group (not in employment, education or training) includes young people aged 15-24 who are unemployed or economically inactive (as defined by the International Labour Organisation) and do not participate in any form of education or training (Employment Committee of the EC).

The assessment is based on a series of quantitative and qualitative studies and discussion meetings conducted among adolescents and young people, as well as representatives of stakeholder institutions in the period September-December 2014.

**The following were conducted:** a nationally representative survey among 1,200 persons aged 15 to 24 based on direct standardised interviews conducted at respondents’ homes; a qualitative focus group survey among people aged 15-18 and 19-24 (6 focus groups in total – two in each of the regions Shumen, Sliven, and Montana); a qualitative focus group survey among representatives of institutions and organisations working with children and persons of the NEET category at regional level (3 focus groups in total in the above said regions); a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with representatives of key stakeholders at national level (10 in-depth interviews in total with representatives of ministries, agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders); consultations with key stakeholders based on the Delphi method (online and a discussion meeting) to verify the formulated conclusions and identify additional recommendations to improve the work with NEETs; discussion meetings with representatives of the NEET group in Sofia and Ihtiman to ensure feedback for the study group.

2. Number and profile OF NEETs

According to National Statistical Institute data, as of 31.12.2013 in Bulgaria there were 751,900 persons aged 15 to 24. Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) were the third largest group of the total population of young people – about 22%.
The share of NEETs among school-aged young people (aged 15-18) is slightly under 11%, while among the older sub-group (aged 19-24) it reaches 28%. Re-assessed against the general population of 15-24 year-olds, this means that in the country there are a total of **167,670 young people** who are not in employment, education or training. 26,650 of them are aged 15-18, and 141,020 – 19-24.

Young NEETs have a clearly defined socio-demographic profile. The majority have secondary or lower education and live predominantly in smaller settlements, while over 50% belong to ethnic minority groups.

**Education is the socio-demographic characteristic that is mostly determinative of belonging or non-belonging to the NEET group.** The latter includes both persons with all types of educational attainments and persons without education. A significant proportion of the NEET group are early school leavers (47%).

**The Roma and Turkish ethnic groups predominate in the structure of the NEET group, while 46% are Bulgarians.** Ethnicity can be identified as the second most common risk factor for joining the NEET group. The Roma are four and the Turkish two times more at risk of ending up in a NEET situation compared to Bulgarians.

**The structure of the NEET group is dominated by residents of smaller settlements (63%).** The smaller the settlement (in terms of type), the greater the proportion of its NEETs population. The reasons could be mostly explained with the depopulation of smaller settlements and the resulting aggravated economic situation. That is why settlement type can be classified as the third most significant risk factor for joining the NEET group.

**Within minority groups gender emerges as an additional risk factor for NEET group belonging.** Due to community specifics the proportion of women among NEETs is almost
3.5 and that of men – 2.3 times that of the control group (young people who are not NEETs). Therefore, women, in particular Roma women, could be identified as a high-risk group in terms of NEET group belonging.

The NEET group includes several sub-groups with varying degrees of vulnerability, characteristics, and needs. Generally, two main categories can be differentiated – unemployed (55%) and economically inactive (45%). These cover the following sub-groups: unemployed with at least secondary education and experience (15%); unemployed with at least secondary education but without experience (19%); unemployed with lower than secondary education (22%); inactive and social maternity beneficiaries (12%); inactive and not searching for employment (32%). The economically inactive are the highest-risk group in terms of the duration of the NEET status. The unemployed have a better chance to acquire another status.

Figure 2. Main neet sub-groups (base: NEETs, 267 persons)

A total of 44% of NEETs have not been in employment, education or training for a long time (over 1 year). The longest residents in the group are early school leavers, in particular those having never worked. The duration of the NEET status is mostly dependent on the young person’s educational attainment.

3. Causes for becoming NEET

NEETs are a heterogeneous group that is formed as a result of socio-demographic characteristics, as well as various other factors/causes. The complex interaction of institutional, systemic and individual factors increases the risk of becoming NEET.

Based on the surveys four major areas have been identified, various disruptions in which can become causes for the formation of a NEET group.
The higher the number of problems for a given young person in each area, the more the obstacles they have to face to continue their education or find employment in the labour market. In the most vulnerable groups – minorities and persons with low education, problems can be identified in each of the four areas, which makes their removal from the NEET group extremely difficult.

3.1. Family and environment

Disruptions in the family and the social environment are the first and most important cause for joining the NEET group. The family and the specific characteristics of its members, community rules and the environment in which each young person grows and develops (including the type of settlement where they reside) are crucial to the formation of their attitudes to training, work, development, and to their overall future behaviour.

**Family Environment**

The composition of the family environment is crucial to the development of young people and is one of the major causes for joining the NEET group. The highest-risk environment for the formation of NEETs includes persons engaging in violence or suffering from dependencies, persons towards whom the young are negative, as well as long-term unemployed. This is due to the tendency of adolescents and young people to adopt and replicate the behaviours of people who play an important role in their lives.

Figure 3. Relative share of NEETs among persons having at some point lived with risk groups

*The proportion of NEETs among those living with persons with a criminal record is not included as the base is insignificant.*
Disruptions in the family environment are the second environment-bound risk cause for the formation of a NEET group. Two types of disruption have been identified.

On the one hand, "disruption" may be considered in the narrow sense – young people living in single-parent or parentless families (under the care of relatives, guardians or foster families). The national survey has shown that these are at a higher risk of acquiring a NEET status than young people raised by two parents.

On the other hand, "family disruption" may be construed along broader lines. According to the qualitative survey, it can also refer to lack of attention to the children in the family resulting from their parents being persistently busy, the gradual alienation between children and parents, or the restriction of communication to "a few words", a time that is insufficient for sharing views and intentions.

A disrupted family environment can also be identified in situations when one or both parents are absent for long periods as a result of the so-called economic migration.

Early marriage, especially for persons giving birth at an early age, is another environment-bound key cause for NEET status acquisition. Despite the low proportion of early marriages at national level – about 1.3% among 15-18 year-olds (approx. 3,500 persons), their share among the NEETs in this age group is rather high – about 25%.

The collected real-life stories of Roma girls in the qualitative survey suggest that early marriages in Roma communities are a form of forced NEET status acquisition for girls. It is their parents who decide how long they should remain in school in view of when they are seen as best to marry. The marriage limits their prospects for development and they practically retain a NEET status until leaving the young age group. As far as boys are concerned, the situation is different – first, they must study, "so as to be able to do something". In terms of the NEET phenomenon, it can be argued that for boys the possibility of leaving this group is much higher.

Social Environment and Lifestyle

The attitudes and behaviour of young people are not only affected by the family and the community, but also by the specifics of the environment in which they communicate informally and the peculiarities of the lifestyle in the respective local community.

The surveys have identified several key characteristics of the social environment and lifestyle which can often become a cause for the acquisition of a NEET status by young people:

- The low standard, which is a barrier for young people to expand their horizons and contacts, as well as to continue their education and seek employment;
- The limited options for a meaningful spending of the free time in the smaller settlements;
- The inertness of smaller or underdeveloped (as well as depopulated) settlements, which engenders "hibernation" among young people and imposes a life dynamic that does not encourage thinking, quick decision taking and problem solving;
- The concentration of businesses, educational institutions and prospects in the capital city and some other major Bulgarian cities, which limits the opportunities for young people living elsewhere;
- The higher requirements to job applicants in the capital city and other big cities resulting from the more stringent competition facilitate the discouragement of young migrants from
villages and smaller towns when they are unable to meet those. After a number of attempts at finding a well-paid job, they become economically inactive, but still do not return to their home towns;

- Housework, which takes up a big part of young peoples’, in particular NEETs’ free time. With the Roma, housework can often take up so much time that it can trigger early school leaving and hence become a cause for joining the NEET group.

3.2. Education

Joining the NEET group is largely dependent on the level of the education attained. This is clearly seen from the group profile, according to which 47% of NEETs are early school leavers, i.e. they remain with a primary or lower educational attainment (fig.4).

Figure 4. Profile of NEETs by level of education (base: NEETs, 267 persons)

In view of the fact that NEETs are largely young people who have not completed their education, it can be argued that schools and teachers have a key role in the early identification of potential NEETs and the prevention of young people joining the group.

Difficulties in school are a serious indication of the presence of young people at risk and are among the causes that directly contribute to the formation of the NEET group. The results of the national representative survey show that almost half of NEETs have encountered difficulties, while 17% have indicated having many problems (in the control group the people with difficulties amount to just 5%). The greatest difficulties in school have been met by persons from minority ethnic groups, especially the Roma.

Young people who later have problems finding a job usually encounter difficulties with both the learning material (i.e. content and volume) – 83%, and with homework – 60%.

At the root of the difficulties in school stand two main problem areas in the education system, registered by both young people and the institutions that work directly with them.

The first problem area is related to the learning material and the method of instruction, in particular – the poor practical orientation of the education, the large volume and lack of focus and structure of the curricula, the passive model and the lack of an interactive approach to teaching.

The second problem area concerns the method of financing educational establishments. The formula "more students = more money" is valid for both schools and universities. It leads to the adverse practice of permitting passage to higher classes/courses for persons who have not reached the required levels for the sole purpose of retaining them in the school/university. This leads to reducing the overall quality of education as there is no competition ("everyone can ‘pass’"). The most absurd manifestation of the problem is the paradox of awarding education degrees to illiterate young people.
In the long run the desire to retain students at any cost leads to a continuous drop in the confidence of young people towards the education system and its potential to serve as a basis for their development.

One of the most worrying consequences of the problems in secondary education is the high relative share of functionally illiterate students. Functional illiteracy has been identified by the representatives of the key stakeholders as a fundamental problem for the education system and a major factor for the acquisition of a NEET status.

When discussing education as a NEET factor it is important to also highlight vocational education and training in view of its important role in the formation of a skilled workforce and a knowledge-based and competitive economy.

The key stakeholders share the view that there is a serious discrepancy between what is offered by vocational schools and what is in demand in the labour market. Moreover, vocational schools lag behind in terms of offering new professions, while some produce graduates whose employment is problematic. In many cases the acquired professions prove inadequate, especially in smaller settlements, where the business is represented by 1 or 2 operating companies. This imbalance is one of the reasons for young secondary school or college graduates with particular professions to remain "overboard" and join the NEET group.

While continuing education in universities actually represents a departure from the NEET group, university education as such is similarly no guarantee for a better future – university graduates often turn to job agencies and join the ranks of the long-term unemployed.

A particular problem is the continuation of the education of young people from smaller settlements. This is due to two reasons: the poorer education they received in school, which does not provide them with the necessary knowledge base, and the lack of funds, which forces them to work, thus reducing their time for studying and becoming a reason for failure.

Representatives of the key stakeholders also commented on higher education from a different perspective – in relation to the needs of the labour market and the need for long-term planning (5-10 years ahead) of state-subsidised university studies. They consider that the autonomy of universities, which is also linked with responsibilities for financial self-sustainability, promotes a "hunger" for more students and in many cases leads to "overproduction" of certain professions and qualifications.

### 3.3. Qualifications and experience, behaviour at the labour market

A comparison of the proportion of NEETs and the unemployment rate across the different planning regions shows that the risk of joining the group of young people not in employment, education or training is higher in regions with high unemployment rates and vice versa – the lower the unemployment rate, the lower the number of NEETs.
The young people in the North-East region, where the unemployment rate is highest, are most at risk. The risk is twice lower in the South-West region, where the unemployment rate is lowest. This pattern shows that measures targeting NEETs should be territorially differentiated.

NEETs themselves point out the lack of jobs as the main reason for their situation - 58% (base: NEETs, excluding social maternity beneficiaries, 234 persons). The conducted focus groups with young people illustrate the problem quite clearly.

**Lack of Qualification**

In addition to the current state of the labour market, the lack of qualifications, which, in turn, is directly linked to poor education, is among the most serious barriers for NEETs to start work. As seen from the group profile, 47% of NEETs are without secondary education, and nearly 70% - without a specialty (without secondary education or with general secondary education). Only one person in the group sample has declared having attended qualification and/or re-qualification courses.

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1 NSI, Unemployed persons and unemployment rate – national level; statistical regions, 2013.
Such data give grounds to assert that **young people without a specialty are one of the most vulnerable groups among NEETs** and have the lowest opportunities for career development. They also retain their NEET status for the longest periods, which leads to a loss of motivation and working habits, and, ultimately, to their exclusion from the workforce (i.e. discouraged unemployed).

The situation of these young people is further aggravated by the fact that 72% of those without qualifications also lack experience. 2/3 do not seek employment or wait for "someone to help them get employed". This is probably due, on the one hand, to ignorance – where and how to look for a job and how to present themselves properly, and, on the other, to the objective restrictions to work availability in smaller settlements. Only 20% have stated that they are actively seeking employment, and 14% - not very actively.

**Lack of Experience**

The next key cause for acquiring a NEET status is **the lack of experience**. Two thirds of the young people in the group have never worked, and 36% are looking for a job but have no previous experience (fig. 7). While the lack of qualification is a barrier mainly for persons with lower education, the lack of experience hinders mostly persons with secondary education.

![Figure 7. Previous employment of NEETs (base: NEETs, excluding social maternity beneficiaries, 234 persons)](image)

The lack of experience is a problem not only for NEETs. Young people in Bulgaria do not find work easily precisely because they leave the education system without practical experience. **One possible solution is participating in internships**. These are expected to complement what has been learned in school/university with practical knowledge so as to support finding employment and enable trainees to decide whether they like the job and if they have the necessary qualities and skills to do it in the future.

**Young people rarely benefit from this type of programmes** – probably due to the lack of information, but also because in smaller settlements and settlements with declining economic functions such programmes are inexistent. At national level (cumulatively for 15-24 year-olds) only 3.3% have participated in internship programmes, all of whom are persons outside the NEET group.
**Behaviour at the labour market**

NEETs need work and often consider their options for finding employment. They connect work with financial independence, contribution to the family budget, a way to relieve the monotony of life, and an opportunity to set-up a social group. NEETs, however, also encounter serious difficulties in the job search process. The studies have shown that a large part of them lack sufficient information about how and where to search, what documents to prepare, and how to present themselves properly at the interview. This is valid not only for young people from smaller settlements, but also for some of those living in regional centres, where employment options are better.

In the job search process on average NEETs use two channels. The major are personal contacts (84%) and specialised websites (41%). Personal contacts are the sole channel for searching for a job for 32%. This is not surprising since most NEETs live in smaller settlements, for which job announcements are unavailable online.

Personal contacts are also a major opportunity to search for a job for young people with lower education – 94% of them use this channel. In second place are the labour offices (34%). The number of the channels used is directly related to the educational attainment –65% of those with at least secondary education and 49% of those with lower education use two and more channels.

Another major problem with the job search approach is the lack of confidence in one's own abilities. This prevents the employment options of NEETs as it compromises their presentation in front of potential employers.

In addition, NEETs have difficulties in formulating their competitive advantages. There are two reasons for this: the first is the lack of information about what is important for the presentation in front of employers, i.e. they do not know how to prepare and what questions to expect. The second reason is the high degree of mistrust in their own potential – instead of trying to present themselves through their skills and knowledge, they focus on the specifics of their personality or completely fail to present themselves properly. This mistrust is often due to multiple difficulties in communicating with employers and their constant rejection as candidates, which increasingly discourages them and lowers their self-confidence.

The lack of work is a constant source of stress for NEETs. This particularly applies to the persons in the age group 19-24. Yet, when looking for a job, they often have requirements towards the job (type, conditions, working hours), which can act as a real barrier to exiting their unfavorable situation. For example, 24% of NEETs are ready to start only a well-paid job, and 20% - only a job that appeals to them.

Young people in a more difficult situation in the labour market, such as early school leavers looking for a job, are more likely to start any kind of work without extra requirements (85%).

**The economically inactive** are the most passive group. Each fourth economically inactive person has stated an unwillingness to work, and just under one third are unclear and do not know what job they would like to do. A total of approximately 40% of inactive NEETs are at the other extreme as they are willing to start any job. This group has a certain potential to return to the labour market. The others, however, will very likely remain in the same situation until outgrowing young age, and, most likely, even after that.

**The persons with completed secondary or higher education** have more requirements and hence finding a suitable job becomes more complicated for them: among young people with education but with no experience 40% tend to start only a well-paid job, and 36% - only a job that they like; of the young people with educational attainment and experience 47% would
only do a well-paid job, and every third person would do a job that appeals to them or one that corresponds to their qualifications. Such results seem surprising bearing in mind the available data about the duration of the NEET status for these groups: for the former it is one year on average, while for the latter – one year and four months. Although motivation differs for the two groups, it ultimately leads to their permanent retention in the NEET category.

Young people in smaller settlements face high unemployment rates and a lack of jobs, which limits their employment options in their regular places of residence. For this reason, NEETs often look for a job in nearby and more distant settlements.

Figure 8. Persons living in smaller settlements - where do you search for a job? (Base: NEETs, job seekers and residents in smaller settlements (another town/village, 120 persons)

People who limit their job search only to their place of residence are driven by two main reasons. The first is psychological – fear of rejection, fear of change, lack of confidence in their own abilities. The second, however, is economic. It is stronger and very rational. A simple calculation shows that with an average pay of about BGN400 and transport costs of BGN60 (as is the case of the towns of Novi Pazar and Shumen) for young people it would not matter whether they will look for a job in a small or in a big town – in both cases they can count on no more than one minimum wage.

Low payment poses a complex choice in front of young people: either to work for the sake of experience and the job itself, as a forward step in their development, and to receive a salary which practically covers their travel costs but not their needs, or to wait for a better opportunity in the future, without actually knowing how, when, and whether this will happen. The choice that they make determines the duration of their NEET status.

The existing employment programmes and measures do not contribute in any major way to the exit of young people from the NEET group. The main reason for their low efficiency is the poor awareness of adolescents and young people about their existence, and hence – the low
level of participation in such support instruments.

The results of the national survey show that of the entire NEET population the share of those having heard of employment and training measures for young people is 14%, and of those having used them – under 5%. The analogical values outside the NEET group are a little more promising – 28% and 7% respectively. Yet, it can be claimed that the awareness of young people, especially of those in need at national level, is relatively poor. Consequently, programmes and measures reach a limited number of persons, who are actually among the least vulnerable groups – ethnic Bulgarians with completed secondary or higher education.

Figure 9. Have you participated in training or employment programmes or projects for young people? (Base: NEETs, 267 persons; control group, 933 persons)

The reasons for the low level of awareness can be sought in young people themselves – in their unawareness about where and how to look for such information. However, the blame often also lies with the institutions responsible for the implementation of these instruments. The focus group participants shared the opinion that municipal/labour office staff do not make sufficient efforts to ensure that the information has reached its targets; on other occasions, it is unclear, inaccurate, or even inaccessible for certain less educated groups.

As far as NEETs with previous work experience are concerned, job loss acts as a factor for joining the group – more than half of NEETs having worked at some point in their lives have quit of their own accord, i.e. they practically join the NEET group voluntarily. 41% were made redundant and nearly 7% chose not to answer (they were most likely laid-off).

The reasons for leaving are related to problems in the workplace. Among the main ones are the low payment, poor working conditions, and the lack of employment contracts. The presence of these kinds of problems, particularly if they happen regularly, can ultimately lead to a loss of motivation to work (based on the assumption that is not worth) and a prolonged stay in the NEET group.

The reasons for staff cuts are most likely hidden behind the logical practice, in the event of problems in the company to initially lay off the staff that is least valuable, i.e. without sufficient experience or trainees. This again drives NEETs to discouragement and instills a sense of failure, thus affecting their performance in the next job.

Unlike NEETs, young people in the control group encounter such problems less often – among them the share of persons who have not encountered difficulties in the workplace is almost twice as high (40% in the control group, 22% among NEETs). This is probably due to
the fact that a large part of them live and work in larger settlements, where they have more job opportunities and where the economic situation is more favorable for business development. They are also better educated, which is an important prerequisite for professional development.

3.4. Motivation

The lack of motivation is a major barrier to the career development of young people – this point of view is shared by most of the key stakeholders. Problems with motivation lead to apathy and hinder interests and professional and life goals.

Institutional representatives believe that the reasons for the lack of motivation are different: a conscious reaction to limited options for professional development, disparity between the educational level and the requirements of the labour market, low payment and reluctance to work or study.

Young people themselves often cite as reasons for not working and/or studying: "I want to take a break/I have just graduated" (18%) and "I don't feel like working/studying" (11%). 12% do not know why they are in this situation.

There are three possible reasons behind these answers.

The first is that the unwillingness to work and study is related to the financial backing and support received from their parents, who let them do what and as they see fit without encouraging their development.

The second possible reason is that behind this rejection lies a justification of the unfavorable situation in which the young person has found him/herself, and a disguise of the sense of failure in terms of career development. In such a way the situation can be presented as a personal choice rather than a bad coincidence.

The third possible reason is a lack of willingness to work or study due to the negative impact of the family and social environment, the role models in which do not stimulate development, on the contrary – they give ideas for other options.

The data from the nationally representative survey show that the lack of motivation (regardless of the reason) is not typical of all NEETs, although many of them demonstrate a high degree of dejection. To the direct question whether they expect a change in the next 6-12 months, 46% have answered positively. 54%, however, do not expect anything or cannot answer (fig. 10).

A more positive attitude towards the future is typical of the lower-risk groups in terms of joining and remaining in the NEET category – people with at least secondary education, experience, qualifications, and ethnic Bulgarians.

Most dominant among the group of young people without much hope for the future are the residents of smaller towns and villages, minorities representatives, especially the Roma, people with primary or lower education, and the economically inactive, i.e. the groups with the lowest chance to get out of the NEET situation. In terms of these characteristics, it is not surprising that every fourth person in the group does not expect any changes due to a lack of prospects (fig. 11).
The concrete plans for the next few years look **similar for NEETs and the control group** (table 1), and it can be claimed that NEETs have even more ideas as far as work is concerned.

Table 1. What do you want to achieve in the next few years? - Aggregated data (base: NEETs, 267, control group, 933 persons having marked at least one item of the respective group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Relative share of NEETs</th>
<th>Relative share in the control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work/business (better job, any job, a job abroad, own business)</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money/purchases (to make money, to buy essential stuff)</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/children</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiday</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving license</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (incl. not known/no answer)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Total *</td>
<td><strong>295%</strong></td>
<td><strong>394%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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* The sum total of answers exceeds 100% as the question allows selecting more than one answer.

**However, the key difference between the two groups is in terms of education** - while for young people outside the NEET group the continuation/completion of education is one of their main priorities, for NEETs it is actually the lowest for the coming years despite the fact that the low educational level is the main obstacle to their exiting the group.

This observation is particularly important in terms of measures to tackle the NEET phenomenon as it shows that urgent action is needed to motivate adolescents and young people belonging to this group to continue their education and thus to improve their chances for professional and personal development.

Further processing of aggregated data shows that 15% of NEETs neither have any intention of starting work (whether as employed or self-employed) nor are they planning to continue their education. For the most part these are young people from smaller towns and villages, mostly Roma with women slightly outnumbering the men, mostly with primary or lower education, without vocational qualification, who are not looking for a job and are most likely to retain their NEET status for a long time. A possible explanation for the existence of this sub-group among NEETs according to the institutional representatives is that some of the young people prefer to benefit from social assistance rather than to work.
The diverging views on the key elements for development between the control group and NEETs can be clearly seen from the question about how they intend to achieve their future plans – 26% of the young people in the control group “bet on” good education, and 35% - on work, persistence and perseverance. The relative shares of NEETs are respectively 7% and 20%. Very often NEETs do not know how to achieve their goals (32% against 14% in the control group). The reasons may be sought, on the one hand, in the school, which does not prepare them to deal with important future issues, and, on the other, in their families, which often focus on survival and household issues and underestimate their children’s need of support.

Finally, it is important to mention that personal motivation is also dependent on the character of the young person, in addition to the objective circumstances of the surrounding environment. Those who are naturally active and persevering have a much better chance for development, especially if supported by their families.

Unlike them, the more passive young people, who have fewer ambitions and less clear objectives, are threatened by a longer stay in the NEET group. They often expect external help and do not undertake any action to change their situation.

3.5. Other causes for joining the neet group

Undoubtedly, at risk of joining the NEET group are young people with health problems, which puts them at a disadvantaged position. The share of NEETs among the persons having declared a disease that prevents them from living as they would like is 39% (base: 31 persons), and among those who estimate their health status as not very good (grade 3 or lower on a scale from 1 to 5) – 65% (base: 52 persons) ². Overall, people with health problems have limited access to the labour market and therefore are at risk of permanently joining the NEET group. In some cases they experience discrimination on account of this circumstance.

*Iveta (physically disabled):* And she told me (author’s note – the lady at the labour office) “Go get a job at the graveyard.”

**MODERATOR:** What job can you get at a graveyard?

*Iveta:* Selling tickets at the entrance. I told them ”I graduated in accounting”, and they answered ”We know, but in your situation this is what we can offer. If you don’t want it, then leave”.

*(Focus group of young people, Sliven, 19-24 yrs.)*

The representatives of the key stakeholders also believe that young people with disabilities and physical and mental conditions are at higher risk of acquiring a NEET status. This is also confirmed by the study of Eurofound, according to which persons with disabilities or health problems are 40% more likely to join the NEET group compared to those in good health³.

Further at risk of joining the NEET group are young people who are under institutional protection or come from such institutions. However, they remain outside the scope of the authorities the moment they leave the institution.

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² Data are tentative, limited base of respondents
³ Eurofound, NEETS – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe, 2012
4. Main conclusions and recommendations.

Possible solutions to the problem

The surveys have shown that at national level there is currently no comprehensive policy or set of interventions and measures to tackle the NEET phenomenon. The existing measures are aimed at specific sub-groups within the main NEET group, but they do not provide a balanced coverage for the entire NEET population, and in particular for the persons who are most at risk. Often the target groups of different measures overlap, which gives many advantages to some at the expense of others who need assistance.

It would be very difficult to target the existing measures specifically at NEETs as there is no reliable system for identification of young people who are not in employment, education or training and monitoring their progress until they have left the young people group.

To tackle the problem, it is necessary to provide effective mechanisms to identify, reach, inform, activate and support NEETs. In general, the following steps are recommended:

- Establishment of a national system for early warning about young people at risk of early school leaving and/or joining the NEET group. The system should mainly cover schools, but should also operate in partnership with local organisations, representatives of local communities, and the families of children at risk of dropping out;
- Establishment of a national system for registering and monitoring the development of NEETs. Data for the system should be fed by municipalities in partnership with schools and other organisations/individuals (e.g. mediators). On the basis of the system, a NEETs "map" should be drawn up to serve for statistically monitoring the group and adequately planning the follow-up steps;
- Conducting mass-scale information campaigns like "children helping children" with the help of distinguished community members (teachers, librarians, local opinion leaders, mediators) to provide basic information for activating NEETs;
- Development of a set of specific measures for each of the NEET sub-groups in view of their specific needs and taking into account their demographic characteristics. The measures should also take into account the fact that a large part of NEETs are economically inactive and are not registered at LOs (i.e. other mediators should be appointed to support them);
- Development of a system for monitoring and evaluation of the effect, effectiveness and impact of NEET policies and measures.

Given the age structure of NEETs, it is necessary to also introduce a timing differentiation for some of the measures, generally in two stages. The first group of measures should start operating prior to the completion of primary education to reduce early school leaving, and the second – before the completion of secondary education to support the continuation of education or career guidance.

The mechanisms to identify, reach, inform, activate, and support should be implemented by the local authorities in partnership with representatives of the local communities, NGO networks or networks of other organisations in villages and smaller settlements which are recognised as centres of information and communication access (e.g. community centres, libraries etc.) The whole system should be managed and monitored at national level so as to ensure the overall success of NEET policies.

The measures to tackle the NEET problem should focus on four main areas, which are also the key causes for the formation of the NEET group:
Area 1. Family and environment

At national level family problems are covered by the National Strategy for the Child, 2008-2018, and the draft Children’s Act. They envisage actions and measures related to parents and families and aimed at improving parenting skills and changing the attitude towards children. In addition to the measures provided therein, the following additional steps are also advisable:

- Organising "schools for parents" at local level to assist parents/guardians in working with difficult young people and to support the prevention of early school leaving. This is particularly pertinent to the Roma, where the main target of the impact should be young parents, who would in turn provide better opportunities for the future development of their children.

- Searching for options to amend the legislation relating to early marriages, which should be prevention-oriented, however without putting unnecessary burdens on institutions or disadvantaging young people.

The current legislative and strategic documents related to young people do not deal with the problems of the environment outside the family. In this regard, it is necessary to ensure:

- Measures that either stimulate removal from the environment or promote development within it. Good examples in this regard are labour mobility programmes, as well as programmes in support of setting up in business. For achieving greater efficiency it is crucial to raise the awareness of young people and to provide them with adequate support in the course of the programme implementation;

- Opportunities for direct meetings between young people from Sofia and the big cities (including young NEETs) and adolescents and young people from the rural areas (especially smaller settlements). The purpose of these meetings will be to provoke ideas for development (through games and in an informal and entertaining environment) and to influence the motivation and confidence in one’s own abilities.

The common actions in the "Family and environment" area cover:

- Coordination of institutional activities for impacting NEETs, families, and the environment through various channels, including motivational training and additional support from schools and other related institutions;

- Differentiation of the approach to the different NEETs sub-groups, their families, and the communities to which they belong;

- Analysis of the specifics of each concrete case and development of a tailored and personalised approach to each family.

Area 2. Education

The education model in our country gives rise to serious systemic problems: a lack of motivation to study, low functional literacy, difficulties in the career development of young people, a lack of motivation for introducing and using modern interactive teaching methods by teachers, tolerance of the status-quo on behalf of parents. All of these, combined with the general economic situation and the labour market conditions, pose a requirement on the key stakeholders – businesses, NGOs, parents’ organisations, educational and training institutions - to demand and support a structural reform of the education system.
In the education system two key issues have been identified, which require urgent action:

- The first major problem area is related to the curriculum and the method of instruction, in particular – the poor practical orientation of education, the large volumes and the lack of focus and appropriate structure of the learning content, the passive model and the lack of an interactive approach to teaching. As a result, the learning process falls drastically short of young people’s expectations towards the methods of teaching and knowledge acquisition. It is necessary to apply modern technologies to learning and to multiply the participation of young people in the process of acquiring knowledge by stimulating creative and analytical thinking and formulating ideas and a vision for their own future. The introduction of games and competitive elements at all educational levels with the aim of eliminating barriers and inconveniences of communication, as well as improving teamwork would be highly beneficial.

- The second major problem area concerns the method of financing educational institutions. The formula "more students = more funding" dramatically lowers the quality of education and the confidence in educational institutions – illiterate young people acquire educational degrees and the proportion of functional illiterates becomes worryingly high.

The surveys have shown the lack or low level of education to be a major determining factors for the future of young people, and early school leaving – a key cause for the acquisition of a long-term NEET status.

At national level interventions, measures and services in education targeting the NEET group are split into three major groups – with regard to the reduction of early school leavers, vocational education and training, and higher education.

**Reduction of the share of early school leavers**

The Strategy for Reducing the Share of Early School Leavers (2014-2020) and its Action Plan include a set of policies and measures related to the prevention, intervention, and compensation of the impact of early school leaving. This situation is also addressed in the draft Children’s Act, which envisages a specific coordination mechanism, as well as specific measures and support services for children who are permanently absent from school. In view of the fact that 47% of NEETs belong to this group, these measures have been addressed directly to them.

In addition, the surveys have identified another effective mechanism for early warning of school leaving and prevention of NEET status acquisition – monitoring young people’s performance at school. The operation of this mechanism requires clear criteria, based on which teachers could identify young people at risk.

In the follow-up process it is necessary to ensure measures for monitoring of the social environment of young people at risk given the fact that any potential NEET (e.g. a person at risk of school leaving) has the capacity through their behaviour to affect their peers/classmates to "foster" other such young people, i.e. the phenomenon could multiply unless prevention is ensured.

**Vocational education and training**

There are serious discrepancies between the education offered by vocational schools and the demand in the labour market. Vocational education and training is not flexible enough and adapts to the dynamics of the labour market with difficulty. Vocational schools lag behind
in offering new professions, while some produce graduates whose career development is problematic. This imbalance is one of the reasons for young people having graduated from secondary schools or colleges with a particular profession to remain "overboard" and join the NEET group.

The policies and measures related to vocational education and training are covered in the Strategy for Development of Vocational Education and Training in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2015-2020 and the Vocational Education and Training Act. The envisaged changes in the VET Act, which are associated with the introduction of dual education, a system for validation of the acquired knowledge and skills, and a system for accumulation and transfer of credits in vocational education and training, are accepted as part of the measures aimed at NEETs as they will enable the acquisition of practical skills and the recognition of subsequently acquired skills and qualifications by persons who have so far been excluded from the system.

In view of the conclusion that NEETs are a group with a specific profile and needs, it is necessary when these measures are implemented to envisage more flexible arrangements, tailored to the individual needs of NEETs, and concrete "pathways" for learning and validation of results achieved through informal and non-formal learning.

- **Higher education**

Urgent changes are needed to ensure the linking of education and business at legislative level. Such changes would contribute to increasing the interest of young people in higher education by offering specialties that are compliant with opportunities for career development. The initiatives in support of practical internships and career guidance for students implemented by the MES at the present moment are not effective enough and do not facilitate the improvement of the relationship between universities and the labour market.

- **Area 3. Labour market**

NEETs are considered one of the most problematic groups in the context of youth unemployment at EU level. This problem in Bulgaria is addressed in several key documents – the National Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan, the updated Employment Strategy, the National Youth Strategy, the regional development strategies for the period 2014-2020. In view of the synchronised implementation of all planned policies and measures, a strict coordination mechanism is needed, which would position the individual institutions within the whole system of interventions for NEETs and describe clearly the role and responsibilities of each participant and the particular mode of interaction.

A comparison between the share of NEETs and the unemployment rate shows that the risk of joining the group is higher in regions with high unemployment rates, and vice versa. This pattern suggests that the measures targeting NEETs need to be territorially differentiated.

The lack of qualifications is among the most serious barriers faced by NEETs with regard to starting work. Young people without a specialty are one of the most vulnerable groups among NEETs and they have the lowest opportunities for development. They are also the ones who remain in a NEET situation the longest, which leads to a loss of motivation and working habits, and ultimately – to a departure from the workforce (the so-called discouraged unemployed).

A key cause for acquiring a NEET status is the lack of experience as a major barrier in the job search. This is a problem for all young people in the country and is directly related to the lack
of practical orientation of the education. Internships and employment measures are unpopular options to tackle the problem as the awareness about their existence is extremely low. They reach a limited number of persons, who are also some of the least vulnerable groups – ethnic Bulgarians with completed secondary or higher education. It is necessary to envisage adequate awareness raising mechanisms - both in schools and in other centres for information and communication (libraries and community centres, internet clubs, offices of local NGOs, etc.) The manner of information provision should be consistent with the educational attainment of NEETs, i.e. the wording should be succinct, clear, easily accessible and with appropriate visualisations.

In the group of NEETs there are serious information gaps in regard to the job search process (how, where, what documents are needed and how they should be prepared and presented), the formulation of personal competitive advantages; and the successful presentation in front of employers. Attempts to overcome this problem should start as early as at school. In the curricula for the 7th and 8th and the 11th and 12th grades classes for vocational guidance, mechanisms for job search, presentation in front of employers, negotiation, etc. should be included. This would also meet the expressed desire of students that the school should prepare them for the "facts of life" in a more relevant manner.

- **Area 4. Motivation**

Motivation is one of the major problems associated with the inclusion of NEETs in the labour market given the fact that it is a dynamic variable, which decreases with each subsequent failure.

Relevant measures are offered mainly by the Employment Agency, which organises, through the labour offices, motivational training for the unemployed, including young NEETs. This, however, is quite insufficient. Generally, three types of measures are needed:

- **Information measures** – aimed at increasing the awareness of available opportunities in view of the fact that often behind the lack of action lies unawareness and not unwillingness (especially with young people from the Bulgarian ethnic group);

- **Motivation measures** – should be directed to those most at risk of long-term NEET status retention, i.e. inactive persons;

- **Measures aimed at the Roma ethnic group** – here the efforts should target, on the one hand, parents – for prevention of early marriages and reduction of early school leaving for girls – and, on the other hand, young people as a whole – to change their attitudes to education and new prospects (the latter mostly through good examples in the Roma community itself).

It is also advisable, in line with the updated Employment Strategy, to implement consultations with social pedagogues and social workers; support and counselling for young people concerning their education and improving their employment prospects in the transition from school to work and preparing personal development plans; daily participation in forms of training and practicing crafts; mastering different competences, etc.

It is also necessary to envisage measures to increase the motivation for continuing education, specifically for the NEET group, as in comparison with other young people the variations under this indicator are very significant.

Mechanisms should be sought to support those who have retained their NEET status for over
one year. The support can be psychological – working on how they view themselves and their own advantages, but also in the form of specialised internship programmes – for acquiring work habits and confidence in communicating in a work environment, or training with a practical orientation.

**Measures for young people with disabilities and SENs**

People with health problems, disabilities, and special educational needs are a specific target group since the barriers relevant to them are quite different. It is necessary to envisage specific measures taking into consideration their physical condition, including construction of accessible physical environment and better training of resource teachers. At national level, possibilities must be sought to influence the attitudes of employers and the community in general to people with disabilities and their acceptance as equal, following the example of other EU countries.

**Interaction between young people and institutions**

On the whole, the relationship between young people and institutions in Bulgaria is not particularly favorable as a basis for building effective communication. As far as young people are concerned, there is a lack of confidence in institutions; as for institutions – a lack of interest and comprehension of the needs of young people. There are gaps in the communication in both directions, and consequently – a low awareness among young people about the relevant policies, programmes and measures. As a result, the effectiveness of tools for institutional support suffers significantly.

Efforts are needed in two directions: first, aimed at young people – to improve their awareness by providing mediators with direct access to the relevant target groups (e.g. community centres, libraries, NGOs, internet clubs, establishments, etc.); and second, aimed at officials in the relevant authorities – to improve their communication skills and to ensure better service provision for young people, especially those with special needs.

5. Conclusion

In 2014 young people in Bulgaria belonging to the NEET group (i.e. not in employment, education or training) represented 22% of the entire young population between 15 and 24 years. This value positions Bulgaria at the unenviable first place among the European Union member states, where young people not in employment, education or training are 12.9%4.

The NEET group is heterogeneous and encompasses various sub-groups with different socio-demographic profiles, levels of labour and social activity, and different degrees of motivation, attitudes and abilities to change their status.

The probability of joining the NEET group is affected by disruptions in four main areas: family and social environment and lifestyle; education; participation in the labour market; motivation.

The institutions related to NEETs recognise the scale and social dimension of the problem, including the risk of marginalisation. NEETs are therefore targeted by various policies aimed at their social inclusion and integration. At institutional level, a variety of programmes and

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4 Eurofound, NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe, 2012, according to Eurostat data for 2012
measures targeting NEETs have been developed. Most numerous and varied are the measures for activation and inclusion of young people in the labour market.

Measures in the field of education have been underestimated. They are aimed primarily at reducing the share of early school leavers – one of the highest-risk groups in terms of acquisition of a NEET status. A reform is needed to change the existing model of school education, increase the motivation and qualification of teachers, and raise the interest and involvement of students in the learning process, as well as their motivation to study and work. Measures in the area of education are extremely important because they would play a preventive role in terms of potential further acquisition of a NEET status.

Despite the diverse measures, however, there is no unified and coordinated policy on NEETs. The measures do not cover in a balanced way the whole population of young people not in employment, education or training, and are not consistent with the specific profile of each sub-group. There are no adequate measures targeting the most vulnerable persons in the NEET group. There is no clear system of indicators to assess the effectiveness of the measures and programmes towards NEETs.

The development of a NEET map at municipal, regional and national level – which will help identify the number and share of NEETs, their socio-demographic profile, and the existing measures to NEETs in education and training and the labour market – will show the dynamics and the trends in the group, and will identify both the challenges and the good practices to deal with the problem.

The institutions and organisations working with NEETs at both national and regional level act independently, without a clear focus or a coordination mechanism describing the role, responsibilities and obligations of each participant in the actions aimed at NEETs. This limits the impact of the implemented measures, while increasing their costs. No institution has been identified as a leader in the implementation of a unified and coordinated NEET policy.

The problem with the group of young people not in employment, education or training should be urgently included in the political agenda, as the annual economic losses resulting from the withdrawal of NEETs from the labour market amount to BGN1.9 billion (based on an estimated loss for Bulgaria totaling 2.36% of the GDP\textsuperscript{5} and BGN80.2 billion worth of GDP for 2013).

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., p. 75