Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT - CZECH REPUBLIC

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Project summary:

The project 'Lost Millennials' focuses on a regularly neglected group of the generation of Millennials: young people aged 25-29 neither in employment or education and training (25+ NEETs). This generation started their working life shortly after the economic crisis of 2008, perceiving uncertainty and lack of security for work and well-being, they are more likely to be inactive or in precarious jobs. The main objective of the project is to contribute to the successful integration of 25+ NEETs to the labour market through increasing knowledge on the effects of employment initiatives on 25+ NEETs, building capacity of stakeholders to perform impact studies and thus improving the quality of labour market interventions. This objective will be achieved through the creation of the transnational research network which will share know-how and good practices, the evaluations of governmental and community-based initiatives targeting 25+ NEETs, as well as the engagement of stakeholders to increase the policy-relevance of project results.

For more information, please visit our <u>website</u>, contact us on <u>Im.leadpartner@hetfa.hu</u> and follow our social media (<u>Facebook</u>, <u>LinkedIn</u>).

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Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 was first discussed in the Czech Republic in January 2020. The government at that time did not take the threat very seriously. In January 2020, when COVID-19 was largely spreading in China, no measures were taken in the Czech Republic to prevent the spread of the disease. The opposition's proposal to introduce certain measures was not approved. The situation escalated rapidly in March 2020 when COVID-19 hit Europe with full strength.

1.1 The First Wave of COVID-19

On March 1st, 2020, the first three cases of COVID-19 were confirmed on the territory of the Czech Republic, with carriers most likely having imported the virus from northern Italian ski resorts. Very quickly, however, the so-called community infection took hold in the Czech Republic, with people who had not even been abroad infecting each other. Testing for COVID-19 also began in March. From an initial 200-400 tests per day, by the end of March, there were 5000 tests. Also in March, the state borders, primary, secondary and higher education schools, where classes were held online, businesses, shops and services were gradually closed, and a so-called state of emergency was declared (a measure that allows the government to approve measures restricting the freedom of movement of residents quickly). The obligation to cover the respiratory tract was introduced.

During April, the disease peaked, and as the end of April approached, the situation seemed to be improving. The government has started to reduce the severity of the existing restrictive measures. During May 2020, these loosening of measures continued, mass gatherings of up to 100 people were allowed, and gradually, many establishments, tourist attractions, etc., were opened. In June and July 2020, the number of infected people increased again. Still, experts attributed this mainly to a much higher testing rate than in the spring months, so the restrictive measures were not tightened during the summer. The government developed the COVID traffic light¹ system in the summer of 2020. On the regional map of the country at the LAU I level, traffic lights (green, orange, red) indicated the coronavirus situation in respective regions.

1.2 Second Wave of COVID-19

From September 2020, the obligation to wear a face mask indoors was reintroduced. On 21 September 2020, Health Minister Adam Vojtěch resigned and was replaced by Roman Prymula, who only lasted about a month in office. A new health minister, Jan Blatný came into the office. October became the first month of the crisis. The government was unprepared for the second wave of COVID-19, and the

¹ The rate of new infections, or incidence, per 100,000 inhabitants in the previous 14 days and the rate of positive COVID-19 tests decide which color is attributed to a given region.

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disease spread, bringing the whole country to a standstill. Many restrictive measures were taken, all factories, and public and private institutions were closed. Educational processes were moved online, as was the working environment in both the public and private sectors.

As the November 2020 crisis continued, the government was introducing a new tool to map the COVID-19 situation in the country, called the Antieppidemic System (PES)². Based on the results of this system, measures were adapted for each region of the country.

At the beginning of December 2020, the Czech Republic took a slight breather, only to plunge back into crisis in the second half of the month.

1.3 Third Wave of COVID-19

By January 2021, the third wave of the pandemic was underway, with the Czech Republic experiencing the highest increase in cases of any country in the world. At the same time, a booking system for vaccinations is launched in January, which takes off in the winter and spring of 2021, initially hampered by a shortage of vaccines. In January, very restrictive measures were introduced, such as the obligation to wear face masks, a night-time curfew between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., the presence of only two people at mass events, accommodation in hotels only for professional or business purposes, and many others.

In February 2021, the disease reached its peak in the Czech Republic, and the WHO explained such a substantial spread in the Czech Republic mainly due to a reckless disregard for anti-epidemic measures. Criticism from other parties, both in the Czech Republic and abroad (journals), is directed at the approach of the entire government and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who as many say is not handling the situation well (MORTKOWITZ, 2021) (KOTTASOVÁ, 2021). At the end of February, a strict lockdown was declared in the country, with restrictions on movement within residential areas and the obligation to wear a respirator of at least FFP2 class.

March 2021 was the month of the harshest measures. The 'hard lockdown' is in force, almost all premises are closed and companies with more than ten employees are obliged to test their employees. In April 2021, Health Minister Jan Blatný was replaced by Petr Arenberger. In the middle of the month, the measures begin to be reduced. Pupils in ISCED 1 and the last year of ISCED 0 returned to school, but testing twice a week was obligatory. Some institutions opened, and the strict lockdown that prohibited movement between districts ended.

In May 2021, the reduction of the severity of the existing restrictive measures continued. ISCED 2 pupils were gradually returning to school and additional establishments were opening. Access to and use of

² The PES is a tool for assessing or mapping the current situation surrounding the coronavirus pandemic and the spread of Covid-19. Based on a risk index (risk score), it is divided into five levels, symbolising the threat of pandemics.

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most of these facilities were subject to a negative COVID-19 test. Testing and vaccination were already fairly common in the country. In May 2021, the Minister of Health was replaced again by the original Minister Adam Vojtěch.

From June 2021 to September 2021, there was a rather relaxed atmosphere, all facilities were opened and mass events could occur almost without restrictions. The population was gradually vaccinated and was not obligated to wear face masks, but this returned at the end of October 2021. In November, the number of people infected rose to a record high in the low tens of thousands per day, and some measures were reintroduced. This included vaccination. Residents over the age of 60 and selected professions were required to be vaccinated.

December 2021 was a month of restrictions, but the new government, previously in opposition, came in and started to turn the page from January 2022. It abolished compulsory vaccination, reduced conditions and began to implement the 'let go' model, despite the high increase in the number of infected people, following the example of other countries in the world where a restrictive policy has proved to have little effect in combating the pandemic. By May 2022, almost no restrictive measures had been implemented despite significant virus peaks in the population.

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

Individuals 25+ NEETs represent one of the labour market's most vulnerable groups in the Czech Republic, as evidenced by various statistics and EU policies. Their susceptibility to economic fluctuations is underscored by an increased sensitivity to socio-economic changes during the pandemic. The overall prevalence of NEETs in the population, as reported by Eurostat, reveals a modest but discernible uptick in the 25-29 age group under examination, observed in 2020, 2021 and 2022, as compared to preceding years, across nearly all selected countries (except Romania) (see Figure 1). However, other age groups of NEETs, defined also experienced a higher proportion of the population during the pandemic (see Figure 4). In comparison to the other selected European countries, the Czech Republic exhibits greater volatility, evidenced by a 1.7 percentage point increase in the population's NEET share between 2019 and 2020. The EU average for this particular indicator increased in 2020 in comparison to the previous year before reverting to its original level in 2021. However, the year 2022 already displays a significant improvement in the situation compared to the pre-pandemic times. These improvements are not present in the Czech Republic, as the percentage of the population of 25+ NEETs in the population remains higher during and after the pandemic period (as illustrated in Figure 1).



↓† 🕱 TIME	2015 \$	2016 💲	2017 \$	2018 \$	2019 💲	2020 \$	2021 \$	2022 \$
GEO \$								
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	20.4	19.5	18.4	17.7	17.2	18.9	17.4 (b)	15.7
Bulgaria	26.5	28.3	24.0	22.6	21.1	24.1	23.9 (b)	19.9
Czechia	18.5	17.2	15.3	15.2	15.8	17.5	17.9 (b)	17.4 (b)
Greece	36.2	33.5	32.2	29.5	27.3	28.9	28.7 (b)	24.0
Spain	26.0	24.2	22.1	20.6	20.0	23.7	20.2 (bd)	17.1
Hungary	21.4 (b)	19.5	17.2	16.5	16.7	19.6	13.4 (b)	12.2
Malta	13.8	10.3	9.0 (b)	7.4	7.0	9.7	9.2 (b)	7.3
Austria	10.7	11.0	11.4	10.9	10.1	11.9	10.8 (b)	10.6
Poland	20.5	18.9	18.0	17.2 (b)	17.7	19.4	16.9 (b)	15.5
Romania	25.3	24.7	22.2	21.5	20.8	20.2	24.8 (b)	24.6
Slovakia	22.8	21.7	22.1	21.3	20.7	22.0	19.3 (b)	16.8 (b)
Finland	15.7	14.9	13.6	12.7	11.8	11.9	11.9 (b)	12.6
Iceland	6.6	5.5	4.4	6.2	7.3	8.5 (b)	10.7 (b)	7.3
Norway	10.8	10.2	9.8	9.3	9.2	9.7	9.4 (b)	7.5

Figure 1. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, in total, 25-29 years old (NEET rates, % of population in age group) custom dataset based on data from (EUROSTAT, 2023)

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Disclaimer

Source: Eurostat, 2023

The data available illustrates a significant gender imbalance among NEETs in the population. In the 25+ NEETs group, there is a difference of 25 percentage points between the proportion of male and female NEETs, with females being the more negatively affected. This is primarily due to the institution of motherhood and the specificity of prolonged leave in the Czech Republic. However, female NEETs are apparently more susceptible to labour market instability resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Men encountered an annual percentage rise of just 0.3 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 (refer to Figure 3), whereas women observed an increase of over 3 percentage points (refer to Figure 2). This emphasises the disadvantageous labour market composition in the country for women.



Figure 2. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, female, 25-29 years old (NEET rates, % of female population in given age group) custom dataset based on data from (EUROSTAT, 2023)

↓† St TIME	2015 \$	2016 \$	2017 \$	2018 \$	2019 💲	2020 \$	2021 \$	2022 🗘
GEO \$								
European Union - 27 countries (from 2020)	24.8	24.3	23.4	22.6	22.0	23.4	21.2 (b)	19.3
Bulgaria	31.6	35.0	31.7	29.1	28.6	31.9	30.5 (b)	24.7
Czechia	29.1	29.0	26.2	26.3	27.2	30.6	31.9 (b)	30.7 (b)
Greece	42.3	42.0	41.3	36.8	32.2	32.2	33.0 (b)	27.7
Spain	27.8	26.7	24.8	23.3	22.1	25.4	20.8 (bd)	18.9
Hungary	30.8 (b)	28.6	27.0	26.2	25.6	28.8	17.6 (b)	16.5
Malta	20.1	14.0	11.3 (b)	10.4	10.3	13.6	13.7 (b)	9.0
Austria	12.4	12.8	14.1	14.3	13.7	13.9	13.2 (b)	12.3
Poland	26.4	26.4	26.6	26.0 (b)	27.1	29.2	24.5 (b)	21.8
Romania	33.6	33.1	29.7	30.6	30.0	30.2	36.1 (b)	34.6
Slovakia	32.8	32.3	33.6	31.7	31.2	33.0	27.0 (b)	21.8 (b)
Finland	19.8	17.9	16.7	16.2	14.9	14.7	12.0 (b)	12.2
Iceland	8.1	7.3	6.4	7.0	7.0	9.8 (b)	12.1 (b)	8.8
Norway	12.3	11.2	11.9	10.8	10.8	10.8	10.2 (b)	7.8

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Available flags: (b) break in time series (bu) break in time series, low reliability

(bd) break in time series, definition differs (see metadata)(u) low reliability

Disclaimer

Source: Eurostat, 2023



Figure 3. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training, male, 25-29 years old (NEET rates, % of male population in given age group) custom dataset based on data from (EUROSTAT, 2023)

1 🛛	TIME	2015 🕏	2016 \$	2017 \$	2018 💲	2019 💲	2020 \$	2021 💲	2022 🗘
GEO 🕏									
European Union - 27 countri	es (from 2020)	16.1	14.8	13.6	13.0	12.6	14.5	13.7 (b)	12.2
Bulgaria		21.6	21.9	16.6	16.5	13.9	16.7	17.6 (b)	15.2
Czechia		8.3	5.8	4.9	4.6	5.0	5.3	4.9 (b)	5.0 (b
Greece		30.6	26.1	23.6	22.6	22.8	26.0	25.3 (b)	20.9
Spain		24.2	21.8	19.4	17.9	18.0	22.1	19.6 (bd)	15.3
Hungary		12.4 (b)	10.9	7.9	7.3	8.3	10.9	9.5 (b)	8.1
Malta		8.0	6.9	6.9 (b)	4.7	4.2 (u)	6.3	5.4 (b)	5.9
Austria		9.0	9.2	8.9	7.6	6.6	9.9	8.5 (b)	9.0
Poland		15.0	11.8	9.8	8.8 (b)	8.7	10.0	9.6 (b)	9.5
Romania		17.7	16.9	15.2	13.1	12.3	11.0	14.2 (b)	14.9
Slovakia		13.1	11.5	11.0	11.2	10.7	11.5	11.9 (b)	11.9 (b
Finland		11.8	12.0	10.8	9.5	8.8	9.5	11.8 (b)	13.0
Iceland		5.2	: (u)	: (u)	5.6	7.5	7.4 (b)	9.5 (b)	5.9
Norway		9.3	9.3	7.7	7.8	7.7	8.6	8.6 (b)	7.2

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(bu) break in time series, low reliability	(u) low reliability

Disclaimer

Source: Eurostat, 2023

Figure 4. Young people neither in employment nor in education and training in the Czech Republic, in total, different age groups (NEET rates, % of population in age group) custom dataset based on data from (EUROSTAT, 2023)

↓t 🙁 T	IME	2013 年	2014 🕏	2015 💲	2016 💲	2017 💲	2018 年	2019 🕏	2020 \$	2021 \$	2022 \$
AGE 🕏											
From 15 to 19 yea	irs	3.1 (b)	3.1	3.0	2.5	2.5	2.2	2.2	2.7	3.8 (b)	6.0 (b)
From 20 to 24 yea	ITS	13.7 (b)	11.8	10.8	10.6	9.5	8.7	9.0	10.5	9.3 (b)	10.2 (b)
From 25 to 29 yea	ITS	18.8 (b)	18.4	18.5	17.2	15.3	15.2	15.8	17.5	17.9 (b)	17.4 (b)
From 30 to 34 yea	rs	22.0 (b)	21.9	22.3	19.6	18.2	19.2	20.8	21.7	21.2 (b)	19.7 (b)

Special value: (:) not available

 Available flags:
 (bd) break in time series, definition differs (see metadata)

 (bu) break in time series, low reliability
 (u) low reliability

Disclaimer

Source: Eurostat, 2023

Due to a lack of data, it is not possible to determine the specific progression and heterogeneity dynamics of 25+ NEETs in the Czech Republic during the pandemic. The pandemic resulted in an overall rise in the long-term unemployment rate from 2020 to 2021. Nonetheless, the rate has reverted to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, although it is currently influenced by the economic and energy crises and the war in Ukraine (refer to Figure 5). The employment sector has experienced intriguing advancements in part-



time employment. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a rise in this type of employment among the population (refer to Figure 6).

Figure 5. Long Term Unemployment Rate in Czech Republic, % of population (TRADING ECONOMICS, 2023 (a)) (on basis of the Eurostat data)



Source: Trading Economics, 2023a

Figure 6. Part Time Employment in Czech Republic, thousands of employment contracts, in total (TRADING ECONOMICS, 2023 (b))



Source: Trading Economics, 2023b

It is worth noting the intriguing statistic that charts the progression of the percentage of job seekers registered with the Labour Office (data ascertained on 31 December of each year) in the economically



active labour force, providing total annual data in thousands. This vital information depicts the regional facet of the conditions faced by individuals in the Czech Republic on NUTS III region level. Based on the available data, it appears that the percentage of NEETs among the general population in 2020 decreased, which contradicts earlier predictions of an increase (see Figure 7). However, when analysing the data specifically for the age group of 25-29, a significant difference can be observed. This age category shows a greater susceptibility to job losses in the labour market, resulting in a rise in the number of jobseekers registered with the Public Employment Service (refer to Figure 8). Surprisingly, the statistics do not include the most structurally disadvantaged regions of the Czech Republic. The gender imbalances in these regions are consistent with the national makeup of the 25+ NEET group, with a significant preponderance of female NEETs.

Figure 7. Share of the number of job applicants in the records of the labour office (31st December of each year data) (custom dataset, CZSO, 2023) on the labour force (economically active, thousands of people in total, yearly data) (custom dataset, CZSO, 2023)



Source: CZSO, 2023

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Figure 8. Share of the number of job applicants in the records of the labour office (25-29 years old, in total) (custom dataset, CZSO, 2023) on the labour force (economically active, thousands of people in total, yearly data) (custom dataset, CZSO, 2023)



Source: CZSO, 2023

2.1 Labour market

The COVID-19 pandemic in the EU resulted in an overall economic decline, prompting countries to adopt measures to mitigate it. The private sector took these measures to address the economic slowdown (transport, supply delays, etc.) and stem the spread of the virus. This is also reflected in the vacancy rate change between 2019 and 2020 (see Figure 9). The hotel and restaurant industry, as well as administrative and support services, were hit the most in the EU.





Figure 9. Decrease in the job vacancy rate between 2019 and 2020 by sector, EU27 (percentage points) (Eurofound, 2021 (a))

Source: Eurofound, 2021a

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the majority of industries in the Czech Republic. The automotive industry, construction and tourism are among the hardest hit sectors. However, textile manufacturing and crop and livestock production have thrived during the first phase of the pandemic (iDNES.cz, 2020) (CZSO, 2022). Based on Eurostat data, Eurofound reports that the sectors with the largest decline in job vacancy rates between 2019 and 2020 in the Czech Republic include administration and support, professional, scientific and technical (this includes the automotive industry) and construction (see Figure 10).

However, it is still not evident how the pandemic has influenced the makeup of NEETs. At present, a thorough categorisation of the NEETs post-pandemic into seven sub-groups cannot be executed since the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) microdata were not attainable at the time of writing. It is acknowledged that the proportion of NEETs during 2020 has surged. Despite this, the available aggregate data depicts that the composition of the NEET population has undergone alterations throughout the year 2020. With the spike in the number of NEETs across the EU, it is highly probable that the fresh NEET additions in 2020 were primarily short-term jobless, given the portion of NEETs who were willing to work (Eurofound, 2021 (a)). This conclusion holds true for the Czech Republic as well. Unfortunately, as of now, it is not feasible to ascertain the particular groups of NEETs that underwent the most significant impact or the sectors where NEETs faced the most turbulence owing to inadequate data.

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Country	Sector 1		Sector 2	Sector 2		
Austria	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Administration and support	-1.1	Information and communication	-1.0
Belgium	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.8	Accommodation and food services	-1.4	Construction	-1.1
Bulgaria	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Real estate	-0.3	Administrative and support services	-0.2
Croatia	Administration and support	-1.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Transport	-0.5
Cyprus	Administration and support	-1.5	Other services	-1.4	Arts, entertainment and	-0.9
Czechia	Administration and support	-3.1	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.7	Construction	-1.3
Denmark	Information and communication	-1.3	Accommodation and food services	-0.2	Wholesale and retail	-0.2
Estonia	Information and communication	-1.3	Wholesale and retail	-1.0	Construction	-1.0
Finland	Transport	-1.1	Real estate	-0.8	Construction	-0.7
Germany	Administration and support	-2.8	Transport	-1.6	Accommodation and food services	-1.6
Hungary	Information and communication	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Construction	-1.0
Ireland	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.3	Finance and insurance	-0.8	Real estate	-0.5
Italy	Accommodation and food services	-1.7	Other services	-1.1	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.1
Latvia	Wholesale and retail	-2.0	Accommodation and food services	-1.9	Construction	-1.8
Lithuania	Accommodation and food services	-0.7	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Real estate	-0.6
Luxembourg	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Information and communication	-0.8	Education	-0.6
Malta	Other services	-3.2	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.5	Accommodation and food services	-2.1
Netherlands	Accommodation and food services	-2.7	Information and communication	-1.5	Transport	-1.2
Poland	Construction	-1.6	Other services	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-0.9
Portugal	Accommodation and food services	-1.0	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Transport	-0.6
Romania	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Finance and insurance	-0.5	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.5
Slovakia	Construction	-0.9	Transport	-0.6	Public administration	-0.5
Slovenia	Accommodation and food services	-2.0	Construction	-1.5	Administration and support	-1.0
Spain	Information and communication	-0.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.3	Public administration	-0.3
Sweden	Accommodation and food services	-1.5	Information and communication	-1.5	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.1

Figure 10. Decrease in the job vacancy rate between 2019 and 2020 in the three most affected sectors by Member State (percentage points) (Eurofound, 2021 (a))

Source: Eurofound, 2021a

Eurofound provides interesting statistics on the transition of young people from employment and education to unemployment during the pandemic by Member States. Compared to the rest of the EU, the Czech Republic is one of the more moderate countries where COVID-19 did not have such a significant impact on young people (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). The proportion of young people who became unemployed during the pandemic is again lower than in the rest of the EU, at 4 % (see Figure 13).





Figure 11. Proportion of young people transitioning from employment into unemployment during the pandemic by Member State (%) (Eurofound, 2021 (a))

Figure 12. Proportion of young people transitioning from education into unemployment during the pandemic by Member State (%) (Eurofound, 2021 (a))



Source: Eurofound, 2021a

Source: Eurofound, 2021a







The overall unemployment rate in the Czech Republic peaked at 3% during the pandemic and returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 (see Figure 14). Unemployment in the Czech Republic is one of the lowest in the EU and is not a significant problem for the Czech Republic. Rather, employers are struggling to find enough workers.

Source: Eurofound, 2021a

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Figure 14: Czech Republic: Unemployment rate from 2003 to 2022, % (O'Neill, 2023)

Source: O'Neill, 2023

The Czech National Bank provides an interesting CZSO (Czech Statistical Office) data processing where it shows the change in employment in 2020. The data is presented in thousands of people and you can see the gender gap, the difference between the impact on full-time and part-time workers, and also the differences in the impact of the crisis on different age groups, with the 25-34 age group being among the most affected, as well as the differences in the impact on people with different levels of education, with the crisis clearly having the greatest impact on people with a high school education without a maturity exam.

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Figure 15. Change in employment in 2020 in the Czech Republic (thousands of people) (GEC, 2021)

Source: GEC, 2023

Unfortunately, the available data does not provide clarity on the impact of COVID-19 in rural and urban areas, as well as on disability and health issues (mental health is discussed below). Based on Eurofound statistics, it appears that respondents in the Czech Republic acknowledge the possibility of different sources of income and contributions from multiple household members. 'When considering the monthly income, of your household, can you manage to cover all your expenses?' In the Czech republic, only 15.8% of respondents answered negatively (with great difficulty/with difficulty), which is relatively favourable result compared to the other European countries where data is available (refer to Figure 16). As such, households in the Czech Republic (in the age range of people aged 18-34) did not experience significant financial hardship compared to other European countries.





Figure 16. Financial situation and security during COVID-19 (age group 18-34 years old) (Eurofound, 2021 (b))

Source: Eurofound, 2021b

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

We do not have enough information on the topic of reskilling and upskilling, so the following part is more a reflection on the topic and general trends related to the pandemic. COVID-19 was accompanied by many restrictive measures and face-to-face participation in courses, training etc. was not possible. On the other hand, the opportunities for online learning grew rapidly and the transition to the online environment was present in many areas. The digital skills of people in the Czech Republic have improved significantly thanks to the pandemic. However, we do not have data on this.

Based on report by European Commission (2022) the pandemic has injected new momentum into digital transformation. Businesses, including small and medium-sized enterprises, started exploring broader applications of digital technologies in the Czech Republic. The education system shifted entirely to online learning for several months, imposing greater requirements on digital infrastructure. This crisis also served as a test of the resilience and reliability of digital public services. The government initiated the launch of several new portals and information technology systems for managing and coordinating vaccination efforts, communication, and data sharing. These included the mobile app "Tečka" and publicly accessible health data. While these services faced initial technical challenges, they eventually stabilized and became indispensable tools for managing the pandemic.



According to Czech Statistical Office (2022), in 2021, 83% of people aged 16 and over in the Czech Republic used the internet. The internet was not mainly used by older people, while it was rarely used by younger people. Among people under 55, 98% used the internet, among those aged 55-64 84% and among those aged 65 and over 43% were online. Smartphones have also become increasingly important in recent years, with 77% of the over-16s using them in 2021. And as with the internet itself, there are big differences in smartphone use between people of different ages. Of those under 55, 96% already own a smartphone, compared to 73% of those aged 55-64 and only 30% of those aged 65+.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

Mental health and quality of life were assessed in the Eurofound questionnaire, where people answered the question: "Overall, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?". Young people aged 18-34 scored 5.1, which was below average for the countries compared (see Figure 17). The results for older age groups were as follows: 35–49-year-olds 5.4 and 50 and over 5.3.



Figure 17. Quality of life during COVID-19 (age group 18-34 years old) (Eurofound, 2021 (b))

Source: Eurofound, 2021b

During the first wave of the pandemic, the CERGE-EI Institute prepared a study on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the Czech population, based on an extensive questionnaire survey (https://idea.cerge-ei.cz/studies/dopady-pandemie-koronaviru-na-dusevni-zdravi). The main conclusions for the first wave of the pandemic are as follows:



- During the first phase of the pandemic, 20% of respondents suffered from impaired mental health (symptoms of at least moderate depression or anxiety). This was more than three times the pre-pandemic level (6%).
- Those most affected were: (i) women (prevalence 26%) and especially women with children (prevalence 37%), (ii) young people aged 18-24 (prevalence 36%) and (iii) respondents from households with high income loss (prevalence 30%).
- The mental health of respondents has gradually improved after the initial sharp deterioration at the start of the pandemic, but the incidence of symptoms of at least moderate depression or anxiety is still almost twice as high in mid-June 2020 as it was before the pandemic.

The Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic presents its study and the following conclusions (Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic, 2020):

- The incidence of current mental illness increased from about 20% to 30%.
- The risk of suicide increased threefold.
- Depression increased has tripled.
- Anxiety disorders doubled.
- The frequency of binge drinking (drinking a large amount of alcohol on one occasion) increased.
- The institutionalised population (children in orphanages, elderly people in old people's homes, prisoners serving their sentences, people undergoing treatment, etc.) is severely affected and experiences feelings of social isolation.
- Feelings of social isolation are widespread among the population. The most vulnerable groups are: people living in collective facilities (institutions, social homes, prisons, etc.), children, socially vulnerable people, people without internet, people with disabilities (hearing, sight, movement, mental disability), minorities and foreigners and citizens (stuck) abroad.³

Two Eurofound studies also focus on mental health during the pandemic in Europe, providing information for Europe as a whole and for European regions, but not for individual Member States (Eurofound, 2021 (a)) (Ahrendt, Mascherini, Nivakoski, & Sándor, 2021).

³ Other studies mapping the mental health situation in the Czech Republic include:

[•] Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health of Working Adults in the Czech Republic: Analysis of Self-Report Psychological Data in a One Year Perspective (Kučera D., 2021)

[•] Increase in prevalence of current mental disorders in the context of COVID-19: analysis of repeated nationwide cross-sectional surveys (Winkler P, 2020)

[•] Prevalence of current mental disorders before and during the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic: An analysis of repeated nationwide cross-sectional surveys (Winkler P., 2021)

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All these studies agree that young people, including NEETs aged 25+, are among the most vulnerable to mental health problems related to the pandemic. There is an increased prevalence of anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance misuse and other characteristics typical of mental disorders.

Many parents of children in the first years of primary school also experienced a difficult situation during the pandemic (Hronová, 2020). From day to day, they became teachers, among other things, and many of them had difficulties with this role. The above-mentioned article is an exploration of the Czech society and the minds of parents. Many of them criticise the system that has made their situation much more difficult. It was particularly difficult for single parents, especially if they were self-employed. Their new role brought them a much greater emphasis on time management, stress, feelings of social exclusion, etc.

3. Support measures

3.1 Employment and financial support

In the Czech Republic, massive programmes were implemented during the pandemic to support vulnerable citizens' employment and financial situation. None of the activities were targeted only at 25+ NEETs. In response to the question 'Have you received or applied for any of the following forms of support since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic?', 8.4 per cent of people aged 18-34 in the Czech Republic answered 'received', which is the second highest result after Lithuania among the countries compared in Eurostat statistics (see Figure 18). It shows a relatively high level of support for people from the government in the Czech Republic. During the pandemic, an expansionary fiscal policy in the social, employment and other areas was typical for the Czech environment. During the pandemic, the government deficit exceeded 5% of GDP (see figure 19).





Figure 18. Support measures during COVID-19 (age group 18-34 years old) (Eurofound, 2021 (b))

Source: Eurofound, 2021b





Source: Trading Economics, 2023b

The government of the Czech Republic, through its ministries and other organisational units, has decided to support a really wide range of end-users, whether they are entrepreneurs, self-employed,



disadvantaged people or careers, unemployed due to the pandemic, etc. The target group 25+ can also be freely included in these groups + NEETs, but specific data for this group are unavailable.

Programmes during the pandemic included for example (Department of Communication, Ministry of Industry and Trade, 2021):

Table 1. Supporting programmes in the Czech Republic	

Supporting programmes in the Czech Republic	
Antivirus	Support programme of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, under which the Ministry provides monthly wage compensation for employees who stay at home because their employer has no work for them due to the pandemic.
COVID I, COVID II, COVID III	Guarantee and investment programme of the National Development Bank to support businesses whose operations have been limited due to the coronavirus.
Compensation bonus	The compensation bonus, administered by the Ministry of Finance, applies to self-employed persons, partners in small, limited liability companies and persons working under a work performance or work activity agreement who work for persons whose activities have been significantly affected by the corona virus epidemic.
COVID - Gastronomy - Closed establishments	The programme is intended for entrepreneurs who, as a direct result of the government's crisis measures, have been prohibited or significantly restricted from selling goods or providing services, thereby reducing their ability to generate turnover
COVID - Culture	The programme is intended to help businesses and professionals in the cultural sector who have suffered restrictions on their activities as a result of the negative impact of exceptional measures.
COVID - Spa and COVID - Spa 2021	Programme to support spa centres.
COVID - Rent	The programme is intended for entrepreneurs who, as a result of emergency measures, have had to temporarily close the premises they use for retail activities - the sale of goods or the provision

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	of services to customers (consumers). It is intended to cover their rental costs, which they have to pay despite the closure of the business.
Others	COVID - Tourism Support COVID - Sport
	COVID - Schools in Nature
	COVID - Accommodation and COVID -
	Accommodation II - Individual Accommodation
	and COVID - Accommodation II - Collective
	Accommodation
	COVID - Fairs
	"Care allowance" for the self-employed

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the Czech labour market. Before the pandemic, unemployment in the country was deficient and employers had problems filling advertised vacancies with many unemployed people. However, this changed during the pandemic and the number of advertised vacancies fell by up to 40% (https://hn.cz/pro-hr-manazery/c1-66768330-rekvalifikace-bude-cestou-z-koronavirove-krize). Unemployment also increased slightly, especially in sectors directly affected by the restrictions, such as tourism, gastronomy, construction, etc. These laid-off workers find it difficult to find work in their sector again and are therefore forced to retrain, further their education or move to another sector. Together with the trend towards digitalisation, globalisation, the introduction of AI, robotics and automation, the labour market is becoming a very dynamically developing sector, in which retraining and upskilling have been an integral part since the pandemic. In 2020-2022, the government of the Czech Republic supported entrepreneurs and consumers with a wide range of programmes. Many of them had been working from home or in a regular job for a long time, but the employer had no work for them. During this time, they were able to retrain, develop new skills or improve existing ones. However, the expert team did not find any support programmes at national level.

3.3 Mental health support

During the pandemic, there were significant developments in the field of mental health care. The pandemic clearly influenced the already growing trend of taking care of one's own mental health and even more pointed out the sad shortage of experts in the field of psychology, psychiatry, therapy and other related professions. The Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic reports the implementation of the following measures (Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic, 2020):

• Mobilisation of traditional registered hotlines with increased capacity.



- Establishment of an ad hoc First Psychological Support Line under the National Information Line 1212, establishment of a Collegial Support Line for healthcare workers, other ad hoc COVID crisis lines and services (ACR Military Psychological Help Line - for citizens; NUDZ line for patients and the public, Antenna - psychotherapy line of the Czech Association for Psychotherapy).
- Information on mental health on the website of the Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic, a one-stop shop for psychosocial information on the website of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (including online sources of help, educational videos of the HZS of the Czech Republic, etc.).
- Comprehensive mobile application 'Coronavirus, COVID-19 in the Czech Republic'.
- Volunteer projects: ad hoc project #delamcomuzu (online psychological and psychotherapeutic consultations on a volunteer basis, initially free of charge); a network of clinical psychologists prepared to provide crisis intervention during the coronavirus period https://www.akpcr.cz/koronavirus; Antenna psychotherapy line, etc.
- Ensuring the reimbursement and provision of remote care in psychiatric outpatient clinics, methodological recommendations from the Ministry of Health to providers of inpatient psychiatric follow-up care, including recommendations to support human rights during the epidemic.
- Establishment of a working group at the Ministry of Health of the Czech Republic to develop crisis centres.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost every citizen, employee, employer or entrepreneur in the Czech Republic. As many studies and statistics show, the group of 25+ NEETs was demonstrably a vulnerable group. The problem with mapping the situation of this group is the lack of data. The lack of data on the sectoral composition of employment of this group, the impact of the pandemic on the structure of the 25-29 age group, and many other missing components prevent a comprehensive assessment of the situation. Overall, based on the numerous data available for young people or people aged 18-34, we can state that the situation of NEETs aged 25+ slightly worsened during the pandemic in the Czech Republic, their share in the population slightly increased, while the increase was much higher for female NEETs, indicating their complicated situation on the labour market and in the educational process.

Many experts say the world will never be the same as before the pandemic. Our team of experts agrees, as they have seen many changes in the labour market. Whether it is the composition of employment, employment in sectors, the use of modern digital technologies, a greater emphasis on mental health and



work-life balance or other issues. And this general truth also applies to 25+ NEETs. It has been confirmed that the best prevention against becoming a NEET is education. It is also true that Czech society is highly gendered when it comes to 25+ NEETs, mainly due to the specificity and length of maternity leave but also due to other characteristics that put women at a disadvantage on the labour market.

Among the main challenges for 25+ NEETs during the pandemic were the rediscovery of a role in society linked to mental health issues, the rediscovery of a position in the labour market, and education with the traditional form of school or other reskilling or upskilling institutions and structures. The pandemic has also highlighted the significantly more difficult situation of female NEETs, who have a gender imbalanced position on the Czech labour market, which is confirmed by the statistics mentioned above. One of the most significant benefits of the pandemic has been the massive and rapid development of digital skills in the population.

In the Czech Republic, massive programmes were implemented during the pandemic to support the employment and financial situation of vulnerable citizens and their mental health. The Czech government provided financial support to a really wide range of companies and business units. It also helped households, carers, people who lost their jobs, etc. Support was also provided to strengthen mental health crisis lines, and studies were carried out in this area, leading to the next steps described above. Young people aged 18-34 scored 5.1 on life satisfaction in the Eurofond survey, which is below average for the countries compared.

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