

Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – SPAIN

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**IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE PROJECT ‘LOST
MILLENNIALS – TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH
NETWORK FOR THE EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES
TARGETING 25+ NEETS’**

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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 [website](#), contact us on lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu and follow our social media ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)).

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Implemented by:



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1. Introduction

In terms of harshness and duration, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis was higher for Spain than for other EU countries, as Spain suffered a higher drop in its economic activity and employment (Kapitsinis et al., 2021). One of the main characteristics of this greater impact is its spatial and sectoral heterogeneity (Prades Illanes & Tello Casas, 2020). The spatial heterogeneity of the impact of COVID-19 refers to the diverse effects that the pandemic has had in the Autonomous Communities of Spain (regions), since they differ in their productive structure. On the one hand, the Canary Islands and Balearic Islands, due to the decrease in the hospitality and tourism sectors, and the Basque Country and Madrid, due to the decrease in automotive services, are the regions that suffered a greater impact in their economic activity (Prades Illanes & Tello Casas, 2020). On the other hand, Catalonia, the Valencian Community and Andalusia were the least affected by the pandemic (Prades Illanes & Tello Casas, 2020). Despite these differences between the different regions, this report focuses on the study of the impact of COVID-19 at a national level.

Thus, at the beginning of chapter 2, this report explains the situation of 25+NEETs in Spain, whose rate grew during the pandemic, with a greater rebound than in other European countries and a higher NEET rate for those aged 25 to 29 years old than for younger population.

Focusing again on the national level, this report analyses the situation of the labour market. Chapter 2.1. shows how the abovementioned sectoral heterogeneity takes place in Spain, with greater impact in sectors such as hospitality, artistic and entertainment activities, and extractive industries. The analysis of these sectors and the general employment rates shows that changes in employment are more radical in the case of young people. This may be due to the precarious conditions that typify the employment situations of young people in Spain (temporary and part-time employment), which are also analysed in this chapter. Chapter 2.1. also analyses the gender gap, which has become more pronounced during the pandemic. In addition, the differences between rural and urban NEETs are shown in this chapter, and how the abandonment of the rural world by young people has been able to provide a certain advantage with a lower impact of the pandemic. This chapter also analyses how the hiring of young people with disabilities has rebounded after the pandemic and refers to the delay in motherhood in Spain and the situation of single-parent families.

In chapter 2.2. this report analyses the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on the educational opportunities of young people by focusing on two variables closely related to the NEET situation: early school leaving and level of training. This chapter also refers to the impact of the pandemic on the digital divide and on the access to devices and technologies. Chapter 2.3 analyses the impact of the pandemic on the mental

health of young people by focusing on emotional mental health and depression symptoms as well as on social stress and tensions in relationships.

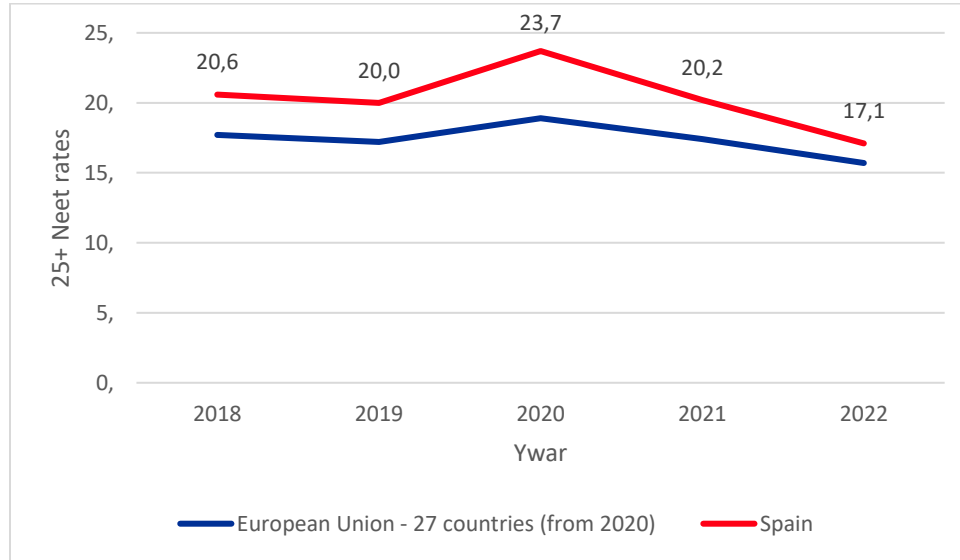
Regarding support measures, the beginning of chapter 3 explains that 25+ NEETs in Spain are included under the Youth Guarantee System and that is why the main plan targeting them as a consequence of the pandemic is the Youth Guarantee Plus Plan 2021-27. Throughout chapter 3.1., this report summarises the preventive measures adopted to avoid increasing unemployment, the measures related to the adaptation of the workplace training to the lockdown, other social protection measures as well as those related to remote work. This chapter also summarises the active labour market policies with a special note on those targeting millennials. It also refers to the 'Youth Employment' priority within component 23 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan and the main programs designed under this priority for young people. It also includes a summary of the recent reforms to address the demographic challenge.

In chapter 3.2. this report summarises the urgent measures to adapt the educational programming, the measures targeting vulnerable groups aimed to prevent early school leaving and the measures related to the vocational training and the university systems. This chapter also includes measures aimed at promoting digital skills. Chapter 3.3. summarises the main strategies and laws addressing mental health issues. The final chapter draws conclusions based on the analysis carried out throughout this report.

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures drawn by authorities to contain the sanitary emergency, led to an intense contraction in numerous economies around the world, Spain among them (Hernández de Cos, 2020) which also severely affected labour market and young people. As a consequence, the rate of 25+ NEETs in 2020 rose to 23,7% as compared to 20% in 2019. Nevertheless, in 2021 it declined to 20,2% (see in Figure 1). Figure also shows that the effect of COVID-19 on 25+NEETs was higher in Spain as compared to the EU average.

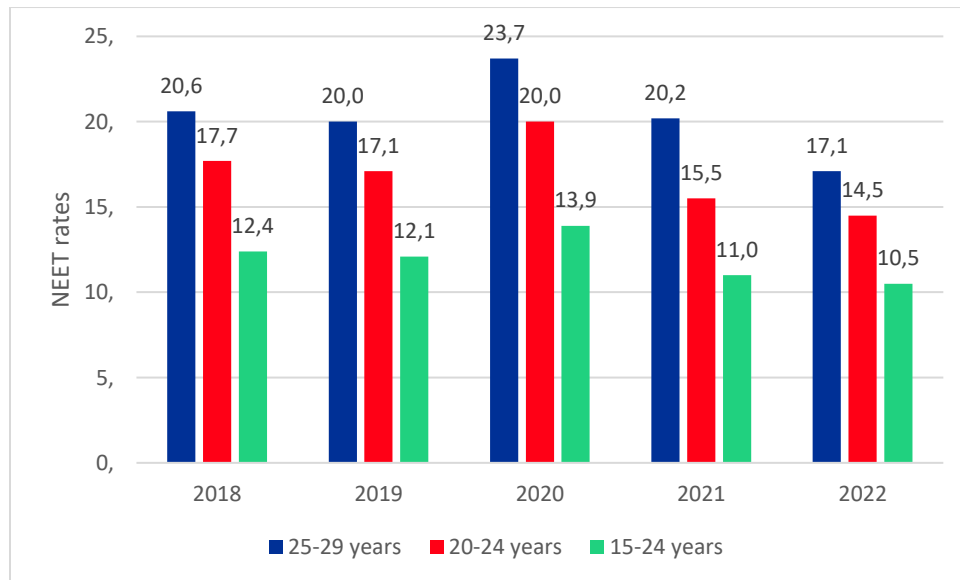
Figure 1. Evolution of 25+ NEETS rates (%)



Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

Data also shows that, compared to NEETs lower in age, the pandemic had a higher impact on 25+ NEETS (see in Figure 2).

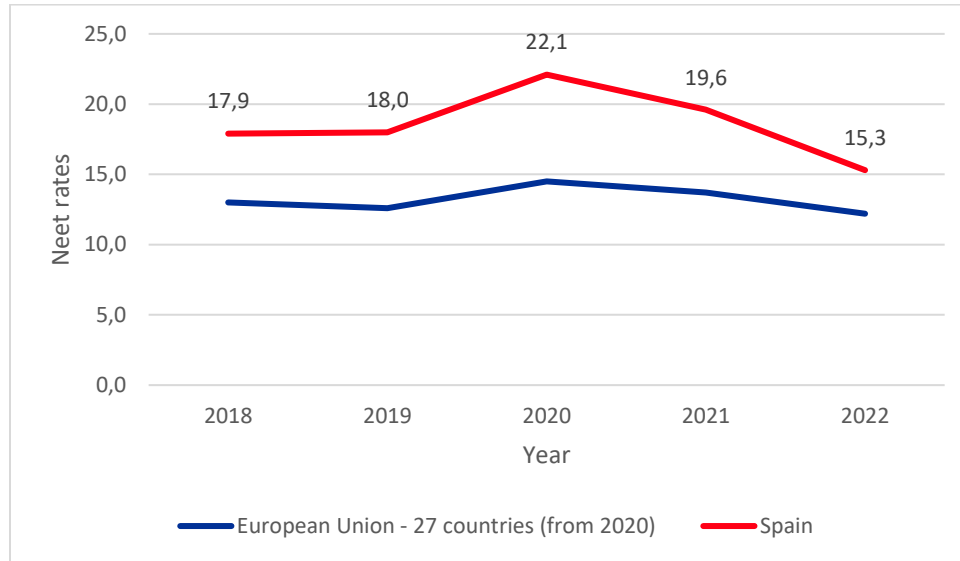
Figure 2. NEET rates according to age groups (%)



Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

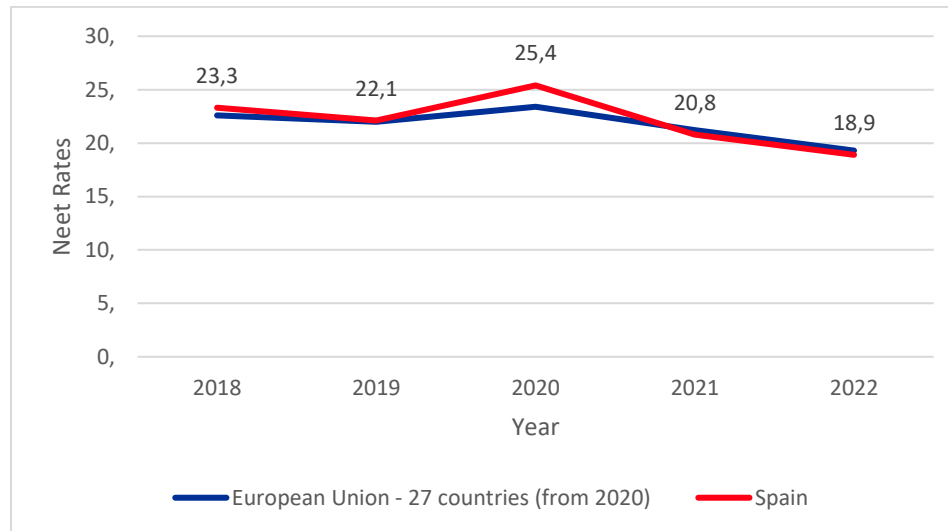
In terms of gender differences, statistics provided by Eurostat (2003a) show that the effect of COVID-19 on the increase in the rate of 25+ NEETs was slightly higher in the case of men as compared to women, and that in the former group it also took more time to return to pre-pandemic levels (see in Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Male 25+ NEET rates (%)



Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

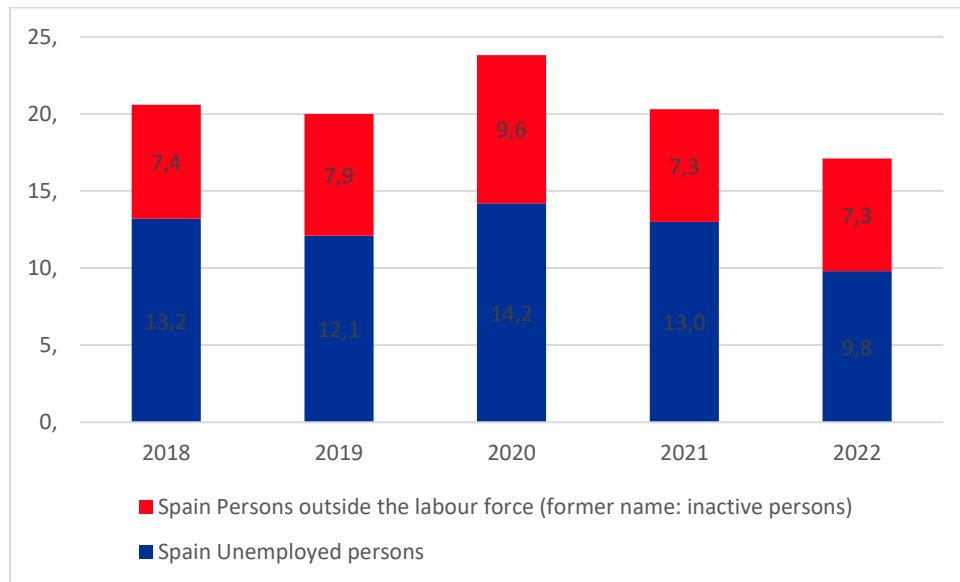
Figure 4. Female 25+ NEET rates (%)



Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

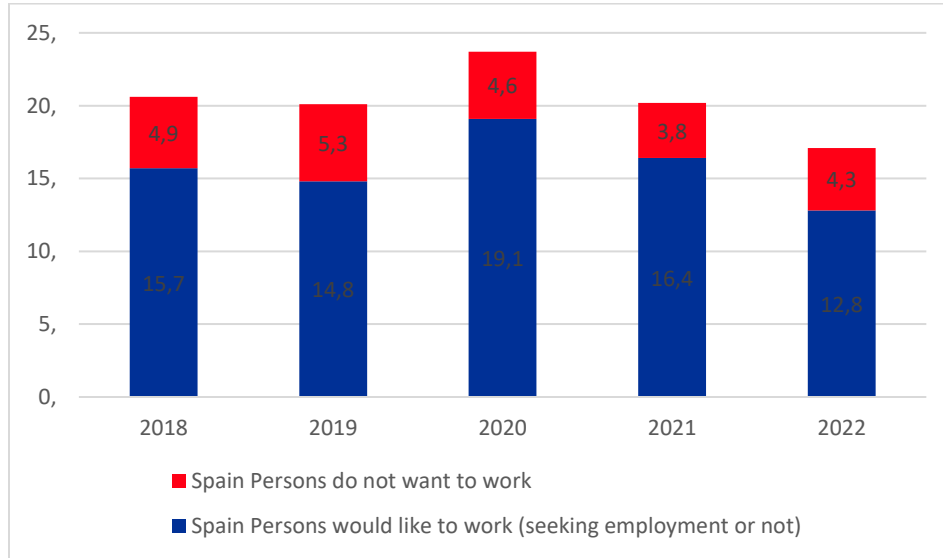
In terms of the composition of 25+ NEETs in Spain, data reported by Eurostat (2023a) show that the increase in 25+ NEETs rates in 2020 where both due to an increase in unemployment rates, and to an increase in the rate of individuals that became outside the labour force (inactive) (see in Figure 5). Paradoxically, the rates of 25+ NEETs that did not want to work where not affected and they even lowered during 2000 (see in Figure 5).

Figure 5. 25+ NEET rates according to employment status (%)



Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

Figure 6. 25+ NEET rates according to activity status (%)



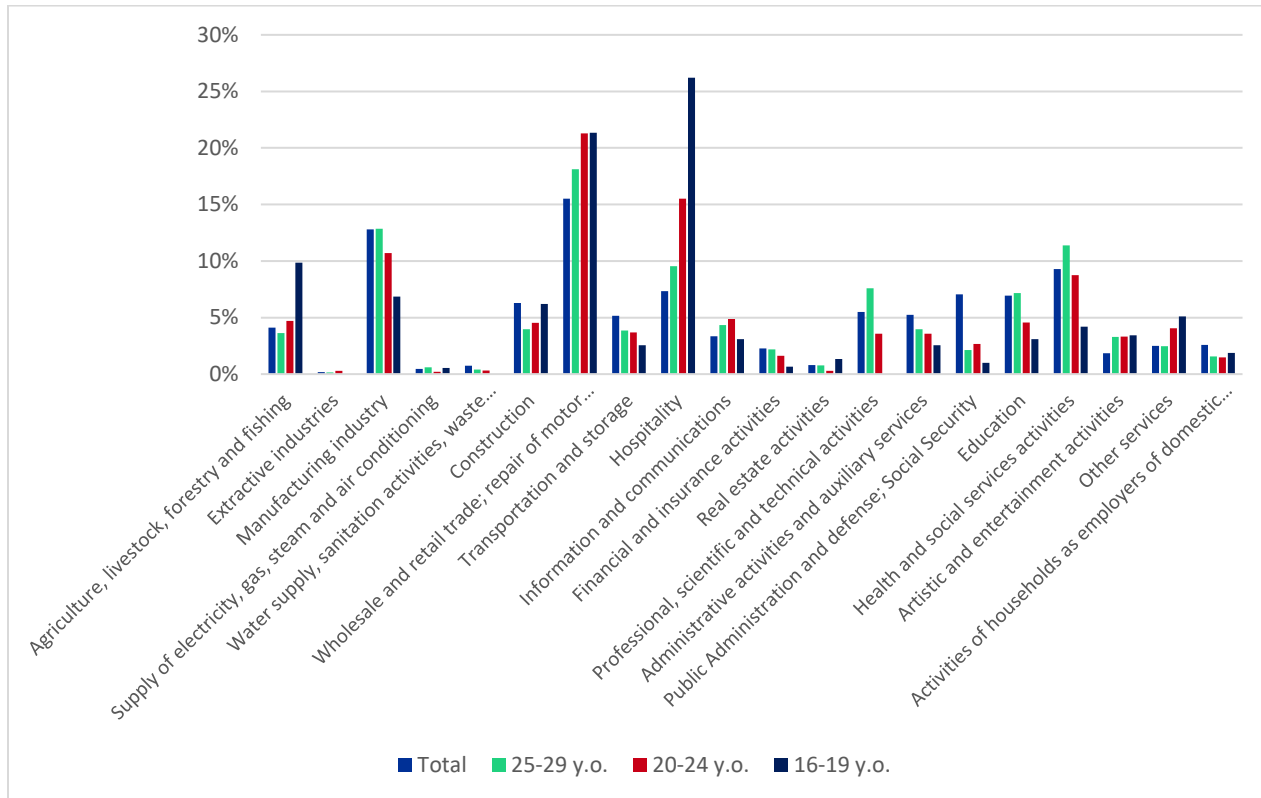
Source: Own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023a).

2.1 Labour market

The impact of the pandemic in the case of the Spanish labour market was quite heterogeneous, with economic sectors affected unequally. Sectors such as hospitality, extractive services, artistic activities, transport and storage, textile industry, and manufacturing of transport equipment were affected (their revenues fell by more than 15% in 2020). Metal transformation, other production services, wood and furniture, paper and graphic arts, machinery manufacturing and wholesale trade sectors were moderately affected (with reductions of their revenues between 8 and 15% in 2020).

Youth employment in Spain has structurally focused on sectors that are considered “risky” such as touristic services or construction, as they are characterized by their strong seasonal and temporary components and by their low productivity (INJUVE, 2023). In the second quarter of 2020, these sectors concentrated most of the employed youth population (16-29 years old): wholesale and retail trade, hospitality, or health activities/social services. The higher percentages of employed youth population on these sectors are present among those between 16-19 years old.

Figure 7. Percentage of employment rate by economic sectors and age groups (Q2 of 2020) (%)

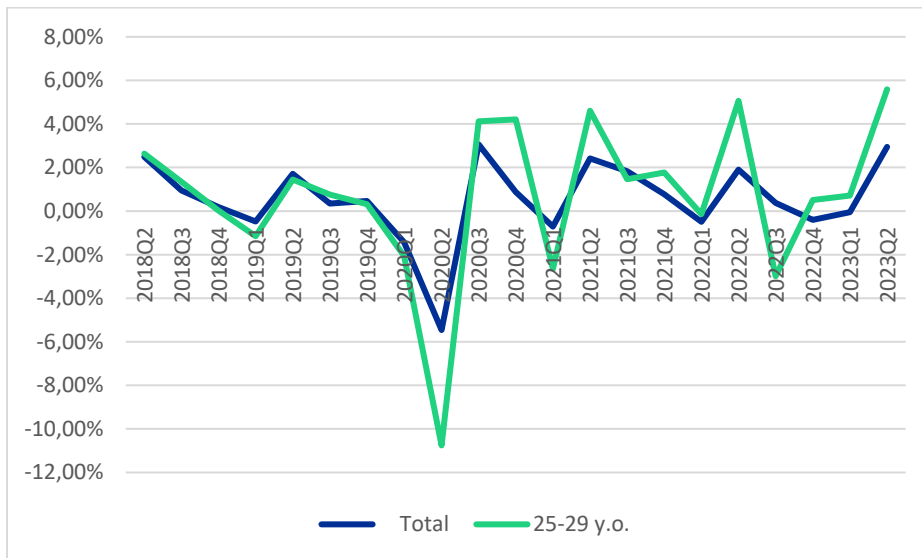


Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

Both in the 2008 crisis and in the one caused by the pandemic, these sectors laid off workers easily and at almost no cost, considering that these workers can be easily replaced when the economic recovery occurs. This management of economic uncertainty through mass layoffs was predominant in the pandemic beyond these risk sectors. In the first lockdown (March-June 2020), 7 out of 10 jobs destroyed corresponded to temporary contracts. Indeed, and due to their overrepresentation in risk sectors and temporary employment, 6 out of every 10 jobs destroyed in the hardest months of the pandemic were for young people up to 30 years old (INJUVE, 2023).

Focusing on the employment rates by age groups and their quarterly evolution, we can see that there was a gradual recovery in activity with the end of the lockdown by the third quarter of 2020, moderated in the fourth quarter as a result of new outbreaks of the COVID-19. Figure 8 also shows how the changes in employment corresponding to the first wave of COVID-19 (lockdown) and subsequent waves were more intense for people between 25 and 29 years old than for the whole population.

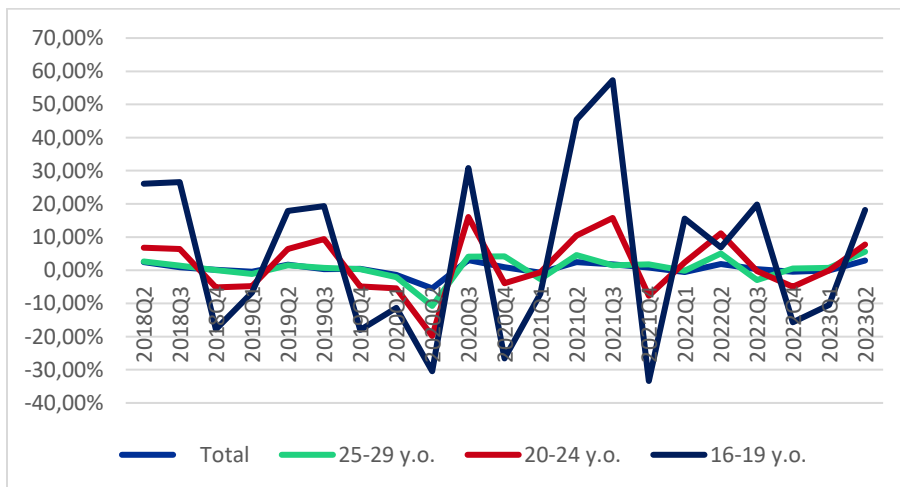
Figure 8. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

In fact, the changes in the employment rate were even more radical in the case of younger population (those from 20 to 24 years old and from 16 to 19 years old). Young people were those who were most affected by the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2021 https://www.mites.gov.es/ficheros/ministerio/sec_trabajo/analisis_mercado_trabajo/jovenes/2021/Marzo_2021.pdf). As explained, this higher variation might be due to the overrepresentation of this young population in risky sectors and temporary work.

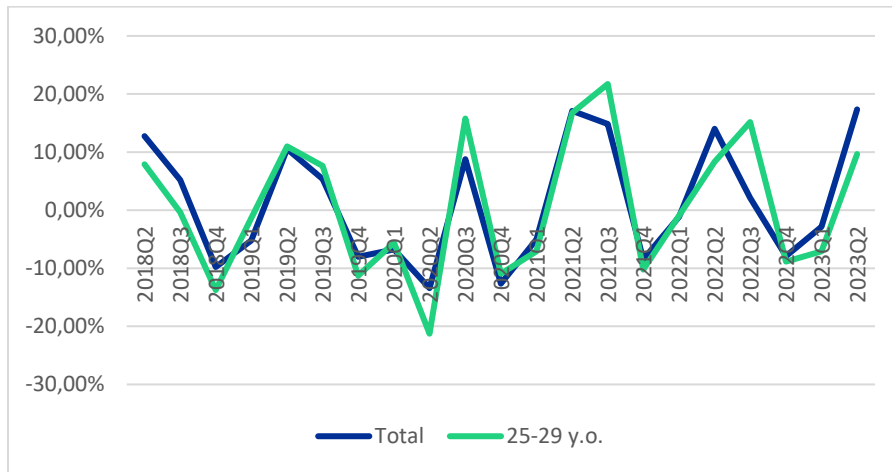
Figure 9. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate by age groups (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023)

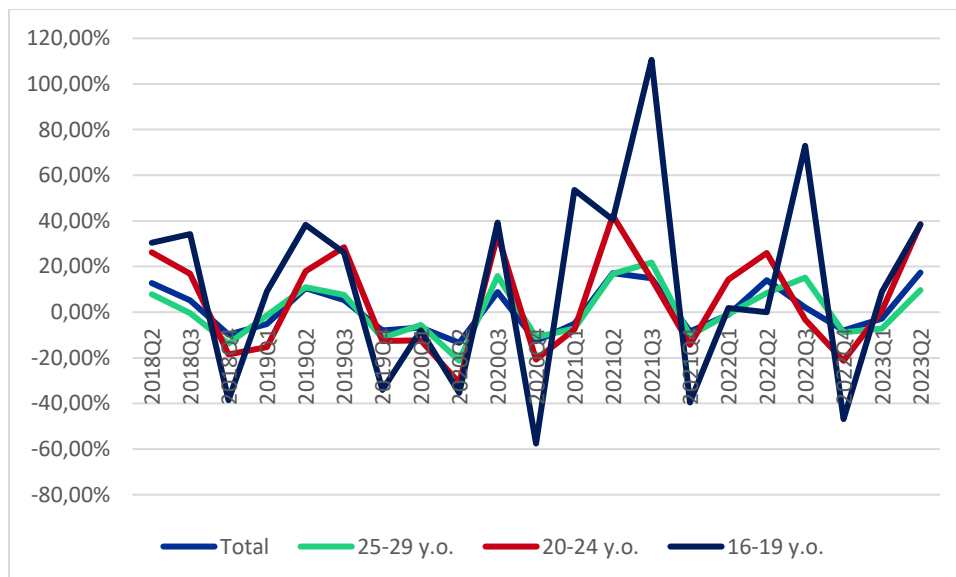
Turning to the sectors most affected by the pandemic, in the case of the **hospitality** industry, the difference between 25-29-years old people and the total population was not as high as the difference with the rest of the young population (see in Figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate in the hospitality sector (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

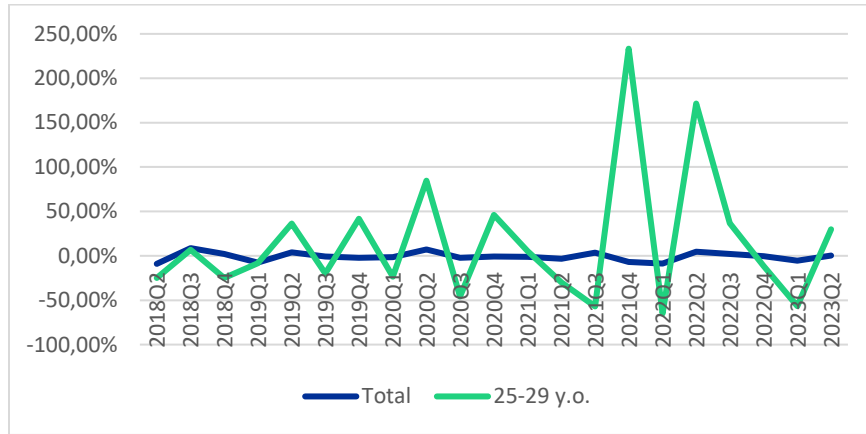
Figure 11. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate in the hospitality sector by age groups (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

Regarding the **extractive industries**, the difference was clear in the case of young people between 25 and 29 years old, with more radical changes in their employment rate than in the rate for the whole population. There is no data available for most of the quarters for the rest of young people (20 to 24 and 16 to 19 years old).

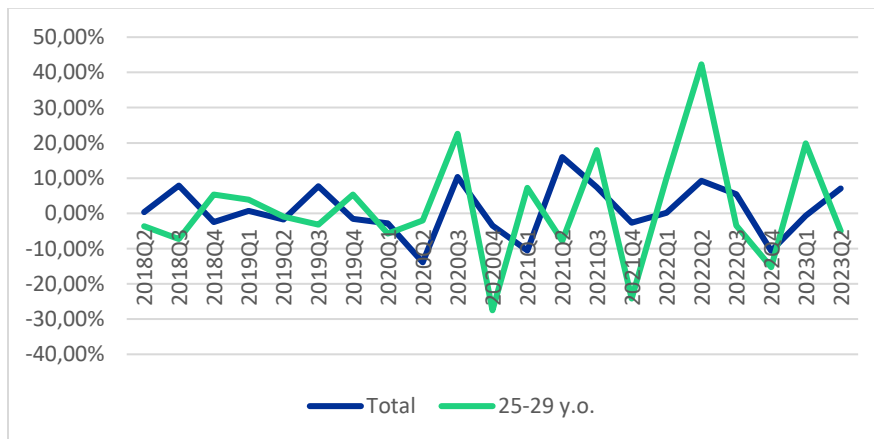
Figure 12. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate in the extractives industries sector (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

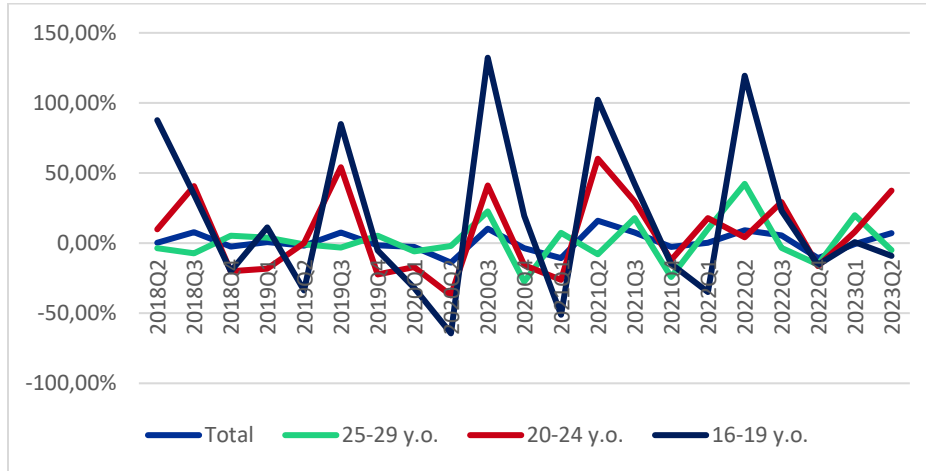
In the case of **artistic activities**, the decreases in the employment rate in general took place earlier for youth (both for those aged 25 to 29 and for those aged 20 to 24 or 16 to 19) than for the rest of the population. However, these decreases were mostly counteracted, and there is a general growing trend in cultural employment among young population as they seem less affected by the digital divide than previous generations (Fundación Iberoamericana de Industrias Culturales y Creativas, 2021).

Figure 13. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate in the artistic sector (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

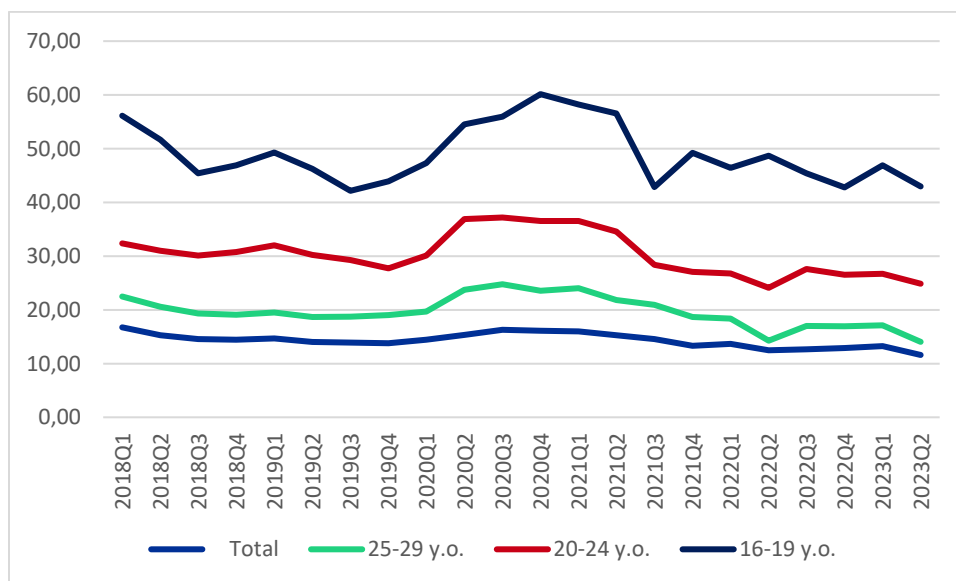
Figure 14. Quarter-on-quarter variation of employment rate in the artistic sector by age groups (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

These findings regarding the employment rate among the most affected sectors during the pandemic point to a higher instability in youth employment compared to the whole population. Consistent with these findings, youth unemployment was also more affected by the COVID-19 crisis, and the increases in the unemployment rate during the lockdown and the successive waves were higher for people between 25-29 years old and even higher for younger population.

Figure 15. Quarter-on-quarter variation of unemployment rate by age groups (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from INE (2023).

2.1.1 Precarious labour conditions

The precarious labour conditions among young people in Spain are not something new that derives solely from the pandemic (Cosano, 2021). Youth was the segment of population most affected by the crisis of 2008 and the recovery pace that started in 2014 was largely based on a greater precariousness of the working conditions of young people (INJUVE, 2023). This precariousness corresponds to two main problems that were exacerbated after the COVID-19 crisis: temporary and part-time contracts.

The temporary employment rate among young people (16-24 years old) decreased quarterly in the fourth quarter of 2020 and stood at 65.5% (Ministry of Labour and Social Economy, 2021). Although the lockdown led to short increases on the temporary employment rate, the trend has been downward since the last quarter of 2018. Among young people up to 29 years old the temporary employment rate in the fourth quarter of 2020 was noticeably lower than for the rest of young people, 52.1%, also following a downward trend (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2021). Despite this downward trend, the temporary nature of contracts is still very high and this overrepresentation of youth in temporary contracts has been a key factor for the higher impact of the pandemic in youth employment (INJUVE, 2023). Additionally, young people have part-time jobs in a significantly higher proportion (26.1%) than the average for the whole population (14,5%). Moreover, this part-time employment is in many cases not chosen by young workers: 46.2% of young people who worked part-time in Spain was in this situation involuntarily, compared to 22.4% in the EU-27, where the majority were those who worked part time voluntarily (Ministerio de Trabajo y Economía Social, 2021). Because of these high unemployment and precarious working conditions, in Spain young people are, along with children, the age group at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion (INJUVE, 2023). This risk of poverty has worsened after the pandemic and by the end of 2020, severe material poverty reached 9.3% of people aged between 19 and 29 years old, compared to 5.8% in 2019 (OXFAM, 2021).

However, if we focus the situation of the 25-29 age group, according to Foessa (2022), the rate of social exclusion did not vary in the period 2018-2021 (13,7), but the rate of severe social exclusion rose from 8,3 to 15,1 in the same period. These rates are lower than the 16-24 age group (14,2 and 16,2 in 2021), but higher than the 30-34 age group (11,8 and 13,4 in 2021).

2.1.2 Gender differences

Regarding loss of income by gender, women's incomes decreased by around three percentage points more than men's by May 2020 in comparison to 2019. Furthermore, while income recovered to a substantial extent for males between May and November 2020, the process of income recovery was slower for women. The larger drop in income and the greatest difficulties for income recovery of women compared to men was taking place among middle-class women. For the poorest and richest ones, the gender gap in income loss and income recovery was much smaller (Martínez-Bravo and Sanz, 2022). One

possible explanation for the worst situation of middle-class women may be that some females may have been driven out of the labour force during the pandemic, as they undertook a larger share of the responsibilities in childcare and home tasks during the pandemic (Farre et al., 2020; Fundación Foessa, 2022).

Data on unemployment points out that the COVID-19 crisis has widened the gender gap. Diverse studies (Alon et al., 2023; Martínez –Bravo and Sanz, 2022 and Cabasés and Úbeda, 2022) found that COVID-19 pandemic has created larger employment losses for women than for men. In fact, according to information from the Continuous Sample of Work Lives 2018 (*Muestra Continua de Vidas Laborales 2018*) by Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, among the employed population in the most affected sectors there is a higher proportion of women, young people, and less educated groups. In terms of gender, women made up half of the employed population in the sectors in which jobs could be destroyed (48%, or 51% if trade is included), a somewhat higher proportion than that observed in total employment (46%) and in the set of activities that may present a possible increase in demand (27%) (Brindusa, Lacuesta and Regil, 2020).

This negative effect of the pandemic on female employment is also reflected in the data on hiring. According to Public Employment Services, temporary hiring of young people under 30 was reduced by 35.3% in the male population and 42.5% in the female population between January and June 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. In the case of people over 30 temporary hiring decreased 30.3% and 39.9%, respectively. Women under 30 lost the most contracts during the pandemic, mainly in the service sectors (Cabasés and Úbeda, 2022).

Finally, the rates of social exclusion, and the effects of the pandemic on these rates, show a gender gap for young people in all age groups, also in the 25-29 age group. According to Fundación Foessa (2022), the rate of social exclusion for men in the 25-29 age group reduced from 12,7 to 12,4 in the period 2018-2021, whereas it rose from 14,5 to 14,9 for women in the same age group. In the case of severe social exclusion rates changed from 8,2 to 13,4 in the case of men and from 8,4 to 16,6 in the case of women in the 25-29 age group.

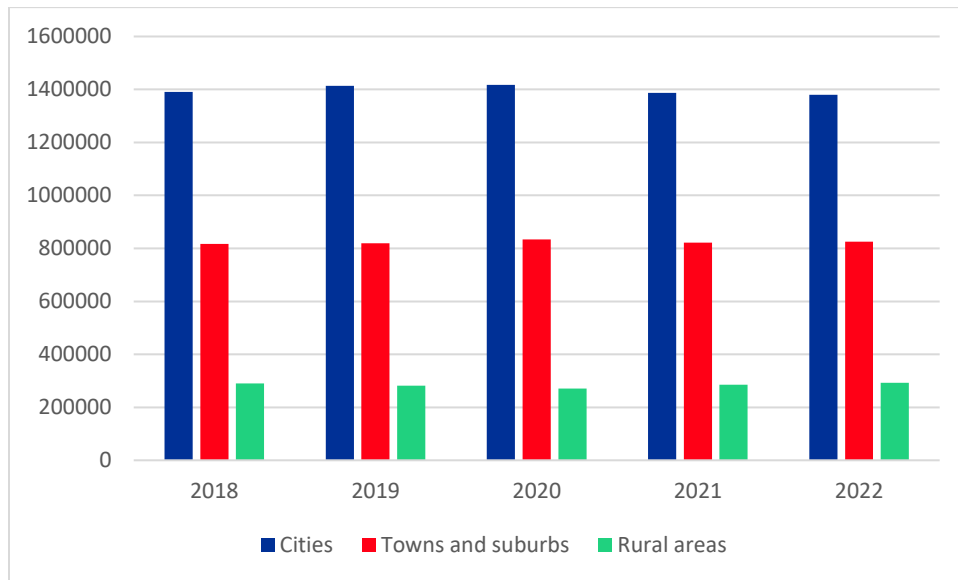
2.1.3 Rural vs. urban NEETs

One of the great challenges facing Spain is demographic change. In this vein, the population is concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural areas depopulated. This tendency towards depopulation of rural areas is especially pronounced among the youth, given that the young rural population even today emigrates to the cities, while the urban population remains in the cities and does not consider the rural environment as an option. As a result, rural areas suffer from problems such as greater poverty, lower employment rates, lack of services and high school dropout rates. Moreover, the speed of transmission

and the incidence of the pandemic in the rural area was lower (Seco González, 2020). In view of this situation, several studies consider that the COVID-19 pandemic may represent a turning point for rural areas due to the greater security shown against the effects of the pandemic or protection against the effects of climate change (Arnaiz-Schmitz et al., 2021; Bernal et al., 2021; Molina Morales et al., 2020).

Following Eurostat criteria, the population is divided into three levels according to the degree of urbanization: 1) Cities: densely populated areas; 2) Towns and suburbs: intermediate density areas; 3) Rural areas: thinly populated areas. According to Eurostat (2023b) data for Spain, figure 16 shows the evolution over the last five years of the young population between the ages of 25 and 29, depending on the degree of urbanization of the territory. As can be seen, the population in this age group is notably lower in rural areas. However, the trend of decreasing rural and increasing urban youth population of the 2018-2020 period was reversed in the 2020-2022 period. In this sense, since the pandemic, the rural population of young people aged 25-29 years has experienced an increase, compared to the decrease in the urban population (see in Figure 16). These data, if maintained over time, may represent a change for the rural area, whose aging is a particularly relevant problem.

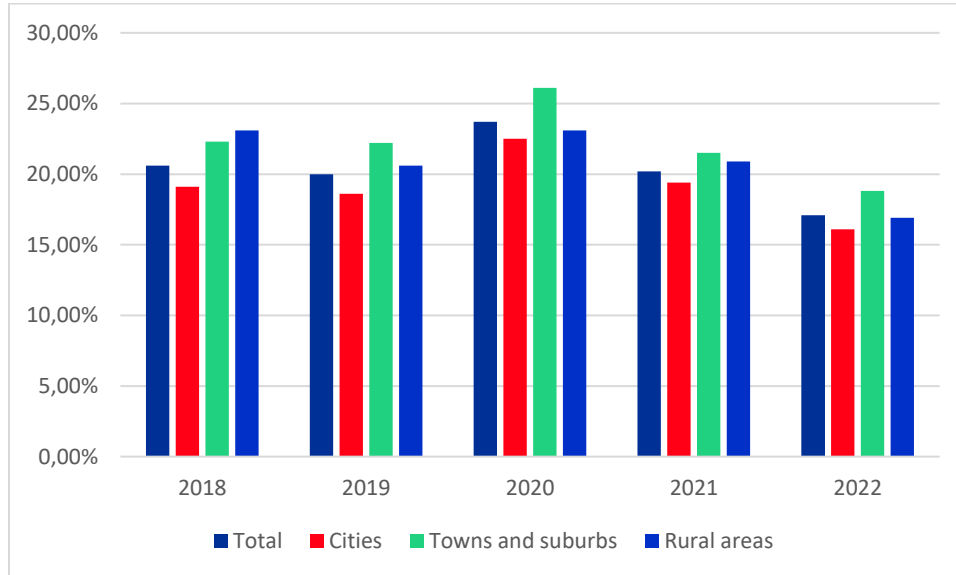
Figure 16. Population between 25 and 29 years old according to the degree of urbanization (in number of people)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

According to Eurostat (2023b), in Spain the evolution of the percentage of young people between the ages of 25 and 29 neither in employment nor in education and training (NEETs) was as follows, depending on the degree of urbanization:

Figure 17. Percentage of NEETs according to the degree of urbanization (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

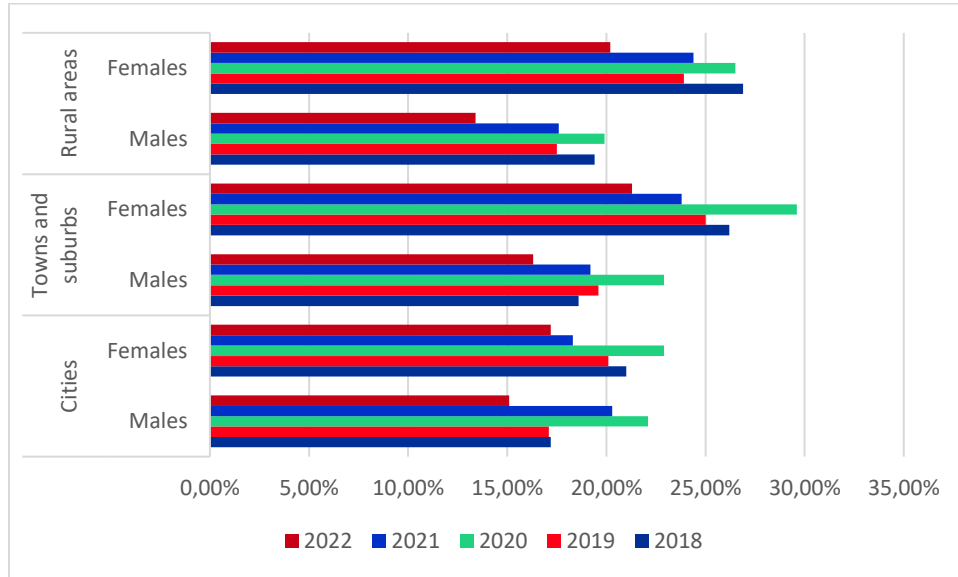
As can be seen in the figure 17, the percentage of NEETs increased in all areas in 2020. However, in 2021 and 2022, the numbers decreased again to levels below the pre-pandemic years. Comparing 2018 with 2022, it is noteworthy that the largest reduction in NEETs has occurred in rural areas.

When disaggregating the NEETs by gender (see in Figure 18), these values are higher in the female case in all urbanization categories. However, the difference between men and women is greater in rural than in urban areas. With respect to the evolution during the period, while in cities and towns the percentage of female NEETs has decreased more than that of men, in rural areas both men and women have decreased in a similar way.

As explained above, one of the problems encountered by previous studies is the poverty of rural areas compared to urban areas. The average net income for towns and suburbs (18,021 euros in 2022) and rural areas (17,900 euros) is lower than that for urban areas (21,115). However, in rural areas this worth has increased more than in urban areas during the last five years (including the pandemic), thus reducing the differences between areas.

The risk of poverty or social exclusion traditionally has been a problem more frequent in rural areas. However, while in urban areas the percentage of people at risk of poverty increased during the pandemic crisis (from 23.3 in 2019 to 26.6% in 2021), it decreased in rural areas (from 28.8% in 2019 to 26.9% in 2021). For instance, in 2022, the percentage was lower in rural areas (27.4%) than in towns and suburbs (28.8%).

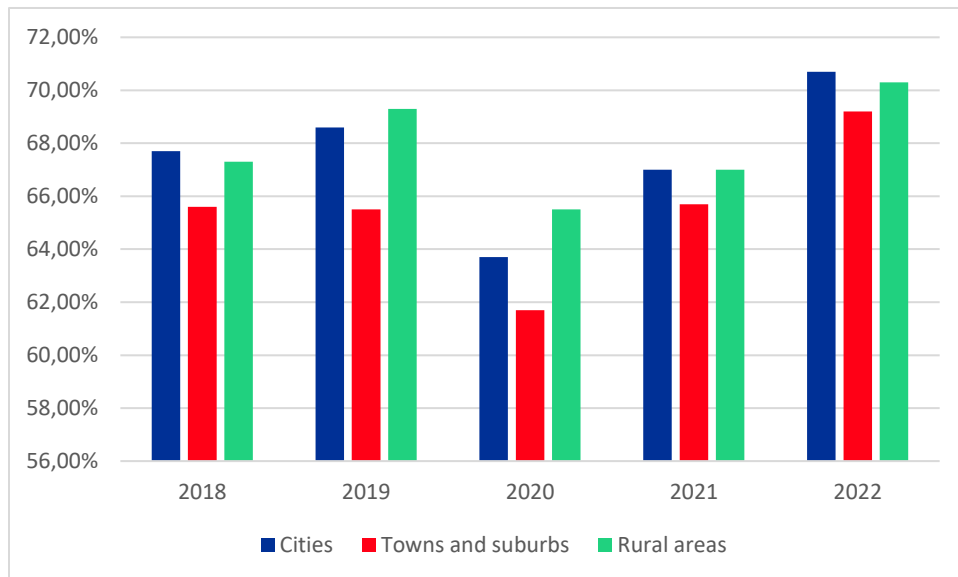
Figure 18. Percentage of NEETs depending on sex and according to the degree of urbanization (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

Regarding the employment rates of young people aged 15-29, the following figure shows similar values and evolution in urban and rural areas. Thus, these rates decreased in 2020, but have recovered and increased compared to 2018.

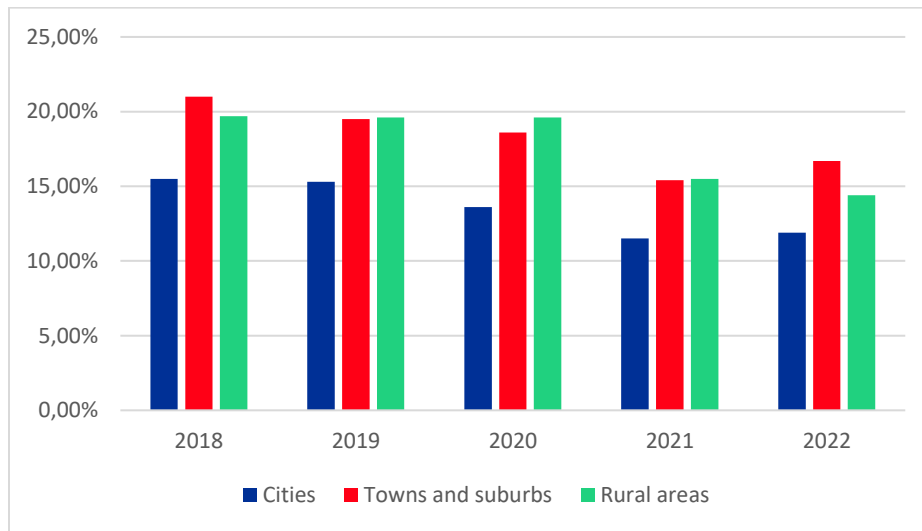
Figure 19. Employment rates of young people aged 15-29 according to the degree of urbanization (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

Focusing on the early school leaving as an important factor behind the NEET situation, the following figure shows the percentage of early leavers from education and training between 18-24 years old. Values are higher in rural areas than in cities. However, in both cases they have decreased in the last five years. In the case of rural areas, this decrease occurred from 2020 onwards.

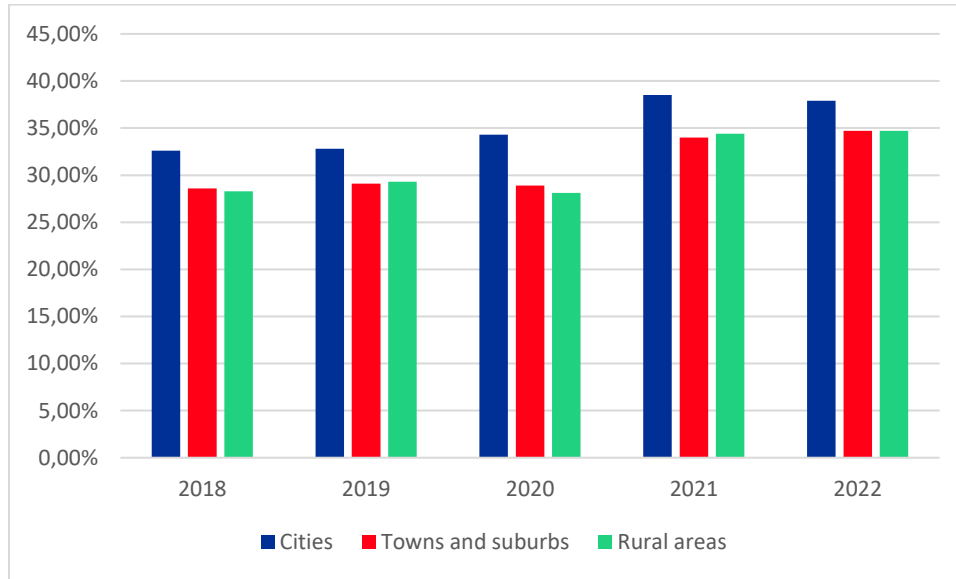
Figure 20. Percentage of early leavers from education and training according to the degree of urbanization (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

In addition, and regarding education, the following table shows the percentage of young people between 20 and 34 years of age who are studying and training. These values are lower in rural areas than in cities, but a considerable increase has been observed since 2018.

Figure 21. Participation rate in education and training (young people between 20-34 years) according to the degree of urbanization (%)



Source: own elaboration with data from EUROSTAT (2023b).

Given the characteristics of the pandemic, it is also important to analyze how the rural or urban setting has affected health-related issues. In 2018, the percentage of young people (25-29 years old) who considered their health as ‘very good’ was higher in urban areas (49.0%) than in towns and suburbs (44.6%) or in rural areas (33.9%). However, in 2022, rural areas were the group with higher values (40.4% vs 35.9% in cities or 35.2% in towns and suburbs).

In recent years, among the opportunities detected to achieve the repopulation of the rural world, teleworking and rural tourism have been considered, among others (Seco González, 2020). Considering the percentage of households with broadband Internet connection, in rural areas the values are lower than in urban areas (93.5% vs. 96.7% in 2022), as previous studies found (Diez-Gutierrez & Gajardo-Espinoza, 2020). However, there was a notable increase in rural areas (from 76.49% in 2018 to 93.55% in 2021), minimizing differences according to the degree of urbanization.

2.1.4 Disabilities and health issues

People with disabilities in general encounters significant difficulties in accessing the labour market. Social prejudices, as well as lack of information, lead to discrimination of people with disabilities in their access to labour market (Silván & Quíñez, 2020). As a particularly vulnerable group, the economic crisis resulting from the pandemic affected them incisively, increasing job loss and hindering labour reintegration (Silván & Quíñez, 2020). Within this group of people with disabilities, youth is also considered a group at special risk of exclusion and difficulties in employment (INJUVE, 2023).

Despite its large decline during the pandemic, the employment of young people (16-25 years old) with disabilities rebounded rapidly (Adecco, 2023). In 2022, they signed a total of 27,741 contracts in Spain, a historical maximum that represents a growth of 16% compared to 2021 and which has already exceeded pre-pandemic values (26,770 contracts in 2019) (Adecco, 2023).

2.1.5 Parents' perspective

According to the most recent Fertility Survey (*Encuesta de Fecundidad*) published by the National Institute of Statistics (INE; 2018), 79.2% of women between 25 and 29 years old did not have any children, 12% had one child, 6.6% two children, 2.2% three or more children. These data, on the other hand, are conditioned by the educational level. Thus, while the average number of children was close to 1 in the case of women between 25 and 29 years old with lower secondary education or less, the value drops to 0.1 for women with higher education. These figures are similar in the case of men. Similarly, according to Eurostat, the average number of children for women between 25 and 29 years old who work is lower than that of unemployed and inactive women. In addition, the average age of emancipation in Spain 2021 was 29.8, higher than the average 25.5 of EU countries. These data suggest that, although the problem of child care responsibilities during lockdown, could be limited for people between 25 and 29 years old in Spain, these difficulties were greater in the case of NEETS between 25 and 29 years old.

A particularly vulnerable group is that of single-parent families. According to Fundación Foessa (2022), social exclusion, is higher in the case of single-parent families, particularly in the case of where the parent is a woman/female. In this case, the index of social exclusion provided by Foessa rose from 1,9 to 2,3 in the period 2018-2021. The report of the Association of Single Mothers 2020 (FAMS, 2020) shows that 30 percent of single mothers did not have the minimum adequate conditions to be at home during the weeks of lockdown. Among the situations repeated were lack of heating, lack of light or ventilation, insufficient space, lack of internet connection for their children or not having a computer. In addition, 27 percent of this group indicated that they had serious difficulties in meeting food expenses (FAMS, 2020).

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

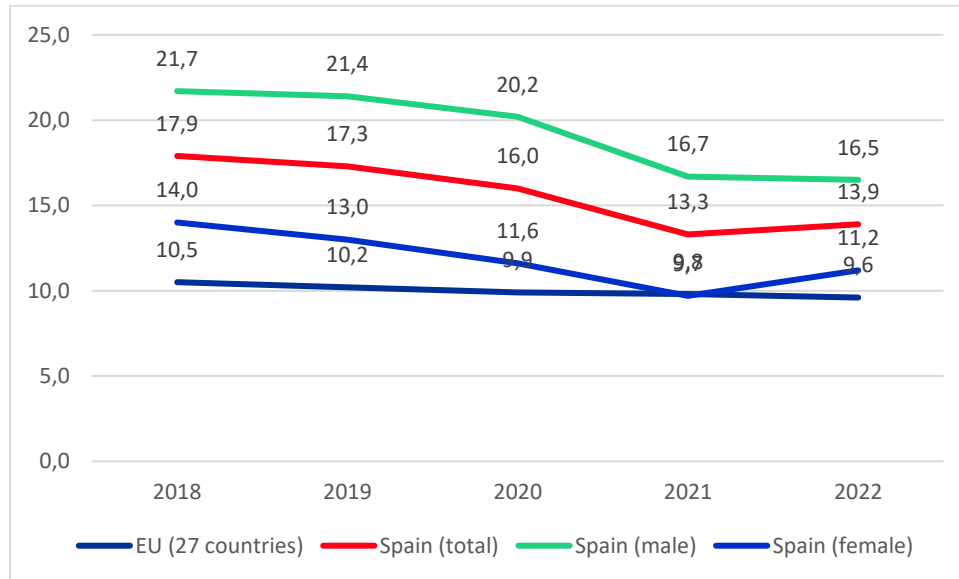
During 2020 and, even 2021, significant challenges were experienced that affected young people in educational terms, the most visible being the closure of educational institutions from March until September 2020, as well as the preventive measures implemented in 2021, which increased the barriers faced by many young people in accessing education.

To analyze the influence of the pandemic on the educational opportunities of young people, we focus on two variables that are closely related to NEETs: early school leaving and the level of training (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023).

The variable called "early dropout from education and training" refers to the percentage of the population aged 18 to 24 years who have not completed the level of training of the International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 3, i.e., Second Stage Secondary Education and do not follow any type of education nor training (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023). In the year 2022 in Spain, 74.1% of the population aged 18 to 24 years have reached at least the aforementioned level of education, 11.9% continue in training and the remaining 13.9% correspond to the group of early educational and/or training dropouts (Eurostat, 2023). This dropout figure is significantly higher than the European Union average of 9.6%, which is closer to the European target of bringing the early dropout rate below 9% by 2030, as indicated in the reference levels of the strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training with a view to the "European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)" (European Council, 2021).

Nevertheless, in the last decade, the dropout rate in the country has decreased by 10.8 percentage points, from 24.7% corresponding to the year 2012 (Eurostat, 2023). Regarding the evolution of these rates since the pandemic, statistics show that the rates of early dropout from education and training in Spain significantly declined in 2020 and 2021, both in the case of men and women. In 2022, after the health crisis was left behind and employment prospects for young people improved due among other factors to the recovery of the tourism sector, the early school dropout rate has increased slightly, reaching 13.9% (Eurostat, 2023).

Figure 22. Evolution of early dropout from education and training (%)



Source: own elaboration from data obtained from Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional and Encuesta de Población Activa.

Another of the factors most closely related to the rates of NEETs corresponds to their level of training (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023). The latest data referred to in the Active Population Survey (Encuesta de Población Activa) provided by the National Statistics Institute (INE) reveal that in 2022, the percentage of NEETs between 15 and 29 years of age stands at 9.9% for those who have second stage Secondary Education or Higher Education while it raises to 17.0% in the case of those who only have a level of training lower than second stage Secondary Education (compulsory schooling or lower); a difference of 7.2 points between both groups (INE, 2022). Ten years earlier, the difference between the percentages of both groups of young people, more and less educated, who neither worked nor studied was almost 12 points. This difference narrowed, reaching its lowest value (6.6 points) in 2020, where the percentage of less educated NEETs was 21.1% while that of the most educated was 14.5% (INE, 2023). From 2013 to 2019, the most significant reduction was observed in the rate of less educated youth who were unemployed and not studying. This rate decreased markedly, from 28.3% in 2013 to 18.9% in 2019 (INE, 2022). During this period, the economy managed to incorporate some of these young people into the labor market, while at the same time fostering greater interest in education and improving academic results through modifications in educational programs, especially in secondary education. In fact, the increase in the level of education of the young population during the last decade is considered to be the fundamental factor in the decrease of early school dropout (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2023). In 2022, 78.7% of the young population in Spain, aged between 20 and 24 years, has managed to complete at least the second stage of Secondary

Education. This represents an increase of 15.7 points compared to the 2012 figure of 63.0%, according to Eurostat (2023). In contrast to the European average, the gap has narrowed significantly, from 17.1 percentage points lower in 2012 to only 4.9 percentage points in 2022, where the European average stands at 83.6% (Eurostat, 2023). Although no European reference level has been established for this indicator in 2030, it has been pointed out in the strategic framework that its monitoring will complement the analysis of early school leaving (European Council, 2021). It is relevant to highlight that during the last decade, this indicator has experienced a continuous growth year after year, even during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding 25–34-year-olds in Spain, 50.5% have reached the level of Higher Education in 2022, which compares favorably with the European average for the same year, which stands at 42.0% (Eurostat, 2023). This fact is not new, since even since 2019 and during the years that the pandemic lasted, this indicator exceeded the European target set for 2030 for completion of higher education, which states that at least 45% of the population should have reached this level (European Council, 2021).

According to the Youth 2030 Strategy report on the situation after COVID-19, the pandemic has increased the educational and digital gap, which already existed between students from different socioeconomic origins. On the other hand, according to Injuve (2023), 60% of students reported that the lockdown caused by COVID-19 had negatively affected their learning process, and 77.7% said they preferred in-person teaching. In addition, 11.2% of the students reported having learned less than 50% compared to a normal year. The differences in the educational achievement, may be due to the digital gap both in terms of digital skills and to access to internet and to devices. According to Eurostat, in 2019 among young people aged 16 to 29; 65% have superior digital skills, 20% have basic ones and 15% have low ones. Regarding the access to internet and devices for education purposes, 11.9% of households with people under 18 years of age did not have a computer and 9.8% did not have internet access in 2021 (Fundación Foessa, 2022). The report *Pobreza infantil y desigualdad educativa en España* (Alto Comisionado contra la Pobreza Infantil, 2020) the frequency of use of electronic devices for educational purposes is positively related to the socioeconomic level.

Relatedly, the report ‘The digital gap in vulnerable youth: evaluation of measures taken during COVID-19’ by EAPN Spain (European Anti-Poverty Network) (2021) analyses some of the main barriers that prevent some individuals and social groups from being able to use information and communication technologies.

The main barrier has been their precarious socio-economic situation and lack of resources and income, which makes it difficult for them to access technological services and a quality internet connection. The situation of unemployment and job insecurity, exacerbated by the social and economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, has reduced the level of income of many families and individuals and has

placed them in a situation of greater vulnerability. The lack of resources makes it impossible for them to purchase technological devices and contract internet connection services in their homes. In addition, the poor quality and condition of homes and the lack of infrastructure make it impossible to properly install technological services and fibre internet. Related to the lack of infrastructure, another important barrier highlighted by young people refers to the lack of facilities in rural areas, which leaves many people living in those areas without access to or with poor connectivity, thus increasing inequality and the digital divide.

Another major barrier is the lack of training and knowledge about the use of new technologies, which hinders accessibility and use of this service, mainly among those who are most vulnerable and/or at risk of social exclusion. Indeed, there is very little free and quality training on new technologies and digital skills. Moreover, this lack of training on the use of the Internet and technological devices generates a high degree of insecurity and fear in the population with less access and resources when using technological resources, as they consider that they do not have the necessary skills and do not know how to do so. Important to note here that the lack of knowledge is not only suffered by young people, but also by their families.

The report "The digital divide among vulnerable youth: evaluation of measures taken during covid-19" (La brecha digital en la juventud vulnerable. Evaluación de las medidas adoptadas durante la covid-19) by EAPN Spain (European Anti-Poverty Network) (2021), also assessed the equipment of households in the pandemic. Equipment refers here to those devices that allow people to connect and carry out computer and communication activities. This concept includes desktop and laptop computers, tablets, mobile and fixed telephones and the availability and quality of Internet connection. Overall, 9.3% of the 16–30-year-old people do not have a desktop or laptop computer at home. The percentage for the total population aged 16-74 is 23.6%, suggesting that the presence of young people is a relevant factor for the introduction of computer equipment in households.

On the other hand, these general data are strongly modulated by some segmentation variables, such as habitat, type of household and, especially, the poverty situation of the households. Thus, 13.7% of children and adolescents in poverty do not have a desktop or laptop computer in their home, while for young people who are not in poverty, this percentage is almost four times lower (3.7%). The availability of computers among young people is more difficult in more rural areas. Areas with small populations, (i.e., those with less than 20,000 inhabitants), have high percentages of young people who do not have PCs nor laptops (between 10.4% and 18.8%, depending on the size of the municipality). In contrast, in highly populated areas, such as municipalities with more than 500,000 inhabitants and capitals, the figures are significantly lower and remain at around 5%.

Today, much of the functionality and use of digital devices is associated with the access to internet. Mobile connections are the most common, due to the almost 100% expansion of mobile phones. In terms of connectivity, almost all households have a broadband connection. However, only 86 % have a fixed broadband connection and 13.8 % of households only have a mobile broadband connection. On the other hand, 100 % of the youth population have access to the Internet via mobile connection.

Therefore, the differences are mainly found in the access to a fixed broadband. 8.4% of the young population has no fixed broadband connection and only a mobile connection. Once again, poverty and habitat strongly discriminate against the type of connection. On the one hand, the percentage of young people living in poverty who do not have a fixed broadband connection is almost four times higher (13% and 3.8% respectively) than those who do not; and on the other hand, living in rural areas severely restricts the possibility of having a fixed broadband connection. In this vein, 13.2% of young people living in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants do not have a broadband connection, while only 3.8% of those living in larger cities do not.

Access to devices and connection are just some of the variables used to measure the digital divide. However, the experience as user and the time that individuals spend surfing the internet are good predictors of both the types of uses for which they use digital technologies and the skills they will demonstrate with them. Mobile phone use is fully developed today: 100% of young people own a mobile phone and only 0.4% of young people in poverty have not used a mobile phone in the last 3 months. There are also no significant differences by gender, type of household, place of residence, etc. Indeed, 100% of the young people surveyed have used the Internet in the last 3 months and most of them use it daily (five or more days a week). On the other hand, 4.5% of young people in poverty use the Internet less than five days a week, which is four times higher than for non-poor young people (1.1%).

Regarding the different ways of using internet services, it is important to highlight, first, that use of the internet for personal communication services, for the total population, is very high (between 92% and 99%). There are no differences by poverty status, gender or habitat for those services for which a mobile phone is primarily used, such as participating in social networks or using instant messaging. However, those that are primarily used from a computer or require high data charges, such as emailing or video calls, show differences that can be significant by income and by municipality size. Second, the use of the internet for leisure-related services, such as downloading music, watching movies, playing games and the like, is also very high. Finally, training-related activities, such as taking a course, using e-learning material or communicating with teachers or students via the web, have an average usage of between 47% and 60% among young people. In this case, the differences according to poverty status, gender and habitat are very high. On the one hand, while 55.3% of young people who are not in risk of poverty have taken an online course, the figure drops to 42.9% for those who are. For the rest of activities, similar

differences are recorded. Finally, in the more rural areas, the percentages of young people undertaking online training activities are significantly lower than in the larger cities.

Regarding digital skills, the percentage of young people with advanced digital skills is extraordinarily high at 72%, compared to 41% for the general population. In addition, 12.7% of young people have no or low skills. Finally, regarding habitat, the most rural areas, with municipalities of 20,000 inhabitants or less, have a higher percentage of young people with low or no digital skills. The lowest value is recorded in large cities (7.6%).

The percentage of young people (16-30) with skills related to searching information online among is even higher (93.8%). There are no differences by gender or habitat, however, despite the relative ease with which it is possible to attain information skills, 8.7% of young people in poverty only manage to attain at most the basic level. Although this figure seems relatively low, it represents a very important disadvantage, especially in terms of access to labour markets, because it concerns tasks and skills that are indispensable for job search.

Computer skills refer to the ability to use simple and commonly used software such as word processors, spreadsheets or audio, photo or video editors, and other more specialised skills such as creating presentations or documents with embedded text and images, using advanced spreadsheet functions or programming in a language. This type of skill is the one that requires a higher level of digital skills as the activities involved are related to the use of word processors, spreadsheets, programming and editing. In other words, these competences are closely related to the use of technologies for education and professional activities, and require a good knowledge of computer skills. Moreover, these are skills that can hardly be performed without the use of a desktop or laptop computer, which results in a high percentage of unskilled people among the young population in poverty situations. Thus, 11.8% of young people have no computer skills or competences and another 10.8% have only basic skills. On the other hand, there is a relatively large group of poor young people who have either no skills or only basic skills. Both options account for 27% of young people in poverty and only 14% of those who are not poor. Among young people in poverty, 25.5% have not used a word processor (14.8% non-poor), 45.7% have not used spreadsheets (24.7% non-poor), 35.5% have not used software to edit photos, videos or audio files (22.7% non-poor), 31.1% have not created documents integrating text, images, tables or graphics (17.3% non-poor) and 33.5% have not used advanced spreadsheet functions (26.9%). There are no differences with respect to the use of programming languages.

According to the Education at a Glance Report (2022) by OECD in 2020, participation in learning activities fell across the board (all ages included), except in five countries (Spain, Greece, United Kingdom, Lithuania and Turkey). The decline is essentially explained by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participation in non-formal learning activities. However, in 2021, participation has returned to pre-

pandemic levels. In 2019, it was 13.8% of the population. In addition, some countries have increased participation between 2019 and 2021 significantly. For example, Spain shows a significant growth between 2019 (10.6%) and 2021 (14.4%) of 3.7 p.p., the increase is mainly associated with an increase in participation in non-formal learning activities (Education at a Glance 2022). The drop in participation in learning activities between 2019 and 2020 was not equal. It affected, to a greater extent, the adult population with a lower level of education. Moreover, this population group often lacks the digital skills needed to benefit from digital learning opportunities. For example, on average in OECD countries with available data, in 2021, only 4% of the population with less than upper secondary education participated in non-formal learning activities, compared to 16% of the adult population with tertiary education. In Spain it was 4% and 18% respectively (Education at a Glance 2022).

Eurostat (2023c) show that the lack of digital skills relates to a lower the participation rate in non-formal educational activities for those between 16- and 30-year-old. Thus, during COVID-19 the participation rate in non-formal education activities decreased considerably. In 2019 the rate was 16.0%, while in 2020 it was 15.9%; in 2021 it was 13.5%; and in 2022 it was 14.2%. These data show that it is essential to provide more resources and training to improve the digital skills of citizens and thus reduce the rate of digital illiteracy. That means that for a young person in a situation of vulnerability, the problem is not only that they lack the necessary support to be trained in ICTs, but also that they have to take care of the rest of the family's digital affairs. This fear and rejection of the digital world also generates demotivation when it comes to learning. Therefore, training and promoting education in digital skills is essential to reduce inequalities in access and the digital divide.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the health of Spanish people, not only because of the more than 100,000 deaths it has caused, but also because of the complications that some of those who have recovered have had, and an increase in mental disorders such as depression and anxiety due to social isolation (United Nations, 2020). As with most recessions, vulnerable young people experience worse outcomes than older adults.

In particular, lockdown measures taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic had widespread impacts on mental health (Palmer and Small, 2021). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), people ages 18 to 29 years suggested that the mental health and well-being effects of COVID-19 have been substantial. Specifically, half of youth surveyed showed indicators of possible depression or anxiety, and around one in six young people had probable depression or anxiety. In addition, many vulnerable young people lack access to affordable or high-quality health services (World Health Organization, 2017), and there has been an increase in mental disorders among young people during the pandemic (ILO, 2020;

United Nations, 2020). Access to affordable health care and health care facilities and providers, in general, is critical to the physical and mental well-being of young people and is an important long-term investment for societies (United Nations, 2020).

In Spain, according to the study on emotional well-being carried out by the Centre for Sociological Research in June 2020 (CIS, 2020), most people felt active and vigorous (81.9%) and good about themselves (88.2%). When we refer to young people aged 25 to 29, the percentages are very similar, with 76.7% indicating they felt active and vigorous and 88.4% indicating they felt good about themselves. In addition, respondents acknowledged that most of the time they were happy (71.6% of the general population and 90.7% of 25-29 age group), calm and relaxed (62.9% of the general population and 67.4% of young people), full of energy and vitality (60.9% of the general population and 74.4% of young people), looking forward to enjoying life (53.8% of the general population and 65.1% of young people) and really rested when waking up in the morning (51.3% of the general population and 55.8% of young people). On the contrary, 30.8% of the general population felt worried most of the time, a percentage that dropped to 11.6% for young people aged 25-29; 19.2% felt stressed (for young people this percentage is only slightly lower, 18.6%); 10.4% felt sad most of the time (for young people only 7%); 9.2% felt depressed (7% in the case of young people); and finally, 8.1% of the population felt lonely, in this case young people seemed to score worse than the general average, as 9.3% of young people reported feeling lonely most or most of the time.

On February 2021, the CIS carried out another study on mental health and the data on sadness, depression and worry seemed to increase considerably, especially in the case of young people (CIS, 2021). In this study 24.5% of the general population indicated they were highly worried (or almost all of the time), and this percentage rose to 33.7% in the case of young people aged 25-29. With regard to sadness or depression, 19.8% of the population (and 21.4% of young people) said they were sad or depressed a lot (or most) of the time. The increase in overwhelm/stress in general was not very noticeable in the general population (up from 21.8%), but rose to 33.2% for young people. On the other hand, feelings of loneliness or isolation soared, rising to 17.2% in the general population and 23% in young people. In addition, 15.8% of the population reported having had an anxiety or panic attack since the beginning of the pandemic situation, rising to 23% among young people between 25 and 29. Finally, 5.8% of respondents indicated that they had been prescribed a psychotropic drug for mental health reasons since the start of the pandemic, a percentage that drops to 3.7% in the case of young people aged 25-29.

These results, which may seem favourable, may not be so when compared to the pre-pandemic situation. Martínez-Bravo and Sanz (2022), in their study on the well-being of Spanish families during the pandemic (between May and November 2020) find that the means of well-being they declare oscillate

between 5 and 6.2 (on a scale of 1 to 10) but they also point out that their well-being has decreased (although not dramatically) with respect to the well-being of the year 2019 (the change is measured between -2 and 2 being the mean of the study -0.38). According to the authors, the reasons for this change are: uncertainty about the future, reduced contact with loved ones, preoccupation with job loss, health problems and difficulties in reconciling work and childcare. Among these factors, uncertainty about the future seems to be the most frequent and, however, preoccupation with job loss was of greater concern to the poorest quintiles while the richest quintiles were more concerned about reduced contact with loved ones.

On the other hand, studies such as Foremny et al (2022) (who launched several surveys between April 2020 and April 2022), indicate that when people were asked about feeling unhappy or depressed before the pandemic, more than half of the sample (68%) responded "not at all", however, in April 2020 the percentage drops to 28% and then recovers only slightly, rising to 33% in April 2022. Thus, almost two years after the pandemic outbreak there is almost no recovery of mental health. Foremny et al. (2022) also find significant differences in mental health between the different professional categories of respondents. When the employment situation is stable, the mental health status is always more favourable than when unemployed (such as NEETs). Significant differences by age are also found in this line, since young people (the group in which the NEETs are found) present worse mental health data than older people (who were curiously the most threatened by the pandemic). One possible explanation the authors find for these differences is that young people have greater social needs than older people and therefore feel more unhappy or depressed.

According to the study developed by INJUVE (Pérez Diaz, 2020, 28.5% of young people between 25- and 29-years old feel tense many times, almost always or all the time. This study also shows that 23.7% are often/almost always/all the time low in morale, 20.0% are discouraged or depressed, 31.2% are stressed, 24.1% sleep badly and 7% feel lonely. On the other hand, 52.3% are calm or quiet and 48.4% are happy many times/almost always/all the time.

Differentiating by gender, the psychological impact on women is always much more intense than on men (in the general sample, aged 15 to 29 years, women were 10 points more tense, 15 lower in morale, 10 more depressed, 15 more stressed and 3 more lonely. In contrast, men were up to 12 points calmer and 10 points happier than women.

This study also addressed which factors determined the propensity of young people to experience social stress during the COVID-19 situation. The results indicate that women, young adults in the 25-29 age group, those who went through solitary lockdown, people with less education, and the unemployed were the most likely to feel distress. Therefore, we can conclude that NEETs were precisely the group of

young people who suffered the most distress in that period, especially women and those who lived alone during lockdown.

Besides de factors described, others may have conditioned the mental health during COVID-19, such as being closed in with others, problems of domestic violence or factors related with living in the digital world.

During the pandemic, Aresi et al (2020) find that the amount of interaction young people had with children increased in all countries (including Spain), while the amount of interaction with friends and peers decreased; interaction with partners and parents, on the other hand, did not experience any change in terms of quantity. The closure of schools and all extracurricular activities led to an increase in the amount of time parents spent with their children. This burden fell mainly on the shoulders of young women. Lockdown also increased the time couples spent together, although no improvement or deterioration in the quality of their interactions was detected. The relationships most affected in quantitative terms were those in which people were not close or living together, i.e., those with friends, co-workers or classmates, especially in the case of women who may have to spend more time with their children.

In Spain, the INJUVE study led by Pérez Díaz (2020) indicates that among young people aged 15 to 29 years, some key factors that led to greater social stress. Specifically, gender and the environment during lockdown. In addition, women had a worse time during lockdown, being subject to more stress. Finally, those who spent the lockdown in a couple or sharing an apartment with other people reported more stress than those who were with their parents. Therefore, the convivial element is revealed as a key element in terms of its psychological effects. In fact, conviction seems to have been harder in these circumstances than even for people living alone.

Also, the CIS mental health study (2021) analyses changes in the way that parents relate at home with their children and also changes in the children's mood detected by their parents. Specifically, they point out that children are more disobedient (56.7%), more irritable (77.2%) or protest about anything (71%). In addition, they point out that children talk back when they are reprimanded (63.8%), demand more attention (65.2%) and also, they isolate themselves easily (53.6%).

The period of lockdown meant for parents the experience of many stressful situations derived from job and economic uncertainty, which could cause them anxiety and make it difficult for them to manage their children emotionally. Therefore, as pointed out by authors such as Cluver et al (2020) or Del Castillo and Velasco (2020), it was considered a priority for parents to have resources to deal with their own stress, such as relaxation tools, the use of telematic psychological counselling and the use of parent groups through social networks. The use of humour, the joint involvement of parents and children in

domestic and play activities, and innovation within structured routines helped them to strengthen family bonds and facilitate the enjoyment of shared time (Díez, 2020).

In Spain, according to the study of Ausín et al. (2021), women suffered the greatest impact in terms of depressive symptoms, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), showing the lowest levels of well-being. As time passed, depressive symptomatology increased significantly in both men and women, while anxiety and PTSD did not show statistically significant changes. Likewise, women's levels of loneliness increased and spiritual well-being decreased. The authors explain that these results can be explained in part because of the prevalence of depression and anxiety is higher in women (Asher et al. 2017) but also because they have suffered a greater care burden during the blockade (Graves, 2020). It is also worth noting the increase in domestic violence that has occurred during this state of emergency, given the impossibility of those affected to physically move away from the aggressor and the lack of support resources (Campbell, 2020). This may also explain the differences in the results presented.

Social networking platforms were used by young people during COVID-19 in a “multifunctional” way (from purely playful to informative and participative). According to Bichi et al (2020) social networking affects both emotional sphere in several ways. First, data reveal an ambivalent relationship between feelings of anxiety and the use of social networks, i.e. the number of those who claim that connecting to social networking platforms has significantly helped them to reduce anxiety is very similar (33.3%) to the number of people who claim that connecting to social networks has made them feel anxious (37.3%). About the emotional sphere, the authors have investigated what Introini and Pasqualini (2017) defined as the "benefit of connection" (emotional state of well-being linked to the simple and generic awareness of being connected with other people as an antidote to loneliness). In this sense, 58.5% of Spaniards confirm that during periods of blocking social networking platforms allowed them to feel less lonely.

New technologies could help to reduce the feeling of loneliness or to manage situations of stress or depression. Thus, as Dr. Azucena Díez (2020) points out, video calls or e-mails as alternative forms of communication and bonding with loved ones. Similarly, parents can watch films, documentaries or concerts online with their children and take advantage of numerous initiatives on the Internet and social networks for enjoyable and varied activities with children.

3. Support measures

The Youth Guarantee system in Spain is aimed at NEETs over 16 or under 30 years old. More specifically, it targets individuals between 16 and 25 years old, or under 30 years old, in the case of people with a disability of at least the 33 percent. Or individuals over 25 years old and under 30 when the unemployment rate of this group is equal to or greater than 20 percent, according to the Survey of Active Population corresponding to the last quarter of the year. This means that the measures targeting specifically 25+ NEETs are included within the Youth Guarantee Framework.

After the Recommendation from the EU Council of 30 October 2020 ‘on A Bridge to Jobs’, Spain approved the **Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021 - 2027 of decent work for young people** (*Plan Garantía Juvenil Plus 2021-2027 de trabajo digno para las personas jóvenes*). This plan aims at further developing the original Youth Guarantee Plan (2013) (included in the Strategy for Entrepreneurship and Youth Employment 2013-2016) and its successive plans whose development was included within the Action Plan for Youth Unemployment 2019-2021. This plan is included in the Strategy Juventud Avanza.

The Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021 - 2027 explains on its grounds that the special impact of the pandemic on the employment and training of young people is the main reason for its existence. The positive evolution of the young employment from 2014 was jeopardized by the COVID-19 crisis. This plan faces old and new challenges and, as well as its guiding principles to promote decent and long-term employment, has 6 axes that define their areas of action considered to be priorities: Axis 1: Orientation; axis 2: Education and Training; axis 3: Employment opportunities; axis 4: Equal access to employment; axis 5: Entrepreneurship; axis 6: Improvement of the institutional framework. Based on these priorities, but also considering the needs from vulnerable groups, it includes measures such as “orientation for young, inactive, discouraged people and people excluded from the labour market, including people in a situation of risk of social exclusion and beneficiaries of benefits”, “guidance on comprehensive employment actions aimed at the LGTBI community” or “guidance on comprehensive employment actions aimed at young migrants”.

3.1 Employment and financial support

After the announcement of the lockdown in Spain in March of 2020, different measures were implemented to support the companies and workers most affected by the restrictions in the economic activity. One of the main measures adopted was the approval of the Royal Decree-Law 8/2020, of March 17, on extraordinary urgent measures to address the economic and social impact of COVID-19. This RDL allowed greater flexibility in the use of Temporary Workforce Reduction Schemes (*Expediente de Regulación Temporal de Empleo, ERTE*) by companies affected by the restrictions (Izquierdo et al., 2021). These ERTEs were preventive measures based on a temporary suspension of the labour relationship, or

alternatively, a reduction of working hours, they were not aimed at youth but at the whole population. During this period of suspension of ERTes, employees could get employment benefits publicly funded while employers only paid employees' social security contributions, which is a minor part of each employee's wage (García Clemente, 2023). These ERTes were used by the most affected sectors such as hospitality, artistic activities, and wholesale and retail trade (Hernández de Cos, 2020). Moreover, the ERTes were widely used in the period immediately following the lockdown, with more than 3.5 million workers covered by these schemes. Subsequently, the use of this type of measures has been declining and only around 20,000 workers were under an ERTE in October 2022¹. Researchers found a strong and positive effect on re-employment probability after being in a ERTE situation, especially when the schemes were held for a short period of time (García Clemente, 2023). From a gender-based perspective, ERTes were distributed almost equally between men and women. However, as the duration of the ERTE situation increased, the presence of women increased as well. On the other hand, the improvement of the employability after an ERTE situation was higher for men than that for women, but only after being held for a short period of time, since the effect declines more intensely for men if the ERTE situation persisted over time.

Although these preventive measures were not specifically targeting youth, research suggests that they had particular effects for young people. Specifically, the relative effectiveness of ERTE in facilitating the return to employment during the pandemic was lower for individuals in the 19-30 age group compared to higher age groups (Izquierdo, Puente and Auciello, 2022). This different influence of ERTes on youth employment may also be due to the different impact of ERTes depending on economic sectors, since ERTes predominated in sectors where the main workforce is youth such as hospitality.

Besides the ERTes, in the case of self-employed people who had to stop their activities or who suffered income losses of more than 75%, social protection measures were also introduced. The extraordinary benefit for cessation of activity (Prestación extraordinaria por cese de actividad -PECA) introduced in March 2020 (Royal Decree Law 8/2020), for people affiliated with the Special Social Security Regime for Self-Employed or Self-Employed Workers (Régimen Especial de la Seguridad Social de los Trabajadores por Cuenta Propia o Autónomos -RETA) or in the Special Regime of the Social Security for Sea Workers (Régimen Especial de la Seguridad Social de los Trabajadores del Mar -RETM). This protection was in force until June 30, 2020. From that moment on, it was replaced by Royal Decree Law 24/2020 and Royal Decree Law 30/2020).

¹ Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2023
<https://www.seg-social.es/wps/portal/wss/internet/EstadisticasPresupuestosEstudios/Estadisticas/EST8/22bfb5ae-8eba-4c44-a258-93a26194e11b>

In addition, Spain adopted urgent active labour market policy (ALMP) measures in response to the lockdown and the early COVID-19 crisis. Some of these measures were related to workplace training and aimed at the whole population such as the Resolution of April 15, 2020, that established extraordinary measures to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on vocational training. This allowed flexibility in the access to training by allowing workers in ERTE situation to participate. Another example was the Resolution of April 15, 2020, of the National Public Employment Service, which established extraordinary measures to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on vocational training for employment in the field of work. Moreover, some measures supported the online training of workers during the pandemic, such as the Royal Decree Law 31/2020 on non-university education and "online job training" and the Resolution of the Ministry of Labor and Social Economy 1109/2020 on special measures for in-company training in the "virtual classroom".

Other urgent measures during the lockdown were related to strengthening the maintenance of employment and economic activity. As an example, the Royal Decree-Law 13/2020, of April 7, established urgent measures regarding agricultural employment, to promote the temporary hiring of workers in the agricultural sector and ensure the maintenance of agricultural activity. Or the Royal Decree-Law 17/2020, of May 5, which approved measures to support the cultural sector, establishing extraordinary access to the unemployment benefit of artists in public shows that were not affected by contract suspension procedures or ERTes (see also Royal Decree-Law 32/2020, of November 3).

Other social protection measures were implemented for unemployed people and other special groups, particularly: I) Exceptional subsidy for the end of a temporary contract; II) Special unemployment subsidy for people who have exhausted their benefit between until June 30 and who did not have access to other unemployment benefits; III) Extraordinary subsidy for domestic workers registered in the Special Social Security Regime (Régimen Especial de la Seguridad Social) who had lost their jobs or had been forced to temporarily suspend them, or to reduce the number of hours worked due to restrictions or lockdown; IV) Extraordinary access to unemployment benefits for bullfighting professionals; In addition, in order to protect population without formal and stable work activity, a series of measures were implemented to urgently respond to the needs of food, housing or supplies, and, in particular, a minimum emergency benefit was introduced; the Minimum Living Income -Ingreso Mínimo Vital- (Royal Decree Law 20/2020, modified by Royal Decree Law 28/20 and Royal Decree Law 30/2020, and Royal Decree Law 3/2021) that guarantees a level of income to households in situations of economic vulnerability.

The afterwards of the pandemic also brought to light important challenges such as the duality of labour market characterized by a gap between "those who are already in the labour market" and "those who arrive to the labour market", with a marked trend towards temporary employment and instability in the career development of new employees. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis worked as a driving force for important

changes in the labour market. In the context of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan and specifically within the component 23, 'New public policies for a dynamic, resilient and inclusive labour market', the government started to undertake reforms for instance to update Public Employment Services, to ease the access to unemployment benefits, to tackle the gender gap regarding salaries or to address the problem of false self-employed delivery workers using digital platforms.

On a special note, and also in the context of the component 23, the government aimed to regulate the remote work approving the Royal Decree-Law on remote work (RDL 28/2020), which offered a regulatory framework to favour the implementation of remote work among businesses. This RDL established the right of those who work remotely to the same working conditions as those who work in person, guaranteeing the voluntary nature of this modality, both for the worker and for the company, on the basis of the European Framework Agreement on Teleworking (2002). Similarly, a specific regulatory framework was approved for public employees through the Royal Decree-Law on remote work in Public Administrations (RDL 29/2020) that recognizes the possibility of providing this type of work on a voluntary, reversible basis and with prior authorization.

In the same vein and based on the parental/gender perspective, the main instrument that young parents were able to take advantage of in order to make the closure of the schools compatible with their work situation was the extraordinary urgent measure regulating remote work. Thus, Article 5 of Royal Decree-Law 8/2020, of March 17, on extraordinary urgent measures to deal with the economic and social impact of COVID-19, established the preferential nature of remote work over other measures in relation to employment, with the company having to adopt the appropriate measures if this was technically and reasonably possible and if the necessary adaptation effort was proportionate, this being an exceptional rule and of limited validity.

In this framework of the component 23 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, the government established as a priority to reform and promote the active labour market policies (ALMPs) by approving the Spanish Active Employment Support Strategy 2021-2024 (*Estrategia Española de Apoyo Activo al Empleo 2021-2024*). This strategy creates a common framework for the Public Employment Services to design and manage their policies. It also establishes two main lines of action to face the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis: digitalisation and ecological transformation. Accordingly, it defines the framework to promote job offers in the STEM and IT fields through, for instance, further analysis of the Empléate job portal. It also defines measures to preserve jobs within the adaptation to the climate change and promote job creation in circular economy. the Spanish Active Employment Support Strategy 2021-2024 is the only strategy in Spain that explicitly refers to the millennial generation and how the COVID-19 crisis has affected them disproportionately more because of their still precarious professional

development. Accordingly, it establishes the basic framework to define future measures to support the creation of permanent contracts and enterprises among the millennial generation.

Reducing the gender gap is also one of the priorities of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan of the Spanish economy. Therefore, in addition to the measure prioritising remote work for parents, some additional measures were adopted in 2020 like the Royal Decree for equal pay between men and women (RD 902/2020). This measure guarantees the principle of pay transparency to identify discrimination due to incorrect evaluations of jobs (when a job of equal value is performed, lower pay is received without this difference being able to be objectively justified), in line with the Recommendation of the European Commission of March 7, 2014 on pay transparency. In this line, the Royal Decree on equality plans and their registration (RD 901/2020) aims to develop equality plans and their registration. Currently, all companies with more than 50 employees are obliged to carry them out. The RD establishes the procedure for negotiating plans, the requirements that the diagnosis must follow and the characteristics of its evaluation and monitoring.

Turning to the component 23 as the main general policy to face the effect of the pandemic on employment (Spanish Government, 2023), it establishes 'Youth Employment' as a specific strategic goal. This 'Youth Employment' goal establishes the framework for programmes designed to improve the employability of young people. It focuses on the main three programmes designed under this framework so far:

- Tandem Youth Employment (*Empleo Joven Tandem*), in which training is combined with employment and involve the training of young people aged 16-29 in projects of the State Public Administration with occupations related to ecological transition and green economy, the digitalization of services, social cohesion (dependency care and intervention with vulnerable groups), the fight against depopulation and rural local development (heritage management, tourism).
- First professional experience in public administrations (*Primera experiencia profesional en las administraciones públicas*) is a plan of access to employment within services provided by public administrations. This programme is aimed at unemployed young people who have completed their training stage. The objective of the program is not only learning administration skills, but also acquire soft skills and socio-professional competencies.
- Research programme (*Programa Investigo*) in which research centres, universities and companies investing in R&D&I within a pre-approved project, will receive a grant to hire young researchers. These young researchers must be specialised primarily in innovation projects and work in R&D&I departments related to health, transition ecological and green economy

(renewable energies, energy efficiency, water and waste treatment and agri-food industry), and digitalization of services.

Given the special situation of vulnerability of people in the rural areas, the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge has proposed several regulatory reforms to address the demographic challenge.

Although not specifically addressing NEETs, the recent Law 10/2021, of July 9, on distance work, must serve to make possible the opportunity to reverse depopulation, in accordance with the characteristics of the territories suffering demographic decline, such as rural and remote areas. In this sense, distance work is fundamental to favor the settlement and fixation of population in rural areas, especially among young people.

Moreover, the Family Budget Survey of the National Institute of Statistics shows that the proportion of expenditure dedicated to the purchase of fuels for transport with respect to total expenditure is higher in households in rural areas (5.6%) than the national average (4.2%). Therefore, it is planned to reinforce the effort in electrification of mobility in rural environments, characterized by low population and greater difficulty (due to distances to be covered, remoteness from urban centers, etc.), with the aim of greater territorial cohesion and to address the demographic challenge.

Other planned reforms include the drafting of a basic statute for small municipalities, demographic impact assessment, the preparation of gender impact reports, children applied to the demographic challenge, the reform of the regional and local financing system, the preparation of the Spain 2030 Sustainable Tourism Strategy, the elimination of pharmaceutical co-payment for vulnerable groups, the promotion of multilevel governance in the face of the demographic challenge, the Joint Cross-Border Development Strategy with Portugal, the promotion of the 2030 Agenda at the local level and the creation of the demographic challenge observatory.

Regarding specific policies addressing youth in the rural environment, the Youth Strategy 2030 refers in its Axis 8, Youth and the rural world. Specifically, the goal of this strategic axis is to convert the rural environment into a space of opportunities for youth and promote the green transition.

Finally, urgent measures were implemented in 2020 to attend vulnerable individuals, severely vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion. Royal Decree-Law 8/2020, of March 17 and Royal Decree-Law 8/2021, of May 4 guaranteed water and energy supply to vulnerable consumers severely vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion and the mortgage debt moratorium. Royal Decree-Law 11/2020, of March 31, adopted the suspension of the eviction procedures for vulnerable households without a housing alternative. Royal Decree-Law 12/2020, of March 31 adopted urgent measures regarding protection and assistance to victims of gender violence.

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

Regarding education, the Royal Decree-Law 31/2020, of September 29, which adopts urgent measures in the field of non-university education introduced measures to favour the temporary hiring of new teachers, to adapt educational programming to the situations arising from the pandemic and to modify the evaluation and promotion criteria for all primary education, compulsory secondary, baccalaureate, and vocational training courses. Other measures were also implemented to include elements of educational reinforcement. Among these programs, the following stand out: Curricular Diversification, created in the mid-1990s (Secretaría de Estado, 1996) and recovered precisely during the pandemic in the Organic Law of Education 3/2020, LOMLOE, (Gobierno de España, 2020), and the Educational Success and Truancy Reduction plans developed by the different autonomous communities.

It is also worth mentioning the Program for Educational Orientation, Advancement and Enrichment (Programa para la Orientación, Avance y Enriquecimiento Educativo PROA+). This program is developed by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, with the participation of the Autonomous Communities, and is part of component 21 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Mechanism. This program focuses on centers of special educational complexity and aims to support the educational success of students, especially vulnerable students, to reduce school leaving and early school leaving rates by providing resources and training to centers with the greatest difficulties. On 2020, Spain approved the Organic Law 3/2020, of December 29, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, of May 3, on Education, (LOMLOE: Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación) which aims to increase educational and training opportunities for the entire population, contributing to the improvement of the educational achievement of students. Despite the limitations in mobility during this two-year period, which included the closure or partial opening of educational centers, as well as the transition from face-to-face to online learning during the last quarter of the academic year 2019-2020, the lowest early dropout rates in the last decade were achieved. Education authorities ensured that equity among students was maintained by allocating public resources to provide disadvantaged students with computer tools and access to internet connectivity. Urgent measures were also approved for the modernization of the Public Administration and for the implementation of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, which has since enabled European funds to be allocated to make improvements in the education system through: improving the digital competence of both teachers and schools themselves within the European reference framework (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2020) , increasing the number of guidance counsellors and community service teachers, promoting robotics, online textbook licenses and reading platforms for students, reducing absenteeism, emotional education programs to overcome post-pandemic trauma, mental health programs to prevent self-harming behaviour and prevention of suicidal behaviour, among others.

In the case of vocational training component 20 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Mechanism: Strategic Plan to promote Vocational Training (Plan estratégico de impulso de la Formación Profesional), includes two major reforms (I) The Plan to modernize Vocational Training, which guarantees professional training and qualification that responds to the growing supply of jobs that require an intermediate qualification and that facilitates the incorporation and maintenance of the population in the labor market and (II) the Law of Management of the comprehensive Vocational Training system (Ley de Ordenación del sistema integral de Formación Profesional vinculado al Sistema Nacional de Cualificaciones) linked to the National Qualifications System, which develops a new model of vocational training under the principles of long life learning. This component also includes three areas of investments. The first regards reskilling and upskilling of the active population linked to professional qualifications, and covers four large areas of measures: (I) Recognition and accreditation of basic and professional competencies, (II) Digital modular offer for people in employment, (III) The flexibility and accessibility of vocational training through the creation of “Mentor Classrooms” and (IV) Modular training aimed at reskilling and upskilling of employed and unemployed people. The second and third areas of investments refers to Digital Transformation of Vocational Training, and the Innovation and internationalization of Vocational Training. On 2022, Spain also approved the Organic Law 3/2022, of March 31, on the Organization and Integration of Vocational Training, (Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de ordenación e integración de la Formación Profesional). which aims to develop a new model of vocational training under the principles of lifelong training.

Regarding University, based on the requirements from the EU, Spain had to reinforce its commitment regarding lifelong learning by approving the Action Plan for the Development of University Micro-credentials (2023). Accordingly, the government has set a budget of 48.5 million euros to the Autonomous Communities for universities to offer micro-credentials (which are shorter courses for adults, even without a baccalaureate) of shorter duration and more flexible, to improve their access to the labour market. Micro-credentials aim to be used for upskilling (teaching a worker new skill to improve his or her performance) and reskilling (training a professional to adapt to a new position). This year Spain has approved the Organic Law 2/2023, of March 22, of the University System. (Ley orgánica 2/2023, de 22 de Marzo del Sistema Universitario).

Besides, the 2030 Youth Strategy includes in its axis 1 inclusive, equitable and quality education and training, and lifelong learning. In any case, it does not make express reference to the situation of the 25+Needs. This axis aims to guarantee the adolescent and young population the right to education, training and lifelong, inclusive and quality learning at all educational stages. Among others, this axis includes three objectives: (I) Guarantee universal, inclusive and comprehensive education in Compulsory Secondary Education, Baccalaureate and Special Regime Education, (II) Guarantee a public, accessible

and quality University: priority to the student body, and (III) Promote a single system for quality, inclusive and flexible Vocational Training throughout life.

Regarding digital skills, during the pandemic, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation launched in May 2020 a package of support and training, through a training service for employment and two calls for grants to accelerate the digitisation process of young people and companies and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their activity. The training service for youth employment in the digital economy aimed to develop training activities in classroom and online mode, for the acquisition and improvement of ICT skills and the provision of a career guidance service. Each training course (both face-to-face and online) consisted of a minimum of 250 teaching hours, of which at least 220 must be dedicated to the specific content of the course subject and a minimum of 30 to employability (improvement of digital skills, digital professional competences). Not only during the more severe times of the pandemic, but also during the afterwards of the crisis, the government took measures regarding digitalisation like those included in the Component 19 "National Digital Skills Plan" of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan. The objective of this component is to guarantee the digital training and inclusion of workers and citizens as a whole, in order to boost the creation of quality jobs, reduce unemployment, increase productivity and contribute to closing gender, social and territorial gaps. It is included in the Digital Agenda Spain 2025.

The National Digital Skills Plan addresses the entire population, from school to university digitalisation, including upskilling and reskilling at work, with a special focus on closing the gender gap and boosting training in areas of demographic decline. The plan aims to guarantee digital inclusion, leaving no one behind in the digitalisation process and advancing in the development of basic citizen skills, so that all people can, among other actions, communicate, shop, carry out transactions or interact with administrations using digital technologies with autonomy and sufficiency. The National Digital Skills Plan is part of the Spain 2025 Digital Agenda, as a strategic line to strengthen the digital skills of workers and citizens as a whole, reducing the percentage of the Spanish population that lacks basic digital skills.

Component 19 is structured into four lines of action that act on a set of challenges to be addressed: (i) transversal digital training for citizenship (digital citizenship), with emphasis on the digital empowerment of women and girls, so that all people can, among other actions, communicate, shop, carry out transactions or interact with the Administrations using digital technologies with autonomy and sufficiency; (ii) the development of digital skills for education, from school to university, including Vocational Training; (iii) training in digital skills throughout the working life (upskilling and reskilling, both in upskilling and reskilling); (iv) training in digital skills throughout the working life, both in the (ii) the development of digital skills for education, from the digitisation of school to university, including vocational training; (iii) training in digital skills throughout working life (upskilling and reskilling, both for

the unemployed and the employed), with a focus on the development of digital skills for SMEs; and (iv) the promotion of ICT specialists.

3.3 Mental health support

In the context of Spain two national strategies addressing mental health have been approved after COVID-19, the Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System (2022-2026) - Estrategia de Salud Mental del Sistema Nacional de Salud (2022-2026) and the Youth Strategy 2030 “Bases for a new social contract with youth.” - Estrategia de Juventud 2030 “Bases para un nuevo contrato social con la juventud”.

In 2022, the Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System (2022-2026) was approved. Its aim is to improve the mental health of the population at all levels and areas of care of the National Health System. Although the diagnosis of the situation refers to the population in different age groups, the strategy does not refer to the group of young people over 25. Nevertheless, its strategic line 5 refers to Mental Health in childhood and adolescence. On the other hand, regarding the consequences of COVID-19, it refers to the need to reinforce care for the adolescent population with more complex mental health problems.

On the other hand, the 2030 Youth Strategy “Bases for a new social contract with youth” establishes in its axis 4 “Comprehensive health and quality of life” various strategic objectives, including Objective 4.1. “Promote the mental well-being of youth, prevent suicide and end the stigmatization of mental health problems”. It proposes several lines of action that aim to pay special attention to the young and adolescent population with mental health problems and provide care services with the necessary and sufficient resources for their correct detection and treatment, in the health context. school and social services in particular, promote their personal development, self-esteem and the acquisition of skills necessary for greater mental well-being, and fight against the stigma of mental health problems and suicide.

Among the laws approved after the pandemic and linked to mental health problems, two stand out:

Law 8/2021, of June 2, which reforms civil and procedural legislation to support people with disabilities in the exercise of their legal capacity. (Ley 8/2021, de 2 de junio, por la que se reforma la legislación civil y procesal para el apoyo a las personas con discapacidad en el ejercicio de su capacidad jurídica)

Royal Decree 689/2021, of August 3, which establishes the title of doctor/or specialist in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (Real Decreto 689/2021, de 3 de agosto, por el que se establece el título de médica/o especialista en Psiquiatría Infantil y de la Adolescencia).

4. Conclusion

This report has addressed the main challenges faced by 25+ NEETs during the pandemic as well as the support measures that have affected NEETs and 25+NEETs in particular. Our report shows the limited information available for this particular group, which has led to extend the analysis carried out in some subsections to other groups of NEETs, youth, or even general population. Despite this limitation, the result of our analysis leads to several conclusions.

First, COVID-19 implied a rise in the rate of 25+ NEETs in Spain in 2020, a rise that was higher compared to average EU. Nevertheless, this rate has declined both in 2021 and 2022, reaching 17,1%. Data provided by Eurostat also shows that the increase in the rate of 25+NEETs in 2020 was slightly higher in the case of men as compared to women and that it also has taken more time to reach pre pandemic levels in the case of men. The rise in 25+NEETs rate was due both to an increase in unemployment rates and to becoming inactive. However, the rate of 25+NEETs that reported that they did not want to work has lower since 2020.

The increase in unemployment rates of 25+NEETs seems to be related to the higher employment rate of youth on risky sectors that were also highly affected by the pandemic, such as hospitality. In addition, even in those sectors, the job instability of youth people is higher compared to the whole population. This may be related to the higher temporality and part time contracts which was exacerbated during COVID-19. Despite its current downward trend after the pandemic, there is still a greater precariousness of the working conditions (especially temporary and part time contracts) among young people.

In terms of gender, statistics and previous studies for the general population during the pandemic show a larger drop in income and greater difficulties for income recovery for women, particularly in the middle class. Additionally, they experienced higher employment losses in part due to the higher proportion of women in the sectors most affected by the pandemic. During the pandemic the rates of social exclusion for the 25-29 age group experienced a higher increase in the case of women compared to men.

Several studies consider that the pandemic may be a turning point for rural areas. Statistics show that rural areas have increased their young population and decreased the percentage of NEETs, improving in youth employment, risk of poverty or social exclusion, young people in education, self-perceived health, and households with broadband Internet connection.

Regarding the effects of COVID.19 on education from the perspective of parents, although in the 25-29 age group levels of maternity and paternity are lower than the average EU, maternity and paternity rates are negatively related to the level of education and to being employed, which suggests that the problem of reconciling child care with a search for a job during the pandemic may have been higher in the case

of 25+NEETs. These difficulties have been even higher in the case of single- parent families, particularly single mother families.

In terms of difficulties linked to upskilling and reskilling, the rates of early dropout from education in Spain were reduced in 2020, but have slightly increased in the aftermath of the pandemic. Nevertheless, the pandemic may have had higher consequences in the case of vulnerable youth due the educational and digital gap. Among the main barriers during the pandemic, literature suggests the access to internet and to devices for educational purposes, as well as differences in digital skills. More than 9% of youth do not have a personal computer or laptop; a broadband Internet connection and scarcity of financial resources to acquire them.

Despite its large decline during the pandemic, the employment of young people (16-25 years old) with disabilities has rebounded rapidly in the aftermath.

Regarding the effect of the pandemic on mental health, COVID has had a profound impact on the health of Spanish people. Studies on mental health in Spain indicate that levels of sadness, depression, worry and feelings of isolation increased considerably during the pandemic. Women, young adults in the 25-29 age group, those who went through solitary lockdown, people with less education, and the unemployed were the most likely to feel distress. Therefore, we can conclude that NEETs were a group of young people who suffered high distress in that period, especially women and those who lived alone during lockdown.

Regarding support measures, most of the national policies and strategies developed in Spain to avoid the negative consequences of the pandemic on economic activity, unemployment, education and health targeted the general population. Nevertheless, Spain has developed two national level strategies after COVID-19 addressing youth and NEETs. Youth is addressed by the National Youth Strategy 2030 and NEETs are specifically addressed by the Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021 - 2027 of decent work for young people (*Plan Garantía Juvenil Plus 2021-2027 de Trabajo Digno para las Personas Jóvenes*). This Youth Guarantee Plan Plus 2021 - 2027 uses the higher impact of the pandemic on youth as starting point to set its priorities (education and training, employment opportunities, or equal access to employment) as well as measures aimed at vulnerable groups).

Besides, other Royal Decree Laws were approved aimed at the general population, which have also affected youth and 25+NEETs. Among others, preventive measures such as the Temporary Workforce Reduction Schemes (ERTEs). Other measures were related to maintaining and promoting the online training of workers during the lockdown, including those allowing the workers in an ERTE situation to register in online training. In addition, other social protection measures allowed getting benefits to those workers facing the end of a temporary contract or domestic workers.

In the aftermath of the crisis the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan and specifically within the component 23, 'New public policies for a dynamic, resilient and inclusive labour market', set a framework for the government to start undertaking reforms. One of the main measures under this component 23 were those related to remote working (to favour the implementation of remote work among businesses and public administrations). The component 23 also establishes the basis for the Spanish Active Employment Support Strategy 2021-2024, the only strategy that refers to the millennial generation as such defines a framework to support permanent contracts and entrepreneurship among the millennials. As well as fighting gender gap and promoting equal pay, the component 23 sets as one of its priorities promoting youth employment and refers to the main programs to do so: Tandem Youth Employment, First professional experience in public administrations, and Research Program.

Other measures have been developed that may indirectly or directly condition the gender gap, such as those favoring remote work and the equal pay between men and women.

During the pandemic and the aftermath of the pandemic several laws have been implemented in all education levels Due to its more direct effect on 25+NEETs it is worth mentioning the Strategic Plan to promote Vocational Training which is addressed by component 20 of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Mechanism, as well as the Organic Law 3/2022, of March 31, on the Organization and Integration of Vocational Training, (Ley Orgánica 3/2022, de 31 de marzo, de ordenación e integración de la Formación Profesional). The digital gap is addressed by the development of the component 19 "National Digital Skills Plan"

Finally, two national strategies addressing mental health were approved after COVID-19, the Mental Health Strategy of the National Health System (2022-2026) -Estrategia de Salud Mental del Sistema Nacional de Salud (2022-2026) and the Youth Strategy 2030 "Bases for a new social contract with youth." - Estrategia de Juventud 2030 "Bases para un nuevo contrato social con la juventud". This later strategy focuses on youth but does not directly focus on NEETs.

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