

# Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – POLAND

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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](mailto:lm.leadpartner@hetfa.hu) and follow our social media ([Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)).

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## Implemented by:



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## 1. Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic made its first official appearance in Poland on March 4th, 2020, marking the beginning of a series of rigorous preventive measures implemented by the government to curb the spread of the virus. As the gravity of the situation became increasingly evident, Poland's Prime Minister took the step of declaring epidemic status for the country on March 20th, 2020. This declaration resulted in a period of unprecedented changes and challenges for the country. In the months that followed, Poland, like many other countries, found itself with the need to impose various forms of lockdowns and restrictions. These restrictions became even more stringent after the summer of 2020 and extended into the autumn and winter of the same year. The strict measures, though necessary for public health, inevitably took a toll on various aspects of daily life, including education and the economy.

The government's response to the pandemic included a combination of restrictive measures, such as lockdowns and social distancing, and efforts to ramp up testing and vaccination. Testing centres were established throughout the country, and testing was widely available. Vaccination began in December 2020, with priority given to healthcare workers, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions. The vaccines from various manufacturers were distributed across the country, with the aim of achieving herd immunity. Poland, like many other countries, faced challenges in vaccine distribution and supply, but efforts were made to secure and administer vaccines from multiple manufacturers to ensure a broad population coverage. The government also launched public awareness campaigns to encourage vaccination and combat vaccine hesitancy.

The economic repercussions of the pandemic in Poland were multifaceted. Remarkably, the country managed to keep its unemployment rate relatively stable during this period. The unemployment rate in Poland stood at 3.3% in 2019, only dipping slightly to 3.2% in 2020, before rising to 3.4% in 2021 and eventually dropping to 2.9% in 2022, marking the end of the pandemic (ILO, 2023). This stability in employment figures is noteworthy, given the global economic turbulence caused by the pandemic. However, Poland's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth experienced a more significant drop. It decreased from a robust 4.5% growth in 2019 to -2% in 2020, showing the severe impact of the pandemic on the country's economic landscape. Nevertheless, it also displayed a later significant rebound, recording a remarkable 6.8% growth in 2021 (World Bank, 2023).

One of the most profoundly impacted sectors was education. Over the course of the pandemic, schools in Poland were partially closed for a total of 18 weeks and fully closed for 26 weeks (UNESCO, 2022). These closures led to a substantial disruption in the learning process and had a lasting impact on students. The effectiveness of remote schooling came into question, and studies suggest that this period of interrupted education could result in a predicted loss of approximately 7.2% of Poland's gross

domestic product (Gajderowicz et al., 2022). The long-term consequences of this disruption may only become fully evident in the years to come.

The population of young people classified as neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET) in Poland did not experience an immediate, pronounced impact when the COVID-19 pandemic initially emerged, mirroring the trend observed across the European Union (as indicated in Table 1). However, it is crucial to emphasize that while the pandemic's immediate effects on this demographic might not have been as evident, its repercussions could potentially be enduring. This persistence is anticipated to lead to both economic and psychological consequences, which may gradually surface over time, marking a shift in the NEET landscape among young individuals.

**Table 1. NEET rates in Poland and the European Union, 2015-2022**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
European Union	15.5%	14.8%	14.0%	13.3%	12.8%	13.9%	13.1%	11.7%
Poland	14.9%	14.0%	13.0%	12.2%	12.0%	13.1%	13.4%	10.9%

Source: Eurostat (Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu)).

In the initial stages of the pandemic, efforts were made by governments and educational institutions in Poland, as well as across Europe, to reduce the impact on NEET by offering support and guidance, such as remote learning opportunities and job retention measures. These actions aimed to maintain a sense of continuity and security in the lives of young people who were not in employment, education, or training. Nonetheless, the latent and more subtle effects of the pandemic are now coming into sharper focus. Over the longer term, the disruption in education and training caused by lockdowns, social restrictions, and the shift to online learning may affect the skill development and educational attainment of young individuals. This, in turn, can have repercussions on their employability and future earning potential. Moreover, the psychological toll of the pandemic, including the stress and uncertainty it brought, could influence the motivation and mental well-being of young people, potentially leading to extended periods of disengagement from work and learning.

## 2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

In Poland, as in many countries, the issue of young people classified as NEET, which stands for "Not in Employment, Education, or Training," has been a subject of considerable concern and policy attention. NEETs represent a demographic group comprised of individuals typically between the ages of 15 and 29 who are disengaged from formal education, the labour market, and vocational training. Understanding

and addressing the challenges faced by NEETs is crucial, as it has far-reaching implications for both individual well-being and the broader economy.

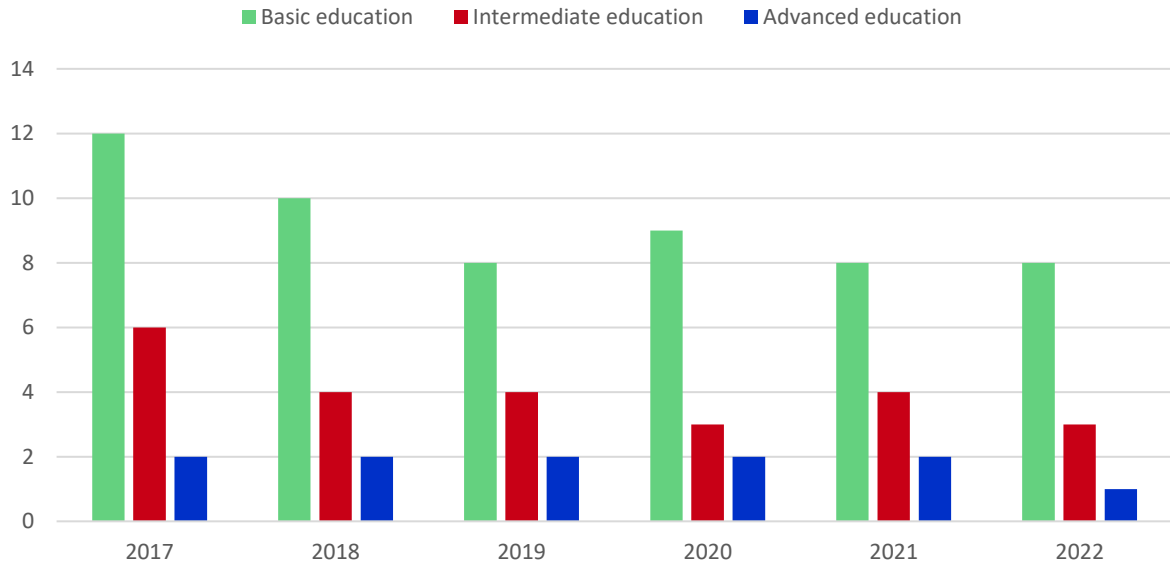
The dynamics of NEETs in Poland are influenced by various factors, including economic conditions, educational opportunities, and social support systems. High NEET rates can be indicative of systemic issues, such as a mismatch between the skills of young people and the demands of the labour market, inadequate access to quality education and training, and the impact of external shocks, such as economic crises or, as seen recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts to reduce NEET rates in Poland have involved a combination of policy initiatives aimed at providing better education and training opportunities, promoting youth employment, and offering social support to young individuals at risk of disengagement. These initiatives aim to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills and opportunities necessary to transition successfully into the labour market and achieve personal and economic independence. Addressing the NEET issue is not only vital for the well-being and prospects of young individuals but also plays a significant role in shaping the future of the Polish workforce and the country's economic development.

## 2.1 Labour market

The labour market in Poland has not suffered from significant disruptions as a result of the pandemic, as noted previously. Nonetheless, it is important to remark how differences are notable depending on the education level (Figure 1). This is because the NEET population, not being engaged in training or formal education, may suffer from even lower opportunities than the population with a basic education, which is the one with the highest unemployment rate compared to intermediate or advanced education. It should also be noted how the population with a basic education is the only one showing a constant trend in terms of unemployment after the pandemic, while people with intermediate or advanced education show lower tendencies. This is a further confirmation of the need to focus on people with no or basic education, as they may experience the most difficulties as a result of the pandemic.

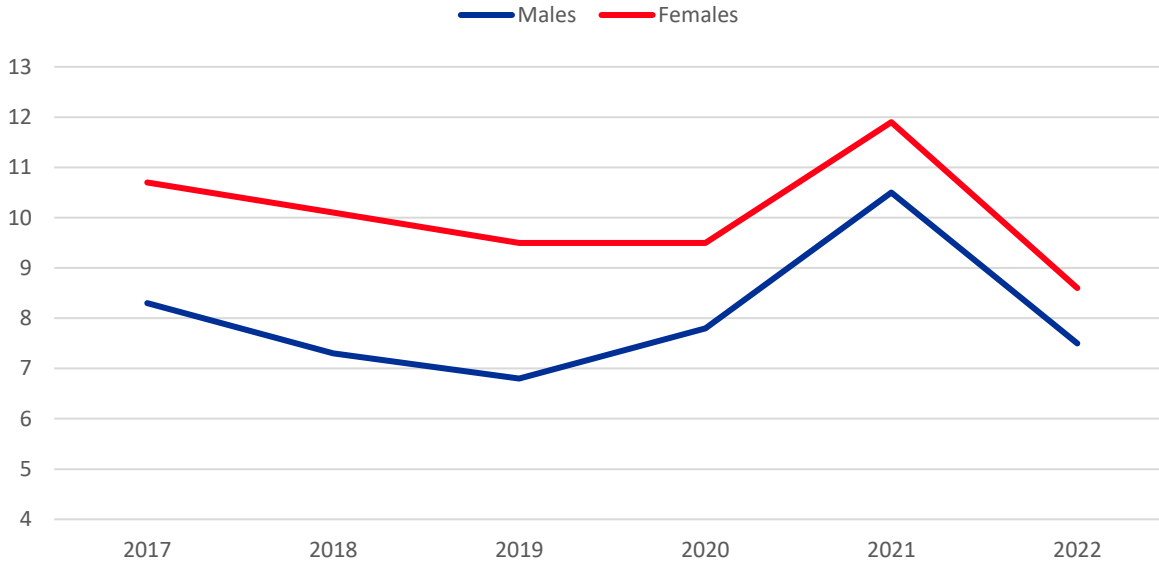
Figure 1. Unemployment rate by education in Poland



Source: ILO, 2023.

The trends based on gender for the NEET population show consistency, although females present higher shares of the population not employed or in education (Figure 2). It should also be noted how there is a slight inconsistency in terms of overall shares between the data provided by the Eurostat (Table 1) and the International Labor Office (Figure 2). This can be seen as an indication of the difficulties that are inherent in the measurement of such an index for the country, due to which many young people who are not in education, employment or training may be missed entirely by the national and international statistics on the topic. For this reason, it is also possible that a large number of young people are included in this definition but are not surveyed and therefore not identified as in need.

Figure 2. Gender gaps in NEET population (aged 15-29)



Source: ILO, 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant disruptions in the employment landscape for young people in Poland. The pandemic's containment measures, including lockdowns and social distancing, resulted in the widespread closure of businesses, particularly in sectors where many young people were employed, such as hospitality, retail, and service industries. As businesses struggled to weather the economic downturn, they were forced to lay off employees, creating a surge in youth unemployment. The sudden loss of job opportunities and income had an immediate and substantial impact on the financial well-being of young individuals. Furthermore, young people preparing to enter the job market or those who had recently graduated found their transition into the workforce significantly disrupted. Entry-level job opportunities became scarce, and competition for these positions intensified. The delay in commencing their careers could have lasting implications for their earning potential and career progression.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on parenting and has been closely intertwined with a surge in mental health issues. The extended periods of lockdowns, school closures, and social isolation placed immense stress on parents, who were suddenly juggling work, childcare, and home-schooling responsibilities (Parczewska, 2021). This added burden, often with limited external support, resulted in heightened parental stress and burnout. Moreover, the uncertainty and fear associated with the virus, along with financial and job insecurities, compounded the psychological toll on parents (Długosz, 2021). The effects of this chronic stress and anxiety had a ripple effect on mental health, leading to an increase in conditions such as depression and anxiety among parents. The pandemic has also significantly



impacted vulnerable groups such as the elderly (Dziedzic et al., 2021) and young unemployed people (Mazurkiewicz, 2022).

**Table 2. NEET rates among young adults (aged 25-29)**

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<i>EU-27</i>	19.5%	18.4%	17.7%	17.2%	18.6%
<i>Czechia</i>	17.2%	15.3%	15.2%	15.8%	17.5%
<i>Poland</i>	18.9%	18.0%	17.2%	17.7%	19.4%
<i>Slovakia</i>	21.7%	22.1%	21.3%	20.7%	22.0%

Source: Nałęcz, 2021.

Table 2 shows the shares of older NEETs, aged 25-29, found in Poland in comparison with the European Union and the neighbouring Czechia and Slovakia for the years leading up to the pandemic. It can be noted how Poland’s shares are in line with the ones of the European Union, and decreasing from 18.9% in 2016 to 17.7% in 2019. Nonetheless, the share of older NEETs increases back to 19.4% in 2020, the last year for which the data was available in Nałęcz (2021). It is important to note that the effects of the pandemic on the share of NEETs in Poland, especially the older ones aged 25 to 29, may have been longer lasting than just in 2020, thus requiring efforts to survey the real share of the population who is not employed or in education in the country.

## 2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the critical importance of reskilling and upskilling in Poland as it prompted a significant transformation in the labour market and workplace dynamics. With the acceleration of digitalization and automation, many traditional job roles evolved, and new skills became essential. In response to these shifts, individuals and employers increasingly recognized the need for continuous learning and skill development.

Poland, like other countries, witnessed a growing emphasis on reskilling initiatives during the pandemic (Radulov, 2020). Various organizations and institutions, including government bodies and private companies, expanded their online learning and training programs. These efforts aimed to equip the workforce with the digital, technical, and adaptability skills needed to thrive in the changing job landscape. Poland was one of the EU countries that provided digital skills training to public employees in the first year of the pandemic (Vasile, 2021). The government introduced schemes to support the

unemployed and those affected by the economic repercussions of the pandemic in acquiring new skills and transitioning into emerging sectors (Denk & Königs, 2022).

For many, the pandemic-induced slowdown provided an opportunity to engage in online courses and training, helping them develop skills that would enhance their employability in a post-pandemic world. The recognition of reskilling as a crucial aspect of workforce development has become a lasting legacy of the pandemic, ensuring that individuals in Poland are better prepared to navigate evolving job market demands and contribute to the country's economic recovery and growth.

## 2.3 Mental health and well-being

We do not possess specific data on the mental health of the 25-29 age bracket population or 25+ NEETs in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, some studies were run in Poland to investigate how the pandemic has impacted mental health and its predictors.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of individuals in Poland has been profound, with reports revealing significant decreases in happiness and life satisfaction among the population (Gawrych et al., 2020). This decline in well-being is indicative of the broader mental health challenges that have emerged during these challenging times. Such challenges were underscored by a concerning statistic: almost one in four participants in a survey reported experiencing suicidal thoughts, reflecting the depth of emotional and psychological distress that many individuals were grappling with during the pandemic (Chodkiewicz et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the pandemic brought about changes in coping strategies, as 16% of the surveyed participants reported an increase in risky alcohol consumption (Chodkiewicz et al., 2021). The increase in alcohol consumption as a means of coping is an alarming trend, as it not only indicates rising levels of stress and emotional strain but also the need for accessible mental health support and interventions. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic was not uniform, as one in five participants reported symptoms of anxiety disorders, with a more pronounced effect observed among women, younger individuals, and those with preexisting mental health conditions (Chodkiewicz et al., 2021).

In addition to these individual-level mental health challenges, the pandemic also brought to the forefront a sense of collective concern and frustration, as people expressed significant worries for others and highlighted perceived failures in the healthcare system (Gawrych et al., 2020). The crisis not only evaluated the resilience of individuals but also raised important questions about the capacity and preparedness of healthcare systems and the need for robust social support structures in times of unprecedented stress and uncertainty. Addressing these mental health challenges and the associated concerns is vital for supporting the overall well-being of individuals in Poland as they navigate the enduring impacts of the pandemic.

## 3. Support measures

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### 3.1 Employment and financial support

The government provided different measures in terms of financial support. In addition to schemes that were already existing, new subsidies and barriers for the employed were put in place, in order to reduce the negative impacts of the pandemic and the switch to remote learning on workers. In terms of employment and financial support, the government introduced a number of initiatives:

- **Wage subsidies:** The government implemented wage subsidy programs to alleviate the financial burden on businesses facing pandemic-related challenges. These subsidies covered a portion of employees' wages, enabling employers to retain their workforce and minimize layoffs, ultimately contributing to economic stability and social security.
- **Job retention schemes:** Various job retention schemes were introduced to provide financial relief to businesses significantly impacted by the pandemic. These initiatives aimed to assist employers in maintaining their workforce by offering financial support, helping to sustain employment levels in a time of economic uncertainty.
- **Unemployment benefits:** Unemployment benefits were extended and made more accessible to individuals who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. These expanded benefits served as a crucial safety net for those facing sudden unemployment, offering financial assistance during challenging times.
- **Support for the self-employed:** Recognizing the unique challenges faced by self-employed individuals, the government provided financial assistance in the form of grants and relief measures. These measures were designed to help the self-employed navigate financial difficulties and sustain their businesses during the crisis.

### 3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

The government also supported a number of initiatives in the field of reskilling and upskilling. The aim of these new programs was to support the unemployed in finding a job in the changed labour market that resulted from the pandemic, as well as improve the skills of those whose job may have been at risk due to the changing economic landscape. In particular, the government introduced the following initiatives:

- **Online training programs:** As the importance of continuous learning became more apparent, the government and educational institutions expanded online training programs. These programs allowed individuals to develop new skills, adapt to changing job requirements, and pursue personal and professional growth from the safety of their homes.

- Subsidized courses: To encourage participation in reskilling and upskilling courses, the government offered subsidies and grants. These financial incentives made it more affordable for individuals to engage in educational programs that would enhance their employability and equip them with relevant skills.
- Vocational training initiatives: With an eye on addressing the specific skill needs of the labour market, vocational training initiatives were introduced. These programs targeted high-demand sectors and provided individuals with practical skills that aligned with the evolving job landscape.
- Youth employment programs: Recognizing the challenges young people faced in a changing job market, special programs were designed to support them. These initiatives aimed to provide opportunities for youth to acquire new skills and gain experience in emerging sectors, helping them secure a foothold in the job market.

### 3.3 Mental health support

Mental health also received attention, given both the observed impact on people during the pandemic and the expected long-lasting effects possibly resulting from a missing intervention. Thus, some measures were implemented in order to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health.

These included:

- Telehealth services: To ensure continuity of mental health care, the government expanded telehealth and teleconsulting services. These services allowed individuals to access professional support remotely, promoting mental well-being while adhering to social distancing measures.
- Crisis helplines: The introduction of crisis helplines provided immediate assistance to individuals experiencing emotional distress or in crisis situations. These helplines played a vital role in offering emotional support and guidance during challenging times.
- Awareness campaigns: Public awareness campaigns were launched to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health issues. These campaigns aimed to educate the public about the importance of mental well-being and encourage individuals to seek help when needed, promoting a more supportive and understanding society.
- Increased access to mental health professionals: Steps were taken to increase the number of mental health professionals and improve their accessibility. This expansion of mental health services aimed to ensure that individuals could readily access the care and support they required, contributing to the overall resilience of the population's mental health.

## 4. Conclusion

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The COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in Poland in early 2020, starting in a period of unprecedented challenges and changes. The government quickly responded by implementing strict preventive measures to contain the virus's spread. As a result, Poland like many countries was faced with recurring lockdowns and restrictions. The government response encompassed both restrictive measures and efforts to enhance testing and vaccination rates, with a particular focus on healthcare workers, the elderly, and vulnerable individuals. Nonetheless, these measures have had an economic impact, both on the labour market conditions and on the general well-being of Polish citizens and workers. In the economic domain, Poland displayed a remarkable degree of resilience in maintaining a relatively stable unemployment rate during the pandemic. However, the country experienced a significant decline in its GDP growth, which plunged from 4.5% in 2019 to -2% in 2020. Yet, the subsequent economic recovery was substantial, rebounding to a 6.8% GDP growth in 2021.

Education, however, was profoundly impacted, with extended school closures causing significant disruption in the learning process. The efficacy of remote schooling was scrutinized, and studies suggested a potential loss of approximately 7.2% of Poland's GDP due to interrupted education (Gajderowicz et al., 2022). This disruption in learning could have far-reaching consequences on the future of the country's workforce and educational attainment. In the context of the NEET population, Poland exhibited a degree of resilience, with NEET rates not immediately surging in response to the pandemic, mirroring trends observed in the European Union. However, the enduring effects of the pandemic could manifest as economic and psychological consequences over time. Young individuals not in employment, education, or training may struggle with prolonged disengagement, impacting their motivation and well-being.

The pandemic prompted a significant emphasis on reskilling and upskilling, with expanded online training programs, subsidies for courses, vocational training initiatives, and youth employment programs. These initiatives addressed the evolving job landscape and equipped the workforce with the digital and technical skills necessary for post-pandemic employability. Mental health and well-being also faced profound challenges, as the pandemic took a toll on happiness and life satisfaction, leading to alarming rates of suicidal thoughts, risky alcohol consumption, and anxiety disorders. The pandemic also revealed a collective sense of concern and frustration while highlighting healthcare system shortcomings. In response to these multifaceted challenges, the Polish government implemented various support measures. Financial support measures included wage subsidies, job retention schemes, extended unemployment benefits, and relief for the self-employed. Reskilling and upskilling initiatives expanded access to online training programs, subsidized courses, vocational training, and specialized

programs for youth employment. Mental health support encompassed telehealth services, crisis helplines, awareness campaigns, and increased access to mental health professionals.

Surveying the NEET population in Poland following the COVID-19 pandemic is of great importance, given the significant challenges and disruptions caused by the crisis, particularly for those aged 25 to 29 who may be face even lower opportunities for re-entering society. First, conducting comprehensive surveys to assess the impact of the pandemic on the NEET population aged 25-29 is vital for understanding the long-term consequences of the disruptions. While initial data may indicate that this group was less immediately affected, it is crucial to recognize that the implications of the pandemic may be enduring, reshaping their educational skills, employability, and overall well-being over time. Surveying this age group would enable to investigate the latent effects that may not be apparent in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

Secondly, a comprehensive survey can help identify the challenges and obstacles that people not employed or in education face in their transitions to employment and education, providing evidence in areas where targeted interventions are required. In a rapidly changing labour market, understanding the specific needs and barriers faced by these individuals is essential for designing effective policies and support systems that facilitate their engagement in the workforce and education. In summary, surveying the NEET population aged 25-29 in Poland in the wake of the pandemic is essential for understanding the pandemic's long-term effects, informing policy decisions, and ensuring that this crucial age group can successfully manage to live and work in the evolving economic landscape.

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