

Impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on 25+ NEETs

COUNTRY REPORT – ROMANIA

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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

The Romanian state has responded to the outbreak by imposing a strict closure, following World Health Organisation guidelines. First, a state of emergency was declared on 16 March 2020, followed by a national closure on 29 March 2020, which included several restrictions such as strict limitations on movement or night curfews, teleworking, temporary closure of restaurants, cafés, shopping centres (except for food sales), etc. (Dumitras et al., 2021). This period lasted for almost two months, as the closure was eased to a "state of alert" on 15 May. Exit was then allowed, but face masks had to be worn in enclosed areas where there was a risk of encountering other people. Some small shops could open, but not hotels and restaurants. Mobility restrictions were also eased, but those travelling outside the municipality of permanent residence had to fill in a declaration of intent. Under strict rules, domestic and international flights were resumed. The relaxation also extended to hotels from 1 June, with restaurants allowed to open after 15 June (Crețan & Light, 2020).

In concordance with the other measures, in Romania, the initial lockdown of the schools was introduced, initially for 10 days, on March 11, 2020. But as the epidemic situation worsened, it was prolonged initially until the middle of April, but finally the whole academic year ended in lockdown, where all the final exams were conducted online. The first relaxation of the lockdown happened during the summer break, and the initial plan was that from the beginning of the 2020–2021 (in mid-September) academic year, everyone would return physically to the school. As the epidemic situation worsened (which was called the 4th wave) in the fall of 2020, Romania was forced to reintroduce the lockdown in schools, nurseries, and kindergartens (and in most of the universities too) on November 6, 2020, for 30 days. This period was the last with full lockdown.

One of the specificities of the Romanian epidemic situation is the increased migration, which has contributed to the spatial differences in the spread of the epidemic (Crețan & Light, 2020). Here, we can distinguish two trends. On the one hand, Romanian migrant workers returned to the country in large numbers when the COVID-19 epidemic intensified in the spring of 2020 in the countries where they worked, e.g., Italy and Spain. However, large numbers of migrant workers also left at the height of the epidemic because they were "needed" in Western European countries, especially in low-paid jobs (Crețan & Light, 2020). The Romanian government agreed to build a special air bridge for agricultural workers, resulting in 188 charter flights carrying seasonal workers to various European countries during the state of emergency (Mutler, 2020). Beyond the spread of the epidemic, the significance of this is that young people working temporarily abroad are statistically classified as NEETs, which encourages economic inactivity among both emigrants and their dependents, especially women, who remain at home (Caroleo et al., 2022).

The Roma community is at a higher risk of unemployment and inactivity (Eurofound, 2017). This is no different in Romania, where the Roma minority is significant among NEET youth (Toderiță et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation of the Roma community, amplifying racist overtones against this community. The Roma people were perceived as a collective health and security threat, resulting in some Roma communities facing further restrictions (Matache & Bhabha, 2020) or police crackdowns (Crețan & Light, 2020).

2. The impact of the pandemic on 25+ NEETs

2.1 Labour market

The Romanian economy and labour market were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as the whole economy reacted negatively to the general lockdown.

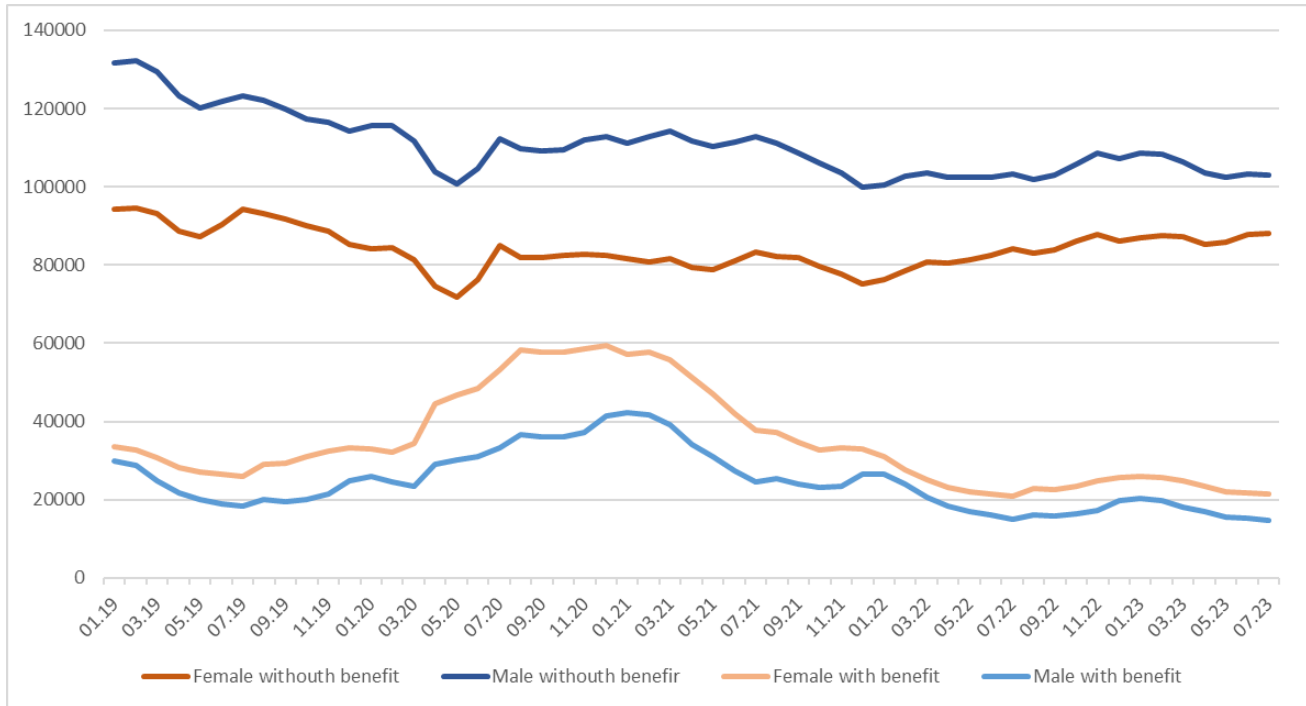
Even if the general context worsened for everyone, some segments of the population were more affected by this crisis.

Chivu and Georgescu (2020) stated that, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, the most affected and exposed to these negative effects were the vulnerable groups, which mostly worked in the grey economy and mostly in low-qualified jobs. A common characteristic of these people is that they usually lacked the social protection and social benefits that were available for legally employed persons.

As it is presented in the figure above, the gender differences are sizable in Romania. If we focus only strictly on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, it can be said that female workers were much more affected by unemployment than their male counterparts, as, from March 2020, the number of female workers receiving an unemployment benefit (which means that they were recently becoming unemployed) increased much more than the males. Looking at the long-term effect, the figure shows that the long- and short-term of unemployment reached at the end of 2021 those numbers that were characteristic of Romania before the pandemic.

The employment statistics also show that women were more affected, especially in the long term, by the constraints of the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic period, as, in comparison with the 2019 data, the number of the male workforce remained similar in 2020 and shrank to 91.5% in comparison with 2019. On the other hand, the women's workforce was 98.5% of the 2019 level and shrank to 87.1% in 2021.

Figure 1. The number of persons receiving unemployment benefits by gender between 01. 19. and 07. 23. in Romania



Source: INS; tempo online database, TEMPO_SOM101A.

2.2 Reskilling and upskilling

It is hard to find any evidence or research regarding the reskilling or upskilling of the Romanian workforce before or during the COVID-19 pandemic. What can be stated is that, according to statista¹ the remote workplace concept was virtually unknown in Romania, as in 2019, only 0.6% of the employees were working from home. Thanks to the lockdown, this situation has been changed radically in 2020, as, according to the same source, 24% of the employees worked from home.

Even if there is not too much information regarding the socio-economic status of those who could switch from the physical workplace to a virtual workplace, we can state that usually the white-collar jobs from the tertiary sector could adapt fast to the new situation. As a conclusion, those employees who are

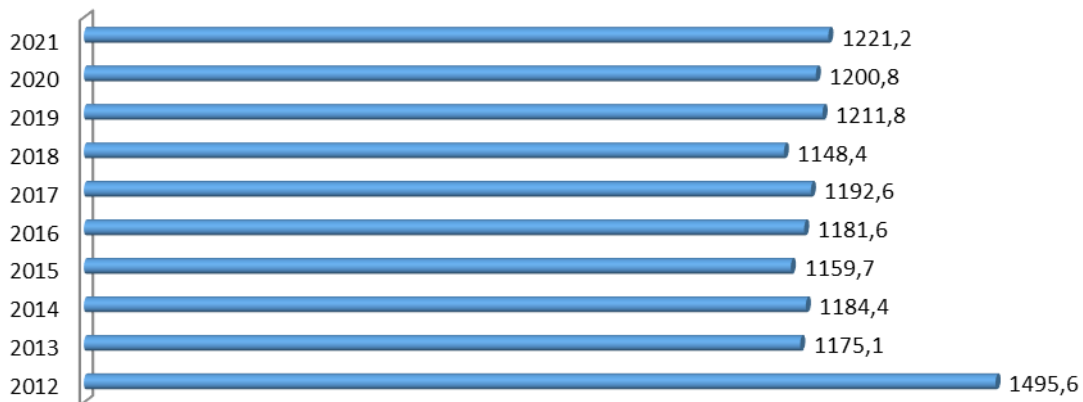
¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1222724/romania-employees-in-home-office/>

working in low-skilled, blue-collar jobs or who do not have the necessary knowledge and/or infrastructure to choose an online job usually lose their job.

2.3 Mental health and well-being

According to the WHO, mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual is aware of their abilities, can cope with everyday stressors, can work effectively, and contributes to their community. In this sense, mental health is the foundation of well-being and effective functioning (WHO, 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to prevent the spread of the virus have increased stressors and challenged individuals' coping skills. These stressors include fears of the disease and more indirect factors due to changes in social life (Chandola et al., 2022), which may consist of grief over losing loved ones. Consequently, the prevalence of mental illness per 100,000 inhabitants in the country showed a slight increase in 2021 compared to previous years (see figure). Despite this, few studies have addressed the psychological impact of the pandemic in Romania (Dumitrache et al., 2021).

Figure 2. Prevalence of mental illness in Romania, 2012-2021 (per 100.000 inhabitants)



Source: Ministerul Sănătății, 2023.

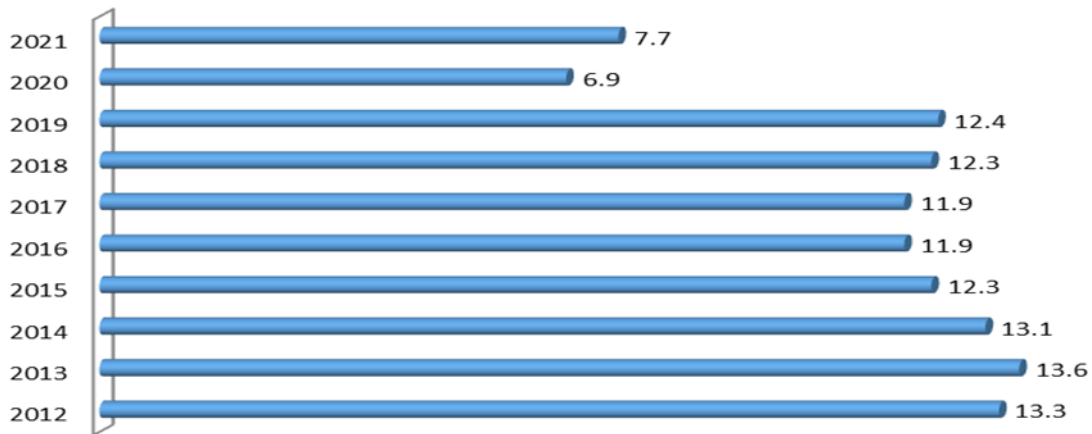
The coronavirus has severely disrupted young people's education and future employment prospects. Consequently, they were left uncertain, which also strongly affected their mental well-being (Bălan, 2022). These stressors could be amplified by isolation from peer groups, social isolation, lack of social leisure activities, etc. Not surprisingly, younger people in the country (18-45 years old) were about twice as anxious and more than twice as depressed as more senior people (45 and above). In Romania, age was thus a predictor of mental health symptoms during the pandemic (Vancea & Apostol, 2021).

While the measures taken to control the pandemic in the country had some positive effects, such as spending more time with their families, the adverse effects were worse, at least among the population

aged 18-40 in Bucharest. They significantly impacted mental health, with over two-thirds feeling bored, irritable, and tired. Depression, anxiety, loneliness, or stress also increased (Androniceanu & Marton, 2021).

As mental and physical health are mutually intertwined concepts (WHO, 2005), we cannot ignore the pandemic's impact on physical health. The health behaviour of the Romanian population is characterised not so much by prevention or health monitoring but rather by procrastination, which means that they often consult a doctor only as a last resort (Ipsos, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, limited access to the health system and the fear of infection with COVID-19 in clinics and hospitals exacerbated the avoidance and delay of health monitoring, even among chronic patients (Ipsos, 2021). This has been no different for mental health problems, with the rate of people hospitalised for mental disorders per 1,000 inhabitants falling sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure)

Figure 3. Number of discharges from hospital with a diagnosis of mental disorder (per 1000 inhabitants) in Romania between 2021 and 2021



Source: Ministerul Sănătății, 2023.

The problem is exacerbated by the country's negative perception of mental illness, where sufferers are stigmatised, considered dangerous, and often expelled (Ipsos, 2022). Stigma usually means that patients with mental health problems do not seek help or may not seek help until it is too late. Although the research findings relate to the adult population, there is no reason to believe this is more favourable among young NEETs aged 25-29. After all, NEET status is intertwined with youth mental health problems, predicting individual mental health status (Gariépy et al., 2022). Nevertheless, little research has examined the mental health status of Romanian youth or young NEETs during or after the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the few exceptions are studies focusing on university students (e.g. Cioca & Bratu, 2021; Dumitrache et al., 2021; Ștefenel et al., 2022; Silișteanu et al., 2022). Romanian university students

experienced various emotional states during the isolation period. Among them, boredom, irritability, and fear were above average. The scores of other manifestations (intolerance, hostility, crying, abandonment, despair, and panic) were also relatively high, approaching the mean values of the manifestations (Gavriliuța et al., 2022).

A proportion of university students in Suceava County reported an increase in unhealthy eating habits because of the pandemic, such as increased consumption of carbohydrates (37.15%) and fats (31.65%), smoking (32.11%) and coffee consumption (28.89%) (Silișteanu et al., 2022). Regarding mental health, there was a significant increase in anxiety and affective, cognitive, behavioural, and physical symptoms following the lockdown. In its combined manifestations, anxiety was reported in 73.39 per cent of students, at least among university students in Suceava County (Silișteanu et al., 2022).

More information on the pandemic's impact on young people's well-being can be found in national representative surveys. A quarter of young people aged 18-35 (26 per cent) think that one or more significant positive changes have occurred in their lives due to the pandemic. In comparison, over 50 per cent believe that one or more significant negative changes have occurred in their lives (IRES, 2021). Positive effects of the pandemic could include increased reading or physical activity, but this is not the case. Although 21% of young people aged 18-35 read more books due to the pandemic, 33% read less or not.

A similar trend for physical activity/sports can be observed: 17% were more active, but 33% were less active or inactive compared to the pre-pandemic period (IRES, 2021). An apparent positive effect of the pandemic in this age group is more time spent with household members and children. Forty-four per cent of respondents played more with their children than before the outbreak, and only 8 per cent played less with their children during the out. Conversely, they were able to spend less time with family members who did not live in the same household (50 per cent) and with friends (72 per cent) (IRES, 2021). Another positive finding was that they valued the things they had more (64 per cent) and thought more about the meaning of life (37 per cent). However, the results also show that a significant proportion (40 per cent) of people in this age group thought less about death during the pandemic than before. In contrast, a third (35 per cent) felt less or no sadness or depression, and two-tenths reported an increase in the frequency of these feelings (IRES, 2021).

In general, it can be said that people aged 35 and younger have generally managed to cope with the effects of the pandemic, even though half of them have experienced one or more negative changes in their lives. However, when looking at specific subgroups of young people (e.g. university students), it appears that levels of anxiety, depression or stress have increased as a result of the pandemic. Unfortunately, there is very little data on the mental health of the 25+ NEETs group.

3. Support measures

3.1 Employment and financial support

The Romanian government has adopted a series of measures to support the economy and companies starting from March of 2020.

Measures dedicated to self-employer natural persons:

Granting allowances incurred from the budget. During the state of emergency, allowances for the period of temporary suspension of the individual employment contract are supported from the unemployment insurance budget, at the initiative of the employer, and are set at 75% of the basic salary corresponding to the job held, but it is borne from the unemployment insurance budget within the limit of 75% of the gross average salary.

Measures dedicated to employers, legal entities:

- Introducing a new category of non-taxable income
 - Benefits in kind granted to natural persons who earn income from wages and assimilated to wages because of occupying positions considered by the employer/payer to be essential for carrying out the activity and who is in preventive isolation at work.
- Granting allowances incurred from the budget.
 - During the state of emergency, allowances for the period of temporary suspension of the individual employment contract are supported from the unemployment insurance budget, at the employer's initiative, art. 52 para. (1) lit. c) from the Labor Code, because of the effects produced by the Russian SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

Measures for companies paying tax on the income of micro-enterprises:

- Granting a 10% bonus for timely payment of microenterprise income tax
- Deduction of amounts representing sponsorships to institutions and public authorities from the income tax of micro-enterprises

Some measures help to ensure the **financial liquidity** of SMEs:

- One or more loans can be granted for making investments/for working capital, in a maximum percentage of 80% of the financing value.
- Loans for working capital financing, in a maximum percentage of 90% of the financing value.
- Payment of instalments and interest related to loans granted by the Ministry of Public Finance may be postponed for a period of three months.
- The payment deadline for building tax, land tax, and means of transport tax is postponed.
- Interest and late payment penalties are not calculated or owed.
- Measures to enforce budgetary claims through seizure are suspended or not initiated

The Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) was approved by the EU Council in 28 of October 2021, and lastly reviewed in 8 of September 2023, includes a budget of 29,2 billion euro with funds from the European Recovery and Resilience Mechanism. Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) is designed to ensure an optimal balance between the European Union's priorities and Romania's development needs, in the context of recovery after the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, the general objective of the PNRR of Romania is the development carrying out programs and projects, which support resilience, the level of preparedness for crisis situations, the capacity to adapt and the potential for growth. Several of the 15 components of the plan directly or indirectly affect the situation of NEETs 25+:

- The 5th component is the *Renovation wave*, in which 2.2 billion euros will be spent on the green and seismically safe renovation of public buildings, will have a positive effect on the demand for labour in the construction industry.
- A part of the 7. component: *Increasing digital skills for the exercise of public function and lifelong digital education for citizens*– in the long term, probably will have the most significant impact through the strengthening of the digital skills of the NEETs 25+ category.

3.2 Reskilling and upskilling support

As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need for non-physical or contactless ways of interaction in numerous fields, Romania developed the EU-funded Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), where around one fifth of the total funds are dedicated to the digital transformation. This plan focuses mainly on the fields where Romania was lagging in the EU, namely, increasing connectivity in rural areas, digitalizing schools and households, and digitalizing public services.

A huge investment is dedicated to creating and delivering electronic ID cards, which could facilitate remote access to education and health care services.

All these reforms will increase the need for the digital literacy of the citizens, so there are dedicated funds for reskilling a given proportion of the population in the digital field.

A specific intervention of the Romanian RRP is to transform the libraries into digital skill hubs, mainly in the areas where the citizens do not have the proper possibility of accessing the internet and lack the possibility of digital training. This scheme is aimed at 105 libraries and 100,000 citizens.

Another programme that is dedicated to the NEETs or the 25+NEETs population is the 'Second Chance Programme' conducted by the Ministry of Education. To attend this programme, the beneficiaries must be at least four years older than the average age group at the given level of education (primary and lower secondary education).

Regarding the distribution of the workforce, according to a survey from 2023², almost half of the Romanian workforce is working physically at the workplace, 20% is working online, and the rest in a hybrid form. This data shows a major shift towards the digitalization of the labour and an increase of resilience towards eventual further lockdowns.

3.3 Mental health support

In Romania, mental health systems are transitioning from hospital to community-based services. The following community mental health services are present in the country (Ciobanu et al., 2022):

- Preventive care (e.g. general practitioner's offices, specialists, specialised mental health teams)
- Self-help groups
- Daycare centres (locations in the community)
- Advocacy groups
- Promotion of mental health and care
- Providing support and care after hospital treatment

There is also a Helpline service for people experiencing domestic violence.

In 2022, the Ministry of Health launched a campaign to protect mental health entitled 'Mental health is a priority. Protect your mental health!' but the primary target groups were older people, their relatives, and professionals.

4. Conclusion

As an initial statement, we can draw the conclusion that only a limited amount of information refers to the 25+ NEETs population.

The situation of the 25+ NEETs can be determined only with the help of the proxies, like the situation of the vulnerable groups. From this point of view, we can state that in Romania, the vulnerable groups, which usually lacked the possibilities to act fast to the challenges provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic, were much more affected by the side effects of the pandemic than the other strata of society. The members of the vulnerable group were those who lived on the periphery, meaning they lacked the infrastructure (and knowledge) to switch to an online or hybrid workplace, even if they had this possibility. The female workforce was also more affected than the male one. The differences between the rural and urban settlements were twofold. On the one hand, in rural areas, the possibilities for an alternative workplace were really limited during the pandemic, but on the other hand, during the

² <https://www.romania-insider.com/almost-half-romanian-employees-working-exclusively-office>

lockdown, the rural population had much more living space than their urban counterparts, where a family was forced to live in flats with 50 square metres.

As more than 50% of the suspended work contract came from the field of blue-collar work, we can also conclude, that even those employees whose job was not affected by the pandemic comes from those segments which are by default more resilient towards the changes.

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