

Polish labor market against the background of European Union Member States – the situation of youth and elderly

Abstract

The search for a way to effectively use available labor resources, especially among young people, is one of the basic challenges of the twenty-first century. In recent years, almost regardless of cyclical changes, both high unemployment as well as economic and educational inactivity among young people (the so-called NEETs – Not in Education, Employment or Training) are maintained. The purpose of this article is to present the situation of young people in the labor market in Poland in 2004-2016. A critical review of the literature and an analysis of statistical data (desk research) from public statistics, primarily data from the European Statistical Office Eurostat and the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS), were performed to achieve the objective adopted in the article.

Key words: labor market, youth on the labor market, unemployment rate, NEET.

JEL CODE: J21.

Introduction

The unfavorable professional situation of young people in the European Union is the main topic of discussion among politicians, researchers and entrepreneurs. This debate emphasizes not only the problem of high youth unemployment, but also the increase in the number of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), in employment instability, and last but not least, the problem of an emerging professional precariat made up of young people. The low level of economic (professional) and educational activity among young people is particularly important in the context of demographic forecasts indicating a declining labor supply in the European Union countries, including Poland.

The purpose of this article is to present the situation of young people in the labor market in Poland against the background of the EU market (the so-called "EU average" of the EU-28). The time frame of the analysis covers the period from 2004 to 2016, which allows to both reproduce the transformation of the Polish labor market as well as show the consequences of the financial crisis in the area of employment. A critical review of the literature and an analysis of secondary data (desk research) from public statistics, primarily Eurostat data (Employment and Social Developments in

Europe) and data from the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS), were used to achieve the adopted objective. The article argues that, despite a significant improvement in the functioning of the Polish labor market, especially against the background of the European market, high unemployment rates remain an issue among young workers, while young people's economic and educational inactivity indicate a certain level of inertia in relation to cyclical changes.

This article is divided into four sections and a summary. The first section presents the characteristics of the Polish labor market against the background of the European market. The second section refers to the problem of unemployment among young people, while the third section presents issues related to the so-called NEET youth. Finally, the fourth section discusses issues regarding the forms of employment used in youth employment. The summary contains relevant conclusions drawn from the considerations contained in the article.

Polish labor market in 2004-2016

At the time of Poland's accession to the EU, the Polish labor market was markedly weaker than the European market. In 2004, the unemployment rate in Poland was almost 10 percentage points higher than in the European Union, while the employment rate was just over 50%. In recent years, a significant improvement in the Polish labor market can be observed, which is reflected in a decrease in the unemployment rate and an increase in employment. Table 1 shows the evolution of the unemployment rate, the economic activity rate, the employment rate and the dynamics of changes in GDP in Poland and in the European Union¹ (the EU-28).

Table 1. Selected indicators describing the labor market in Poland and in the European Union in 2004-2016

Year	Unemployment rate (%)		Economic activity rate of people aged 15-64 (%)		Employment rate (% of people aged 15-64)		GDP growth dynamics (% increase compared to the previous year)	
	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28
2004	19,1	9,3	64,0	69,3	51,7	62,9	5,3	2,6
2005	17,9	9,0	64,4	69,7	52,8	63,4	3,6	2,2
2006	13,9	8,2	63,4	70,1	54,5	64,3	6,2	3,3
2007	9,6	7,2	63,2	70,3	57,0	65,2	7,0	3,1
2008	7,1	7,0	63,8	70,7	59,2	65,7	4,2	0,4
2009	8,1	9,0	64,7	70,8	59,3	64,5	2,8	-4,4
2010	9,7	9,6	65,3	71,0	58,9	64,1	3,6	2,1
2011	9,7	9,7	65,7	71,1	59,3	64,2	5,0	1,7
2012	10,1	10,5	66,5	71,7	59,7	64,1	1,6	-0,5

¹ As of 2013, the European Union has 28 members. However, in the statistical publications used in this article, the data for 2006-2016 also include Croatia.

Year	Unemployment rate (%)		Economic activity rate of people aged 15-64 (%)		Employment rate (% of people aged 15-64)		GDP growth dynamics (% increase compared to the previous year)	
	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28
2013	10,3	10,9	67,0	72,0	60,0	64,1	1,4	0,2
2014	9,0	10,2	67,9	72,3	61,7	64,8	3,3	1,7
2015	7,5	9,4	68,1	72,5	62,9	65,5	3,8	2,2
2016	6,2	8,5	68,8	73	64,5	66,6	2,7	1,9

Source: own study based on European Commission 2015 (2017).

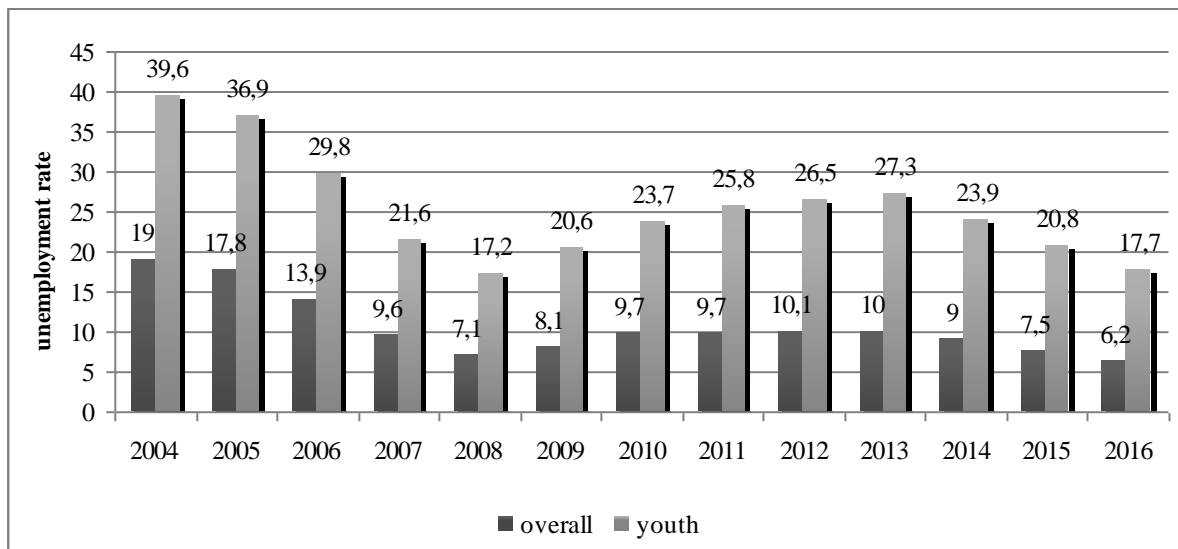
Looking at Table 1, it can be concluded that, in 2004, the situation of the Polish labor market was unfavorable in comparison with the EU market. The Polish labor market was characterized by a high unemployment rate (19.1% against 9.3% in the EU-28), as well as a low level of economic activity (64.0% compared to 69.3% in the EU-28) and a low employment rate (51.7% against 62.9% in the EU-28). In 2008, the European economy was hit by the financial crisis, leading in 2009 to a 4.4% decline in GDP compared to 2008 and the simultaneous increase in unemployment by 2 percentage points. At that time, Poland recorded a small but positive GDP growth and a slight increase in the unemployment rate. In subsequent years, a positive GDP growth was sustained in Poland, coupled with a gradual increase in economic activity and employment. It can also be noted that, in 2011, the unemployment rate in Poland for the first time reached the average EU level, and went below the EU average in the following years. This was influenced, among other factors, by the opening of markets in Germany - and, to a lesser extent, in Austria and Switzerland – to the Polish workforce.

In 2012-2013, the European economy was affected by the second wave of the financial crisis, resulting in yet another decline in GDP and an increase in the unemployment rate to above 10% in the EU-28 countries (including Poland). The economic recovery and related increase in employment were observed from 2014, although an in-depth analysis of statistical data indicates that the improvement in the labor market does not cover all of its segments, and the employment of young people remains one of the problem areas.

Youth unemployment

The situation of young people in the EU labor market shows a profound diversification, both in the area of employment and the non-utilization of available labor resources. The problem of “economic activation” among young people can also be observed in Poland, a fact which is reflected in the low level of their economic activity (at 34.5% in 2016), low employment rate (at 28.4% in 2016) and high unemployment rate. Chart 1 shows the changes in the unemployment rate overall and among youth (people aged 15-24) in Poland in 2004-2016.

Chart 1. Unemployment rate overall and among youth in Poland in 2004-2016 (%)

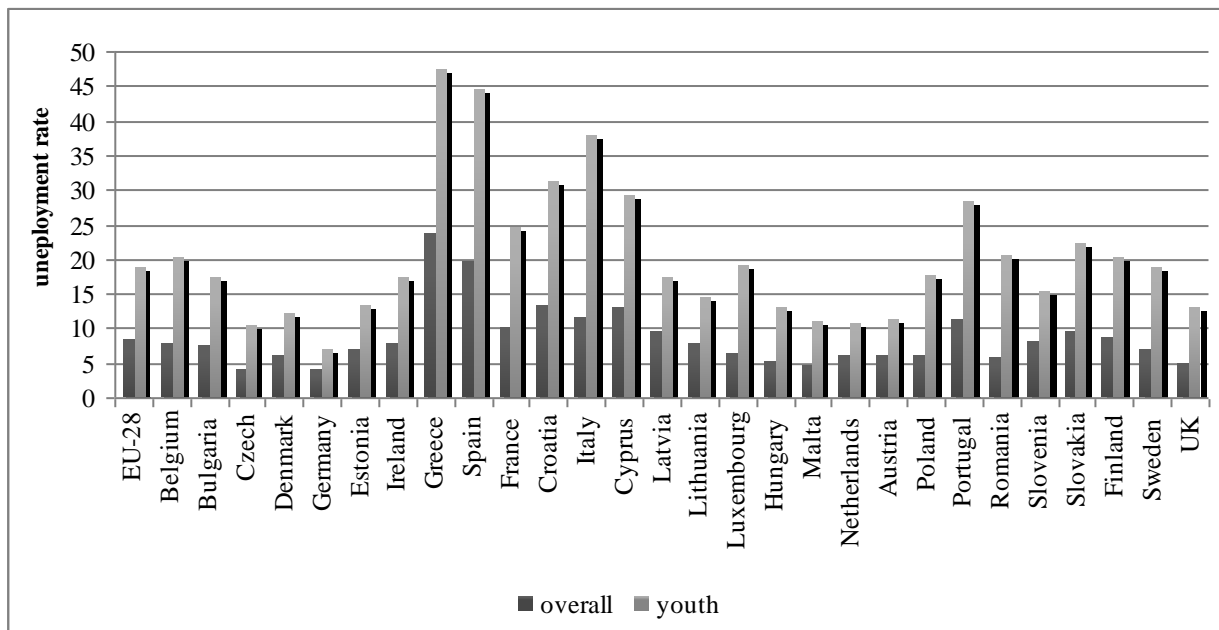


Source: own study based on European Commission 2015 (2017).

Two conclusions can be drawn based on Chart 1. First, in the entire analyzed period, the youth unemployment rate was either two or three times higher from the general rate. Both in the recession and economic recovery periods, there were high disproportions between the overall unemployment rate and the youth unemployment rate. Second, in 2008-2013 (the first wave of the financial crisis), the growth rate of unemployment among youth was markedly higher than overall, having increased by 10 percentage points against 3 percentage points overall, which indicates the lack of stabilization of younger employees in the labor market and the fact that this group of workers is particularly susceptible to the consequences of an economic downturn.

The problem of high youth unemployment is also present in other European Union Member States. Chart 2 shows the evolution of the unemployment rate overall and among youth in the European Union in 2016.

Chart 2. Unemployment rate overall and among youth in the EU in 2016 (%)



Source: own study based on European Commission 2017.

As can be seen in Chart 2, the problem of high youth unemployment is present in all EU countries, albeit with a significant spatial diversity. In countries most affected by the financial crisis, such as Greece or Spain, the overall unemployment rate remains high (23.6% and 19.6%, respectively), with youth unemployment affecting nearly half of the population aged 15 -24 years (47.3% and 44.4%, respectively). On the other end of the spectrum, the country where youth unemployment stayed below 10% throughout the years, and therefore does not significantly differ from the overall unemployment rate, is Germany (with youth unemployment rate at 7% in 2016, against 4.1% overall). Also in the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark, youth unemployment is relatively low. Thus, a question arises as to the reasons for high youth unemployment and the spatial diversity of this phenomenon.

Many authors (including Dziejczak-Foltyn 2014, pp. 30-45, Wronkowska 2017, pp. 198-199, Turek 2015, pp. 8-16, Kabaj 2012, pp. 4-5) trace back the causes of high youth unemployment to a mismatch between educational programs and labor market needs, stressing the necessity for closer cooperation of education and business in order to align qualifications and skills with the requirements of the labor market, also in the area of soft, interpersonal and analytical skills. Similar conclusions are presented by the authors of the report *The Polish labor market - challenges and directions of actions* developed by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development (PARP 2015). The report points out that "despite the generally higher education, significant competence and skill gaps can be identified among young people which occur both in terms of professional and higher qualifications" (p. 43). The authors of the report go on to note that "in many situations the adjustment of supply to demand proves difficult to achieve not so much due to individual decisions

of learners, but mainly due to the ineffectiveness of the education system, which is unable to increase the number of learners for purely technical reasons, without the gradual deterioration of the quality of its graduates" (p. 43). It is subsequently emphasized that young employees lack certain soft social skills, such as: maintaining contacts with clients, communicativeness, personal etiquette, self-presentation skills, and traits that ensure the high quality of the work done, i.e. responsibility, discipline, integrity, reliability, diligence, accuracy, and precision. In addition, employers draw attention to gaps in the professional background of many job candidates, which may indicate either poorly prepared education programs or low effectiveness of some schools and colleges (p. 43).

In turn, the problem of spatial diversity of youth unemployment in EU countries can be perceived through the prism of patterns of entering the labor market. Following D. Piróg (2016, p. 144), an argument can be put forward that entering the labor market is "one of the most difficult developmental transitions, increasingly understood not as a one-off act of taking up employment, but as a long-term (often lasting until reaching 30 years of age) process of transformation from youthful dependence to the financial and family independence typical of an adult person". In line with the above, four patterns of developmental transitions are presented (2016, p. 147):

- 1) *study first, then work* – education precedes job search, a pattern which is the most prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe,
- 2) *study while working* – involving the overlapping of work and study, occurring mainly in Great Britain and Ireland,
- 3) *study late while working* - studies are taken up after gaining work experience, resulting from the need to acquire specific competences useful in developing a career path already started, an approach practiced in the Nordic countries and Slovenia,
- 4) *apprenticeship* – doing specific apprenticeships (after graduating from secondary school but before enrolling into university) which favor the successful outcome of professional plans, a pattern observed in Germany and Austria.

Given that the problem of youth unemployment is the least severe in Germany and Austria, it seems that the popularization of the dual (alternate) education system may be a viable solution. As noted by M. Kabaj (2012, p. 7), a dual system of education in terms of professional and higher qualifications allows the graduate to master theoretical knowledge while learning about the work environment and the requirements of the labor market. In addition, it positively affects the increase of investments in education, as it engages public authorities, businesses and student employees.

NEET – Youth not in employment, education or training

When discussing issues related to the situation of young people in the labor market, attention should also be paid to the so-called NEET youth, which includes young people who are neither in employment, education or training (hence the acronym). The problem of economically and educationally inactive youth is a relatively well-recognized phenomenon, since it was dealt with already in the 1960s in the United States, in the context of the problems of people outside the society, the underclass and adolescent dropouts (Szcześniak, Rondón 2011, p. 242). In Europe, the first attempts to identify NEETs date back to the 1980s in the United Kingdom (NEETs ..., 2012, p. 19), and they were related to limiting access to the unemployment benefit system for people aged 16-18. Officially, the term NEET was first coined in 1999 in the British government report *Bridging the gap* (p. 1), in the context of the situation of people aged 16-18 who have not worked, studied or participated in training for at least 6 months.

The term NEET is sometimes defined differently in the context of the age ranges of young people. This is due to the fact that the original definition derives from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in which schooling is legally enforced until the age of 16. For this reason, the NEET group initially included people aged 16-18 who were outside the education system, not participating in training and not employed in the labor market (NEET Statistic 2013, pp. 1, 6). In most European countries, until recently, NEET youth were assumed to be people aged 15-24. However, currently, mainly due to the ever-increasing period of education, this age range tends to be 15-29 and it was adopted as such by the European Commission in the programming documents of the European Social Fund (Eurofound, 2018) as well as in Polish legislation. The amendment to the Act on the promotion of employment and labor market institutions, as well as of certain other acts of 14 March 2014, defines the instruments of assistance addressed to persons under 30 years of age (Journal of Laws of 2014, item 598).

Perceiving NEETs through the prism of untapped potential of young people, who may later experience a disadvantaged position in the labor market or even social exclusion, gave rise to an indicator which, combined with traditional measures of unemployment and inactivity, allows to examine the situation of youth in the labor market from a somewhat broader perspective. While the youth unemployment rate determines which part of the economically active population aged 15-24/29 is unemployed, the NEET rate shows which part of the total youth population are people outside the education, training and labor markets. Which is to say, not every NEET is by default unemployed, just like not every unemployed person can be classified as a NEET. In the NEET group, there will be cases such as an unemployed part-time student registered in a job center. The fact of studying does not necessarily exclude this person from the NEET group and classifies them

as less vulnerable to social exclusion in the future. However, NEETs will include those who cannot be classified as unemployed because they do not show willingness to take up employment, regardless of the reasons. Therefore, the number of NEET youth in the EU is higher than the number of unemployed people (in 2016, the number of unemployed people aged 15-24 in the EU was 4,260,000, against 6,258,00 NEETs), while the unemployment rate exceeds the NEET rate (in 2016, the unemployment rate for people aged 15-24 was 18.7%, against the NEET rate of 11.5%). Differences in the methods used for calculating the unemployment rate and the NEET rate are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Methodological differences in calculating unemployment rate and NEET rate

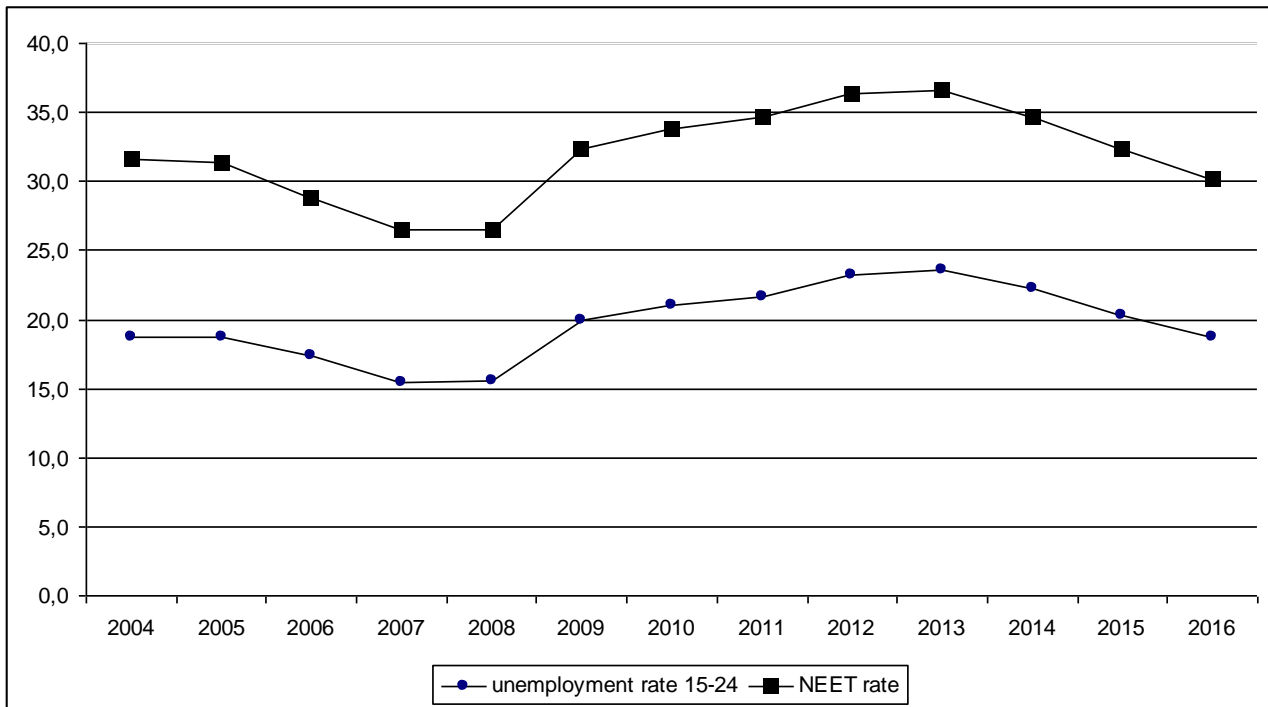
$$\text{Youth unemployment rate} = \frac{\text{number of unemployed youth}}{\text{number of economically active youth}} \quad (1)$$

$$\text{NEET rate} = \frac{\text{number of NEET youth}}{\text{total number of youth}} \quad (2)$$

Source: own study based on: *NEETs Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2012, p. 23.

An analysis of statistical data clearly reveals a positive correlation of NEET rate and unemployment rate trends. In 2008-2013, a significant increase in both indicators was observed, which was a consequence of the financial crisis, with the effects of the economic downturn more visible in youth unemployment than a broader exclusion of young people from the labor market (in 2013, the unemployment rate was over 10 percentage points higher from the NEET rate). The economic recovery observed since 2013 is also reflected primarily in the decline in the youth unemployment rate, with a slight decrease in the NEET rate (in 2013-2016, the unemployment rate dropped by nearly 5 percentage points, and the NEET rate dropped by only 1.5 percentage points). Changes in the unemployment rate and the NEET rate of people aged 15-24 in 2004-2016 in the European Union are presented in Chart 3.

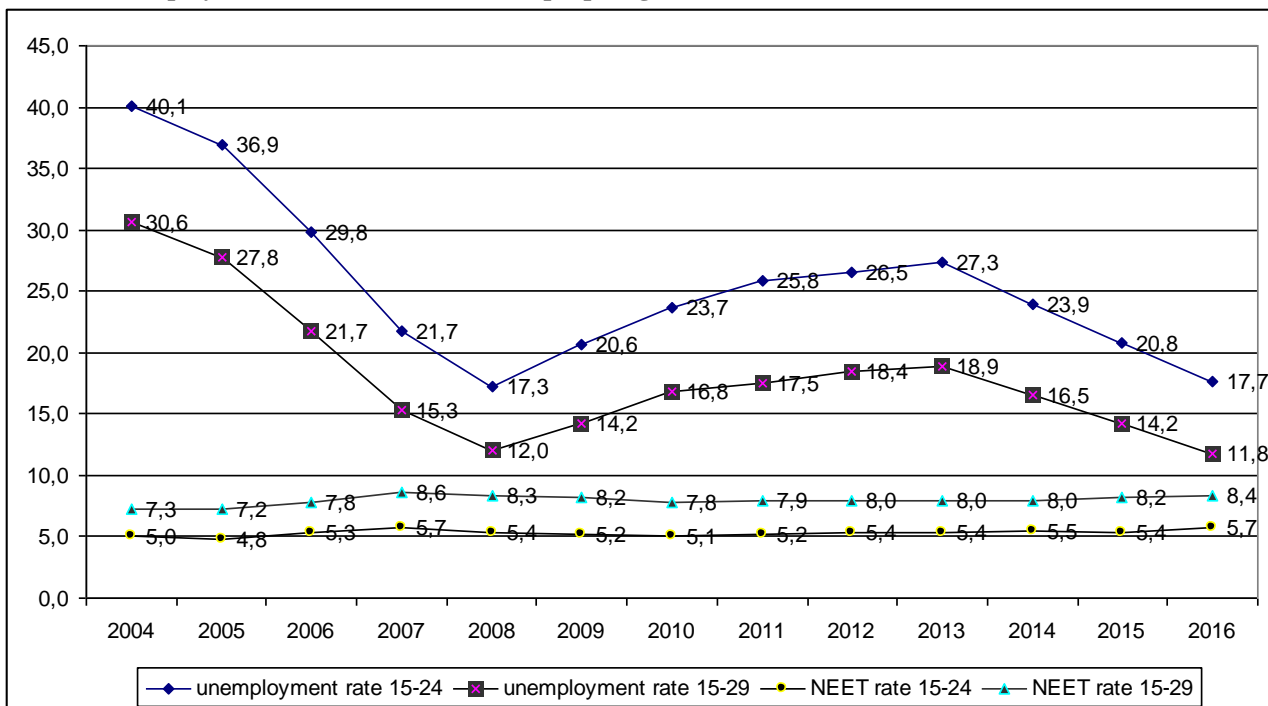
Chart 3. Unemployment rate and NEET rate of people aged 15-24 in EU countries in 2004-2016 (%)



Source: own study based on Eurostat data.

Also in Poland, there is a positive correlation between the NEET rate and the unemployment rate. Chart 4 shows the evolution of the unemployment rate and the NEET rate in people aged 15-24/29 in Poland in 2004-2016.

Chart 4. Unemployment rate and NEET rate in people aged 15-24/15-29 in Poland in 2004-2016 (%)



Source: own study based on Eurostat data.

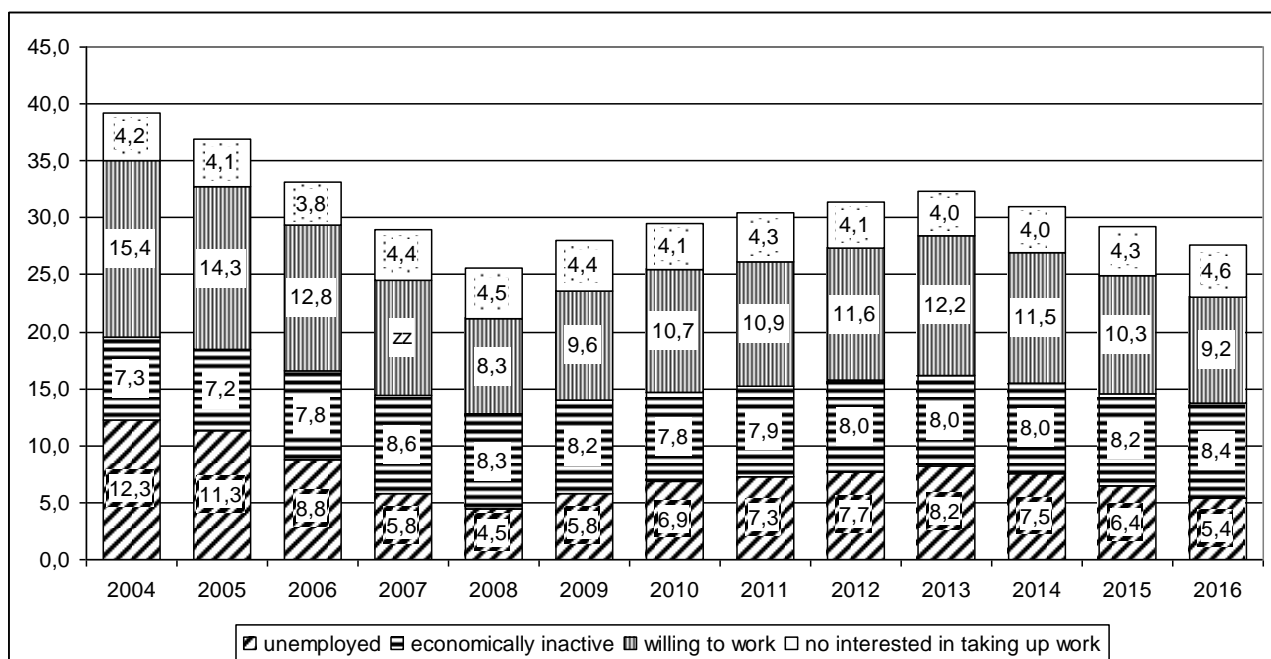
Looking at Chart 4, it can be seen that the unemployment rate assumes higher values in the 15-24 age group, while the NEET rate - in the 15-29 age group. An increase in the share of NEETs

in the older age group indicates that young graduates, instead of taking up employment, enter a state of economic and educational inactivity. This encourages carrying out a more in-depth analysis of the NEET population, which is a clearly heterogeneous group. Within this group, the following subgroups are distinguished (NEETs, 2012, pp. 24-25):

- 1) *unemployed* - both short- and long-term unemployed people, constituting the largest subgroup;
- 2) *unable to work* - disabled, sick people who have family obligations (care for dependents);
- 3) *uninvolved* - not seeking employment or training opportunities, leading a dangerous and asocial lifestyle;
- 4) *willing to take up employment* - actively seeking employment or training opportunities in line with their abilities and social status;
- 5) *voluntarily NEET* - people involved in other activities (travel, music, art).

Analyzing available statistical data, an observation can be made that changes in the NEET rate in Poland in the analyzed period spring primarily from changes in the share of unemployed youth, while the share of economically inactive youth remains basically unchanged. Moreover, the share of people not interested in taking up employment remained unchanged (see Chart 5).

Chart 5. NEET rate distribution among people aged 15-29 in Poland in 2004-2016



Note: the percentage of unemployed and economically inactive people, as well as the percentage of those willing and uninterested in taking up employment, add up to the NEET rate.

Source: own study based on Eurostat data.

A significant NEET population entails a number of negative consequences, among others (NEETs, 2012, pp. 58-105): individual (prolongation and obstruction of development transition,

hysteresis effect, low remuneration, wage penalty), macroeconomic (at 1.5-2% of GDP in 2011 in Poland), and social (distrust of NEETs in democratic institutions, weaker political engagement among NEETs, lower social and civic participation among NEETs, which favor social exclusion). These costs were a prerequisite for adopting EU measures aimed at limiting the scale of this phenomenon. Two major objectives in the area of education were formulated in the Europe 2020 strategy, in particular reducing the dropout rate to below 10% in 2020, against 14% in 2010 (Poland committed to reducing the rate to 4.5%) and increasing the share of people aged 30-34 with university diplomas to 40% (against 31% in 2010). The implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy goals is pursued, among others, through the 2010 Youth on the Move program, which aims to improve the performance and increase the attractiveness of European higher education institutions internationally and raise the quality of all levels of education and training in the EU by supporting the mobility of students and trainees and improving the situation of young people in the labor market. However, given the constant prevalence of the NEET rate, and especially the persisting share of people who are economically inactive and uninterested in taking up employment, the measures undertaken so far should be considered insufficient.

Types of youth employment

An important issue related to the situation of young people in the labor market is the time limitations of employment (see Table 2). In recent years, a clear increase in the number of temporary employment offers, i.e. non-standard types of employment, can be observed. This trend and its socio-economic consequences are highly controversial, prompting a question as to whether temporary employment should be viewed as an opportunity or a threat. Increasing the flexibility of labor markets, work organization and labor relations, while taking into account the reconciliation of work and private life, employment security and social protection in accordance with the concept of flexicurity is an opportunity, especially for young people who are just starting their careers, but only when the so-called non-standard types of employment serve as a transitional stage on the way to obtaining permanent employment based on a full-time employment contract (i.e. one drafted for an indefinite period of time). There are particular reasons for concern in Poland, as the share of fixed-term employees is almost twice as high as the EU average (see Table 2).

It is worth emphasizing that the temporary nature of employment concerns mainly the youngest employees. In 2016 in Poland, 71.8% of people aged 15-24 were employed temporarily, while the share of this type of contracts declined in older age brackets. Employment under a fixed-term contract is accepted by young people entering the labor market as a step towards proper full-time employment, but Table 2 shows that employers commonly, and even excessively, use this fact to their advantage.

Table 2. Temporary employees as a share of all employees by age in Poland and in the European Union in 2004-2016

Year	Temporary employees as a share of all employees (%)					
	People aged 15-24		People aged 15-29		People aged 15-64	
	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28	Poland	EU-28
2004	63,0	37,6	45,7	28,0	23,9	13,2
2005	65,9	40,3	49,1	30,3	26,5	14,2
2006	66,2	40,7	50,1	30,9	27,8	14,7
2007	65,7	41,2	49,6	30,8	28,4	14,5
2008	62,9	39,7	46,4	29,8	26,8	13,9
2009	63,0	41,0	46,7	29,9	26,4	13,6
2010	66,1	42,2	49,9	31,3	27,7	14,0
2011	67,5	42,5	49,6	31,6	27,1	14,1
2012	67,4	41,7	49,7	31,0	26,5	13,6
2013	68,8	44,1	50,7	32,8	26,8	14,1
2014	72,4	43,2	54,8	32,1	28,9	14,0
2015	72,7	43,1	53,9	32,1	27,8	14,1
2016	71,8	43,7	52,5	32,2	26,7	14,3

Source: own study based on Eurostat data.

The conditions of the youth labor market in Poland mean that young people are afraid of entering the labor market. This hypothesis is confirmed by the results of a study by SW Research commissioned by the Polish Business Council². It shows that only 25% of students and graduates declare feeling no fear of entering the labor market, while a third of respondents express the need for support in making a professional decision or are afraid of graduating. These fears were mainly related to lack of experience (65.7% of respondents), excessive requirements of employers (38.9% of respondents) and lack of self-confidence (31.9% of respondents). In addition, the students and graduates who participated in the study indicated the need to intensify internship programs and apprenticeships (48.1%), to increase the number of practical classes instead of theoretical classes (45.7%), and importantly, to receive more assistance in identifying their individual potential.

Conclusions

Issues related to the functioning of youth in the labor market are of interest to researchers because of the available labor resources which are not properly explored and the high economic and social costs related to the lack of economic or educational activity among young people. The analysis of statistical data describing the situation of young people in the labor market leads to the conclusion that, despite the general market improvement, the high youth unemployment and NEET rates still persist. It should also be noted that, while the youth unemployment rate shows a certain sensitivity to cyclical changes (it declined in the face of the economic recovery), economic and

² The research was carried out on 20-24 April 2017 by SW Research, having been commissioned by the Polish Business Council and the website *programkariera.pl* using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) on the online SW Panel. As part of the study, 1017 surveys were conducted with students and graduates up to 30 years of age. The results of the study were published on 12 May 2017 on: <https://tvn24bis.pl/z-kraju,74/mlodzi-na-rynku-pracy-czuja-sie-niepewnie,739292.html>

educational inactivity of young people points to a certain level of inertia in relation to cyclical changes. The issue of professional inactivity and lack of interest in taking up employment is particularly problematic. Therefore, it seems advisable to continue research on the general factors affecting the risk of inclusion in the NEET population, placing particular emphasis on the reasons for economic inactivity and disinterest in taking up work (it seems that the reasons for high youth unemployment are well recognized, unlike economic and educational inactivity among young people). Effective implementation of measures encouraging young people to take up employment or further education requires identifying their specific needs and, above all, the circumstances that led to their economic inactivity in the first place

Youth tends to be associated with activity, the search for interesting experiences, and continuous development. Meanwhile, changes in contemporary society indicate that a significant subpopulation of young people show an entirely different approach, feeling unmotivated to pursue education and rejecting in advance any duties that may limit them. It is, thus, necessary to take appropriate measures which would counteract this trend. An important aspect related to the failure to use the available labor resources is the role of professional work in human life. It enables the implementation of a number of functions, not only economic, but also psychosocial. Professional work is a source of satisfaction and self-fulfillment, positively affecting one's self-esteem and sense of value, as well as enabling to build and maintain social relations. The state of inactivity, resulting from unemployment or difficulties in entering the labor market, consequently leads to feelings of loneliness, depression and social exclusion. Economic inactivity may therefore mean inactivity in social life, thus increasing the risk of social exclusion.

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Młodzież na rynku pracy – wybrane aspekty

Abstrakt

Poszukiwanie sposobu efektywnego wykorzystania dostępnych zasobów pracy, przede wszystkim ludzi młodych, stanowi jedno z podstawowych wyzwań w XXI wieku. W ostatnich latach, w zasadzie niezależnie od zmian o charakterze koniunkturalnym, utrzymuje się wysoki poziom bezrobocia oraz bierności zawodowej i edukacyjnej wśród osób młodych (tzw. młodzież NEET – *Not in Education, Employment or Training*). Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie sytuacji młodzieży na rynku pracy w Polsce w porównaniu z rynkiem unijnym (tzw. „średnią unijną” UE28) w latach 2004-2016. Do realizacji celu przyjętego w artykule wykorzystano krytyczną analizę literatury przedmiotu oraz analizę danych wtórnych (*desk research*), pochodzących ze statystyk publicznych, przede wszystkim danych Europejskiego Urzędu Statystycznego Eurostat oraz Głównego Urzędu statystycznego (GUS).

Słowa kluczowe: rynek pracy, młodzież na rynku pracy, stopa bezrobocia, młodzież NEET.

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