

## **SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION AMONG ADOLESCENTS AGED 16-17: THE LACK OF EARLY LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The analysis was conducted across three age segments, revealing specific vulnerabilities among the 15-17 age group (where educational continuity predominates) and the 16-17 age group (where labour market insertion is almost absent). In the 18-24 age group, a structural pattern of occupational vulnerability was identified, with the share of NEET youth reaching 28.7%, a value above the national average. Labour market selection and exclusion mechanisms operate particularly in the case of young people with an educational attainment below upper secondary level, while the probability of occupational vulnerability is higher among women.*

**KEY WORDS:** *school-to-work transition, human capital, NEET youth, occupational vulnerability.*

**JEL CLASSIFICATIONS:** *J24, I24, J21, J64.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This article addresses the issue of educational capital in formation among adolescents aged 15-17, the school-to-work transition for the 16-17 age group, and the NEET phenomenon among young people aged 18-24.

The three aspects examined are important both at the individual and social levels. The interruption or cessation of the formation of educational capital during the 15-17 age period is, or should be, followed by labour market insertion. Early labour market entry, analysed here for the 16-17 age group, may be hindered by the incomplete educational status of adolescents, the insufficient availability of jobs, or a mismatch between individual qualifications and labour market requirements. At the societal level, there is the possibility that the aggregation of these individual trajectories may generate pressure on society, leading to the emergence of a segment that is vulnerable both educationally and occupationally.

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The NEET phenomenon (Not in Employment, Education or Training), analysed here only for the 18-24 age group, refers to young people who are outside employment, education, or short-term training programmes. Within certain limits, and with caution, it may also have an anticipatory role for the 16-17 age group if a particular structural pattern of labour market insertion becomes visible.

Phenomena such as school dropout, early labour market insertion, or NEET status should be studied not only at the national level but also in regions known for their post-industrial characteristics, marked by tensions and structural inequalities, including in terms of access to employment.

The municipality of Petroşani, a former mono-industrial area marked by prolonged processes of deindustrialization and depopulation, provides an appropriate framework for studying the mechanisms of selection and exclusion operating in the labour market. It also offers an opportunity to observe how specific vulnerabilities evolve into a structural model that fails to utilise the educational capital assumed to be completed among young people aged 18-24.

## **2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

Two concepts that require clarification in order to better understand youth labour market insertion are ELET (Early Leavers from Education and Training) and NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).

ELET refers to the early leaving of education and training, targeting individuals aged 18-24 who have completed at most lower secondary education and who are not involved in any additional form of education or training. The importance of analysing this phenomenon lies in reducing social exclusion and poverty by increasing the level of education, as its negative consequences affect society as a whole, not only individuals. Across the European Union, the share of ELET individuals varies significantly between countries, ranging from approximately 5% to 20%, with many countries exceeding the EU target of 10%.

The concept of NEET refers to young people who are no longer in education but are neither employed nor involved in training programmes, usually targeting individuals aged 15-24. It should be noted that the first use of the concept referred to the 16-18 age group, although several studies extend the interval to 15-29 years (Flisi et al., 2015, pp. 4-7).

The two concepts share both differences and similarities. The differences relate to two dimensions: static vs. dynamic and homogeneous vs. heterogeneous group composition.

Regarding the static/dynamic dimension, ELET is relatively static, as the level of education already attained tends to remain stable, since only a small proportion of individuals return to the formal education system to obtain a higher level of qualification. By contrast, NEET status is dynamic, as young people may frequently enter or exit this condition (for example, an unemployed person may find employment, an inactive person may enrol in a training course, or someone may become unemployed). However, there are also cases in which NEET status becomes persistent, when multiple vulnerability conditions accumulate over time.

In terms of the homogeneity/heterogeneity dimension, the ELET category displays relative homogeneity in terms of age and educational level, but heterogeneity in occupational outcomes. Similarly, the NEET category is heterogeneous from an educational perspective but homogeneous in occupational terms, since all individuals are outside employment, although the reasons for this situation vary, generating further heterogeneity (Flisi et al., 2015, pp. 12-13).

With regard to NEET youth in Romania, studies indicate that after EU accession the proportion increased, reaching approximately 18% around 2009, with women having a higher probability of being NEET than men, while at the EU level the gender gap is smaller (Țoc, 2020, pp. 11-12).

A worrying aspect in Romania compared with the EU is that among NEET youth 70% are inactive and only 30% unemployed, whereas at the EU level the distribution is 42% unemployed and 58% inactive (Țoc, 2020, pp. 12-13). From a gender perspective, 80% of female NEET youth in Romania are inactive, compared with 43% at the EU level.

Furthermore, in the EU there are no major differences in the distribution of NEET youth according to the place of residence, whereas in Romania the probability of belonging to this category increases in rural areas or small urban localities. Another issue highlighted in the literature is that almost one quarter of NEET youth in Romania are difficult to identify, as they are not registered in the records of employment agencies (Țoc, 2020, pp. 14-16).

Beyond the statistical dimension, the literature also highlights structural factors that facilitate entry into the NEET category. Although individuals with different educational levels may fall into this category, in Romania, as in several other European countries, those with lower educational attainment are overrepresented. Several factors favour entry into the NEET category: social background (parents with low educational status, unemployed or divorced), housing vulnerabilities (including residence in isolated areas), disability, or low family income (Bălan, 2013, p. 37).

Within this framework, the school-to-work transition must be understood not only through statistical indicators but also as an individual experience and a social process.

The transition from school to work has a dual dimension. On the one hand, the young person searches for a position in which to carry out formal activities and to acquire a corresponding social status. On the other hand, this process is often accompanied by frustrations generated by the very process of job searching. From this perspective, it is necessary to adopt an approach that balances both success and failure in order to maintain personal and social equilibrium.

Through systematic job searching and interaction with employers, young people become aware of the reality of the validation of human capital, formed during the years of education through the accumulation of knowledge and skills. However, numerous studies show that there is often a mismatch between human capital and labour market requirements, which leads to significant social and economic losses and ultimately renders this transition a frustrating process both for individuals and for society (Istrate et al., 2019, pp. 3-4).

### **3. RESEARCH AREA AND METHODOLOGY**

This article is based on data obtained from a study conducted in the municipality of Petroșani, a reference locality within the urban micro-region of the Jiu Valley.

Over the past decades, Petroșani has experienced profound structural tensions, as the locality underwent a transition from a socialist-type economy to a market-oriented economy. The entire socio-economic reality that characterised the period prior to 1989, when systemic changes occurred throughout Eastern Europe, was gradually dismantled.

This transformation was accompanied by processes such as mining sector restructuring, regional deindustrialization, and significant depopulation, as the area shifted from being a region of immigration to one of emigration. Together, and often as consequences of one another, these processes produced significant changes in both the local economy and the population structure, with the education system and labour market becoming sensitive receptors of these structural transformations.

As a former mono-industrial region, Petroșani has not experienced significant economic diversification through the development of alternative industries or services capable of absorbing the workforce released from the mining sector. Consequently, unemployment and poverty have become persistent features of the local socio-economic landscape.

The decline of mining and related industries has also affected the education system, as young people encounter difficulties in the transition from school to work, even though educational institutions have attempted to adapt their programmes to labour market demands. This context is further compounded by school dropout and the risk of early school leaving.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in May 2017. The research method consisted of a sociological survey based on a questionnaire, administered face-to-face by trained interviewers at respondents' homes.

The research instrument was an omnibus-type questionnaire structured into several sections. The first section addressed the dimension of human capital, the second focused on employment, the third examined housing conditions, and the final section included socio-demographic characteristics, which were used in constructing the sample.

The items used in this article belong to different sections of the questionnaire but jointly investigate the phenomena of human capital formation and the school-to-work transition among adolescents aged 16-17.

The analysis was structured across three age segments. The 15-17 age group was used to evaluate educational capital in formation. The 16-17 age group, which represents the core of the analysis, was examined from both educational and occupational perspectives in order to approximate the number of adolescents outside both education and employment. The 18-24 age group was included as a comparative category, providing a relevant benchmark for possible future trajectories of current adolescents aged 16-17.

The research is quantitative and predominantly descriptive, based on a multi-stage quota sample defined by sex, age, residential area, and street. This sampling strategy ensured a good level of structural representativeness relative to the total population.

The initial sample size consisted of 1,000 individuals, but due to objective constraints certain deviations occurred from the projected volume without affecting structural representativeness. Ultimately, 931 questionnaires were validated.

Data processing was carried out using the SPSS software, with the field data organised into an electronic database.

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

This chapter is structured into three sub-sections, each analysing distinct levels: the educational capital of the 15-17 age group, the occupational status of adolescents aged 16-17, and a comparison with the 18-24 age group in relation to the intermediate category. The comparison is useful from the perspective of the existing situation in Petroșani, a reality that allows for a certain degree of anticipation regarding the future trajectories of adolescents aged 16-17.

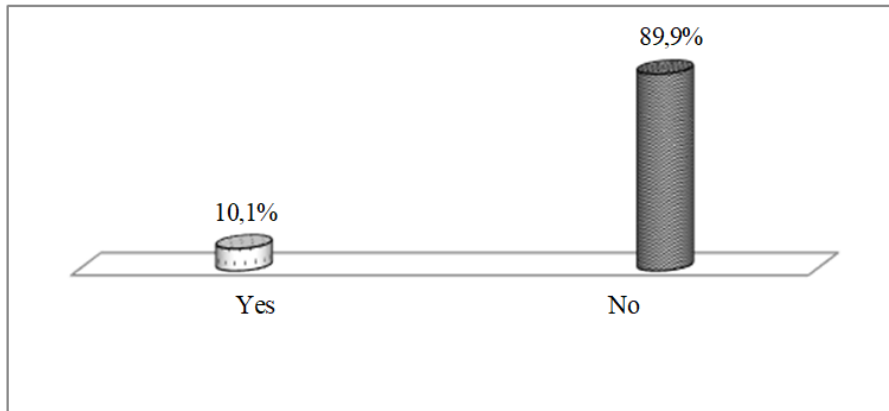
##### **4.1. Educational Capital in Formation among Adolescents Aged 15-17**

Educational capital represents a dimension of human capital that each individual possesses, alongside practical skills and health status (Voicu, 2007, p. 97). It has become increasingly important in today's world which, from a functionalist perspective, allocates positions within society based on the certification of competencies (Hatos, 2011, p. 598). In this context, the credential effect is frequently invoked, referring to the benefits derived from obtaining educational diplomas (Hatos, 2011, p. 600).

Within such a framework, the efforts of public policies aimed at developing educational human capital must be understood. This is particularly relevant given that Romania lags behind the European Union both in terms of the number of higher education graduates and in the proportion of individuals for whom lower secondary education represents the highest level of completed schooling (Voicu, 2007, p. 103).

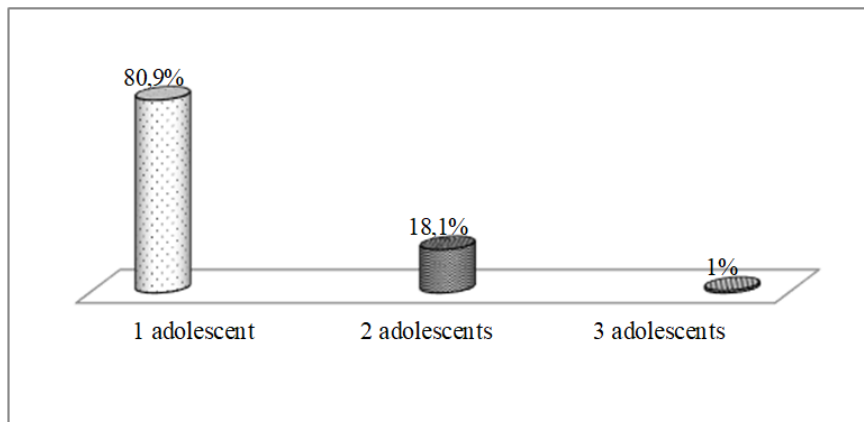
Against this background, we attempted to estimate whether potential risks and vulnerabilities related to educational capital in formation can be identified in Petroșani, a region strongly affected by socio-economic transformations. As a first step, based on questionnaire data, we determined the proportion of households in Petroșani that include young people aged 15-17.

Figure 1 indicates that 10.1% of households in Petroșani include adolescents aged 15-17. This does not imply that the remaining households do not have children, nor that the target households do not also include children of younger ages.



**Figure 1. Proportion of households including adolescents aged 15-17 (N = 931 households)**

The next step was to determine the structure of households that include adolescents aged 15-17. The distribution presented in Figure 2, obtained after filtering the initial sample, highlights a significant concentration of households with only one adolescent (80.9%). At a considerable distance follow households with two adolescents (18.1%), while those with three adolescents are marginal (1%).



**Figure 2. Distribution of households by number of adolescents aged 15-17 (N = 94 households)**

This structure suggests an orientation of households in Petroșani toward the paradigm of the small nuclear family, in contrast with the city's industrial period, when the model of the family with several children was more common.

The predominance of households with a single adolescent can be interpreted as an adaptation to economic realities and labour market constraints in Petroșani, particularly in the period following the restructuring of the mining sector characteristic of the 1997-1999 period.

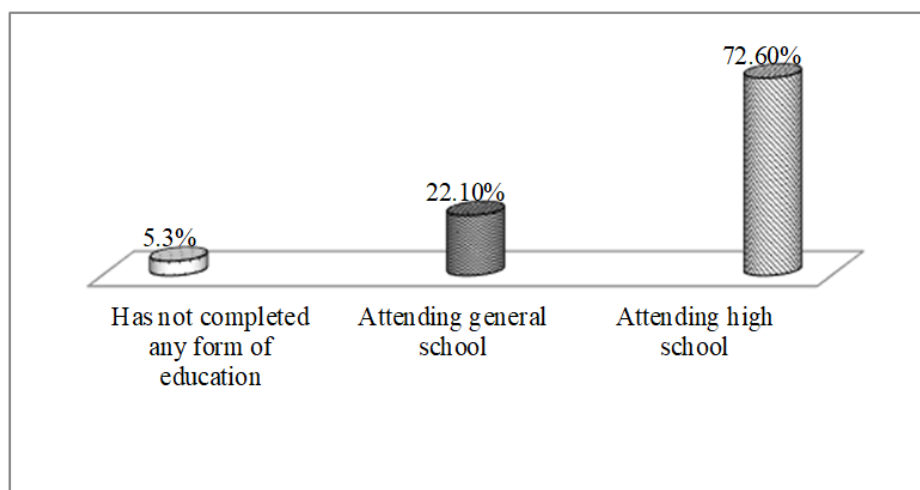
It should be noted that the research is based on data collected in 2017, which aligns the distribution data, births (these adolescents having been born just a few years after the major layoffs in the Jiu Valley, specifically during the period 2000-2002), and the research period.

Following the aggregation of responses for all adolescents identified in the investigated households, a total of 113 individuals aged 15-17 was obtained, constituting the reference population for the analysis of educational capital (Table 1).

**Table 1. Structure of the developing educational capital of adolescents aged 15-17 (N=113)**

Adolescent Category	Has Not Completed Any Education	Attending General School	Attending High School	Total
<i>First adolescent</i>	4	22	68	94
<i>Second adolescent</i>	2	2	14	18
<i>Third adolescent</i>	0	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	6	25	82	113

The proportion of adolescents aged 15-17 identified in the sample, by age categories 15, 16, and 17, within the total population of Petroșani municipality, proves to be consistent with the municipality's demographic structure during the analyzed period.



**Figure 3. Structure of the developing educational capital of adolescents aged 15-17 (N=113)**

Figure 3 highlights the distribution of developing educational capital among adolescents aged 15-17. For the 5.3% who, according to household respondents, have not completed any form of education, the situation reflects educational vulnerability. This may manifest as early school leaving, severe grade repetition, or exit from the educational system, although the exact cause cannot be determined due to the absence

of a longitudinal study. For those attending general school (22.2%) or high school (72.6%), the educational trajectory appears to follow a normative path, at least at the time of the survey.

Although the 5.3% proportion of adolescents aged 15-17 who have not completed any form of education may seem high, when compared to the national rate of early school leaving among young people aged 18-24 (18.1% in 2017 and 16.8% in 2024), it reflects enrollment within a broader structural context characterized by persistent educational vulnerabilities (Eurostat, 2025). This comparison uses the 18-24 age group as a reference because the Eurostat indicator for early school leaving is defined for this age cohort. For the 15-17 age segment, no official indicator exists, as many European countries mandate compulsory education until the ages of 16 or 18.

The distribution of educational capital shown in Figure 3 cannot be separated from the specific structural context of Petroșani municipality. A former mining center with a predominantly mono-industrial economy, Petroșani has experienced, over the past decades, deindustrialization, unemployment, and demographic contraction (driven by migration and declining birth rates).

The 5.3% of adolescents aged 15-17 who have not completed any form of education should not be interpreted solely as an individual or familial failure, but rather as a consequence of structural conditions that have generated systemic vulnerabilities, including educational ones. Educational human capital is inherently renewable, highlighting the need for targeted social policies that allow affected individuals to re-enter the formal educational system and simultaneously reduce or prevent school dropout. Otherwise, educational vulnerability may evolve into occupational vulnerability, impacting not only the individual but society as a whole, with at-risk youth increasingly falling into the NEET category.

#### 4.2. Occupational Status of Adolescents Aged 16-17 and the Absence of Early Labor Market Entry

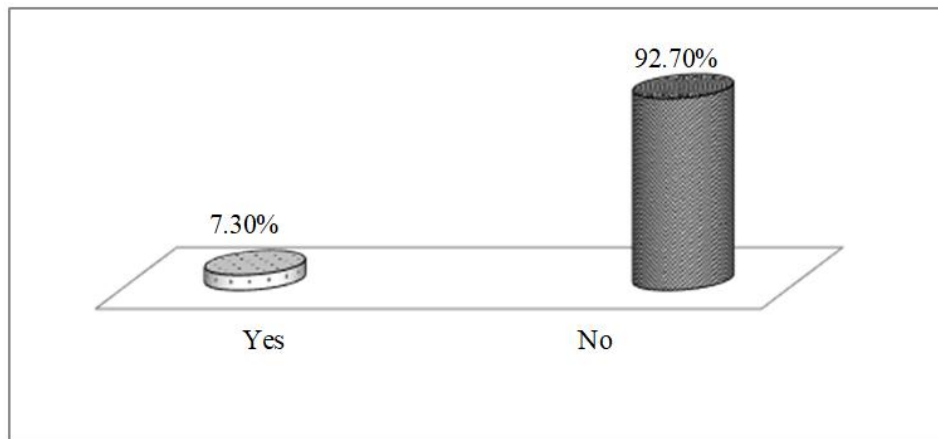


Figure 4. Proportion of households with members aged 16-17 (N = 68 households)

To identify households with members aged 16-17, a second filter was applied to the initial sample, resulting in 68 households, representing 7.3% of the total cases investigated.

Within the 68 households, a total of 76 adolescents aged 16-17 were identified, constituting the analytical basis for the assessment of occupational status. Their distribution across occupational categories is presented in Table 2.

The designation “first adolescent” and “second adolescent” does not imply an age hierarchy or status differentiation within the family; rather, it refers to the order in which responses were recorded in the questionnaire administered to the respondent.

**Table 2. Occupational status of adolescents aged 16-17 (N = 76)**

<i>Adolescent Category</i>	<i>Attending High School</i>	<i>Unemployed</i>	<i>Employed</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>First adolescent</i>	60	2	0	62
<i>Second adolescent</i>	13	1	0	14
<b><i>Total</i></b>	73	3	0	76
<b><i>Percentage of total</i></b>	96.1%	3.9%	0%	100%

The correlation between the occupational distribution in Table 2 and the structure of developing educational capital presented in Table 1 shows that the three adolescents aged 16-17 reported as unemployed by household respondents coincide with those who have not completed any form of education. The difference up to the total of six cases identified in the 15-17 age segment is explained by the presence of three 15-year-old adolescents (Table 1), who, although they have not completed any form of education, cannot be formally registered as unemployed in official employment records. This is in accordance with the Romanian Labor Code (Law no. 53/2003), which stipulates that the minimum employment age is 16, and 15-year-olds may only be employed with the written consent of their parents.

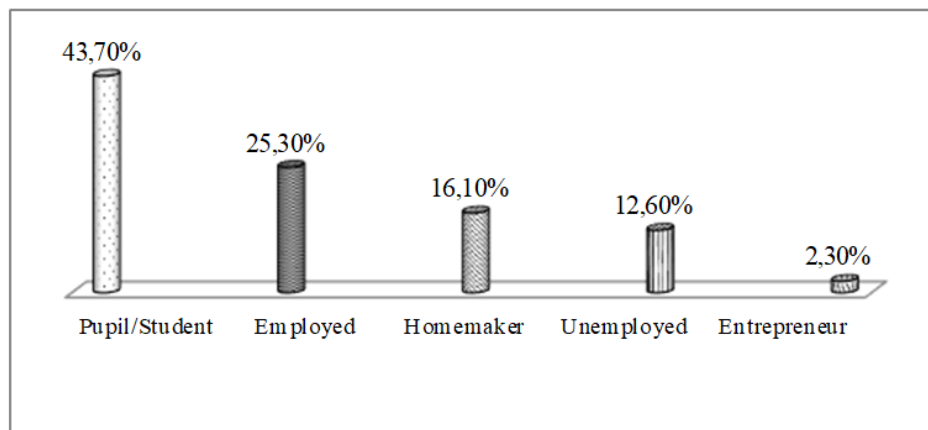
The occupational status distribution presented in Table 2 indicates an almost generalized continuation of the formal educational trajectory, with 96.1% of adolescents aged 16-17 attending high school. Of particular relevance for this analysis are the three cases of reported unemployment (3.9%). Although the absolute number is small, these cases gain analytical significance within the context of successive sample filtering and the structural representativeness of the sample for the population as a whole.

Therefore, the interpretation must be cautious, highlighting the existence of specific vulnerabilities within the analyzed cohort without implying the emergence of a structural phenomenon. Accordingly, the absence of early labor market entry at this age more likely reflects educational continuity supported by familial mechanisms within a socio-economic context dominated by vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, these incipient vulnerabilities may evolve into persistent ones, an assumption that can gain validity when compared with the 18-24 age segment, where labor market integration becomes a normative expectation, both socially and economically.

### 4.3. The 18-24 Age Segment: Transition to the Labor Market

This age category (18-24 years) is significant both theoretically and analytically, as it serves as a comparative reference for the 16-17 age cohort. Its conceptual importance lies in the consolidation of educational and occupational status under the influence of social and economic norms. From an analytical perspective, in this article, the comparison between the two age categories may provide a predictive framework for cautiously anticipating the future trajectories of 16-17-year-old adolescents.

The distribution shown in Figure 5 highlights the structural elements of occupational status for young people aged 18-24, totaling 87 individuals within the investigated households.



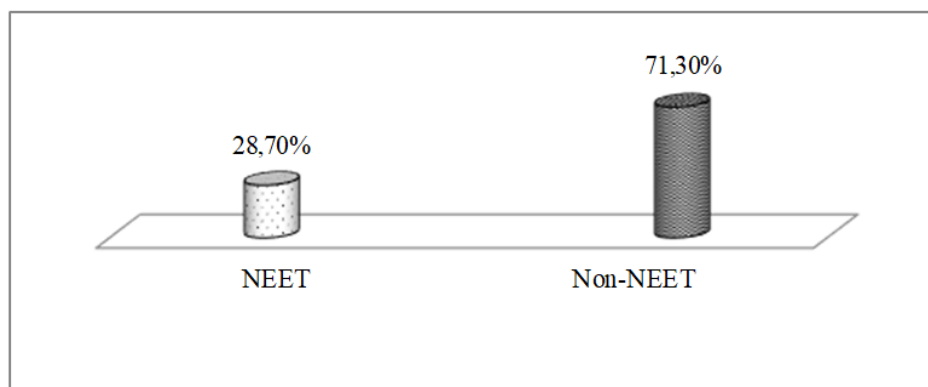
**Figure 5. Occupational status structure of young people aged 18-24 (N = 87 individuals)**

The majority of young people hold formal institutionalized occupational statuses (71.3%), with the unemployed having a formal administrative status (12.6%), while the status of homemaker is non-occupational and non-formal economic, acquiring sociological significance through social self-identification (16.1%).

To capture the occupational vulnerability area as accurately as possible, we constructed the NEET indicator for the 18-24 age segment. This indicator was defined by excluding young people engaged in education (pupils/students) and those employed (employees and entrepreneurs). The exclusion allowed the NEET indicator to encompass young people who are neither participating in any form of education nor engaged in formal occupational activities (the unemployed and homemakers).

In the present analysis, the NEET indicator does not capture participation in short-term training or requalification programs. Although this is a limitation imposed by the survey design, it is largely mitigated by the characteristics of the labor market in Petroșani. Participation in such courses (as an unemployed person or homemaker) does not guarantee actual labor market integration, given an economy lacking stable employment opportunities, making the status of unemployed or economically inactive

(homemaker) reflect an occupational vulnerability comparable to the conceptually defined NEET situation.



**Figure 6.** Distribution of young people aged 18-24 by NEET status (N = 87 individuals)

The distribution shown in Figure 6 indicates that 28.7% of young people are NEET, highlighting the presence of a significant component of occupational vulnerability within this segment. The concept of occupational vulnerability for young people in Petroșani is further emphasized by comparing it with the proportion of NEET youth in Romania in 2017, which reached 15.2% (Eurostat, 2025). Although the NEET indicator for Romania differs in age range (15-24 years), this comparative reference suggests that occupational vulnerability in Petroșani exceeds the national average.

A deeper analysis of the NEET indicator was conducted by examining its relationship with educational attainment and gender among young people aged 18-24. Table 3 presents the distribution of young people according to their accumulated educational capital, while Table 4 highlights gender differences within the NEET and Non-NEET categories.

**Table 3.** Association between educational attainment and NEET status among young people aged 18-24

<i>Educational Level</i>	<i>NEET n (%)</i>	<i>Non-NEET n (%)</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Below high school level</i>	16 (57.1%)	12 (42.9%)	28
<i>High school</i>	9 (18.0%)	41 (82.0%)	50
<i>Higher education</i>	0 (0.0%)	9 (100.0%)	9
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>25 (28.7%)</b>	<b>62 (71.3%)</b>	<b>87</b>

**Table 4.** Association between gender and NEET status among young people aged 18-24

<i>Gender</i>	<i>NEET n (%)</i>	<i>Non-NEET n (%)</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Male</i>	9 (19.1%)	38 (80.9%)	47
<i>Female</i>	16 (40.0%)	24 (60.0%)	40
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b>25 (28.7%)</b>	<b>62 (71.3%)</b>	<b>87</b>

The data in Table 3 indicate substantial differences in NEET proportions according to educational level: the lower the educational capital, the higher the proportion of NEET youth. It is observable that young people with high school education face an occupational vulnerability risk three times lower than those with education below the secondary level. Among young people with higher education, no NEET cases were recorded. A contingency analysis confirmed a statistically significant association between educational level and NEET status ( $\chi^2(2) = 17.477$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), with Cramer's V coefficient indicating a moderate association ( $V = 0.448$ ) (see Table 1 in the Appendix). These findings underscore that educational level is an important structural factor regarding the risk of belonging to the NEET category in the 18-24 age segment. The results observed in Petroșani converge with national data, with ANOFM studies showing that young people with a low educational level have a threefold higher risk of becoming NEET compared to those with higher education (Asociația „Centrul de Consultanță și Management al Proiectelor” EUROPROJECT, 2024, p. 9).

Further, we examined gender differences in NEET status. Table 4 shows that young women face nearly double the risk of being NEET (40%) compared to young men (19.1%). Contingency analysis confirmed a statistically significant association between gender and NEET status ( $\chi^2(1) = 4.588$ ;  $p = 0.032$ ), with Cramer's V coefficient indicating a low-to-moderate association ( $V = 0.230$ ) (see Table 1 in the Appendix). These results suggest that gender acts as a differentiating factor, though not as strongly as educational status. The findings align with other studies showing that the likelihood of women being NEET is higher than that of men (Țoc, 2020, p. 12).

To further explore whether inclusion in the NEET category is influenced by age within the 18-24 segment, we applied an independent samples t-test, using exact ages reported by participants rather than broader age intervals. This tested whether significant differences exist between NEET and Non-NEET groups in terms of mean age (Labăr, 2008, pp. 83, 97-99). The comparison revealed no statistically significant differences ( $t(85) = -0.683$ ;  $p = 0.496$ ), with the mean ages being very close: 21.64 years for NEET and 21.29 years for Non-NEET. The effect size associated with the t-test was very small ( $r = 0.08$ ). Positioning within the 18-24 age range does not appear to be a differentiating factor, as the phenomenon is relatively evenly distributed.

At this point, comparing the 16-17 age segment with the 18-24 segment becomes meaningful and highlights notable differences. Among adolescents aged 16-17, occupational vulnerabilities are limited (3.9% reported unemployment), without forming a structural phenomenon, and educational continuity is predominant (96.1%). For young people aged 18-24, where the NEET proportion reaches 28.7%, educational capital becomes a mechanism of selection and exclusion, and gender emerges as an additional differentiating factor in labor market access.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis revealed two levels of vulnerability in the school-to-work transition. The first level, with positive significance, concerns adolescents aged 16-17, where educational continuity prevails and early labor market entry is absent. The second level, specific to the 18-24 age segment, is marked by the emergence of

selection and exclusion mechanisms characteristic of the labor market, with educational level and gender being decisive: individuals with secondary and higher education, and to a greater extent men, are advantaged.

In the specific context of Petroșani, the 18-24 age segment can serve as an anticipatory reference for younger cohorts, with indications of a structural model of labor market integration. This is supported by Eurostat data showing the persistence of the NEET phenomenon in Romania, fluctuating between 14.5% and 18% during 2017-2024 (Eurostat, 2025). This persistence provides insights into national occupational vulnerability, with Petroșani following this trend but experiencing a local intensification of the structural pattern (28.7% NEET).

In the absence of national and local policies capable of addressing the NEET phenomenon, it is likely that it will persist, reaching levels significantly above the national average in former mono-industrial areas affected by deindustrialization, such as Petroșani.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1. Summary of association tests ( $\chi^2$ ) and Cramer's V coefficient for NEET status (18-24 years)**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Analyzed Variables</i>	<i>N</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cramer's V</i>	<i>Intensity Interpretation</i>
1	Educational level × NEET status	87	17.477	2	<0.001	0.448	Moderate association
2	Gender × NEET status	87	4.588	1	0.032	0.230	Low association