

The empty youth reserve

5.3% of young Dutch people are neither working nor in education, the lowest share in the EU. The EU average is double that: 11.0%.

Summary

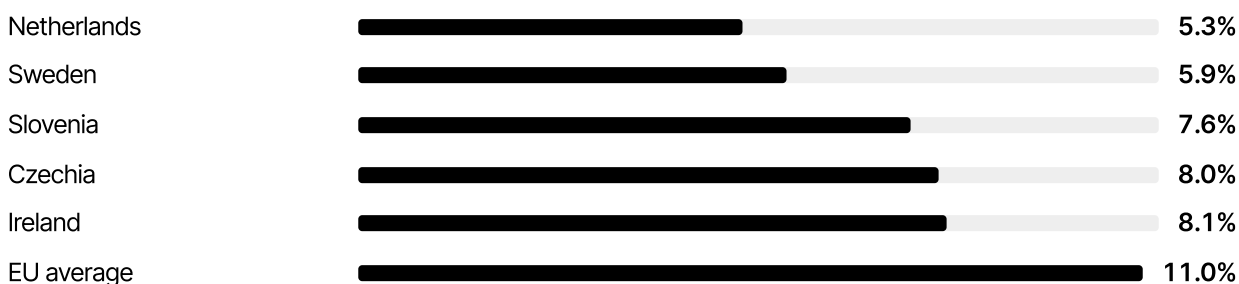
Every plan that counts on activating young people runs, in the Netherlands, into an empty reserve. Of people aged 15 to 29, 5.3% were neither in work nor in education or training in 2025, the lowest share in the EU; the average is 11.0% and Sweden follows at 5.9%. Within that small group, most are willing: 4.3 of the 5.3 percentage points say they want to work. The reserve is not unwilling but thin, and whoever recruits from it competes with all of Europe for the continent's smallest surplus.

When the labour market is tight, someone always points at the young people standing on the sidelines. For the Netherlands that gesture is quickly made and quickly refuted: the group exists, but it is the smallest in the EU. This paper measures it.

The lowest share in the EU

Of young Dutch people aged 15 to 29, 5.3% were neither in work nor in education or training in 2025, the group European statistics call NEET. The EU average is 11.0%, more than double.

5.3% of young Dutch people were without work and without education in 2025



Share of people aged 15 to 29 not in employment, education or training, 2025. Eurostat, edat_lfse_20, retrieved 1 September 2026.

Ten years earlier the Netherlands stood at 6.7%. The tightest labour market in decades has thinned the group further, not let it grow.

Small, and mostly willing

The composition surprises. Of the 5.3 percentage points, 1.8 points are unemployed under the international definition, so searching and available. The remaining 3.4 points are inactive. But asked about the wish, 4.3 of the 5.3 percentage points say they want to work; only 1.0 point does not.

Four in five young Dutch people without work and education are willing. The distance sits not in the will but in the circumstances: care duties, health, or a mismatch between what they can do and what is asked. In the EU as a whole the ratio differs: there, 6.9 of the 11.0 percentage points want to work and 4.1 points do not.

What this means for the activation story

The arithmetic is sobering. Even if activation worked perfectly and every willing young Dutch person found work, it would amount to roughly 4 percentage points of one age group, once. That is not a structural source of supply; it is a reservoir that empties one time.

For countries in double digits it is different. Whoever seeks young talent in Europe will find the untapped young not here but in the countries above the average. The Dutch youth market is, on balance, a demand market: nearly everyone who can and wants to participate already does.

What this figure does not say

- NEET is not an availability figure. Whoever gives informal care or is ill counts, but is not deployable. The 4.3 percentage points who want to work are an upper bound of the reserve, not a stock standing ready.
- The group is heterogeneous: a graduate searching for two months counts as much as someone out of view for years. The duration of NEET status is not in this figure.
- Percentages hide small numbers. In a small group the breakdowns move from year to year; the country ranking is more stable than the decimals.

What this means

- **The quotable number.** 5.3% of Dutch people aged 15 to 29 were without work and without education in 2025, the lowest share in the EU. The average is 11.0%.
- **The reserve is thin, not unwilling.** Four in five in the group want to work. Reaching them means solving circumstances, not preaching motivation.
- **Do not count on structural supply.** The group is small and the tight market has already thinned it. Activation is socially valuable, but it does not fill a sector.
- **Young supply sits elsewhere in Europe.** For volume in untapped young talent the map points to the countries above the EU average, not to the Netherlands.

Method and sources

All figures come from Eurostat, dataset edat_lfse_20, people aged 15 to 29 not in employment and not in education or training, as a percentage of the age group, reference years 2015 and 2025, retrieved on 1 September 2026, licensed CC BY 4.0.

The breakdowns use the same dataset: unemployed versus inactive under the labour force survey definitions, and wanting to work versus not. Due to rounding, the components do not always sum exactly to the total. The comparison with 2015 crosses the 2021 survey redesign and is meant as context, not as a precise trend. What is missing: the duration of NEET status, which determines how reachable the group really is and which this dataset does not measure.

Europe, Education, All markets

Sources

- Eurostat (edat_lfse_20), jongeren zonder werk of opleiding, CC BY 4.0