

How PES strategies for reaching young NEETs can be improved

A Policy Brief

The Youth Guarantee (YG) reached and helped over 30 million young people across the EU between 2015 and 2021. However, it has become evident that large groups of non-employed youth have not been able to benefit from the YG. Indeed, early evaluations of the YG's implementation have reported that the public employment services (PES) were struggling to reach young people with vulnerable backgrounds. The upgraded YG, called the 'Bridge to Jobs', calls for raising awareness about the YG, and for stepping up outreach to vulnerable groups. These efforts can be considered essential to the effectiveness of the YG, as previous studies have shown these groups of young people are among those who stand to benefit the most from the services and measures that the PES can offer.

The purpose of this policy brief is to call attention to the lack of outreach to vulnerable youth by focusing on the experiences of four European countries (Spain, Hungary, Italy, and Poland). We also show why the PES might not make sufficient efforts to incentivise vulnerable young people to register as jobseekers. Addressing this question can inform policymakers about potential paths to increasing registration levels among youth.

It is likely that this problem worsened over the last two years due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as in 2021, the share of young people, and especially of young women, who were neither in education nor in training (NEET) was significantly higher than it was in previous years. The policy responses to the pandemic led to reduced internship opportunities, decreased motivation, and increased risks of being unemployed or in precarious employment among disadvantaged youth. By limiting social interaction, the pandemic-related public health measures reduced young people's access to information and advice from teachers, peers, prospective employers, and the PES. However, in this brief, we analyse data from the pre-COVID-19 period, as we are more interested in examining the PES' efforts in normal circumstances than in investigating the effects of policy responses to the pandemic.

State of play

The proportion of NEETs who reported being registered as unemployed in 2019 was relatively high (slightly above 50%) in Spain. However, in Hungary, Italy, and Poland, only one in four (or

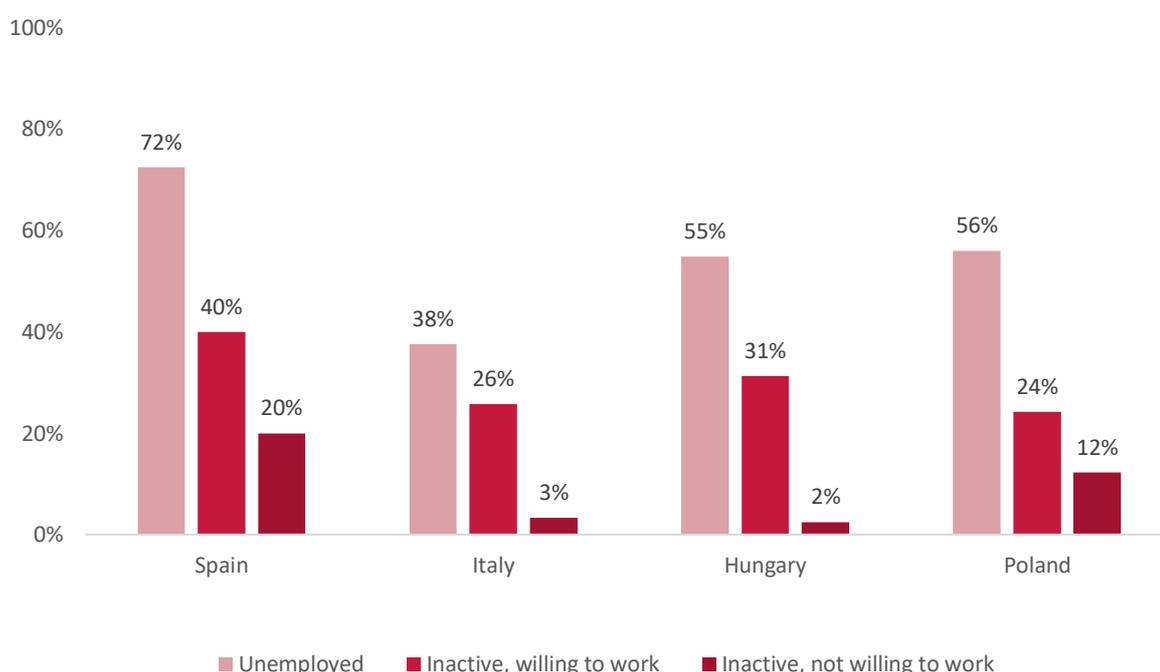
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fewer) NEETs indicated they were in contact with the PES in 2019¹. This gap can be explained in part by the relatively high proportion of young NEETs in Spain who were actively looking for a job, as such individuals were more likely to seek the help of the PES. However, we can also see that even within this group of young NEETs who were closest to the labour market, sizeable shares were not in contact with the PES. Providing support to these groups could prevent them from further disengaging from the labour market, and improve the effectiveness of the YG.

Figure 1. The PES registration rate among NEETs in Spain, Italy, Hungary, Poland



Source: own elaboration based on the EU Labour Force Survey 2019.

¹ All of the data presented in this policy brief are based on the national reports that investigated various aspects of the PES' outreach efforts in Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain. The data presented in the national reports are, in turn, based on several sources, such as Labour Force Survey data, administrative data, data gathered by surveys distributed among local PES offices or by surveys conducted within the randomized controlled trials study, and data collected through desk research and the literature review. All national reports on outreach in Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain can be found on the website: <http://yepartnership.ibs.org.pl/publications>.

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There is one group in particular that seems to be a relatively obvious first target group for the PES' activities: namely, the group of young people who are inactive but want to work, as their registration rate tends to be below one in three. These young people typically think that there are no jobs available that match their skills. Clearly, these individuals would benefit from receiving more information about other jobs that might be of interest to them, or from having access to upskilling or a mentor to motivate them – all of which are available through the Youth Guarantee.

Those young people who say they currently do not want to work should also be viewed as potential PES clients. A very sizeable group of NEETs (especially in Poland and Hungary) is composed of mothers who are looking after their young children, and are likely to return to the labour market at a later stage. While these young people are currently almost completely outside of the scope of the PES' activities, the PES can nonetheless consider offering them services and training, especially if they have low education, to prepare them for a future job search, and to help them avoid long-term unemployment or inactivity.

It should be noted that there is considerable variation in registration rates not just across but within countries, and across regions. In Spain, the regional registration rate among NEETs varies from 25% to 45% for the inactive, and from 60% to 85% for the unemployed. In Poland, the overall regional registration rates vary between 20% and 40%. In Hungary, the registration rate does not exceed 25% in the bottom quarter of districts, while it is above 50% in the top quarter of districts. Although some of these differences can be attributed to the composition of the NEET population, we cannot rule out the possibility that they are also related to the outreach efforts of the local PES offices. A survey of the PES in Poland and Hungary uncovered a relatively large degree of variation in the outreach efforts and attitudes of the PES staff. The evidence for Hungary shows that disparities in registration rates are correlated with the efforts and attitudes of the PES employees.

Why do young people decide not to register with the PES?

Among the reasons why young people do not register with the PES are barriers related to their attitudes and motivations, such as low trust in public institutions, fear of the stigma of being officially registered as unemployed, the perception that the programmes the PES offer are of poor quality, or simply limited knowledge about the PES. However, there are also barriers to registration related to the inadequacy of the PES' efforts. Employment offices face difficulties in identifying and approaching unregistered NEETs, and in mapping local stakeholders and establishing cooperation with them. When the services offered are not tailored to the needs of various NEET subgroups, the young people in these groups who

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register as unemployed often do so mainly for administrative reasons, and to gain access to passive entitlements. A lack of incentives and the insufficient capacity of PES staff to develop outreach strategies can also lead to low rates of registration.

What do local offices actually do 'on the ground'?

The results of two surveys carried out in Poland and Hungary in 2019-2020 indicate that the outreach activities of local PES offices are rather limited, and that the PES have little interaction with local stakeholders in related sectors (such as social NGOs).

Cooperation with schools exists, but is not formalised. Cooperation with teachers would allow the PES to find at-risk individuals, and to provide them with advice and guidance before they become disconnected from the labour market. Most of the PES in Poland and Hungary send employees to visit the public schools, and to meet students. However, the PES staff tend to focus on the most motivated students who are about to enter the labour market. In such cases, the most disadvantaged students may be left behind. Only a handful of employment offices exchange data with schools and track the school-to-work transition of dropouts or of individuals from less favourable environments.

While the PES staff do venture 'outside the office', they often do so only to attend certain events, such as education and job fairs, or, even more rarely, to participate in various types of local (cultural or sports) events. These activities are usually held once or twice a year. The PES rarely use mobile or stationary counselling points that would allow them to provide information and services to youth living in remote areas. There are no efforts to approach at-risk individuals in places where they usually meet, such as clubs, shopping malls, streets, or their homes (street social work).

The PES meet with local stakeholders, but joint projects are rare. Local stakeholders, such as grassroots NGOs, often have more contacts and know-how, more experienced staff, and better reputations than the PES. Other stakeholders, such as municipal social services, support people at risk and their families on a daily basis. Although the PES employees are in contact with local governments, schools, and social welfare offices, more active cooperation with these stakeholders in the form of joint projects is rare. Moreover, the PES seldom cooperate with institutions that deal with people at risk (e.g., juvenile detention or re-education centres) or with youth in general (e.g., sports, cultural, or religious institutions).

The PES offices mainly rely on traditional forms of communication, and rarely use social media. In Poland, 40% of the PES offices report using social media to promote the Youth Guarantee. In addition, just 23% of the offices say they monitor the effectiveness of their information

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campaigns. This suggests that most of the PES offices do not monitor whether their messages are reaching potential clients.

Randomised controlled trials – What works and what does not?

We conducted randomised controlled trials (RCT) in Poland, Hungary, and Spain to investigate which interventions increase the PES' reach, and thus encourage more NEETs to register with the PES. We divided the study participants into at least two groups, with one group receiving the intervention, while the other did not. We then compared the results in the two groups. The advantage of using this method was that it enabled us to interpret the results in a causal way.

Providing students in Spain with information about the PES' offerings, as well as with information about the location of the nearest PES office, made them more likely to say they intend to register with the PES. Undergraduate students in the Basque Country who were in the last year of their degree received an email sent by the university with two versions of information about the PES' offerings. The first information campaign, which only informed students about the potential benefits of registering, was not effective in increasing their likelihood of indicating an intention to register with the PES. However, when the students were informed of both the benefits of registering with the PES and the existence of a nearby PES office providing services tailored specifically to students (a PES office located on the university campus), their likelihood of reporting an intention to register with the PES increased by more than 10 percentage points (from around 50% to 60%). These findings show that while informing students about the potential benefits of registering with the PES did not affect their willingness to register with the PES, providing them with additional information about the proximity and the customised services of the local PES office did.

The results of the study conducted in Poland suggest that outreach efforts should go beyond information dissemination to help NEETs overcome the various barriers they face. In Poland, we recruited unregistered NEETs to take part in our study. The NEETs from the treatment group received information about various services offered by the PES. The participants were then sent three text messages (SMS): one with the PES' contact details, one with links to the PES' social media accounts, and one with links to the PES' job search engines. The NEETs in the control group did not receive this information or these text messages. We then compared the rates of registration with the PES among the NEETs in the two groups, and found that the differences were not statistically significant. Thus, we did not find evidence that providing NEETs with information about the PES' offerings led to an increase in their registration rate. These findings may suggest that outreach efforts should go beyond information

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dissemination by seeking to build trust between NEETs and the PES; help people at risk of social exclusion overcome the various barriers they face, such as stigma; and initiate social change processes for the beneficiaries.

The findings of the study conducted in Hungary indicate that organising workshops for local stakeholders might be a first step towards effective outreach. We held workshops in 29 local PES offices in eight counties of Hungary during the summer of 2020. The goal was to assemble local stakeholders, including representatives of social service providers, secondary education institutions, local youth service providers, and local ethnic self-governance organisations. During the workshops, primarily while working in small groups, the local stakeholders formulated plans for reaching out to different groups of disadvantaged NEETs that drew on the wealth of contacts (resources) that each party brought to the table. The workshops were successful not only in enabling the local PES offices to acquire useful contacts, but also in fostering trust and reinforcing the need for cooperation among the stakeholders. However, the labour market situation in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for increased efforts to reach out to disadvantaged young people. Indeed, the results of a follow-up questionnaire and a comparison of the outreach activities of the participating local offices in the nine months following the workshop with similar local offices from the control group did not show large changes in behaviour.

How can outreach be improved?

More attention should be paid to activating NEETs who are outside the labour force, and especially those NEETs who are willing to work but remain inactive, as they may be easier to approach and to persuade to use the support offered. However, measures that adequately address their specific needs should be developed to attract them.

The role of the PES in supporting NEETs should be reconsidered. Reaching out to individuals who are outside the labour force is not perceived as a traditional task of the PES staff in the countries analysed in this brief. While most of the staff agree with the goal of getting more NEETs registered, a considerably smaller share believe that this is the responsibility of the PES. Changing the attitudes of PES counsellors is crucial, as the effectiveness of such initiatives is correlated with their attitudes and efforts. The PES in these countries could draw from the examples of PES in other European countries that incorporated practices aimed at reaching out to unregistered and economically inactive individuals.

More data on NEETs should be collected. Information on, for example, the composition of the NEET population, and on their labour market flows, may be collected at the national and local levels, and then used to tailor the support to the needs of particular subgroups. Local PES

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offices should be provided with support in developing and using tools to collect information on potential clients at the local level.

The PES should increase their presence in areas in closer proximity to the potential target groups. This can be done by using mobile units or establishing local branches. The study conducted in Spain showed that information provided to university students about the presence of a local PES branch on the university campus increased their willingness to use PES services.

It appears that information campaigns alone are not enough to encourage NEETs to register with the PES. Information should be provided by a trustworthy institution, and be supplemented by other activities that support NEETs in overcoming the various barriers they face.

Further reading: more information about outreach activities aimed at NEETs in Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Spain can be found at: <http://yepartnership.ibs.org.pl/publications>

The project "Youth employment partnership: evaluation studies in Spain, Hungary, Italy and Poland" aims to evaluate employment initiatives targeting youth in these four European countries. The project benefits from a €1.8 million grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants Fund for Youth Employment.

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