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youth not in employment, education or training (NEET)
in South Africa

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Working Paper Series

Number 320

Author

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Recommended citation

De Lannoy, A. (2025). A generation on hold? Profiling the persistent crisis of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) in South Africa. Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town. (SALDRU Working Paper Number 320)

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A generation on hold? Profiling the persistent crisis of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) in South Africa

Ariane De Lannoy

Saldru Working Paper 320
University of Cape Town
September 2025

Abstract

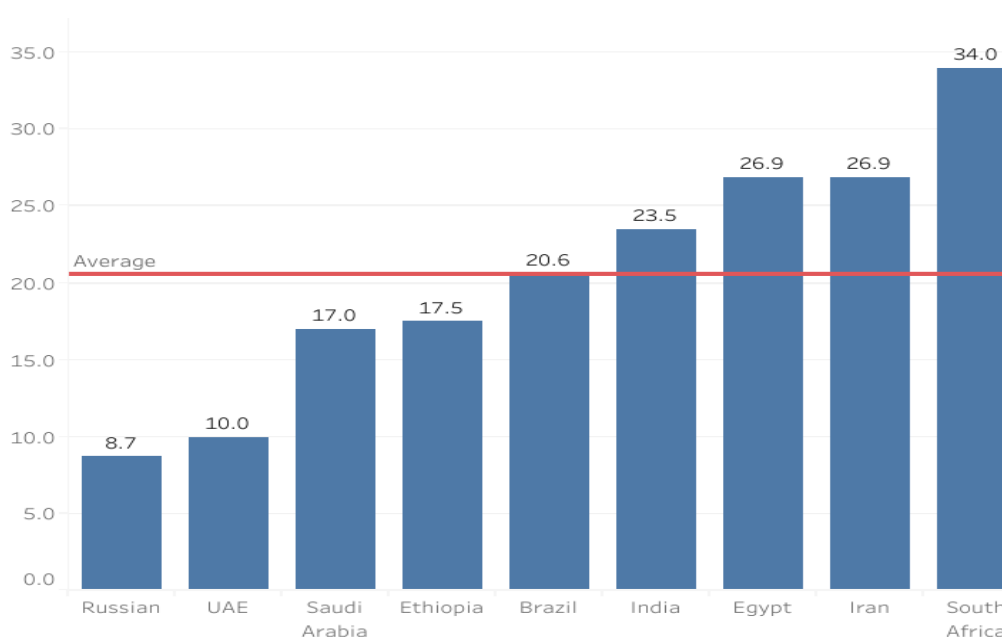
South Africa's persistently high NEET rate, with nearly one in three youth aged 15–24 not in employment, education, or training, signals a generation on hold. This study provides an update on the scale, profile, and predictors of being NEET among youth, using nationally representative data from the 2015 and 2025 Quarterly Force Surveys and 2014 and 2024 General Household Surveys. The NEET rate has hovered above 30% for a decade and reached 34.2% in 2025, affecting over 3.3 million young people. The analysis reveals stark disparities by gender, race, age, education, location, and household income, with young women, Black African youth, those aged 20–24, those with matric or less and residing in low-income households at greatest risk. While most NEET youth are actively seeking work, many remain trapped in long-term unemployment, especially new labour market entrants, a situation that has become more entrenched over the past decade. Multivariate analysis confirms key predictors of NEET status, including age, gender, education, work experience, location, and marital status. The findings thus continue to underscore the complex interplay of multiple structural and individual-level factors that keep large numbers of young people socio-economically excluded. Despite decades of policy attention to the challenge, South Africa remains unable to reliably transition young people into sustainable income earning opportunities – and thus, out of poverty. The results confirm the urgent need to develop and implement an integrated, multi-sectoral approach that rigorously strengthens supply-side readiness, scales supportive and effective intermediation accessible to all young people and enhances demand-side incentives and responsibility. That approach should be able to provide support for the (often long-term) unemployed, recognising the need to remediate for scarring effects, and to bridge the school-to-work transitions through well-targeted, multi-dimensional interventions, tailored to diverse youth experiences. Without accelerated action to support youth onto pathways to sustainable livelihoods, South Africa risks leaving an entire generation behind.

Keywords: *NEET youth, Unemployment, Inactive, School-to-work transition, Education*

1. Introduction

A growing share of young people in South Africa are increasingly disconnected from learning or earning opportunities. Despite substantial investments in post-school education, employment-readiness initiatives, matching interventions, large-scale departmental coordination efforts and an Employment Tax Incentive (The Presidency, 2025), a persistently large segment of youth remains not in employment, education, or training (NEET). This is more than an education or labour market challenge, it reflects a deeper systemic failure in comprehensively supporting the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood. As of 2025, South Africa's NEET rate for 15–24-year-olds stood at 34.2%, representing over 3 million young people disconnected from both the education system and the labour market. This rate has remained stubbornly high above 30% for over a decade. Globally, this places South Africa among the worst-performing countries on youth inclusion: its NEET rate is more than double the global average of 16.5%, and significantly higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average (26.1%) and the average for upper-middle-income countries (17.3%) (International Labour Organization, 2024). Even within the Southern African region (32.0%) and among BRICS peers (20.6%), South Africa stands out for the scale of youth disconnection (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proportion of youth who are NEET in extended BRICS Country.



Source: International Labour Organisation. Extended BRICS countries according to available data. For Brazil, India, South Africa, Russia and Saudi Arabia we used 2023 data. For Iran, Egypt and UAE we used 2022 and for Ethiopia we use 2021 data. The red line shows the average NEET rate for extended BRICS countries in 2023.

Particularly concerning is the high share of NEET youth who are actively seeking work but face prolonged unemployment. In 2025, nearly half of NEET youth (46.5%, or 1.6 million) were searching for

jobs, and of these, 73.8% (1.2 million) were long-term unemployed, having been job-seeking for over a year. Many are first-time labour market entrants without prior work experience (79.6%) and over one-fifth (22.8%) have been looking for work for more than five years. These patterns point to an increasingly precarious time in young people's lives, with persistent structural barriers preventing them from accessing employment, particularly those transitioning from school into the labour market.

The consequences of this disconnect are far-reaching. Extended periods of inactivity during early adulthood can leave lasting "scars", including poor mental health, lower lifetime earnings, and reduced social participation (Basta et al., 2019). At a national level, the NEET crisis reinforces cycles of poverty, deepens inequality, and undermines inclusive economic growth. It is no surprise that reducing NEET rates is a key target under Sustainable Development Goal 8.6, one that South Africa has missed and continues to struggle to meet.

Given the scale, persistence, and consequences of a high NEET rate, there is an urgent need for targeted and evidence-based responses. Effective policymaking requires a clear understanding of who NEET youth are, what factors drive their exclusion, and how their profiles are changing over time. To inform this effort, this study provides an updated profile, trend analysis, and predictor model of youth who are NEET in South Africa, using 2015–2025 Quarterly Labour Force Surveys (QLFS) and General Household Survey data. It tracks changes in the scale and composition of the NEET population and offers policy-relevant insights to support progress toward SDG 8.6 and to strengthen school-to-work transitions.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the data. Section 3 presents the main findings. Section 4 concludes with policy implications and recommendations.

2. Data¹

This study utilises two key data sources collected by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the NEET youth cohort in South Africa. The first data source is the first quarter of the years 2015 to 2025 of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS). This dataset allows us to profile trends and characteristics of NEET youth aged 15 to 24, providing valuable insights into their activity status, including employment, education, and inactivity. The QLFS is particularly useful for understanding the dynamic nature of youth participation in the labour market and education system. In addition to the QLFS, we incorporate data from the 2014 and 2024 General Household Survey (GHS).

¹ The previous annual updates utilised data from the first quarter of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the years 2013 to 2023, along with data from the 2013 and 2021 General Household Surveys (GHS). See Mudiriza De Lannoy (2023). For the current study, the analysis used QLFS data starting from 2015 to 2025 and for the GHS data we use 2014 and 2024 data (Statistics South Africa, 2024a; 2025).

GHS offers valuable household-level information, allowing us to explore contextual factors such as household income and adult employment status. This allows for a deeper understanding of the socio-economic environment in which these young people live.

Both the QLFS and GHS datasets include crucial variables such as age, gender, race, education, and geographic location. These variables are essential for identifying patterns and disparities within the NEET youth population. Given that both datasets are nationally representative, all descriptive estimates presented in this study are weighted using the personal weights provided in the QLFS and GHS datasets. This weighting ensures that our findings accurately reflect the broader NEET youth population in South Africa, thereby enhancing the reliability and generalisability of our conclusions.

3. Results

Our analysis begins with an overview of youth in South Africa and then moves into a more detailed and nuanced profiling of youth who are NEET.

3.1. Overview of youth in South Africa (2015 and 2025).

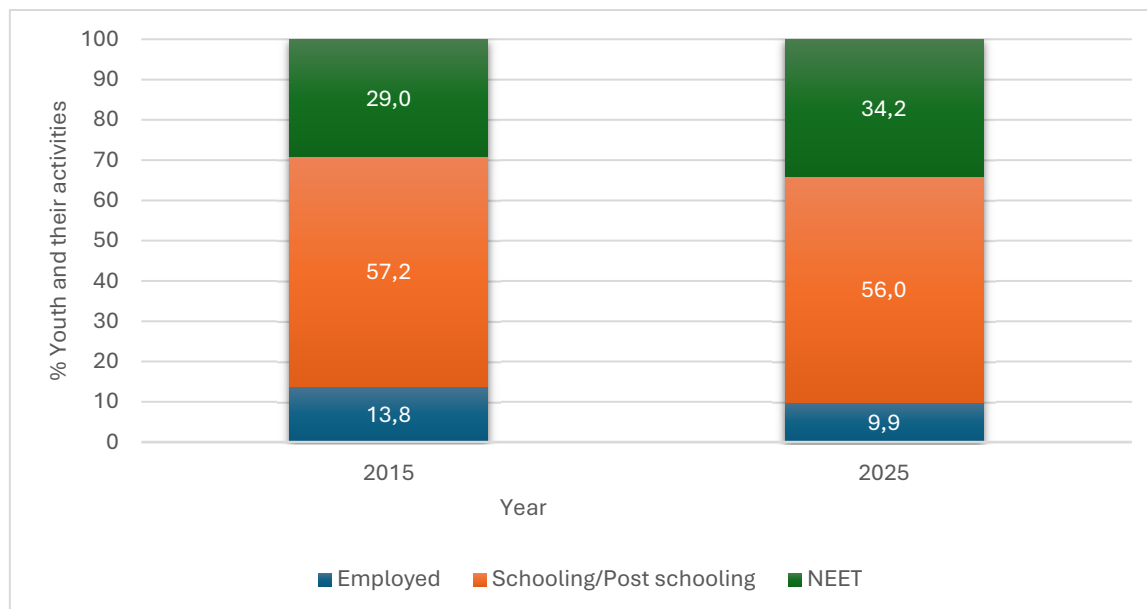
South Africa is home to over 10.3 million young people between the ages of 15 and 24 in 2025, representing about 16.8% of the total population - slight increase from 2015. This youth cohort is a critical demographic for the nation's future, not only due to its size but also because of the pivotal role it plays in shaping the socio-economic landscape of the country. The 15-24 age group represents a crucial transitional phase from adolescence to adulthood - a period marked by the transition through education, entry into the labour market, and the establishment of independent social identities. However, this stage is often fraught with challenges, making young people particularly vulnerable as they struggle to navigate the difficulties of securing employment, remain engaged in education, or avoid inactivity.

Figure 2 shows that between 2015 and 2025, the majority of this youth cohort remained engaged in school or post-school education, though the proportion decreased slightly from 57.2% in 2015 to 56.0% in 2025. A smaller proportion of young people were employed, a figure that also fell from 13.8% in 2015 to 9.9% in 2025, reflecting the tough economic conditions and job market challenges.² Worryingly, a sizeable proportion of youth were NEET, a figure that rose from 29% in 2015 to 34.2% in 2025,

² The QLFS captures employment in both the formal and informal sectors. As such, the reported employment figures include informal sector work. In 2025, 1,017,758 youths were employed, and excluding those in private households, 24.6% of them were working in the informal sector. Most of these informal sector jobs were in elementary occupations (30.4%), service and sales roles such as shop and market work (30.2%), and crafts and related trades (14.2%).

suggesting a growing inability among young people to find connection to the labour market or to educational systems.³

Figure 2: Activity status of youth aged 15-24 in South Africa (2015 and 2025).



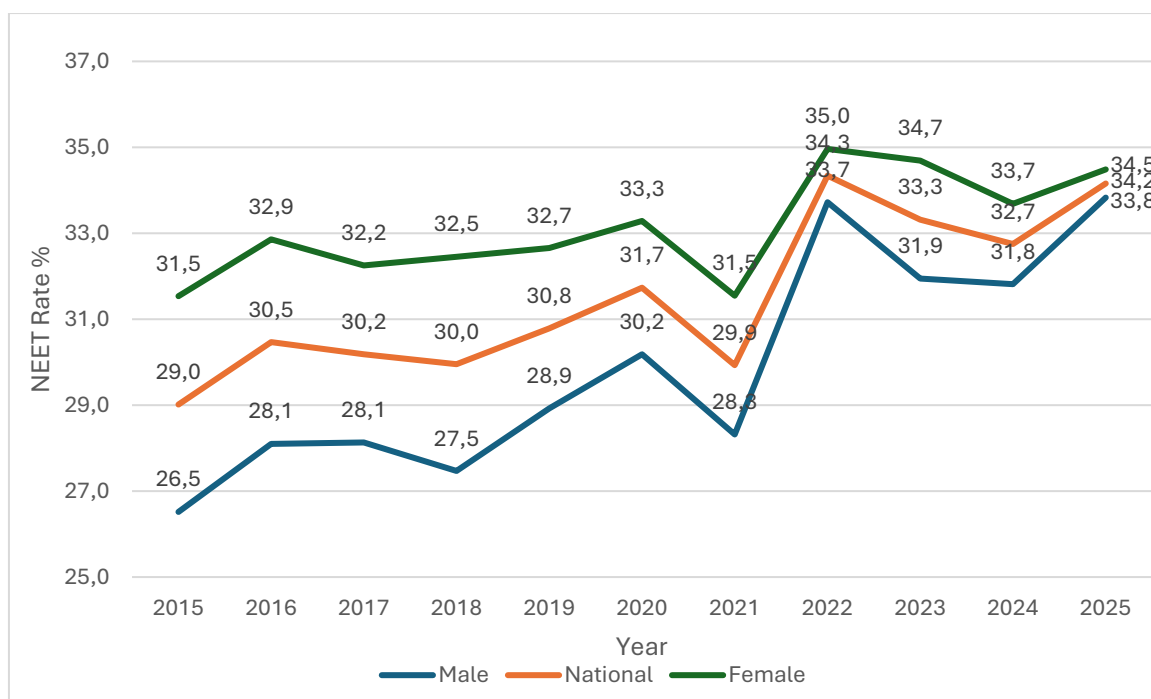
3.2. Trend of the NEET rate in South Africa (2015-2025)

Figure 3 shows the trend in the NEET rate among youth in South Africa from 2015 to 2025, revealing a general upward trajectory that reflects increasing challenges for young people to remain connected to opportunities. In 2015, the national NEET rate was 29% with male and female rates at 27% and 32%, respectively. Over the following years, the rate gradually increased, reaching a peak in 2022 at 34%, the highest recorded during this period. The sharp rise in 2022 is largely attributable to the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The national NEET rate slightly declined to 33% in 2024, but then rose again in 2025 to 34.2%. The NEET rate continues to rise gradually, particularly for females, who consistently exhibit higher rates than their male counterparts. These trends highlight the persistent and gendered nature of youth exclusion in South Africa. Spikes in specific years suggest periods of intensified economic or social challenges, pointing to the need for targeted policy interventions to not only address the barriers that youth face in accessing education, training, and employment opportunities, but also to ensure that they are resilient and agile enough to respond to

³ Focusing on unemployed youth, a subset of the NEET population, Figure 1A in Appendix 1 shows that the official youth unemployment rate has generally trended upward over the past decade, rising from 50.5% in 2015 to a peak of 64.5% in 2022. Although the rate declined slightly in 2023 and 2024, it remains high at 62.4% in 2025. While the expanded unemployment rate, which includes discouraged job seekers, is significantly higher, the official rate alone highlights the ongoing challenges youth face in securing employment despite actively searching.

either opportunities as they arise, or additional crises that would otherwise render them even more vulnerable.

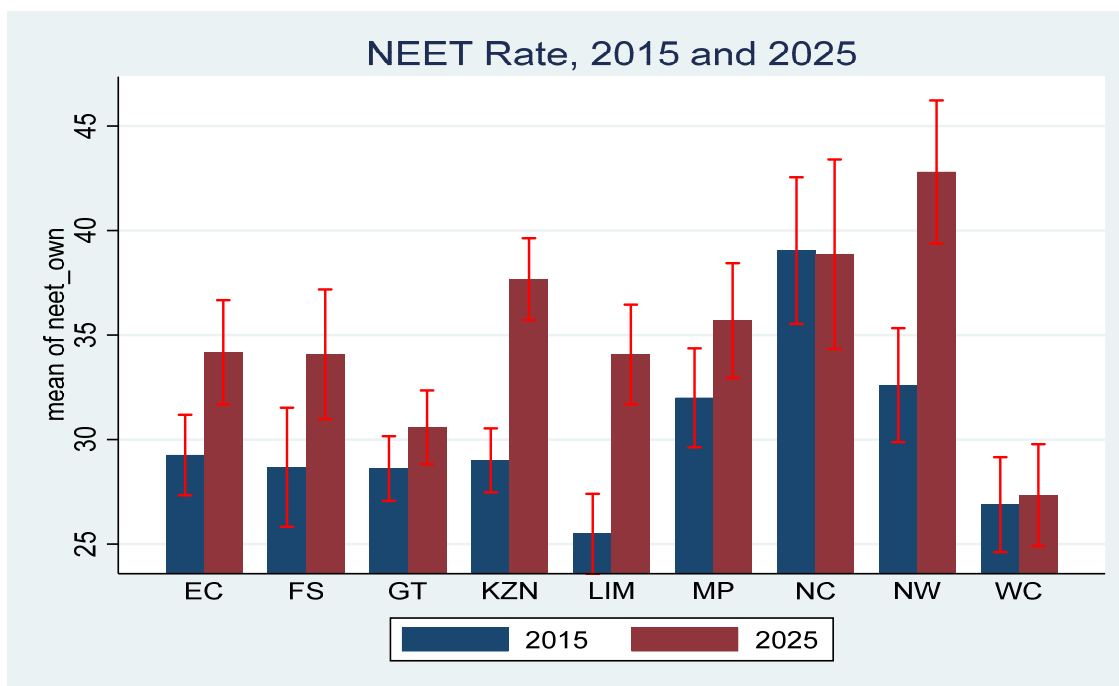
Figure 3: Trend in the NEET rate in South Africa QLFS Q1 data 2015-2025



Notes: Point estimates are weighed using person weights.

There are significant disparities in NEET rates depending on where young people live in South Africa, as shown in Figure 4. Between 2015 and 2025, the North West province recorded the highest increase in NEET rates, from 33% to 43%. Limpopo, which had the lowest rate in 2015 at 26%, also experienced a substantial increase to 34% by 2025. Gauteng saw a relatively modest rise from 29% to 31%, and the Western Cape registered the smallest rise from 27% in 2015 to 27.3% in 2025 while it was the only province to register a decline dropping from 29% to 27% when comparing 2014 and 2024 NEET rates. Looking at absolute figures as of 2025, KwaZulu Natal has the highest absolute number of NEET youth, with approximately 773,440 followed closely by Gauteng with 736,345 youth not in employment, education, or training. This reflects Gauteng's and KwaZulu Natal's status as the most populous provinces, but also signals that despite their economic opportunities, many young people remain excluded from productive activities. These provincial-level variations also underscore how the national NEET average can obscure important regional trends, emphasizing the need for tailored, province-specific policy interventions.

Figure 4: NEET youth rate across provinces in South Africa QLFS Q1 data 2015 and 2025



Notes: Point estimates are weighed using person weights.

3.2. Who are the young people who are NEET in South Africa?

Table 1 provides a detailed comparative analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of NEET youth between 2015 and 2025. The data indicates a worrying trend, with the absolute numbers of NEET youth increasing from 2.98 million in 2015 to 3.52 million in 2025, and the overall NEET rate rising from 29.0% to 34.2% over this period. The analysis further highlights the persistent diversity within the NEET youth population, which has remained throughout the decade. The majority of NEET youth are female, African Black, slightly older (aged 20-24), live in urban areas, and have achieved a matric or lower level of education. However, over time, significant changes can be seen for educational attainment and area of residence among NEET youth. The percentage of NEET youth with less than a matric qualification decreased notably from 59.8% in 2015 to 43% in 2025, while those *with* a matric increased from 37% to 52%.⁴ Additionally, the proportion of NEET youth living in urban areas rose from 57% in 2015 to 60% in 2025, indicating a growing concentration of disconnected youth in cities.

⁴ Figure 2A in the appendix shows a gradual shift in the education profile of NEET youth between 2015 and 2025. The proportion of NEET youth with less than matric has been declining over time, while the share of those who have completed matric or an equivalent qualification has been steadily increasing. This trend suggests that holding a matric qualification may no longer sufficient to safeguard against youth labour market exclusion.

Table 1: Overview of Youth in South Africa, QLFS Q1 data for 2015 and 2025

	Indicator	2015		2025		
		Total Number	Percentage	Total Number	Percentage	
Total SA Population:	Total Youth (15–24 yrs)	10 280 713	–	10 299 024	–	
	NEET Youth (15-24yrs)	2 982 984	29.0	3 517 923	34.2	
Of those young people who are NEET:	Status	Unemployed	1 354 124	45.4	1 634 303	46.5
		Discouraged	625 985	21.0	732 307	20.8
		Inactive	1 002 874	33.6	1 151 313	32.7
	Gender	Male	1 368 762	45.9	1 746 719	49.7
		Female	1 614 222	54.1	1 771 204	50.4
	Race	Black African	2 585 492	86.7	3 101 654	88.2
		Coloured	254 352	8.5	302 969	8.6
		Indian/Asian	59 337	2.0	35 991	1
		White	83 804	2.8	77 309	2.2
	Geo Type	Urban	1 705 700	57.2	2 095 336	59.6
		Rural	1 277 285	42.8	1 422 587	40.4
	Age Group	15–19	637 909	21.4	743 708	21.1
		20–24	2 345 075	78.6	2 774 214	78.9
	Education Level	Less than Matric	1 784 617	59.8	1 479 459	42.5
Matric		1 092 340	36.6	1 817 757	52.3	
Any Tertiary		105 516	3.5	181 402	5.2	

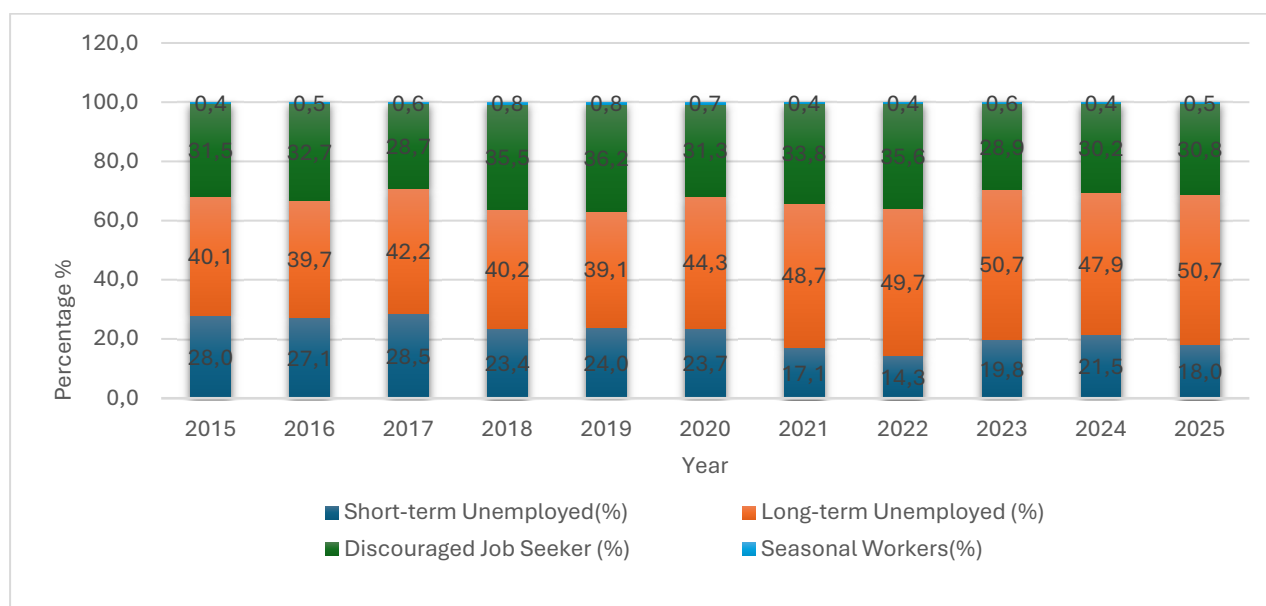
Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person Weights

Moreover, Table 1 shows that the majority of NEET youth in 2025 are unemployed, either actively searching for work (46.5%) or discouraged job seekers (20.8%), rather than inactive (32.7%) - proportions that have remained relatively stable since 2015. The data thus indicates that the vast majority of young people *want* to work, and are available to work, sustaining an orientation towards the labour market despite very harsh labour market conditions in the country; almost half of the cohort is actively searching for work. Importantly, while we see a higher proportion of youth in the older age bracket within the NEET cohort, the number of younger youth is also substantial - 743,708 in 2025, indicating the need to also work preventatively to ensure that youth of school going age remain connected.

3.3. Labour market engagement among NEET youth.

Table 1 indicates that most NEET youth are unemployed and have a strong desire to work. However, Figure 5 reveals a concerning trend: the majority within this group are experiencing long-term unemployment, defined as actively seeking work for over a year. The proportion of long-term unemployed NEET youth has increased from 40.1% in 2015 to a staggering 50.7% in 2025. On the contrary, the proportion of NEET youth in short-term unemployment (searching for less than a year) and those classified as discouraged job seekers has declined, from 28.0% and 31.5% in 2015 to 18.0% and 30.8% in 2025, respectively. The increasing proportion of long-term unemployed youth within the NEET cohort is especially concerning, as research suggests that extended periods of 'NEET-hood' heighten the risk of mental health issues and deepen poverty traps among young people in South Africa (Branson et al., 2019).

Figure 5: Engaged NEET youth QLFS Q1 Data from 2015 to 2025



Note: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Table 3 provides a breakdown of searching unemployed NEET youth by their unemployment status. A striking observation is that most of these youth are new entrants into the labour market, having never worked before. This has stood out in each of the analyses of the NEET cohort, but what is particularly concerning is the stark increase in the number of new entrants - from 951 882 (70.3%) in 2015 to 1 301 432 (79.6%) in 2025 – while the proportion of job losers and job leavers sees significant decreases. Still,

a significant portion of searching unemployed NEET youth are job losers - those who have lost their jobs and are struggling to find new employment. Although this proportion decreased to 13.5% by 2025, it represents nearly 220 000 NEET youth with prior work experience who face significant challenges in connecting to opportunities. Overall, this data suggests that over the past decade, more youth have been entering the labour market, outpacing the creation of new jobs.

Table 3: Searching unemployed NEET youth by unemployment status, QLFS Q1 data for 2015 and 2025.

Unemployment Status	2015		2025	
	Total Number	Percentage	Total Number	Percentage
Job loser	265 722	19.6	219 912	13.5
Job leaver	66 699	4.9	25 963	1.6
New entrant	951 882	70.3	1 301 432	79.6
Re-entrant	52 001	3.8	29 132	1.8
Other (last worked >5 years ago)	17 820	1.3	57 864	3.5
Total	1 354 124	100	1 634 303	100

Note: Sample restricted to NEET youth who are searching unemployed. Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Even more concerning is the duration that new entrant, searching unemployed NEET youth have spent in the labour market looking for employment. Table 4 reveals a truly alarming rise in the proportion of youth who have been searching for more than five years, with the number more than doubling, from 102 445 (10.8%) in 2015 to 296 702 (22.8%) in 2025. This is alongside stark decreases in the proportion of youth who have been searching for less than 1 year, indicating again the increasingly difficult circumstances faced by youth as they seek to transition from school to work. However, the trend simultaneously highlights the determination of large numbers of young people, who, despite these prolonged periods of unemployment, remain committed to their pursuit of securing employment.

Table 4: New entrant NEET youth by time in the labour market looking for work, QLFS Q1 data for 2015 and 2025.

Duration Trying to Find Work	2015		2025	
	Total Number	Percentage	Total Number	Percentage
Less than 3 months	160 224	16.8	145 187	11.2
3 months – less than 6 months	47 171	5.0	50 835	3.9
6 months – less than 9 months	29 590	3.1	11 685	0.9
9 months – less than 1 year	58 601	6.2	49 654	3.8
1 year – less than 3 years	361 385	38.0	442 127	34.0
3 years – 5 years	192 516	20.2	303 823	23.4
More than 5 years	102 445	10.8	296 702	22.8
Total	951 932	100	1 300 013	100

Notes: Sample is restricted to NEET youth who are searching unemployed and new entrants in the labour market. Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Finally, as shown in Table 1 previously, a sizeable number of NEET youth are inactive. This inactive cohort is a very heterogeneous group, with various reasons underlying this inactivity. Table 5 shows that of the disengaged youth in 2015, the majority (51%) were inactive due to homemaker (family) responsibilities, but this decreased to 36.1% in 2025. A sizeable number were also inactive due to health reasons, with a slight increase from 15.3% in 2015 to 18.4% in 2025. The remaining inactive NEET youth fall into the 'Other inactive' category – a proportion that grew significantly over the past decade, but which is even more diverse. This category includes youth who are NEET due to reasons such as voluntarily not working, pregnancy or lacking money for transport. Given this heterogeneity, designing effective interventions to reengage inactive NEET youth in the labour market or to reconnect them to education or training is highly challenging. Tailored approaches that address the specific barriers faced by different subgroups within this population are essential to creating meaningful and sustainable pathways for reentry into productive activities.

Table 5: Disengaged NEET youth QLFS Q1 data 2015 and 2025

Disengaged Category	2015		2025	
	Total Number	Percentage	Total Number	Percentage
Homemaker	424 677	51.2	269 164	36.1
Health reasons	127 201	15.3	137 538	18.4
Other Inactive	277 101	33.4	338 981	45.5
Total	828 979	100	745 683	100

Notes: Sample is restricted to NEET youth who are inactive. Point estimates are weighted using person weights. Other inactive include Voluntarily not working, too young to work, pregnancy and lack of transport money.

In summary, the growing proportion of long-term unemployed NEET youth indicates a persistent struggle for young people to find employment; this is particularly, but not only, true for new labour market entrants. This trend points to deep-rooted structural challenges in South Africa's labour market, which not only undermine economic prospects but also risk exacerbating poverty, mental health issues, and prolonged social exclusion among young people. With an economy failing to create enough formal sector jobs and unable to absorb the youth population, there is an urgent need for the revision of the multiple interventions currently in place to resolve demand, intermediation and supply side challenges in the labour market. In the absence of formal job growth, comprehensive and targeted interventions that aim to create not only opportunities for young people to become or remain active members of a broader society, but that support them to build the capabilities and networks needed to enable their inclusion, are required. Policies must simultaneously address the demand and supply sides of the labour market, stimulating growth in areas that have the potential to generate decent employment for young people (Presidency, June 2025), while also enhancing the employability and well-being of youth.

Young people need supported, scaffolded pathways that include connections to income provision (grants, starter capital, etc.), alongside high quality and relevant skills provision, opportunities to work, support for self-employment, or further learning. The literature indicates that one-size-fits all approaches are rarely successful, but that multi-pronged and diversified approaches that can respond to individual life circumstances are more effective, especially when implemented over extended periods of time (Kluve et al. 2019). Tailored support for different subgroups within the NEET population, offered through an integrated, multi-sectoral support system that involves social protection, public employment services, quality education, and private sector engagement, can create coherent, navigable pathways rather than uniform interventions and systems working in isolation.

3.4. Who are the young people who are NEET, living in income poverty?⁵

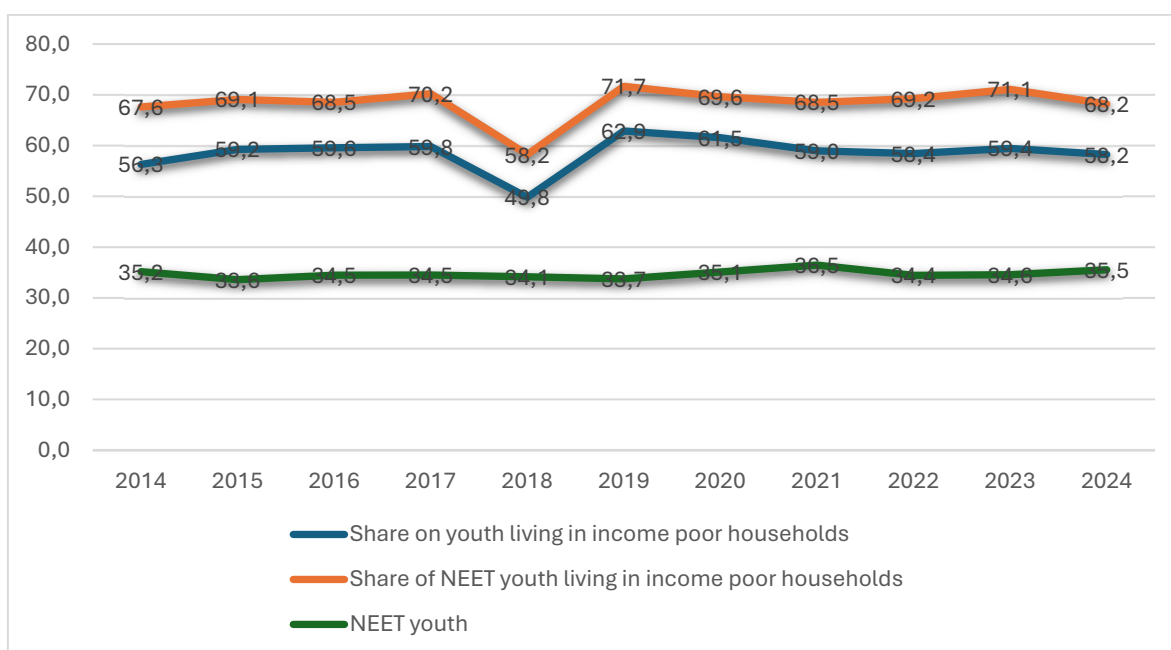
To deepen our understanding of NEET youth in South Africa, we move on to analyse data from the 2014 - 2024 General Household Surveys (GHS), focusing on NEET youth aged 15-24 who are living in income-poor households. A comparison of the data over this ten-year period reveals important shifts and concerning trends, indicated in Figure 6 and table 6. Figure 6 shows that the proportion of youth living in income-poor households has remained persistently high, above 55%, throughout the past decade, with the exception of 2018, where it dropped sharply to 49.8%.⁶ The share stood at 56.3% in 2014 and

⁵ We rely on GHS data to measure income poverty since the QLFS does not collect household information, such as household income.

⁶ To determine the proportion of NEET youth who live in income-poor households, we use Statistics South Africa's upper-bound poverty line of R942 in 2014 and R1634 in 2024, which refers to the food poverty line plus the

fluctuated around 59% in recent years, reaching 58.2% in 2024. The situation is even more concerning when focusing on youth who are NEET. Over the same period, the share of NEET youth living in income-poor households has remained particularly high, rising from 67.6% in 2014 to a peak of 71.7% in 2019, before slightly declining to 68.2% in 2024.

Figure 6: Share of youth in income-poor households, GHS data 2014 - 2024



Note: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

In line with findings from the QLFS analysis, data from the General Household Survey (GHS) confirms that NEET rates have persistently remained above 30%. This persistent disconnection, combined with high levels of poverty, creates a dual burden that reinforces cycles of socio-economic exclusion. Evidence shows that NEET youth from income-poor households face multiple, intersecting barriers, including limited access to quality education, scarce job opportunities, and weak social networks that make it significantly harder to transition into work or training (Noh and Lee, 2017). The share of NEET youth living in income-poor households in South Africa grew to 68.2% in 2024, signaling entrenched marginalisation.

The GHS analysis further reveals that a significant proportion of young people who are NEET reside in households with no employed adults. The absence of working adults in the household limits young

average amount derived from non-food items of households whose food expenditure is equal to the food poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2024b).

people's access to critical resources, knowledge, networks and opportunities, further perpetuating a vicious cycle of exclusion from the labour market and education (Thompson and Dahling, 2019).

Table 6: Overview of NEET youth by household income-poor status, GHS data 2014 and 2024

	Indicator	2014		2024	
		Total Number	Percentage	Total Number	Percentage
	Total Youth (15-24)	10 000 434		10 399 666	
	Income Poor Youth	5 599 899	56.3	6 026 099	58.2
	NEET Youth	3 499 713	35.2	3 694 712	35.5
Of those young people who are NEET:	Income-poor	2 343 513	67.6	2 501 071	68.2
	No Employed Adult	1 251 647	35.8	1 322 814	35.9
Of those young NEETs who are income poor:	Unemployed	952 177	40.6	1 389 316	55.6
	Discouraged	423 156	18.1	261 968	10.5
	Inactive	968 180	41.3	849 786	34.0
	Male	1 032 768	44.1	1 139 746	45.6
	Female	1 310 745	55.9	1 361 324	54.4
	African/Black	2 157 310	92.1	2 327 534	93.1
	Coloured	172 095	7.3	158 850	6.4
	Indian/Asian	10 272	0.4	6 402	0.3
	White	3 836	0.2	8 286	0.3
	15–19 years	518 094	22.1	645 485	25.8
	20–24 years	1 825 419	77.9	1 855 585	74.2
	Rural	1 116 046	51.3	1 218 640	49.4
	Urban	1 059 479	48.7	1 250 004	50.6
	Less than matric	1 537 200	66.3	1 212 956	49.1
	Matric/Equivalent	728 296	31.4	1 191 444	48.3
	Any tertiary	52 800	2.3	64 598	2.6

Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

The analysis shows that the majority of income-poor NEET youth in 2024 were unemployed (55.6%), female (54.4%), Black African (93.1%), aged 20–24 (74.2%), and had either less than matric (49.1%) or matric/equivalent (48.3%), with an almost even urban–rural split. Over time, the unemployed share within this income poor cohort has risen significantly from 40.6% in 2014, while inactivity has declined from 41.3% to 34.0%, and discouraged job seekers dropped from 18.1% to 10.5%, again indicating more active job search among young people, although with limited success. Persistent gender and racial disparities remain as well, with young women and Black African youth still disproportionately affected. Although educational attainment has improved - with a sharp drop in the proportion of youth in the cohort who have completed less than matric - we note again that this has not translated into employment. Representation of young people with tertiary education remains rare in this group (only 2.6%).

These patterns again highlight the entrenched nature of labour market exclusion and the stubbornly strong structural barriers that continue to lock young people out of meaningful economic participation – despite more youth completing higher levels of education and actively searching for work. Without urgent multi-sectoral action that drives inclusive economic and job growth, while supporting young people to escape deprivation and precarity, South Africa risks cementing the marginalisation of a generation of young people who are eager to work and to build sustainable lives for themselves.

4. Individual predictors of NEET status among youth in South Africa.

Building on the descriptive NEET profiling above, this section investigates the individual-level factors that influence the likelihood of youth aged 15–24 being NEET in South Africa. Using nationally representative data from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the period 2015–2025, we estimate a series of multivariate logistic regression models to explore both overall NEET status and its key subcategories.⁷ The dependent variable in each model is binary and takes the value 1 if a youth falls into one of the following NEET categories, and 0 otherwise: Overall NEET, Inactive NEET, Discouraged NEET, Unemployed NEET, Long-term unemployed NEET. Separate models are estimated for each outcome to better understand the distinct factors associated with each form of disconnect. The explanatory variables include a range of individual characteristics: age group, gender, race, educational attainment, urban or rural residence, marital status and previous work experience. Adjusted odds ratios (aORs) with 95% confidence intervals are reported to identify statistically significant associations. For a detailed explanation of the estimated model and the underlying literature, please refer to Mudiriza and De Lannoy (2023), who estimated a model examining the factors associated with NEET status among youth in South Africa.

A key limitation of the QLFS data is that it does not capture household-level variables such as income, household employment status, or caregiving responsibilities. This restricts the analysis of broader socio-economic contexts influencing NEET status. However, a major strength of the QLFS is its detailed tracking of labour market activity, including long-term unemployment, a critical dimension in understanding the depth and persistence of youth labour market exclusion.

Result interpretation and discussion

⁷ The multivariate logistic regression models allow us to measure the individual impact of each of the predictors on each of the dependent variables while controlling for other factors.

The logistic regression results presented in table 7 provide insights mainly into the individual factors associated with NEET status as well as different subcategories of NEET status in South Africa. The analysis reveals that age is a strong predictor of NEET status. Youth aged 20–24 are over seven times more likely to be NEET compared to those aged 15–19, and significantly more likely to be discouraged (aOR=1.316), searching unemployed (aOR=2.144), and long-term unemployed NEET (aOR=4.019). However, they are less likely to be completely inactive (aOR=0.393), suggesting that while older youth are more exposed to labour market exclusion, they are also more engaged in job search. These findings are consistent with international findings that older youth, particularly youth who are long-term NEET, face heightened vulnerability due to accumulated disadvantages, unmet employment expectations, and a greater psychological toll over time (Gadsby, 2019).

Gender differences also emerge strongly. Female youth are more likely to be NEET (aOR=1.181) and inactive NEET (aOR=1.644), pointing to gendered barriers such as caregiving responsibilities, and social norms that limit labour market participation. On the other hand, they are less likely to be searching unemployed (aOR=0.709) or discouraged (aOR=0.863). These findings align with existing literature that finds that young women who are NEET face a higher burden of unpaid care work and limited mobility (Davidson and Arim, 2019; Singh and Pattanaik, 2020), rendering it more difficult to search for work.

Table 7: Multivariate logistic regression results (Adjusted Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals)

Variable	NEETs	Inactivity NEETs	Discouraged NEETs	Unemployed NEETs	Long term unemployed NEETs
Age group (20-24)	7.748*** [7.498, 8.005]	0.393*** [0.372, 0.416]	1.316*** [1.229, 1.409]	2.144*** [2.022, 2.273]	4.019*** [3.635, 4.443]
Gender (Female)	1.181*** [1.147, 1.217]	1.644*** [1.562, 1.730]	0.863*** [0.816, 0.913]	0.709*** [0.675, 0.744]	1.150*** [1.064, 1.242]
Marital status (Married)	0.511*** [0.444, 0.588]	0.524*** [0.376, 0.730]	0.814 [0.602, 1.099]	1.831*** [1.414, 2.372]	0.777 [0.567, 1.063]
Female#Married	6.123*** [5.204, 7.205]	3.646*** [2.585, 5.142]	1.069 [0.774, 1.477]	0.309*** [0.235, 0.408]	1.944*** [1.354, 2.793]
Race: Coloured	1.227*** [1.152, 1.306]	0.852*** [0.767, 0.945]	1.336*** [1.175, 1.519]	0.998 [0.904, 1.101]	1.094 [0.946, 1.265]
: Indian/Asian	0.570*** [0.499, 0.650]	1.331** [1.054, 1.680]	0.708** [0.525, 0.955]	0.981 [0.780, 1.233]	0.840 [0.587, 1.202]
: White	0.279*** [0.250, 0.311]	1.469*** [1.191, 1.812]	0.639*** [0.463, 0.882]	0.862 [0.702, 1.059]	1.088 [0.803, 1.474]
Years of education	0.951*** [0.944, 0.958]	0.894*** [0.885, 0.903]	0.978*** [0.967, 0.990]	1.146*** [1.134, 1.159]	0.845*** [0.827, 0.863]
Work Experience					0.156*** [0.143, 0.170]
Residence (Urban)	0.834*** [0.804, 0.865]	0.829*** [0.781, 0.880]	0.709*** [0.664, 0.757]	1.558*** [1.471, 1.651]	1.340*** [1.214, 1.478]
Time dummy	1.194*** [1.159, 1.229]	1.067*** [1.016, 1.120]	1.015 [0.961, 1.072]	0.929*** [0.886, 0.973]	1.618*** [1.501, 1.745]
Province Dummy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs	108 972	33 518	33 518	33 518	15 345

Notes: The regression analysis is based on pooled data from 2015 to 2025. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Reference categories: **Age**: 15-19 years; **Gender**: Male; **Race**: Black African; **Urban**: Rural; **Married**: Not married; **Female#Married** – Interaction term between gender and marital status; **Time dummy**: Before 2020 – pre COVID pandemic; **Work Experience**: No work experience.

The model includes an interaction between gender and marital status, which offers a more nuanced understanding of this gendered exclusion. Being married alone appears protective against being NEET (aOR = 0.511) and against inactivity (aOR = 0.524). However, a different story emerges when gender is interacted with marital status. Married young women face significantly higher odds of being NEET (aOR = 6.123) and inactive (aOR = 3.646), underscoring compounded constraints. In addition, their odds of being long-term unemployed NEET are higher (aOR = 1.944), highlighting that for those married women who do engage in the labour market and in active job search, entry may be especially difficult and prolonged. These findings align with global evidence on the intersectional disadvantages facing married women (Amarante and Rossel, 2018; Stöcker, 2025).

Race remains a key driver of youth labour market exclusion in South Africa. Coloured youth are significantly more likely to be NEET (aOR = 1.227) and unemployed NEET (aOR = 1.336) than other race groups, while White and Indian/Asian youth are much less likely to be NEET. These disparities reflect persistent structural inequalities, including unequal access to quality education and employment opportunities (Lambon-Quayefio et al. 2025; van der Berg et al., 2011). Notably, differences in educational attainment further deepen this exclusion. In 2025, 56% of Coloured youth who were NEET had not completed matric, and only 2.6% had any tertiary education. By contrast, among Black African NEET youth, 42% had less than matric, over half had completed matric (52.8%), and 5% had some tertiary education.⁸ This suggests that Coloured youth may be entering the labour market with comparatively lower levels of formal education, increasing their vulnerability. Previous research also indicated that Black youth are more likely to remain in school longer, even with grade repetition potentially improving their chances of attaining matric (Lam et al., 2011).

Despite higher proportions of youth who have completed matric in the 2025 cohort, the regression results indicate that educational attainment is generally protective against NEET status. Each additional year of education reduces the likelihood of being NEET (aOR=0.951), inactive (aOR=0.894), and a long-term unemployed NEET (aOR=0.845). Interestingly, it increases the likelihood of being unemployed NEET (aOR=1.146), suggesting that more educated youth are more likely to actively search for jobs, even in the face of limited opportunities. It points at the risk of higher levels of frustration among educated youth in a constrained labour market, but also to a continued mismatch between young people's skills and those required by available jobs. This finding again reinforces the urgent need to

⁸ These statistics are derived from the 2025 QLFS, first quarter data.

improve school-to-work transitions and better align education with labour market demand (Ranchhod and Daniels, 2021).

We find that urban residence is associated with mixed outcomes. Youth in urban areas are less likely to be NEET (aOR=0.834), inactive (aOR=0.829) or discouraged (aOR=0.709), possibly due to better access to services, information, and job opportunities. However, they are significantly more likely to be unemployed NEET (aOR=1.558) and long-term unemployed NEET (aOR=1.340). This suggests that while urban youth are more engaged in the labour market and actively seeking work, they also face heightened competition and limited job absorption, leading to prolonged joblessness. These findings point to a paradox of urban opportunity without adequate inclusion where youth may be better connected to the labour market but still excluded from its benefits. Similar tensions were observed in Greece, where urban youth who were NEET, though more connected, experienced prolonged exclusion and higher psychological distress (Basta et al., 2019).

Importantly, having prior work experience reduces the odds of being long-term unemployed NEET (aOR=0.156). This emphasises the importance of early labour market exposure to improve employment prospects. Youth who gain work experience, even if temporary, are less likely to become chronically detached from the labour market. These findings are consistent with recent evidence highlighting the protective effect of early job access and the important role of youth employment programs (Jacobs et al., 2024; Statistics South Africa, 2022; Espi-Sanchis et al., 2022).

Finally, time and provincial effects are also notable. The time dummy variable suggests that the odds of being NEET, inactive, unemployed, or long-term unemployed worsened during the post-COVID period, with the largest increase observed in long-term unemployment (aOR = 1.618). This points to the lingering effects of the pandemic on youth labour market outcomes. The provincial controls, which account for geographic heterogeneity across South Africa, largely confirm earlier patterns. Notably, being located in the Western Cape is associated with a lower likelihood of being NEET or falling into any of the NEET subcategories, relative to other provinces. Regional differences in labour market conditions, service availability, and economic structure thus play a significant role in shaping youth outcomes.

In sum, these findings emphasise the diversity within the NEET youth cohort and the complex, multi-faceted nature of their marginalisation. They point to the importance of interventions that are sufficiently agile to be able to respond to varied youth profiles and that are capable of tackling the structural drivers that perpetuate young people's persistent socio-economic disadvantage. Targeted

support is particularly critical for women, Coloured and African youth, individuals with lower levels of education, and those experiencing long-term unemployment. Effective strategies require an integration of multiple forms of assistance, combining access to early work experience, clear pathways through the skills development system, aimed at labour market integration, and psychosocial support to counter the scarring effect of long-term socio-economic exclusion.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study sheds light on the persistent crisis of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET) in South Africa, offering an urgent and nuanced understanding of a generation increasingly excluded from pathways to independent adulthood. The findings suggest that being out of education and the labour market may be a more persistent condition, and one that disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. Contrary to public perceptions of passivity, the majority of youth who are NEET are actively seeking employment. More young people in the cohort have completed at least their matric year. Yet, many, especially new labour market entrants who have never held a job, remain locked out of opportunities for prolonged periods.

Multivariate analysis confirms that NEET status is significantly shaped by age, gender, education level, location and prior work experience. These predictors reflect deep systemic failures within the education system, labour market, and social protection system to support effective school-to-work transitions. The persistent and rising rates of youth who are NEET, and who are long-term unemployed NEET, signal a national crisis of opportunity. If left unaddressed, this disconnection risks further entrenching cycles of poverty, and deepening existing inequalities. This generation of young people, completing more years of education than before, and eager to work, seems effectively "*on hold*" in their desire to transition to independent adulthood. The situation warrants an urgent call to action.

Despite these concerning findings, the insights provide strong guidance on how to design more effective and inclusive policy responses. The recommendations that follow build directly on the structural and individual-level challenges identified in this study and emphasize the importance of integrated, data-informed, and targeted interventions that can meaningfully support youth re-engagement in education, training, and the labour market.

Policy recommendations

Expand access to second-chance education and diversify post-secondary education pathways. Young people who exit the education system prematurely, particularly those with less than matric, require flexible re-entry opportunities. The education departments should be supported in their mandate to actively reach out to youth who leave the schooling system prematurely and to then collaboratively re-design a pathway back to learning or earning opportunities. Policymakers should recognise and support non-traditional education models that combine quality vocational training, life skills development, and entrepreneurship education to meet the diverse needs of youth.

Bridge the school-to-work divide through work-integrated learning. To smooth the transition from education to employment, South Africa should expand and institutionalise apprenticeships, learnerships, and internship programs that are tailored for first-time job seekers, particularly the 20–24 age cohort. Better targeted public-private partnerships between educational institutions and employers should aim to offer structured pathways that blend learning with work exposure, ultimately facilitating long-term employment.

Prioritise support for long-term unemployed and first-time job seekers. Long-term unemployed youth, especially those who have never worked, require targeted, intensive support. This includes income support or job search subsidies, hiring incentives for employers, and the establishment of local job centres offering high quality career coaching, psychosocial support, and job placement services. Evidence from other contexts demonstrates that such multi-faceted services can significantly improve employment outcomes (Liu et al. 2014).

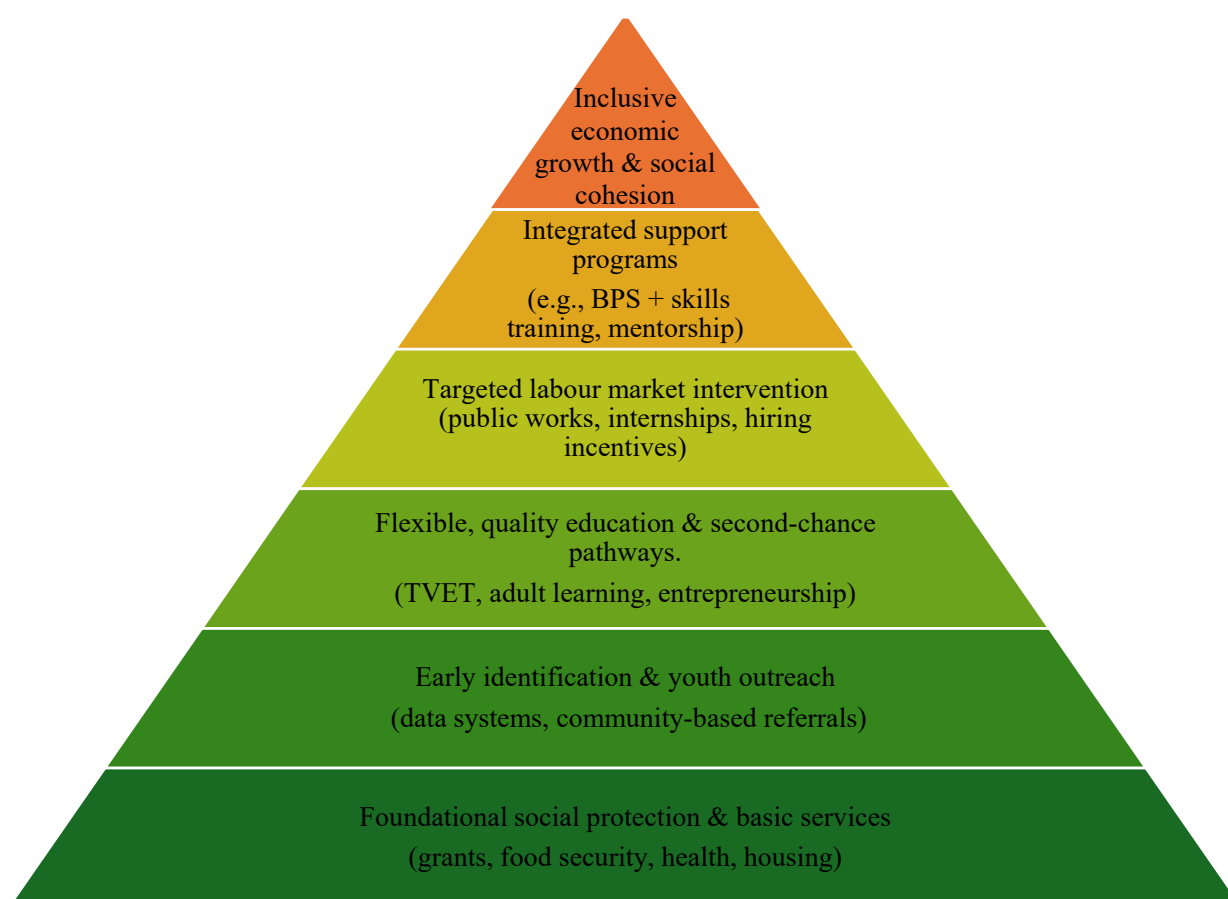
Target interventions geographically and demographically. The spatial dimension of NEET status is particularly pronounced. Interventions should be targeted to high-risk provinces and areas with high youth unemployment and inactivity. Public employment programmes serve an important role, as immediate income support, social inclusion measures and stepping stones into the labour market in these underserved areas.

Promote gender-responsive policy and programming. The continued gender dimension within the NEET cohort calls for deliberate investment in subsidised childcare, safe, reliable and affordable transport, and the creation of inclusive training and work environments. These measures are particularly crucial in enabling young women to access learning and earning opportunities, especially in male-dominated fields.

In summary, addressing South Africa’s persistent NEET youth crisis requires a bold shift toward sustained, integrated, and youth-centered interventions. The Basic Package of Support (BPS), developed by the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) at UCT and the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) at UJ, and partners, offers a promising model. Designed to support young people who are NEET, the BPS delivers tailored services including individual guidance counseling, peer support, and connections to relevant services and opportunities within a community. However, to fully tackle the deep-rooted barriers confronting NEET youth, especially those furthest from opportunity, the BPS needs to be able to connect youth to high quality, complementary services such as targeted and labour market relevant skills development, second-chance education pathways, and active labour market interventions. Intentionally building and sustaining this high quality, diversified ecosystem of support for young people, alongside a drive for truly inclusive growth in decent jobs for young people is a strategic investment in breaking intergenerational poverty and restoring the social contract between the country and large numbers of its young people.

Figure 6: Building pathways for addressing the NEET youth crisis in South Africa illustrates a progressive, layered intervention model that can make the BPS a complete wraparound support system for addressing the NEET crisis. The model has, at its base, social protection and basic services to stabilise the situation of vulnerable youth, followed by early identification and outreach to ensure timely, targeted support. Flexible, quality education and second-chance opportunities offer re-entry into learning, while targeted labour market programs bridge the school-to-work divide. At the center are integrated support systems such as the BPS and an enhanced service ecosystem that provides labour market relevant skills training. Ultimately, these interconnected layers converge toward the goal of inclusive economic growth and social cohesion, ensuring that no youth remain “on hold” and that all young people are given a meaningful opportunity to be productivity citizens of South Africa.

Figure 6: Building pathways for addressing the NEET youth crisis in South Africa



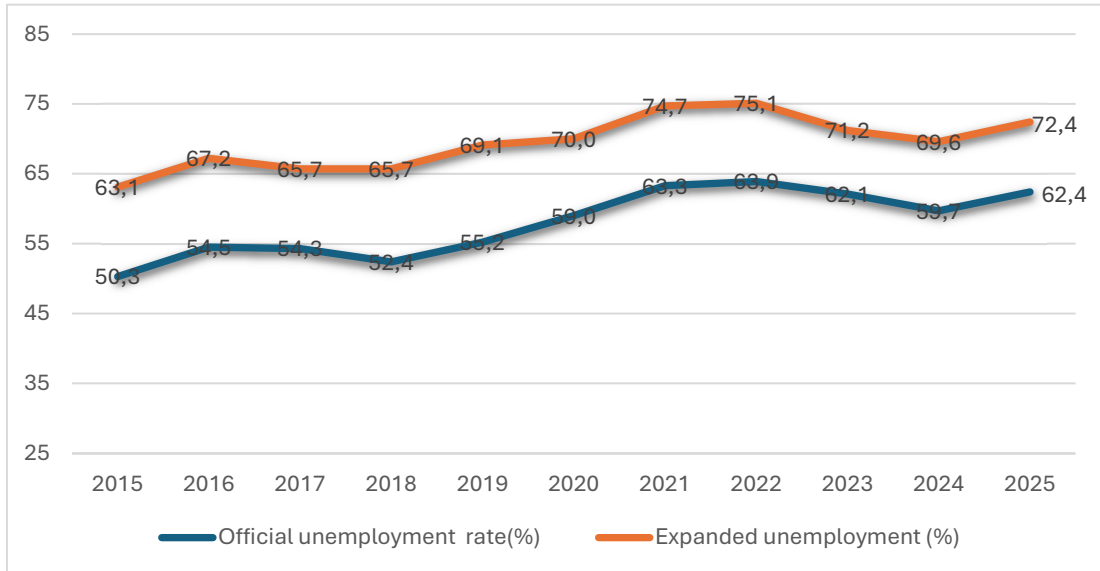
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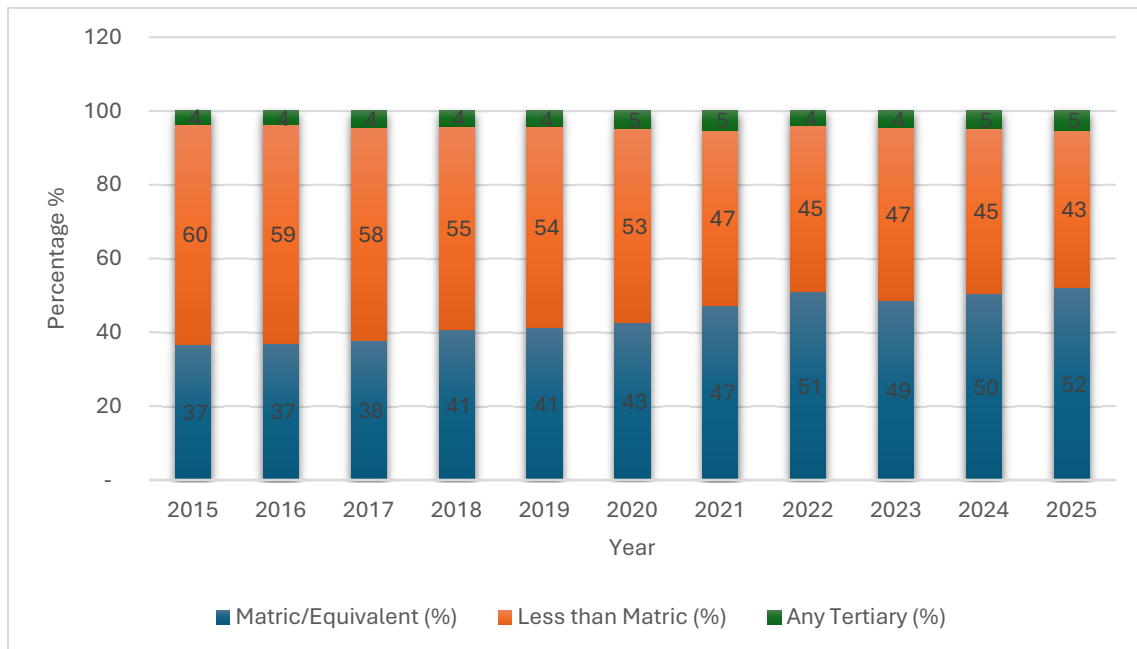
Appendix 1

Figure 1A: Trend in the unemployment rate in South Africa, QLFS Q1 Data 2015-2025



Note: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Figure 2A: Education level of NEET youth, QLFS Q1 Data 2015 to 2025



Note: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.



SALDRU

Southern Africa Labour and
Development Research Unit

Founded in 1975, the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) is a research-based social responsiveness initiative housed in the School of Economics at the University of Cape Town.

The unit carries out research and capacity building in applied empirical microeconomics with an emphasis on poverty and inequality, labour markets, human capital and social policy. We strive for academic excellence and policy relevance.

SALDRU has implemented a range of innovative surveys in South Africa including the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development (PSLSD), Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS) and the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS), among others. Building on these large data gathering projects, we conduct a range of training and capacity building activities in the use of survey data to analyse social well-being.

Our mission is to challenge inequalities through policy relevant academic research.



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