YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE YOUTH GUARANTEE IN IRELAND

Think-tank for action on social change

National Youth Council of Ireland

TASC Report for the National Youth Council of Ireland

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Youth Unemployment and the Youth Guarantee in Ireland

Report for the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)

Oisín Gilmore, Senior Economist,

TASC – Ireland's Think Tank for Action on Social Change

National Youth Council of Ireland

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Contents

Executive Summary

Youth unemployment is a serious policy problem because its effects can last long after a young person has found work. Periods of unemployment or non-employment early in life can reduce future earnings, weaken labour market attachment, increase the risk of later unemployment and affect health, wellbeing and social participation. For this reason, youth unemployment cannot be treated simply as a temporary difficulty experienced by young people as they move from education into work. It is a problem that can shape people's lives for many years.

On the headline measures, Ireland has made a strong recovery since the Great Recession. Youth unemployment rose from around 10 per cent in 2008 to over 30 per cent in 2010, before falling from 32 per cent in 2012 to 11 per cent in 2019. The proportion of young people aged 15 to 24 not in employment, education or training also fell sharply. Ireland now has the fourth lowest NEET rate in the EU, at 6.4 per cent, compared with an EU average of 9.0 per cent.

However, these positive headline figures hide significant problems. The number of young people in employment fell by more than half during the crisis, from 441,200 in Q3 2007 to 211,500 in Q3 2011, reaching a low point of 189,600 in Q1 2012. While youth unemployment has largely recovered, youth employment has not returned to pre-crisis levels. This is not simply explained by population change: the number of people aged 15 to 24 living in Ireland fell sharply during the recession but had largely recovered by April 2025.

There are also concerns about the quality of employment available to young people. Workers aged under 20 remain subject to sub-minimum wage rates, with workers under 18 entitled to as little as €9.91 per hour in 2026. Recent ESRI evidence shows that the share of workers aged under 20 paid sub-minimum rates increased from around 15 per cent historically to 30 per cent in the first half of 2025. This is especially concerning given that the Low Pay Commission has recommended abolishing sub-minimum youth rates.

The wider conditions facing young people also point to a deeper problem. Housing costs have risen sharply, with the national average house price more than doubling between 2012 and 2025, from €155,114 to €375,307. In Dublin, average house prices rose from €240,333 to €520,046 over the same period. Rents have also increased substantially, reaching €1,755 nationally and €2,232 in Dublin by late 2025. These pressures are delaying young people's transition to independent adulthood. Between 2017 and 2022, the proportion of working young people living with their parents increased from 27 per cent to 40 per cent.

Ireland also stands out in European evidence on youth social exclusion and emigration intentions. In 2023, 33 per cent of young people in Ireland reported feeling socially excluded, the highest rate in the EU. Eurofound also found that 61 per cent of young people in Ireland were planning or wishing to move to another country within three years. Emigration by Irish citizens remains far above pre-crisis levels: around 13,000 Irish citizens emigrated each year in 2007 and 2008, compared with 35,000 in 2025.

The policy response has developed unevenly. After 2008, the initial domestic response was shaped by austerity, including sharp cuts to Jobseeker's Allowance rates for young people. Later, at EU level, the Youth Guarantee created a commitment to provide young people with a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. In Ireland, however, the Youth Guarantee has been implemented largely through the existing Pathways to Work activation framework, rather than through a distinct youth employment system.

The central conclusion of this report is that Ireland has recovered strongly from the youth unemployment crisis of the early 2010s, but it has not solved the problem of youth labour market insecurity. Falling youth unemployment is welcome, but it is not enough. A serious youth employment strategy must focus not only on whether young people are employed, but on whether they can access decent work, adequate income, secure housing and a realistic pathway to an independent life in Ireland.

1: Introduction

Youth unemployment is a serious policy problem because its effects can last long after a young person has found work. A period of unemployment early in life can interrupt the accumulation of skills and experience, weaken labour market attachment, reduce future earnings and increase the risk of later unemployment. For this reason, youth unemployment cannot be treated simply as a temporary difficulty that young people experience as they move from education into work. It is a problem that can shape people's lives for many years.

This report examines youth unemployment and the Youth Guarantee in Ireland from the period after the financial crisis to the present. It does so at an important moment. Ireland has experienced a strong recovery from the crisis years, and on many headline indicators the position of young people has improved significantly. Youth unemployment has fallen dramatically from its post-crisis peak, the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training has declined, and Ireland now compares favourably with the EU average on several key measures.

However, these positive headline figures do not tell the full story. Youth unemployment remains high relative to unemployment among those aged 25 and over. The number of young people in employment has not recovered in the same way as employment among older workers. Many young people continue to face insecure work, low pay, unaffordable housing, delayed transitions out of the parental home, social exclusion and renewed pressures to emigrate. The problem, therefore, is not simply whether young people can find work. It is whether they can find decent work, build secure lives and make a successful transition into adulthood.

The experience of the Great Recession remains central to understanding this issue. Youth unemployment in Ireland rose dramatically after 2008, reaching crisis levels by the early 2010s. The number of young people in employment collapsed, youth poverty increased sharply, and large numbers of young people left the country. The policy response during this period was shaped by austerity. One of the most significant domestic measures was the reduction of Jobseeker's Allowance rates for young people, justified at the time as a way to incentivise employment, education and training, but also reducing the income floor available to young unemployed people during a period of exceptional labour market weakness.

At European level, the crisis led to the creation of the Youth Guarantee. Established in 2013, and reinforced in 2020, the Youth Guarantee is the European Union's main youth employment instrument. It commits Member States to ensuring that young people receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. In Ireland, the Youth Guarantee has been implemented largely through the existing *Pathways to Work* activation framework, rather than through a distinct youth employment system.

This report reviews the development of youth unemployment in Ireland, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, and the wider policy landscape affecting young people's labour market outcomes.

The argument of the report is straightforward. Ireland has made real progress since the depths of the crisis, and this progress should not be dismissed. But falling youth unemployment is not enough. A successful youth employment policy must also be judged by the quality of work available to young people, the adequacy of income supports, the ability of the system to reach those most at risk of exclusion, and whether employment provides a realistic pathway to independence and a decent life.

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 explains why youth unemployment matters, drawing on the literature on scarring and the long-term effects of unemployment early in life. Chapter 3 sets out the good news: the dramatic decline in youth unemployment, the fall in the NEET rate and the improvement in youth poverty indicators since the crisis. Chapter 4 then shows why these headline improvements conceal significant problems, including weak youth employment recovery, sub-minimum youth wages, housing pressures, social exclusion and emigration. Chapter 5 examines the policy response, from cuts to Jobseeker’s Allowance to the development of the European Youth Guarantee and its implementation in Ireland. The conclusion brings these findings together.

2: The problem of youth unemployment

Youth unemployment is not simply a temporary difficulty that affects young people at the beginning of their working lives. Periods of unemployment or non-employment early in life can interrupt the accumulation of skills and experience, weaken attachment to the labour market, reduce future earnings, and increase the risk of later unemployment. For this reason, youth unemployment has long been recognised in the academic literature as a problem with potentially lasting effects, rather than a short-term transitional issue that affects young people only briefly as they move from education into work.[1]

This long-term impact is often described as "scarring". A substantial body of research finds that unemployment when young can leave a lasting mark on later labour market outcomes. Gregg and Tominey's widely cited study of people born in Britain in 1958 found that one additional year of unemployment before age 23 was associated with wages that were 13 to 21 per cent lower at age 42. Put differently, each three-month spell of youth unemployment was associated with a wage penalty of around 2 to 3 per cent two decades later. Importantly, this effect remained even after controlling for education, cognitive ability, family

[1] Becker, B.E. and Hills, S.M. (1980) 'Teenage unemployment: some evidence of the long-run effects on wages', *The Journal of Human Resources*, 15(3), pp. 354–372. https://doi.org/10.2307/145288; Stevenson, W. (1978) 'The relationship between early work experience and future employability', in Adams, A.V. et al. *The Lingering Crisis of Youth Unemployment*. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research; Ellwood, D.T. (1982) 'Teenage unemployment: permanent scars or temporary blemishes?', in Freeman, R.B. and Wise, D.A. (eds) *The Youth Labor Market Problem: Its Nature, Causes, and Consequences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 349–390. Available at: https://www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c7878/c7878.pdf.

background, region and later unemployment.[2] Other studies have found similar evidence of wage and unemployment scarring, particularly where unemployment occurs at key transition points, such as immediately after leaving education or graduating from college.[3]

The 2008 financial crisis showed how exposed young people are to downturns. Across Europe, youth unemployment rose sharply, often to two or three times the adult unemployment rate. Ireland was among the countries hardest hit. Youth unemployment, which had averaged around 9 per cent between 2005 and 2007, rose to a peak of 33 per cent in mid-2012.[4] This was not simply a temporary deterioration in headline unemployment. It affected a generation of young people as they entered the labour market and may have had lasting impacts.

The literature that developed after the crisis reinforced the importance of taking youth unemployment seriously. Bell and Blanchflower's analysis of young people and the Great Recession showed that entering the labour market during a downturn can reduce earnings for many years. They also found that the effects of

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[2] Gregg, P. and Tominey, E. (2005) 'The wage scar from male youth unemployment', *Labour Economics*, 12(4), pp. 487–509. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2005.05.004

[3] Gregg, P. (2001) 'The impact of youth unemployment on adult unemployment in the NCDS', *The Economic Journal*, 111(475), pp. F626–F653. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00666; Arulampalam, W. (2001) 'Is unemployment really scarring? Effects of unemployment experiences on wages', *The Economic Journal*, 111(475), pp. F585–F606. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00664; Mroz, T.A. and Savage, T.H. (2006) 'The long-term effects of youth unemployment', *The Journal of Human Resources*, 41(2), pp. 259–293. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.XLI.2.259; Gartell, M. (2009) *Unemployment and subsequent earnings for Swedish college graduates: a study of scarring effects*. Working Paper 2009:10. Uppsala: Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy. Available at: https://www.ifau.se/globalassets/pdf/se/2009/wp09-10.pdf

[4] Department of Social Protection and Department of Education and Skills (2014) *Pathways to Work: The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee: Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf; Houses of the Oireachtas Library & Research Service (2021) *Youth unemployment rates*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. Available at: https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/libraryResearch/2021/2021-08-05_l-rs-note-youth-unemployment-rates_en.pdf

early unemployment are not limited to wages. Spells of unemployment while young can affect happiness, job satisfaction and health many years later. The consequences of youth unemployment are therefore economic, social and personal.[5]

More recent research has widened the focus beyond unemployment alone. Studies of school-to-work transitions and NEET status show that repeated spells of insecurity, temporary work, inactivity or non-employment can also have lasting effects. Young people who experience long and fragmented transitions into stable work are more likely to face lower earnings, unstable employment and future joblessness. This is especially important because not all young people face the same risks. Low educational attainment, poverty, disability, poor mental health, adverse childhood experiences and weak local labour markets can all increase the likelihood of prolonged exclusion from employment, education or training.[6]

Irish and European evidence also shows that scarring is shaped by wider economic conditions. Regan's study of graduates across 13 European countries finds that each one percentage point increase in the unemployment rate at the time of graduation is associated with a wage penalty of around 2 per cent one year later, with effects lasting for almost a decade. In the countries worst affected by the eurozone crisis, including Ireland, new graduates faced wage losses of between 12 and 23 per cent over the first ten years of their careers. This

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[5] Bell, D.N.F. and Blanchflower, D.G. (2011) 'Young people and the Great Recession', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 27(2), pp. 241–267. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grr011

[6] Fabrizi, E. and Rocca, A. (2024) 'The scarring effect of a prolonged school-to-work transition on young people's future careers and the influence of family background', *Italian Economic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40797-024-00302-5; Tanzi, G.M. (2022) 'Scars of youth non-employment and labour market conditions', *Italian Economic Journal*, 9, pp. 125–149. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40797-022-00191-6; Rahmani, H., Groot, W. and Rahmani, A.M. (2024) 'Unravelling the NEET phenomenon: a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of risk factors for youth not in education, employment, or training', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 29(1), 2331576. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2331576

demonstrates that scarring is not simply the result of individual choices or characteristics. It is strongly influenced by the economic and institutional context into which young people enter the labour market.[7]

Youth unemployment therefore requires a serious and sustained policy response. It is not enough to treat it as a short-term problem that disappears when the economy improves. Even when headline unemployment falls, the effects of early unemployment can continue to shape young people's earnings, job security, health and life chances for many years.

[7] Regan, M. (2020) *Wage scarring among unlucky European cohorts*. ESRI Working Paper No. 668. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/wage-scarring-among-unlucky-european-cohorts

3: Youth unemployment is down

Given the lasting consequences discussed in the previous chapter, youth unemployment is a major policy issue. The good news is that, on the headline measures, Ireland is now performing well. Youth unemployment has fallen dramatically since the Great Recession. The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training has also declined sharply. Measures of youth poverty have improved substantially since the worst years of the crisis.

These are important achievements and should not be dismissed. However, they do not mean that the labour market problems facing young people have disappeared. As this chapter shows, Ireland has made a strong recovery from the crisis period. But the headline figures also conceal some important weaknesses, which are discussed in the following chapter.

Youth Unemployment

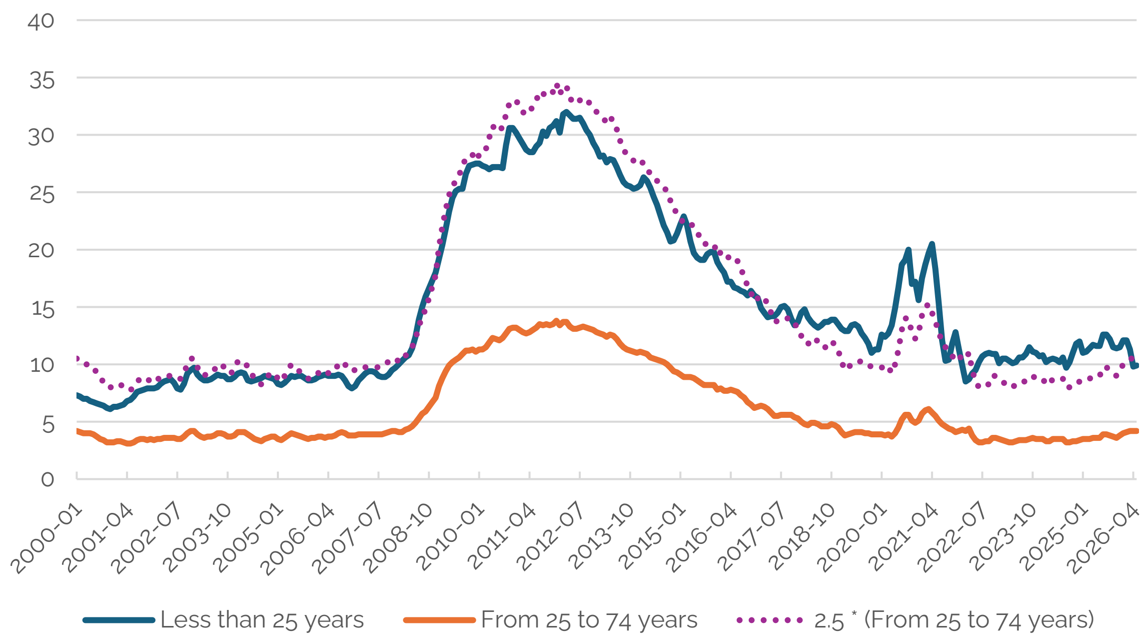
At the start of the century, youth unemployment in Ireland, measured for those aged 15 to 24, was relatively low. It remained between 7 and 10 per cent up to 2008. However, with the onset of the Great Recession, it increased dramatically, rising from 10 per cent in 2008 to over 30 per cent just two years later, in 2010. At the same time, the number of young people in employment fell by more than half, from 441,200 in Q3 2007 to just 211,500 in Q3 2011.[8] (See Figure 1 below.)

The recovery since then has been substantial. Between 2012 and 2019, youth unemployment fell from 32 per cent to 11 per cent. This was a remarkable

[8] Due to the high seasonality of youth employment, I am give Q3 in both years to ensure comparability. However, the low point was Q1 2012 when youth employment fell to 189,600.

improvement in a relatively short period. In August 2024, it fell below 10% for the first time since 2007. Since then, despite concerns about a hiring slowdown, youth unemployment remained low.[9] In May 2026 it was 9.9%.[10]

Figure 1: Unemployment in Ireland



Source: Eurostat

It is important to understand why youth unemployment is consistently higher than unemployment among workers aged 25 and over.[11] Young people are at a more fragile stage of their working lives. Many are entering the labour market for the first time, moving between education, training and work, or searching for their first stable job. Employers often prefer candidates with experience, references and

[9] McGinn, R. (2026), 'Ireland's job market has stalled, recruiters warn', *Irish Independent*, 11 May. Available at: https://www.independent.ie/business/irelands-job-market-has-stalled-recruiters-warn/a/151380407.html; Taylor, C. (2026), 'The Irish jobs market is slowing and younger people are in the firing line', *The Irish Times*, 22 February. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2026/02/22/the-irish-jobs-market-is-slowing-and-younger-people-are-in-the-firing-line/

[10] These are seasonally adjusted data, not calendar adjusted data.

[11] While unemployment has tended to be significantly higher among young people than among the general working age population, this is not the case with underemployment. Underemployment among young people has tended to be very similar to underemployment among the wider working age population, where both series have tended to track each other closely and where underemployment is lower among those aged under 25. See Appendix A.

proven workplace skills. This can put young workers at a disadvantage, even when they have good formal qualifications.

Young people are also more likely to be employed in insecure, temporary, part-time or entry-level roles. These jobs tend to be more exposed to economic downturns and are often the first to be cut when demand falls. Because young workers usually have shorter job tenure, weaker employment protection and less firm-specific experience, they are more vulnerable to redundancy than older workers.

There is also a "matching" problem. Early in their careers, young people are still trying to find work that fits their skills, qualifications and preferences. This means they are more likely to move between jobs or experience short spells of unemployment. Some of this reflects normal labour market transition. However, when weak demand, poor-quality jobs or inadequate support systems are added, these transitions can become prolonged and damaging.

A further issue is how unemployment is defined. In almost all instances, unemployment is measured using the International Labour Office definition. A person is counted as unemployed if, in the week before the survey, they were without work, available for work within the next two weeks, and had taken specific steps in the previous four weeks to find work. This information is gathered through the Labour Force Survey.[12]

The key point is that the definition of unemployment depends on being out of work, available for work and actively seeking work. Therefore, a student who is out of work, available for work and has taken specific steps to find work in the previous four weeks is counted as unemployed. The category of young people

[12] Central Statistics Office (2021) *Labour Force Survey Quarter 3 2021: Background notes*. Cork: Central Statistics Office. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter32021/backgroundnotes/

who are not in employment, education or training, commonly referred to as NEETs, is separate and is discussed below.

For these reasons, youth unemployment is structurally higher than unemployment among those aged 25 and over. This can be seen in Figure 1. An obvious question therefore arises: how should we identify youth unemployment as a specific problem, rather than simply as a reflection of wider labour market conditions?

One metric that the Government has begun to use in recent years is whether the youth unemployment rate is no more than 2.5 times the unemployment rate of those aged 25 and over.[13] This benchmark is shown in Figure 1 using a dotted line. Before the financial crisis, youth unemployment was close to 2.5 times the unemployment rate of those aged 25 and over, but generally slightly below that level. During the Great Recession, despite the extremely high level of youth unemployment, the rate remained marginally below 2.5 times the unemployment rate for those aged 25 and over.

However, since 2017, youth unemployment has exceeded 2.5 times the unemployment rate of those aged 25 and over. This is the first indication that, despite the dramatic fall in youth unemployment since the Great Recession, the headline figures may conceal other problems. This issue is discussed further in the next chapter.

Finally, if we compare Ireland with the EU average, we can see that unemployment increased much more dramatically in Ireland during the recession, both for young people and for those aged 25 and over. However, it also

[13] Labour Market Advisory Council (2024) *Pathways to Work 2021–2025: Mid-Term Review and Second Annual Progress Report*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/pathways-to-work-2021-2025-mid-term-review-and-second-annual-progress-report.pdf

declined much more dramatically after the crisis. Youth unemployment and unemployment among those aged 25 and over are now both well below the EU average.

Figure 2: Youth Unemployment in Ireland and the EU

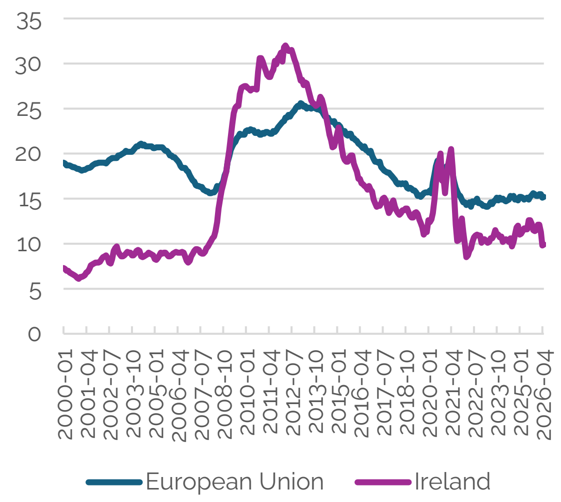
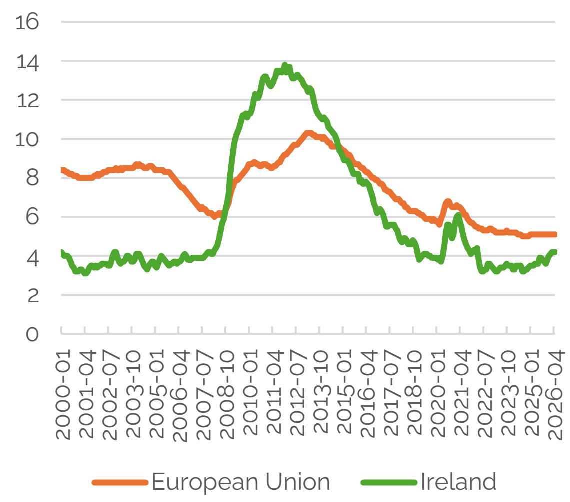


Figure 3: 25+ Unemployment in Ireland and the EU



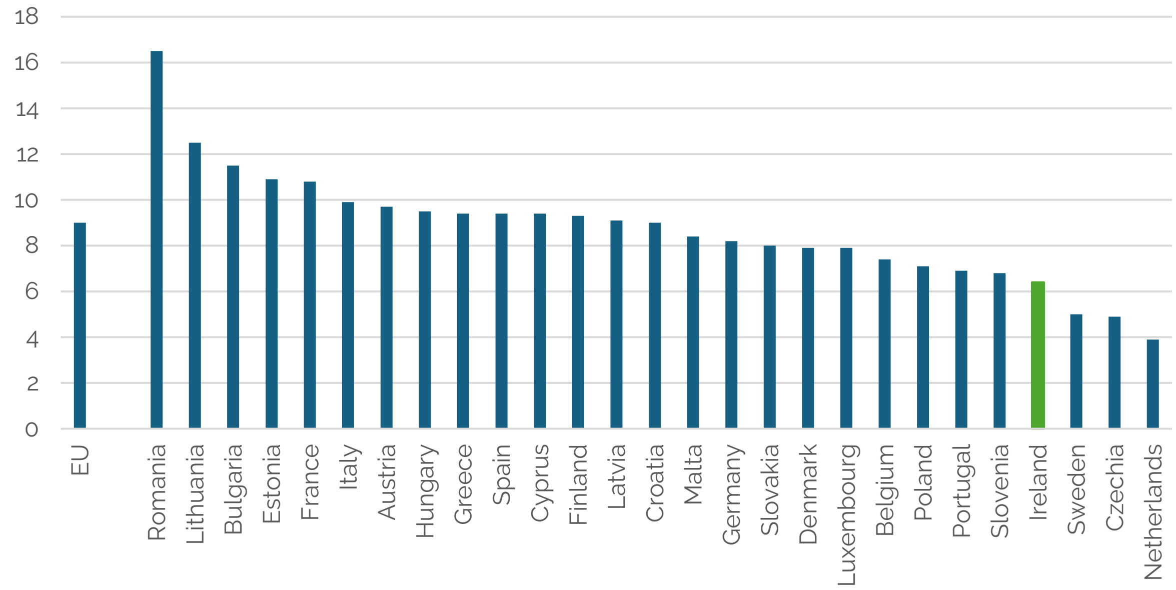
Source: Eurostat

NEETs

As noted above, a significant number of unemployed young people are also in some form of education or training. A smaller but more concerning group are those who are not in employment, education or training, commonly referred to as NEETs.

On this measure, Ireland is now performing well. Ireland has the fourth lowest proportion of young people aged 15 to 24 not in employment, education or training in the EU. In Ireland, 6.4 per cent of young people are NEETs. This is well below the EU average of 9.0 per cent. The lowest rate in the EU is in the Netherlands, where only 3.9 per cent of young people are NEETs. The highest rate is in Romania, where the rate is 16.5 per cent.

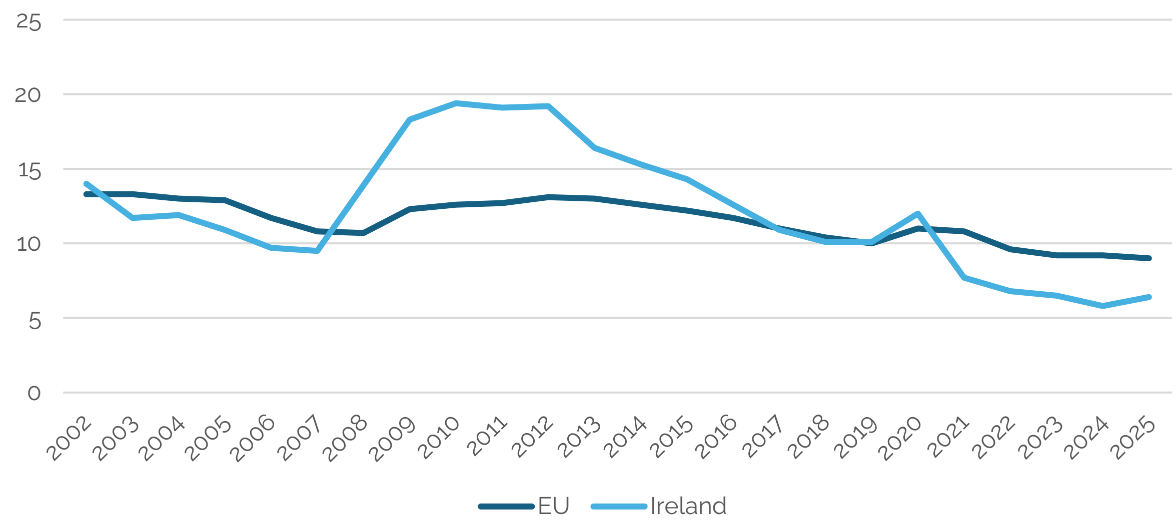
Figure 4: Persons aged 15-24 not in employment nor in education and training (2025), by country



Source: Eurostat

This strong performance contrasts sharply with Ireland's recent past. Between 2007 and 2010, the proportion of young people in Ireland not in employment, education or training increased dramatically, from 9.5 per cent to 19.4 per cent. This pushed Ireland well above the EU average. However, the NEET rate declined gradually in the years that followed and fell below the EU average in 2021.

Figure 5: Persons aged 15-24 not in employment nor in education and training (2002-2025), Ireland and EU27



Source: Eurostat

In recent years, the EU has increasingly focused on NEETs aged 15 to 29, rather than only those aged 15 to 24. The results for this wider age group are broadly similar. To avoid repetition, the graphs for those aged 15 to 29 are presented in Appendix B.

If we look more broadly at the labour market status of young people, the pattern in Ireland is fairly similar to the EU average, although there are some important differences.

Figure 5: Young people by labour status (EU)

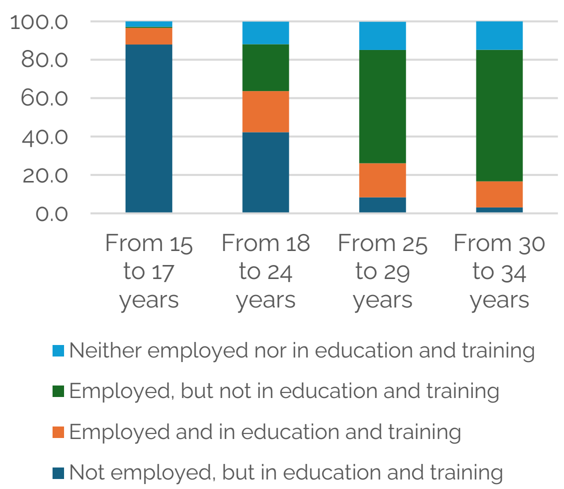
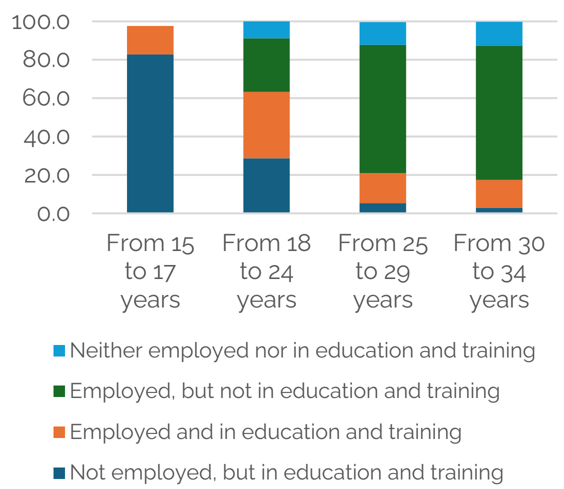


Figure 7: Young people by labour status (Ireland)



Source: Eurostat

The vast majority of those aged 15 to 17 are in education or training: 97 per cent on average in the EU, and 98 per cent in Ireland. Among this age group in the EU, 2.8 per cent are NEETs and 0.6 per cent are in employment. In Ireland, the numbers in each of these categories are too small to report separately, but combined they amount to 2.4 per cent.

For older age groups, the proportion in education declines. In the EU, 88 per cent of those aged 15 to 17 are in education or training but not in employment. Among those aged 18 to 24, this falls to 42 per cent. In Ireland, the equivalent decline is from 83 per cent to 29 per cent. However, a much higher proportion of young people in Ireland are both in education and employment: 35 per cent, compared with 21 per cent across the EU.

The proportion in employment increases with age, from almost none among those aged 15 to 17, to around 24 to 28 per cent among those aged 18 to 24, and to between 59 and 70 per cent among those aged 25 to 34. The proportion of NEETs also increases with age, from less than 3 per cent among those aged 15 to 17, to between 9 and 12 per cent among those aged 18 to 24, and to between 15 and 16 per cent among those aged 25 and over.

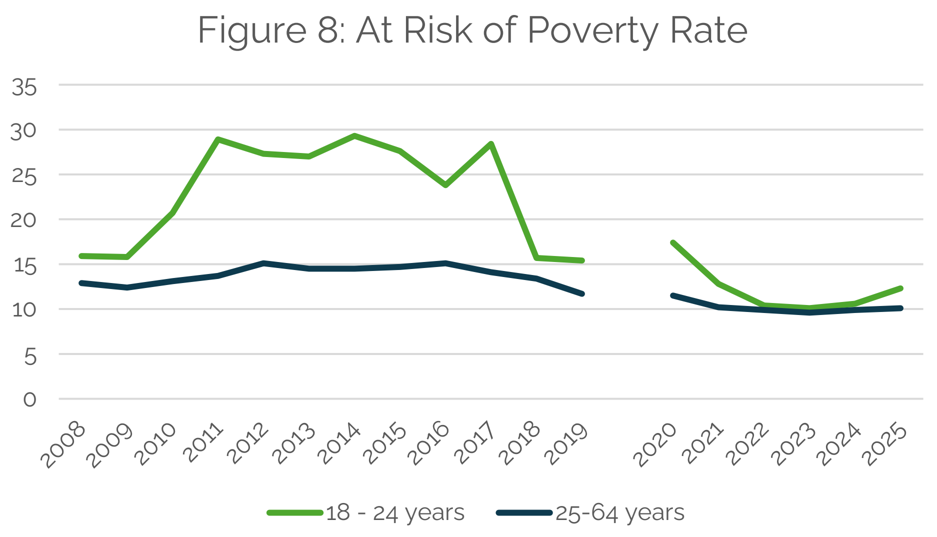
Youth Poverty

The story of youth poverty over the last 20 years follows a similar pattern. Poverty among young people increased dramatically during the recession before declining in the years that followed.

Between 2009 and 2010, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for those aged 18 to 24 increased from 15.8 per cent to 20.7 per cent. It then increased again, reaching 28.9 per cent in 2011. An individual is defined as being at risk of poverty if their nominal equivalised disposable income is below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 per cent of median nominal equivalised disposable income.[14]

This remarkable increase in the at-risk-of-poverty rate coincided with the start of the recession and the dramatic rise in unemployment discussed earlier. It also coincided with sharp cuts to the Jobseeker's Allowance rates for young people. It is noteworthy that, despite the large increase in unemployment among those aged 25 and over during the same period, this older group did not experience a similar rise in poverty.

[14] Central Statistics Office (2026c) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025: Poverty*. Cork: Central Statistics Office. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2025/poverty/



Source: *CSO*

The at-risk-of-poverty rate for those aged 18 to 24 remained between 25 and 30 per cent fairly consistently until 2017, after which it fell dramatically. By 2022, it had fallen to 10.4 per cent, just 0.5 percentage points higher than the at-risk-of-poverty rate for those aged 25 and over. However, between 2023 and 2025, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for young people began to increase slightly. It is also important to note that these figures reflect the very substantial cost-of-living supports introduced by the Government in recent years.[15]

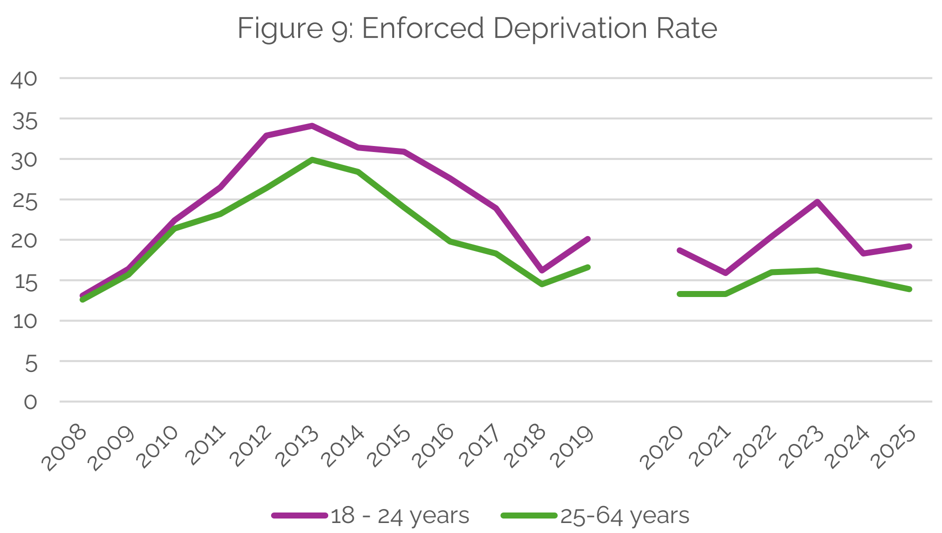
Due to a change in the survey in 2020, a break in the series is shown in the graph.

Another widely used poverty indicator is the enforced deprivation rate. Enforced deprivation refers to the inability to afford goods, services or activities that are considered necessary for an acceptable standard of living.

[15] Gilmore, O. (2025) *The State We Are In: Inequality in Ireland 2025*. Dublin: TASC. Available at: https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/tasc_the_state_we_are_in_2025.pdf; Central Statistics Office (2026d) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025: Impact of cost of living measures on poverty and income*. Cork: Central Statistics Office. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2025/impactofcostoflivingmeasuresonpovertyandincome/

Once again, we see a sharp rise in the enforced deprivation rate for young people during the recession. Between 2008 and 2012, the rate increased from 13 per cent to 33 per cent, before declining again in the years that followed. By 2018, it had fallen to 16 per cent, although it subsequently increased to 25 per cent in 2023. While the enforced deprivation rate before the recession was similar for those aged below and above 25, since 2010 the rate for young people has remained above the rate for those aged 25 and over.

As above, due to a change in the survey in 2020, a break in the series is shown in the graph.



Source: *CSO*

The good news

Taken together, the figures in this chapter tell a fairly encouraging story. The Great Recession had a severe impact on young people in Ireland. Youth unemployment rose dramatically, the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training increased sharply, and youth poverty worsened considerably.

However, over the last decade, there has been a major improvement. Youth unemployment has fallen dramatically. The NEET rate has declined. The at-risk-of-poverty rate and enforced deprivation rate have also fallen significantly from their post-crisis peaks.

These are very positive outcomes and should not be quickly dismissed. Ireland's labour market has recovered strongly from the crisis period, and young people have benefited from that recovery. However, as the next chapter shows, these headline improvements conceal some significant and concerning problems facing young people in Ireland.

4: The decline in youth unemployment hides significant problems

The previous chapter showed that youth unemployment has fallen dramatically since the Great Recession. This is an important and positive development. However, the headline figures do not tell the full story. Beneath the decline in youth unemployment, there remain significant problems in the youth labour market and in the wider conditions facing young people in Ireland.

One of these problems has already been noted. As Figure 1 shows, youth unemployment has consistently been far higher than unemployment among those aged 25 and over. Before the financial crisis, it was generally just under two and a half times the 25+ rate, which is the benchmark recently adopted by the Government. This pattern broadly continued during the Great Recession. Even when youth unemployment reached extremely high levels, it remained slightly below that ratio. Since 2017, however, the relationship has shifted. Youth unemployment has risen to more than two and a half times the rate for workers aged 25 and over. This suggests that, although headline youth unemployment has fallen, the relative position of young people in the labour market has worsened.

Employment numbers remain well below pre-crisis levels

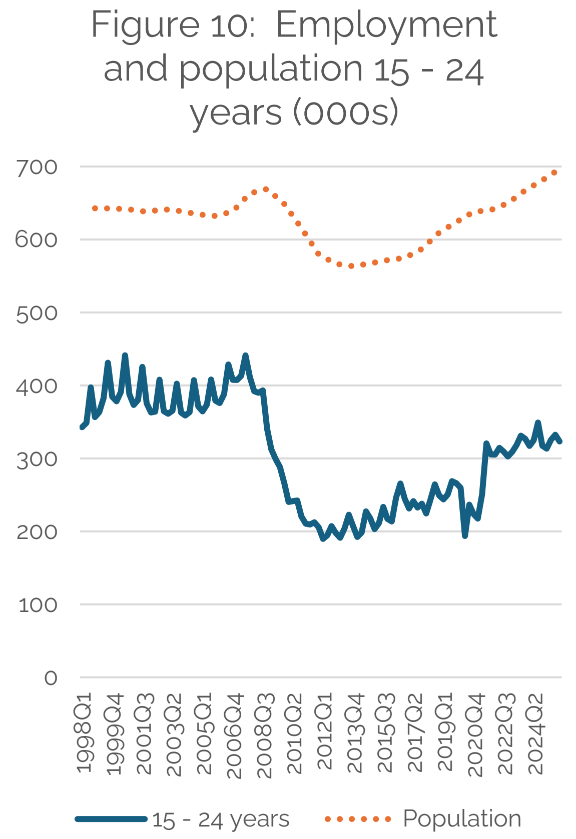
As noted earlier, in the early years of the crisis the number of young people in employment fell by more than half. It declined from 441,200 in Q3 2007 to just 211,500 in Q3 2011, before reaching a low point of 189,600 in Q1 2012.

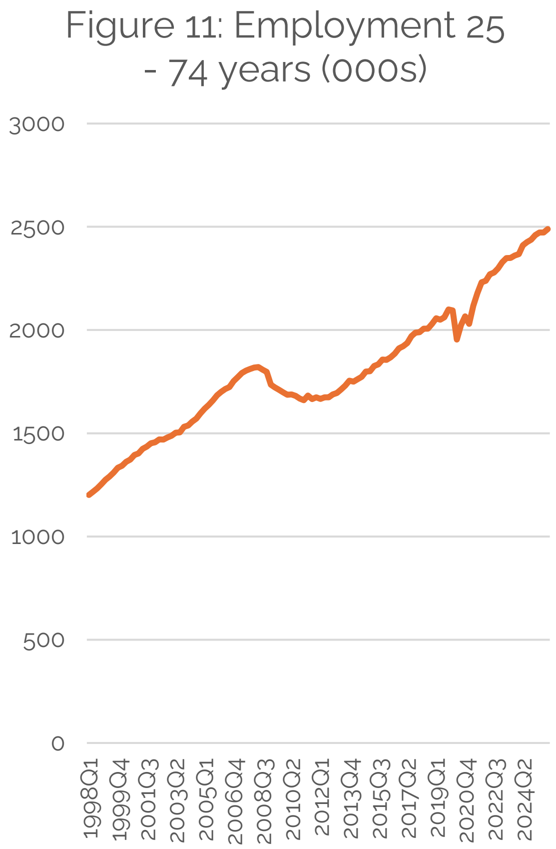
Youth unemployment has not returned fully to its pre-crisis level, when it was around 8 to 9 per cent. However, it has returned to something close to that level, with the rate now around 10 per cent. More concerning is the fact that no similar recovery has occurred in youth employment.

As can be seen in Figure 10, between 2000 and 2008 roughly 400,000 people aged 15 to 24 were in employment. Between 2008 and 2012, that number fell by more than half. Over the subsequent 14 years, the number of young people in employment gradually increased, but the decline has not been fully reversed. More concerningly, after reaching 320,600 in Q3 2021, the recovery in youth employment appears to have stalled, with little increase since then.

It might be assumed that this lower level of youth employment reflects underlying changes in the population. However, this does not appear to be the case. The number of people aged 15 to 24 living in Ireland did decline sharply during the recession, falling by more than 100,000, from 669,200 in April 2008 to 566,600 in April 2012. This presumably reflected the high levels of youth emigration during this period. However, the youth population has since recovered. In April 2025, it was estimated to be 696,600.

It is also worth noting the very large contrast between the development of employment among young people and the development of employment among those aged 25 and over.





Source: *CSO*

As Figure 11 shows, employment among those aged 25 and over also declined during the recession, falling from 1,820,300 in Q2 2008 to 1,660,000 in Q1 2012. However, the relative decline was much smaller than among those aged under 25. More importantly, the subsequent recovery was much stronger. Employment among those aged 25 and over increased steadily after the crisis, reaching 2.5 million in Q4 2025. This is strikingly different from the pattern among those aged under 25.[16]

Young employees on subminimum wages

There is also evidence that some young workers are being employed in lower-quality jobs and on lower wages.

[16] Another way of telling this same story is in reference to the participation rate. This is described in Appendix C,

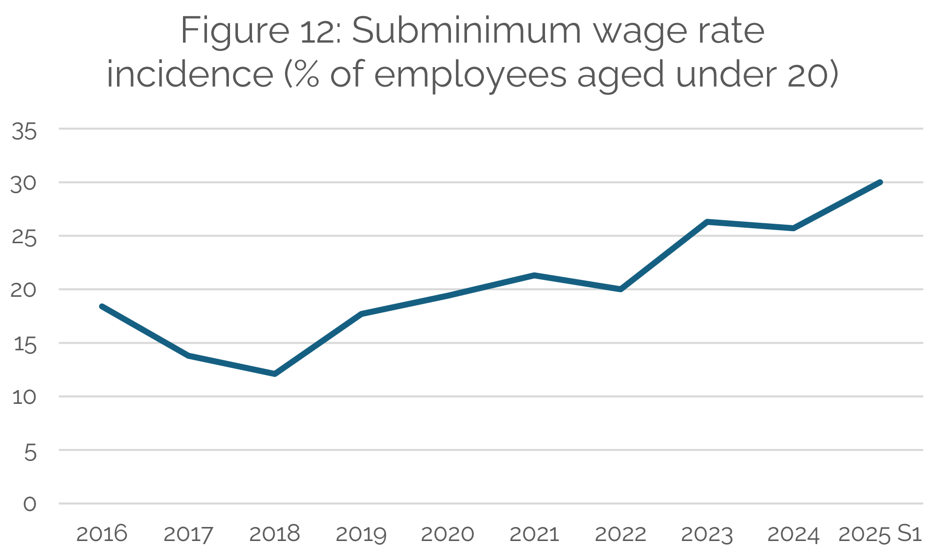
In Ireland, workers aged under 20 are only entitled to reduced minimum wage rates, as shown in Table 1. For those aged under 18, the minimum rate is as low as €9.91 per hour.

Table 1: Minimum Wage Rates on or after January 2026

Age group	Minimum hourly rate of pay	% of minimum wage
20 and over	€14.15	100%
19	€12.74	90%
18	€11.32	80%
Under 18	€9.91	70%

While the number of young workers on these sub-minimum rates has historically been relatively low, there is evidence that their use is increasing. A recent ESRI study found that, while previously around 15 per cent of workers aged under 20 were paid sub-minimum wage rates, this had increased to 30 per cent in the first half of 2025. This is shown in Figure 12.[17]

[17] Redmond, P., Kelly, L. and Creaton, H. (2026) *The impact of a minimum wage increase on employment: evidence from Ireland*. ESRI Research Series No. 228. Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute. Available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS228_2.pdf



Source: Redmond, P., Kelly, L. and Creaton, H. (2026) The impact of a minimum wage increase on employment: evidence from Ireland.

In 2022, the then Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar T.D., asked the Low Pay Commission to examine the issue of sub-minimum youth rates. In a 2024 report, the Commission found that, under the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages, sub-minimum rates require an objective justification. This includes the need for a clearly identified "legitimate aim" and a sufficient evidence base showing that the sub-minimum rates are effective in achieving that aim.

The Low Pay Commission stated that it was "unable, firstly, to identify the specific 'legitimate aim' of sub-minimum youth rates based purely on age alone. Secondly, when possible justifications for sub-minimum youth rates were considered, no justifications were identified that had a sufficient evidentiary base to clearly justify retaining sub-minimum youth rates based purely on age alone." On this basis, the Low Pay Commission recommended the abolition of sub-minimum youth rates.[18]

[18] Low Pay Commission (2024) *Report on sub-minimum youth rates*. Dublin: Low Pay Commission. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/report-on-sub-minimum-rates-of-the-national-minimum-wage.pdf, p.45.

However, on 16 April 2025, the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment wrote to Ultan Courtney, Chairperson of the Low Pay Commission, stating that "as part of a package of measures to preserve Ireland's competitiveness Government has also agreed to defer any decision on sub-minimum youth rates of the National Minimum Wage".[19]

The decision to defer abolition of sub-minimum youth rates is a worrying signal about this government's attitudes to the working conditions of young workers.

Young People's Quality of Life

The problems facing young people are not confined to unemployment. They also relate to the wider conditions that determine whether young people can build a secure and independent life.

Ireland is in the grip of an escalating housing emergency, and this places a particular burden on young people. In May 2026, 17,447 people, including 5,583 children, were in emergency accommodation, with thousands more experiencing hidden homelessness.[20] Estimates put the overall housing shortfall at between

[19] Low Pay Commission (2025) *Recommendations for the National Minimum Wage*. LPC No. 21 (2025). Dublin: Low Pay Commission. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/8daa546f/Low_Pay_Commission_Annual_Report_2025.pdf, pp.10-11.

[20] Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2026) *Monthly homelessness report: May 2026*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/publications/monthly-homelessness-report-may-2026/.

212,500 and 256,000 homes.[21] In contrast, just 36,284 units were completed in 2025.[22]

Prices and rents have continued to rise. Between 2012 and 2025, the national average house price more than doubled, from €155,114 to €375,307. In Dublin, the increase was from €240,333 to €520,046.[23] Rents have followed a similar trajectory, rising from around €800 per month in 2015 to €1,755 nationally by late 2025, and to €2,232 per month in Dublin.[24]

These pressures have had a visible impact on young people's living arrangements. According to Eurofound, between 2017 and 2022 Ireland saw a 13-percentage-point rise in the proportion of working young people living with their parents, from 27 per cent to 40 per cent of the cohort.[25] Before the recession, Ireland had relatively low numbers of young people living with their parents compared with other European countries. Today, Ireland is an outlier in North-Western Europe. Around 40 per cent of people aged 25 to 34 live in their parental home. This contrasts sharply with other advanced European economies such as Sweden and Finland, where only around 2 per cent of people in this age group live in their parental home.

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[21] Social Justice Ireland (2025) *National Housing Plan 2025–2030: Submission to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage*. Dublin: Social Justice Ireland, April. Available at: https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2025-05/National%20Housing%20Plan%202025-2030%20Submission%20SJI.pdf.

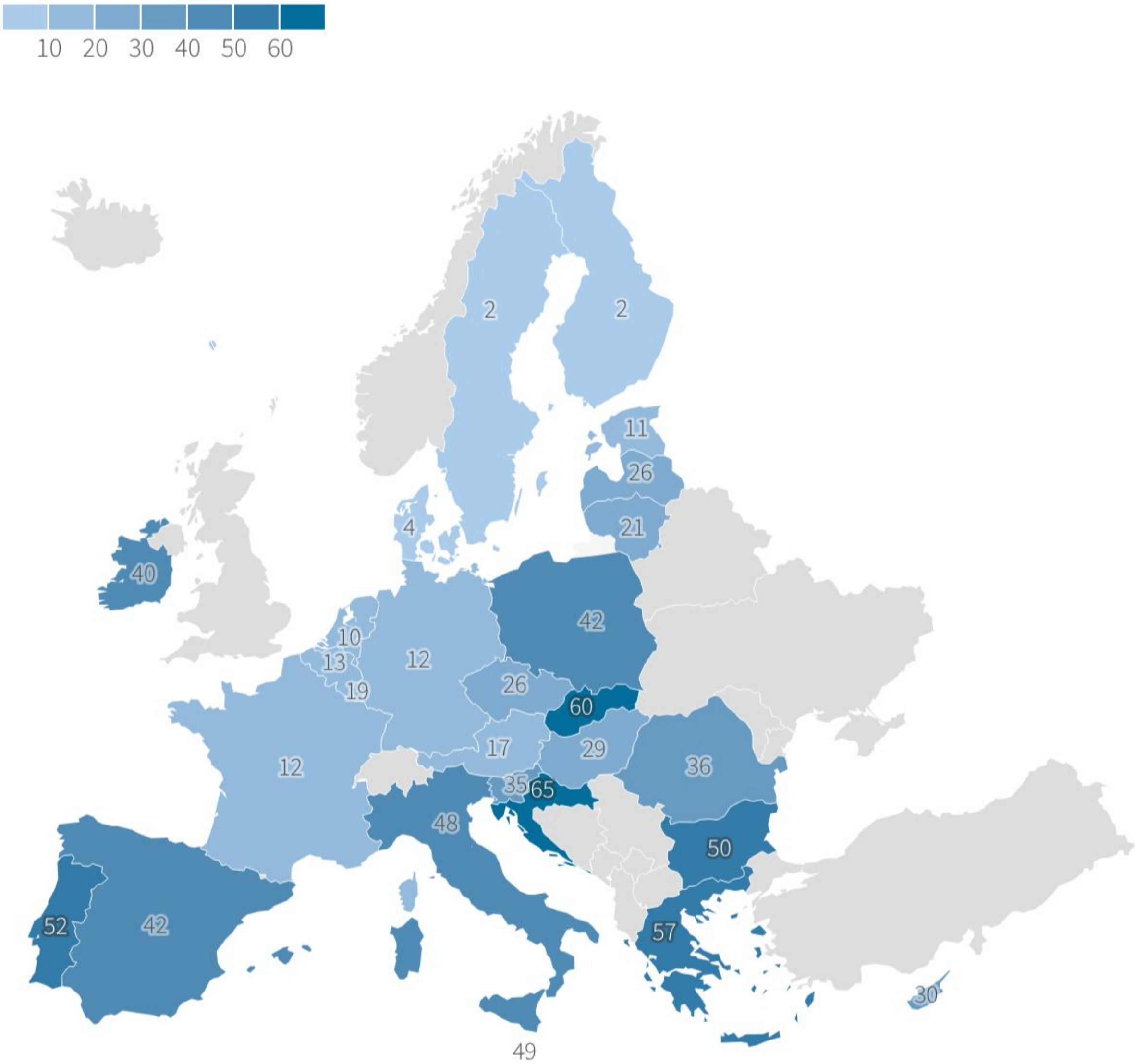
[22] Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2026a) *New dwelling completions, Quarter 4 2025*. Dublin: CSO. Available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ndc/newdwellingcompletionsq42025/.

[23] Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2026b) *Residential dwelling property transactions (StatBank table HPA02)*. Dublin: CSO. Available at: https://data.cso.ie/table/HPA02.

[24] Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) (2026) *Rent Index, Quarter 4 2025*. Dublin: RTB. Available at: https://rtb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/RTB-Rent-Index-Q4-2025.pdf.

[25] Skopeliti, C. (2024) 'EU data shows rise in employed young people living with parents', *The Guardian*, 21 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/article/2024/may/21/data-shows-rise-in-employed-young-people-living-with-parents-across-eu

Figure 13: Young people aged 25–34 in employment and living in the parental home by EU Member State, 2022 (%)

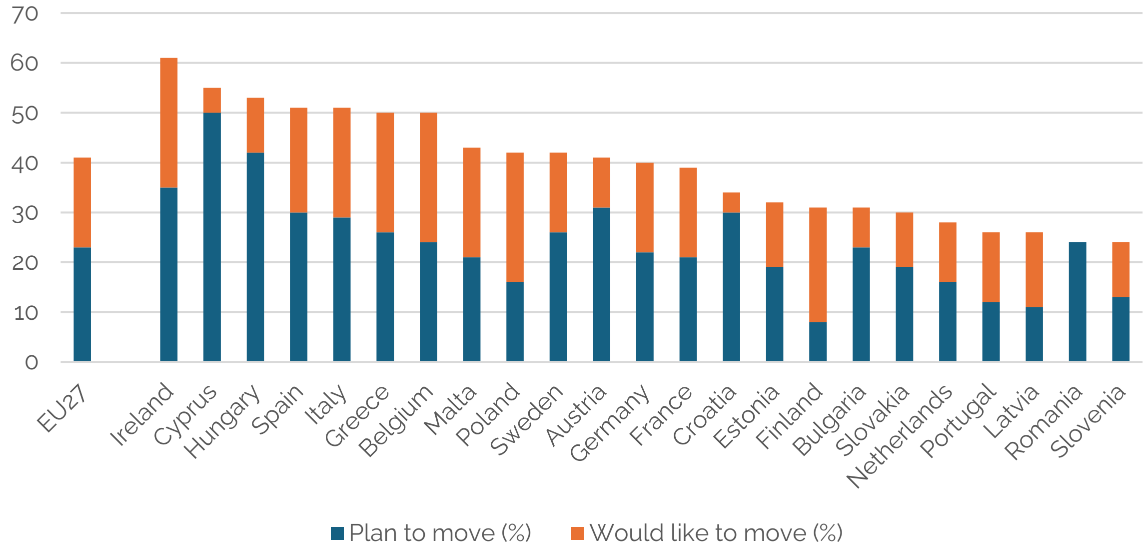


Source: *Eurofound (2025) Living and working in Europe 2024.*

Eurofound evidence also points to high levels of social exclusion among young people in Ireland. The survey asks respondents the extent to which they agree with the statement "I feel left out of society" on a scale of 1 to 5. In 2021, before the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, self-perceived social exclusion among 16 to 29 year olds was highest in Ireland, at 63 per cent. By 2023, this had fallen to 33 per cent. However, even after this significant decline, young people in Ireland were still the most likely to report feeling socially excluded in the EU. The lowest levels of social exclusion were recorded in Germany and the Netherlands, at 9 and 11 per cent respectively.[26]

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the same study found that Ireland had the highest proportion of young people planning or wishing to move to another country within three years. According to Eurofound, 61 per cent of young people in Ireland were planning or wishing to leave the country. This is a striking figure. It suggests that, for many young people, the issue is not simply whether they can find work, but whether they can imagine building a decent and secure life in Ireland.

Figure 14: Young people planning or wishing to move to a different country within three years by Member State, 2023 (%)



Source: *Eurofound (2025) Living and working in Europe 2024.*

Emigration

We have already seen in Figure 10 that the number of people aged 15 to 24 living in Ireland declined by more than 100,000 during the recession, from 669,200 in

[26] Eurofound (2025) *Living and working in Europe 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/living-and-working-europe-2024, p.45.

2008 to 566,600 in 2012.[27] This likely reflected the high levels of youth emigration during this period.

Looking at total emigration figures in Figure 15, the sharp rise during the recession is very visible. The number of people leaving Ireland increased from 36,000 in 2007 to 83,000 in 2012. In the years that followed, emigration declined, reaching a low of 50,900 in 2020. Since then, however, the number of people emigrating has begun to rise again.

Because Ireland has experienced large migratory flows in both directions over the last two decades, it is useful to distinguish between Irish citizens and citizens of other countries. The return migration of recent immigrants is not the same, in policy terms, as the emigration of Irish citizens who may feel unable to build a future in Ireland.

When the figures are divided by citizenship, it is clear that the main driver of fluctuation in the headline emigration rate has been the emigration of Irish citizens. The main exception was the surge in emigration of non-Irish citizens between 2008 and 2010. This was caused primarily by the return migration of citizens of the twelve accession states that joined the EU after 2004, many of whom had migrated to Ireland between 2004 and 2010. Apart from that period, emigration of non-Irish citizens has remained close to 30,000 per year for the last 15 years.

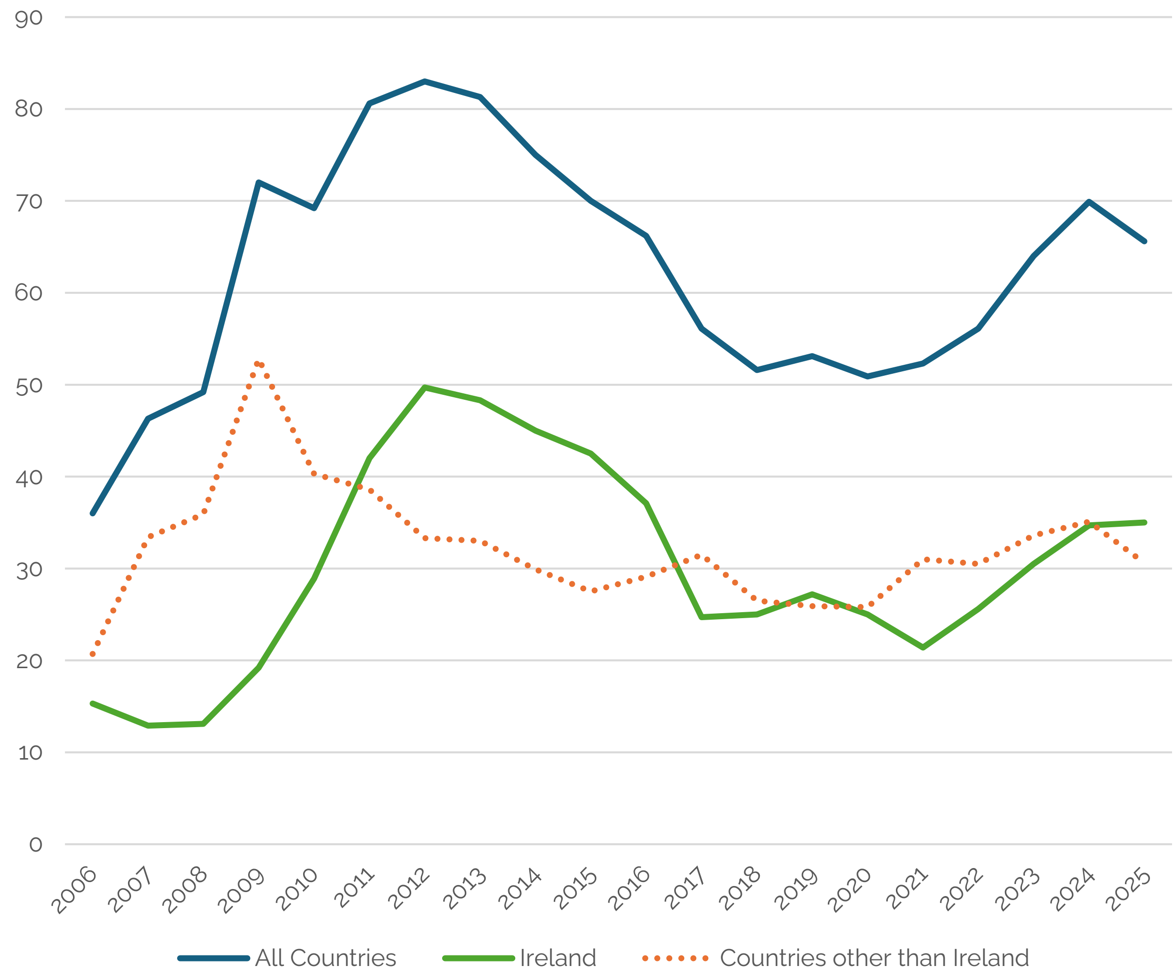
The main driving force behind the rise in emigration during the recession was the emigration of Irish citizens. Between 2008 and 2012, annual emigration from Ireland increased by 37,000. Over the same period, the annual number of Irish citizens emigrating increased by nearly the same amount. Likewise, the

[27] All of the following figures are for the twelve months before April of the given year.

subsequent decline in emigration, and the more recent rise, have been driven primarily by changes in the emigration of Irish citizens.

It is also worth noting that, despite full employment, the emigration of Irish citizens has never returned to pre-crisis levels. In 2007 and 2008, around 13,000 Irish citizens emigrated each year. Since the crisis, there has been hardly a single year in which fewer than twice that number emigrated. The only exception was the period from April 2020 to April 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the number fell below 25,000. Since then, emigration by Irish citizens has increased again. In 2025, 35,000 Irish citizens emigrated, nearly three times the pre-crisis level.

Figure 15: Emigration from Ireland, by citizenship (000s)

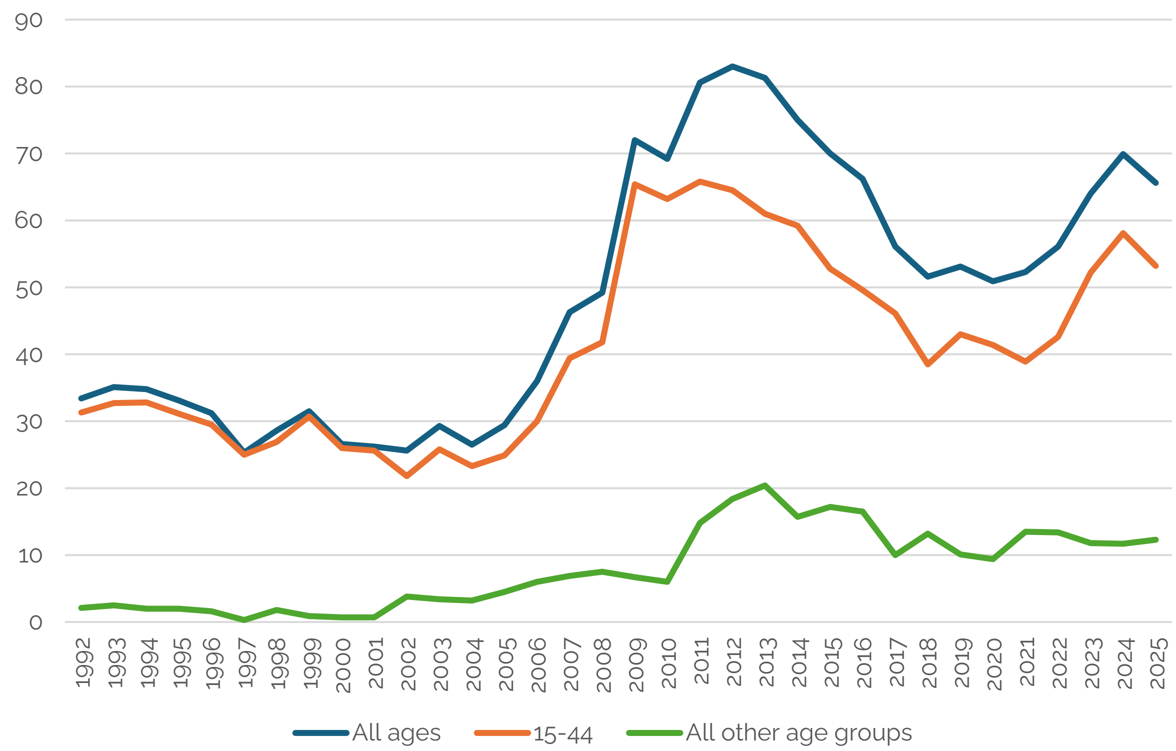


Source: CSO

This emigration story is primarily a story about young people. As can be seen in Figure 16, the vast majority of emigration, between 75 and 98 per cent depending on the year, is accounted for by those aged 15 to 44. Particularly striking is the sharp increase in emigration among those aged 15 to 44 in recent years, from between 38,000 and 43,000 between 2018 and 2021 to 58,100 in 2024.

Unfortunately, the available data does not provide data on those aged 18 to 29, which would be more relevant for the purposes of this report, nor can it be broken down by both age and citizenship. Nevertheless, the sharp rise in emigration among younger adults in recent years should be a source of concern. Combined with the data in Figure 15, it suggests that large numbers of young Irish citizens continue to leave the country, even during a period of very low unemployment.

Figure 16: Emigration from Ireland, by age group (000s)



Source: CSO

This underlines the central argument of this chapter. The fall in youth unemployment is real and important. But it does not mean that the conditions facing young people in Ireland are secure or satisfactory. Youth employment remains well below pre-crisis levels. A growing share of young workers under 20 are being paid sub-minimum wage rates. Housing costs are delaying independence and forcing many young adults to remain in the parental home. Social exclusion remains high by European standards. And emigration, including emigration by Irish citizens, remains far above pre-crisis levels.

The problem, therefore, is not simply whether young people can find a job. It is whether young people can find decent work, secure housing and a realistic pathway to an independent life in Ireland.

5: The policy response

Recent policy responses to youth unemployment in Ireland have developed in two distinct phases. The first was shaped by austerity and the fiscal crisis that followed the crash, when the state responded in part by sharply reducing Jobseeker's Allowance rates for young people. The second was shaped by the growing recognition, at both Irish and European level, that youth unemployment required a more active and coordinated labour market response. This chapter traces that shift: from cuts to income supports, justified as a way to incentivise work and training, to the development of the European Youth Guarantee and its implementation in Ireland through the Pathways to Work framework.

Cuts to Jobseeker's Allowance

The initial policy response to rising youth unemployment after 2008 was shaped by the wider economic crisis.[28] The Government was facing a severe deterioration in the public finances and, in this context, introduced sharp cuts to welfare entitlements for young jobseekers. These cuts reduced state expenditure, but they were also justified on the basis that lower payments would incentivise young people to take up employment, education or training, rather than become detached from the labour market.

The first step was taken in late April 2009, when the weekly personal rate of Jobseeker's Allowance for new claimants aged 18 and 19 was reduced from €204.30 to €100. Later that year, from 30 December 2009, this reduced rate was extended to new Jobseeker's Allowance claimants aged 20 and 21.

[28] Whelan, K. (2014) 'Ireland's economic crisis: the good, the bad and the ugly', *Journal of Macroeconomics*, 39(Part B), pp. 424–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmacro.2013.08.008.

Claimants aged 22 to 24 also had their personal rates reduced in stages between 2009 and 2014. First, the rate was cut from €204.30 to €150 from 30 December 2009. It was then reduced to €144 per week from December 2010, and finally to €100 per week from 15 January 2014. This meant that all Jobseeker's Allowance claimants under 25 had a full personal rate of €100 per week, while those aged 26 and over received the higher full rate of €188.

The final age-related reduction was applied to 25-year-old jobseekers from 15 January 2014, when their weekly payment was reduced from €188 to €144. This cut was reversed in Budget 2020. Since 2021, there have therefore been two main rates: one for those aged under 25 and one for those aged 25 and over.

Table 2 overleaf shows the development of these rates from 2009 to today.[29]

[29] Department of Social Protection (2020) *Poverty Impact Assessment of age related rates of Jobseeker's Allowance for young people aged 18–24 years*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/poverty-impact-assessment-of-age-related-rates-of-jobseekers-for-young-people-age-18-2.pdf

Table 2: Full Jobseeker's Allowance rates from 2009 to 2026

Budget	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26+
2009	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3
2009*	100	100	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3	204.3
2010	100	100	100	100	150	150	150	196	196
2011	100	100	100	100	144	144	144	188	188
2012	100	100	100	100	144	144	144	188	188
2013	100	100	100	100	144	144	144	188	188
2014	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	144	188
2015	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	144	188
2016	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	144	188
2017	102.7	102.7	102.7	102.7	102.7	102.7	102.7	147.8	193
2018	107.7	107.7	107.7	107.7	107.7	107.7	107.7	152.8	198
2019	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	157.8	203
2020	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	203	203
2020	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	203	203
2021	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	112.7	203	203
2022	117.7	117.7	117.7	117.7	117.7	117.7	117.7	208	208
2023	129.7	129.7	129.7	129.7	129.7	129.7	129.7	220	220
2024	141.7	141.7	141.7	141.7	141.7	141.7	141.7	232	232
2025	153.7	153.7	153.7	153.7	153.7	153.7	153.7	244	244
2026	163.7	163.7	163.7	163.7	163.7	163.7	163.7	254	254

Source: For 2009-2020: Department of Social Protection (2020) Poverty Impact Assessment of age related rates of Jobseeker's Allowance for young people aged 18–24 years; For 2020-2026: Department of Social Protection (2026) Rates of Payment – SW19.

It is worth noting that, while the two-tier structure has been maintained despite the improved economic environment, the gap between the two rates has narrowed. In 2017, the under-25 rate was just 53 per cent of the full adult rate. In 2026, it is worth 64 per cent of the full rate.

In the early 2010s, as the crisis continued, and the scale of youth unemployment became a more visible social and political issue, pressure grew at European level for a more coordinated response.

The European Youth Guarantee

Figures 2 and 3 compare unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 with unemployment among those aged 25 and over, both in Ireland and across the EU. While the rise in unemployment was more dramatic in Ireland than across the EU as a whole, youth unemployment increased significantly across Europe. This had two major consequences. For the young people affected, unemployment increased the risk of poverty, social exclusion and alienation. For the wider economy, it represented a substantial waste of productive potential, alongside higher costs through increased welfare spending and lower tax revenue.

In the early years of the recession, there were growing demands that something be done about this.[30] These demands emerged both within the EU and internationally.[31]

An initial step was the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Union's ten-year strategy for economic and social development from 2010 to 2020. The strategy included seven flagship initiatives, three of which were particularly relevant to young people: Youth on the Move, the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs, and the European Platform Against Poverty. Youth on the Move was the initiative most directly focused on improving young people's education, training, mobility and labour market prospects. It helped establish youth unemployment as a central concern of EU employment policy.

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[30] Eichhorst, W., Hinte, Holger and Rinne, Ulf (2013) *Youth unemployment in Europe: what to do about it?* IZA Policy Paper No. 65. Bonn: Institute of Labor Economics. Available at: https://docs.iza.org/pp65.pdf.

[31] International Labour Organization (2017) *Rising to the youth employment challenge: new evidence on key policy issues*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_556949.pdf.

This was followed by a series of further initiatives, including the Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Youth Employment Package and the Youth Employment Initiative.[32] The Youth Guarantee developed out of this broader policy agenda. In 2013, a Recommendation of the Council of the European Union established the Youth Guarantee as a political commitment to ensure that all young people receive a high-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education.

Implementation varied across Member States, but the Youth Guarantee was generally delivered through a combination of active labour market policies. These typically included education and training measures, such as vocational provision and support for early school leavers to re-enter education or training; employment support services to help young people find and secure work; and wider labour market interventions, including hiring subsidies, public employment schemes and support for self-employment.[33]

It is important, however, not to overstate what active labour market policies can achieve. Since the OECD's 1994 Jobs Study, there has been a strong policy emphasis on labour market activation. The underlying argument has been that unemployment should not be addressed primarily through "passive" labour market policies, such as income supports, but through active measures designed to help, encourage and, in some cases, compel unemployed people to take up work.

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[32] O'Reilly, J., Eichhorst, W., Gábos, A., Hadjivassiliou, K., Lain, D., Leschke, J., McGuinness, S., Mýtna Kureková, L., Nazio, T., Ortlieb, R., Russell, H. and Villa, P. (2015) 'Five characteristics of youth unemployment in Europe: flexibility, education, migration, family legacies, and EU policy', *SAGE Open*, 5(1), pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015574962

[33] Scandurra, R. and Cefalo, R. (2025) 'Assessing the impact of the Youth Employment Initiative in European regions', *Journal of Social Policy*, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279425101001

Nearly three decades on, the results are more mixed than the early advocates of this approach often suggested. The evidence on the effectiveness of active labour market policies is variable. Some programmes can be effective, particularly when they are well designed, well targeted and linked to real labour market opportunities. However, the overall evidence base does not support a simple conclusion that activation policies, on their own, can solve unemployment.[34]

Some of the early cross-country studies frequently cited in support of active labour market policies found weak or statistically insignificant effects on unemployment.[35] Subsequent research has produced more nuanced findings, with the impact depending heavily on the type of programme, the target group, the timing of the intervention and the wider labour market context. There is no simple consensus on how to design effective active labour market policies.

This caveat is especially important in the case of young people. A number of studies have found that active labour market programmes targeted specifically at young unemployed people appear to be less effective than broader programmes targeted at the unemployed population as a whole. This does not mean that youth-focused measures are unnecessary. But it does mean that the design, quality and labour market relevance of interventions matter greatly.[36]

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[34] O'Reilly, J., Eichhorst, W., Gábos, A., Hadjivassiliou, K., Lain, D., Leschke, J., McGuinness, S., Mýtna Kureková, L., Nazio, T., Ortlieb, R., Russell, H. and Villa, P. (2015) 'Five characteristics of youth unemployment in Europe: flexibility, education, migration, family legacies, and EU policy', *SAGE Open*, 5(1), pp. 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015574962

[35] Blanchard, O. and Wolfers, J. (2000) 'The role of shocks and institutions in the rise of European unemployment: the aggregate evidence', *The Economic Journal*, 110(462), pp. C1–C33. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00518; Scarpetta, S. (1996) 'Assessing the role of labour market policies and institutional settings on unemployment: a cross-country study', *OECD Economic Studies*, 26, pp. 43–98.; Elmeskov, J., Martin, J.P. and Scarpetta, S. (1998) 'Key lessons for labour market reforms: evidence from OECD countries' experience', *Swedish Economic Policy Review*, 5(2), pp. 205–252.

[36] Card, D., Kluve, J. and Weber, A. (2010) 'Active labour market policy evaluations: a meta-analysis', *The Economic Journal*, 120(548), pp. F452–F477. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2010.02387.x; Card,

The European Youth Guarantee largely left it to Member States to decide how to implement the commitment. Countries developed national implementation plans between 2014 and 2016 and delivered the Guarantee through their own employment, education and training systems. In Ireland, the implementation plan was incorporated into the pre-existing Pathways to Work strategy.[37]

By 2017 and 2018, evaluations of the Youth Guarantee were beginning to emerge.[38] These found that the Guarantee had contributed to the creation of new active labour market policies[39] and that funding provided through the Youth Employment Initiative had a positive impact on opportunities for young people.[40] However, evaluations also found that implementation had been uneven and that the Guarantee had not been fully delivered in all Member States.[41]

D., Kluve, J. and Weber, A. (2018) 'What works? A meta analysis of recent active labor market program evaluations', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 16(3), pp. 894–931. https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx028; Kluve, J., Puerto, S., Robalino, D., Romero, J.M., Rother, F., Stöterau, J., Weidenkaff, F. and Witte, M. (2019) 'Do youth employment programs improve labor market outcomes? A quantitative review', *World Development*, 114, pp. 237–253. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.10.004

[37] Department of Social Protection (2012) *Pathways to Work: Government policy statement on labour market activation*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2021-09/2012-02-23pathwaystowork.pdf; Department of Social Protection and Department of Education and Skills (2014) *Pathways to Work: The implementation of the EU Council Recommendation for a Youth Guarantee: Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Youth-Guarantee-Implementation-Plan.pdf

[38] European Court of Auditors (2017) *Youth unemployment: have EU policies made a difference? An assessment of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative*. Special Report No. 5/2017. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/sr17_5/sr_youth_guarantee_en.pdf

[39] Tosun, J., Treib, O. and De Francesco, F. (2019) 'The impact of the European Youth Guarantee on active labour market policies: a convergence analysis', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 28(4), pp. 358–368. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12375

[40] Scandurra, R. and Cefalo, R. (2025) 'Assessing the impact of the Youth Employment Initiative in European regions', *Journal of Social Policy*, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279425101001

[41] Escudero, V. and López Mourelo, Elva (2017) 'The European Youth Guarantee: a systematic review of its implementation across countries', *International Labour Review*, 156(1), pp. 1–45. Available at:

In response, the European Commission launched its proposal, *A Bridge to Jobs*, in 2020. This aimed to reinforce the existing Youth Guarantee. One of the central changes was the expansion of the target age group from those aged 15 to 24 to those aged 15 to 29. More recently, organisations such as the European Youth Forum have called for the further development and strengthening of the Youth Guarantee.[42]

The Youth Guarantee in Ireland

In Ireland, the Youth Guarantee was implemented against the backdrop of wider labour market reforms introduced after the financial crisis. From 2011 onwards, the Government developed a series of Pathways to Work strategies, which expanded active labour market policies and strengthened conditionality for people receiving unemployment supports. Rather than creating an entirely separate system for young people, Ireland's approach to the Youth Guarantee was largely built around the existing activation infrastructure for the unemployed population as a whole.[43]

The first Irish Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan mainly sought to reserve places for young people under 25 on existing employment, training and activation programmes. It also introduced some youth-specific initiatives, although these

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https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12054; Andor, L. and Veselý, L. (2018) *The EU's Youth Guarantee: a broadly accepted reform in need of full implementation*. OSE Paper Series, Opinion Paper No. 19. Brussels: European Social Observatory. Available at: https://www.ose.be/sites/default/files/publications/2018_AV_OpinionPaper19.pdf

[42] European Youth Forum (2025) *Youth Guarantee: How to support young people finding a pathway*. Position paper. Brussels: European Youth Forum. Available at: https://www.youthforum.org/files/250415-PP-YouthGuarantee.pdf

[43] Gaffney, Stephen and Millar, Michelle (2025) 'Youth unemployment as a policy problem for the OECD, European Union, and the Republic of Ireland in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 29(2), pp. 277–293. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2446174

tended to operate on a relatively small scale compared with the overall level of youth unemployment.

One early example was the Ballymun Youth Guarantee Pilot Scheme, which ran in a disadvantaged area of Dublin between 2013 and 2014 and involved 739 participants. An independent evaluation found that the pilot had positive results locally, but concluded that the model would be difficult to replicate nationally because of its cost and the particular local conditions that supported it.[44]

Ireland also developed specific internship and work-experience schemes for young unemployed people. These included First Steps, which ran from 2015 to 2018, and its successor, the Youth Employment Support Scheme, which operated from 2018 to 2021. However, participation in these schemes appears to have been limited. Parliamentary responses indicated that only 55 people were participating in First Steps in April 2016, rising to 75 in 2017. [45] In 2021, the Youth Employment Support Scheme was replaced by the Work Placement Experience Programme, which was aimed at the unemployed population more generally rather than at young people specifically.[46]

Ireland's implementation of the Youth Guarantee was also criticised for its limited coverage. A 2017 European Court of Auditors report argued that Ireland, along with Italy, had focused on too narrow a section of the NEET population. It estimated that around 30 per cent of young people not in employment, education or training

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[44] Devlin, M. (2015) *Policy and Practice Report: Key Learning from the Ballymun Youth Guarantee Project*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection. Available at: https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/key-learning-ballymun-youth-guarantee-project.pdf
[45] Humphreys, K. (2016) *Youth Guarantee: Dáil Éireann debate, Parliamentary Questions 91, 94, 95 and 96, 6 April*. Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas. Available at: https://oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2016-04-06/95/speech/534/
[46] Gaffney, S. (2022) *A sleight of hand? The problematisation of youth unemployment in Ireland 2008–2014*. PhD thesis. Galway: National University of Ireland Galway. Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10379/17041

were effectively excluded, including unemployed students, inactive students, carers and young people inactive due to disability.[47] However, the report also noted that Irish authorities disputed the significance of this gap, arguing that almost all NEETs aged 18 and over were registered with the system because of their eligibility for Jobseeker's Allowance.[48]

A new phase began with the publication of *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*, which incorporated the EU's reinforced Youth Guarantee following the 2020 Council Recommendation. This extended the Youth Guarantee to young people aged up to 29, reflecting the EU's broader definition of youth. In this sense, the Irish Youth Guarantee evolved from a relatively narrow set of places on existing activation schemes for under-25s into a broader framework linked to the wider employment services system and the post-pandemic labour market recovery.

In *Pathways to Work 2021–2025*, young people were identified as a priority group under the strategy's commitment to "leaving no one behind". The Department of Social Protection has since indicated that young people will remain a priority in the next iteration of the strategy.

Because the 2021–2025 strategy was developed during the pandemic, it included a significant set of measures for young jobseekers, reflecting concerns that the crisis could produce a major labour market shock. In practice, the anticipated shock did not materialise on the scale expected. The full list of policy commitments is set out in Appendix D, while Appendix E provides a detailed overview of the active labour market policies oriented towards young people that

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[47] It is not completely clear to this author why the Court of Auditors are counting unemployed and inactive students as being "not in employment, education or training".

[48] European Court of Auditors (2017) *Youth unemployment: have EU policies made a difference? An assessment of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative*. Special Report No. 5/2017, p.40. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/sr17_5/sr_youth_guarantee_en.pdf

are currently being implemented. The *Pathways to Work 2026-2030* strategy is expected to be launched in September 2026.

6: Conclusion

Youth unemployment is not a minor or temporary labour market issue. As the evidence reviewed in this report shows, unemployment early in life can have lasting consequences for earnings, employment stability, health, wellbeing and social participation. The experience of youth unemployment can leave scars that persist long after an individual has returned to work. For this reason, youth unemployment should not be treated simply as a short-term problem that disappears when headline unemployment falls. It requires a sustained policy response aimed not only at reducing unemployment when it rises, but at preventing young people from becoming detached from employment, education and training in the first place.

On the headline measures, Ireland's performance has improved dramatically since the Great Recession. Youth unemployment rose to crisis levels after 2008, while the number of young people in employment collapsed. Since then, youth unemployment has fallen substantially, the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training has declined, and youth poverty indicators have improved from their post-crisis peaks. These are important achievements. Ireland is now performing well compared with the EU average on youth unemployment and NEET rates, and this recovery should not be dismissed.

However, the decline in youth unemployment hides significant problems. Youth unemployment remains high relative to unemployment among those aged 25 and over, and since 2017 it has exceeded the Government's benchmark of being no more than two and a half times the older adult rate. Youth employment has also not recovered in the same way as employment among those aged 25 and over. Although the youth population has recovered from the decline seen during the recession, the number of young people in employment remains well below pre-crisis levels. This suggests that the headline unemployment rate alone gives an incomplete picture of the position of young people in the labour market.

There are also serious concerns about the quality and conditions of work available to some young people. The continued existence of sub-minimum youth wage rates means that young workers can legally be paid less than older workers for the same hour of work solely on the basis of age. This is particularly difficult to justify given the Low Pay Commission's recommendation that sub-minimum youth rates should be abolished. The fact that the use of these rates appears to be increasing among workers aged under 20 makes this a more pressing issue. A youth employment strategy cannot be concerned only with moving young people into any job. It must also be concerned with whether those jobs are decent, fairly paid and capable of supporting a transition to independent adulthood.

The wider conditions facing young people reinforce this point. Ireland's housing crisis, high rents, delayed transitions out of the parental home, high levels of self-reported social exclusion and renewed emigration all point to a deeper problem. For many young people, the issue is not only whether they can find work, but whether work provides a realistic pathway to security, independence and a decent life in Ireland. This is why youth employment policy cannot be reduced to activation alone. It must be connected to questions of job quality, income adequacy, housing, education, training and the broader social infrastructure that supports young people's transitions into adulthood.

The policy response to youth unemployment in Ireland has developed in uneven ways. The initial response after 2008 was shaped by austerity and the fiscal crisis. Rather than increasing income security for young people at a time of exceptional labour market weakness, the state sharply reduced Jobseeker's Allowance rates for younger claimants. These cuts were justified as a way to incentivise work, education and training, but they also significantly reduced the income floor available to young unemployed people. Although the gap between the under-25 rate and the full adult rate has narrowed in recent years, the two-tier structure remains in place.

At European level, the Youth Guarantee represented a recognition that youth unemployment required a coordinated and active policy response. The 2013 Recommendation committed Member States to ensuring that young people receive a high-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. The 2020 reinforced Youth Guarantee extended the target group to those aged up to 29 and reflected the continued importance of youth transitions in a changing labour market.

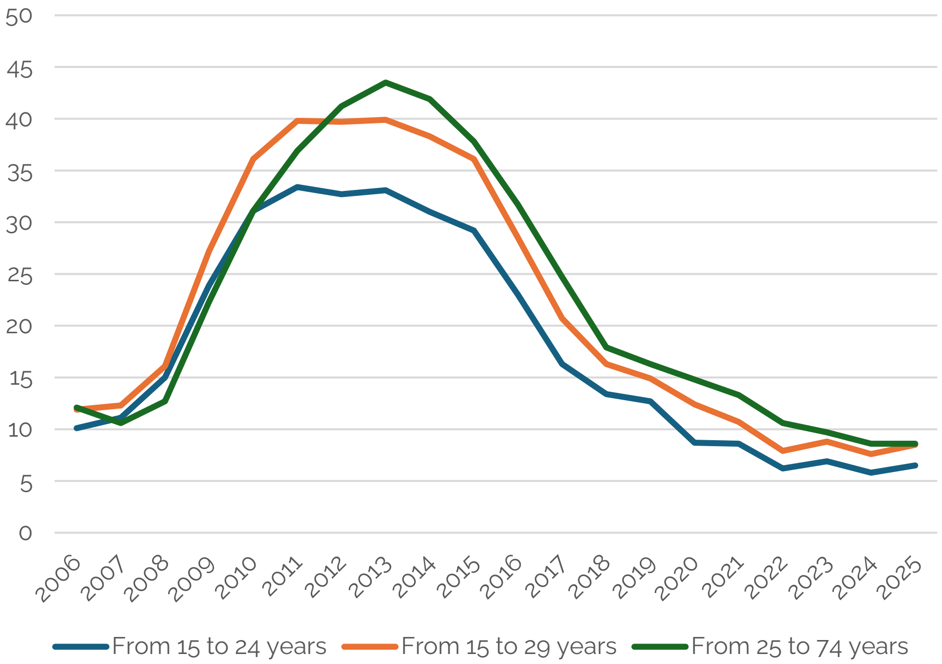
In Ireland, however, the Youth Guarantee was implemented largely through the existing *Pathways to Work* activation framework rather than through a distinct youth employment system. This had some advantages, but it also limited the ambition and visibility of the Guarantee. Early implementation relied heavily on reserving places for young people on existing programmes, while youth-specific initiatives were often small in scale. Ireland's implementation was also criticised for limited coverage. More recent policy has placed young people within a broader "leaving no one behind" framework, but the central question remains whether this is sufficient to meet the scale and complexity of the challenges facing young people.

The evidence reviewed in this report therefore points to a clear conclusion. Ireland has recovered strongly from the youth unemployment crisis of the early 2010s, but it has not solved the problem of youth labour market insecurity. The challenge is no longer simply one of responding to mass youth unemployment in the context of recession. It is now about building a more resilient, inclusive and youth-focused system that can prevent unemployment and NEET status and support those furthest from the labour market, but can also increase youth employment and ensure that employment provides a route to a secure and independent life.

Appendices

Appendix A: Underemployment

Figure A1: Underemployment in Ireland



Source: Eurostat

In Ireland, underemployment among younger workers aged 15–24 or 15–29 has generally been slightly lower than among workers aged 25–74. During the recession, the underemployment rate among those aged 25–74 rose as high as 43.5%. The rate among those aged 15–24 also increased substantially, although the gap between the two age groups widened to more than 10 percentage points. However, the rate for the broader 15–29 age group remained consistently close to that recorded among older workers.

In 2025, the underemployment rate among those aged 15–24 was 6.5%, 2.1 percentage points below the 8.6% recorded among those aged 25–74. Among those aged 15–29, however, the rate was 8.5%, just 0.1 percentage points below that of the older age group.

Appendix B: NEETs aged 15-29

Figure B1: Persons aged 15-29 not in employment nor in education and training (2025), by country

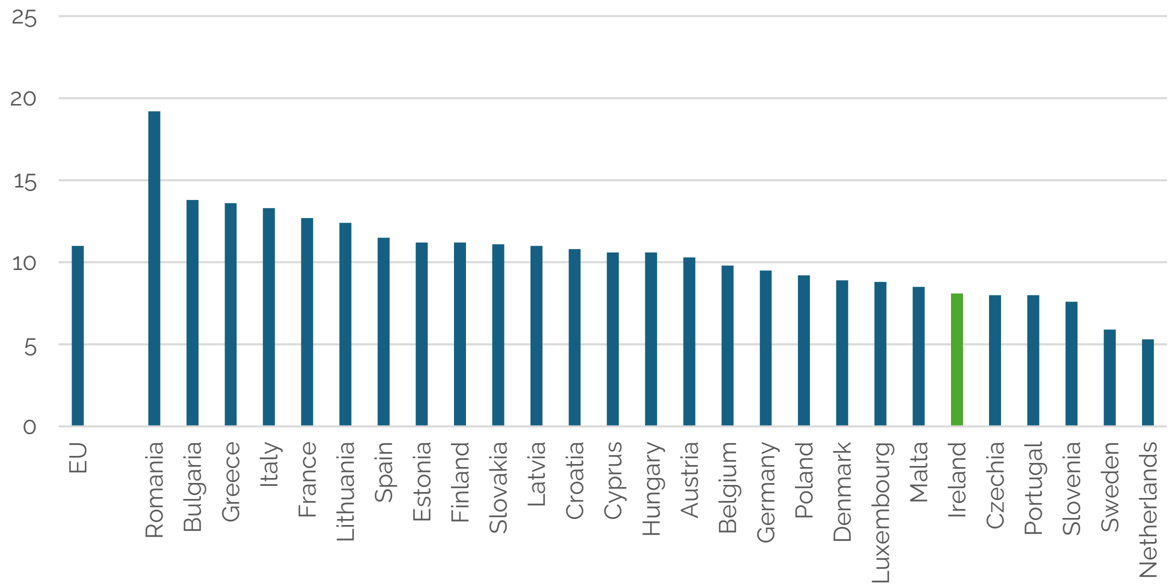
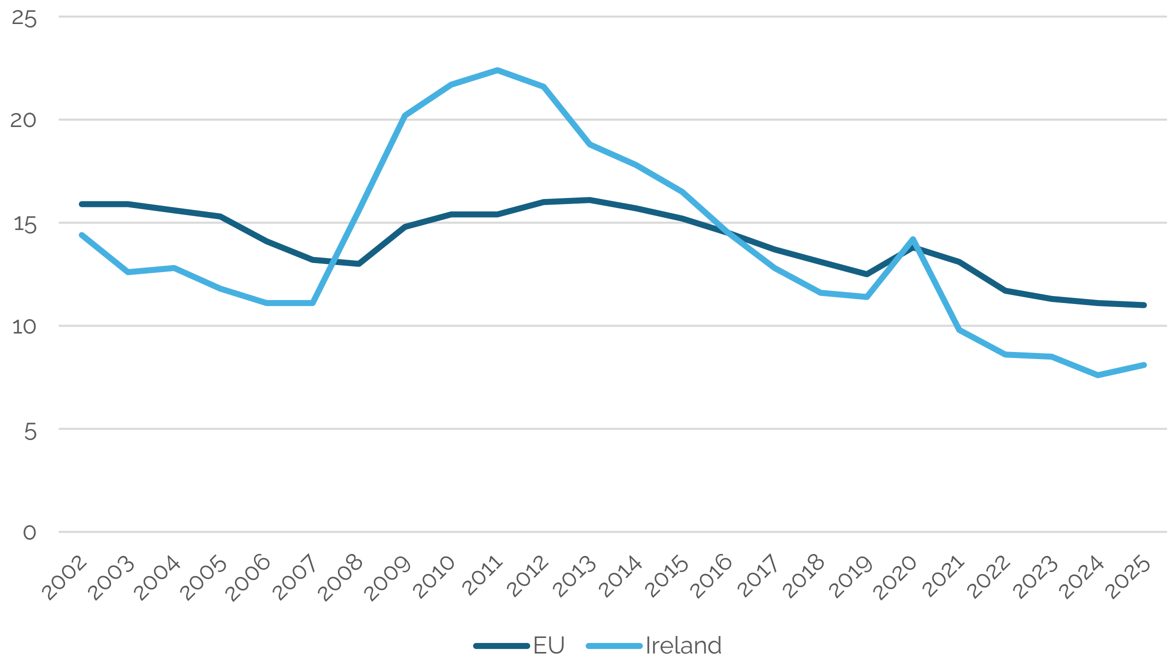


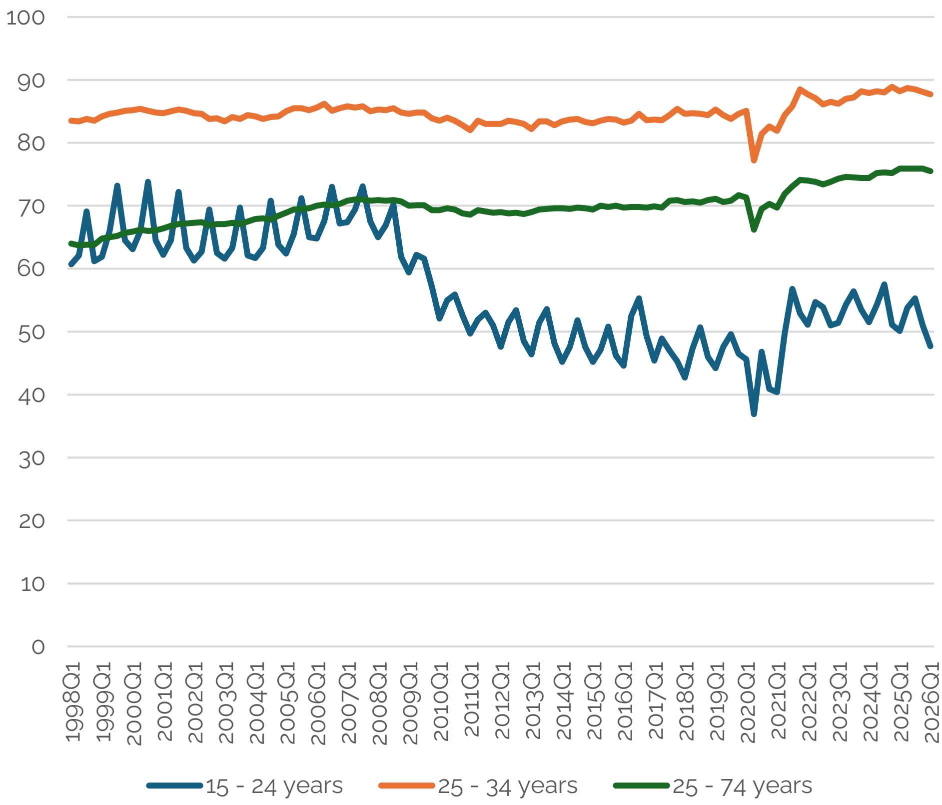
Figure B2: Persons aged 15-29 not in employment nor in education and training (2002-2025), Ireland and EU27



Source: Eurostat

Appendix C: Participation Rates

Figure C1: Participation Rates



Source: *CSO*

The participation rate refers to the share of the total population who are either employed or unemployed, with the latter defined as those actively seeking work. During the recession, the participation rate among those aged 15–24 fell dramatically and has never recovered. Between 1998 and 2008, the rate for this age group ranged from 60% to 70%. During the recession, however, it fell to around 50% and has remained at approximately that level ever since.

This contrasts sharply with the participation rate among those aged 25–74, which has increased steadily from below 65% in 1998 to more than 75% today. Before the recession, the participation rates of those aged 15–24 and those aged 25–74 were similar. Since then, the rates have diverged sharply.

The trend among those aged 15–24 also contrasts with the participation rate among those aged 25–34, which has remained between 80% and 90% over the same period.

Appendix D: Youth Commitments in Pathways to Work 2021-2025

The following list is taken from the Department of Social Protection's *Labour Market Update – Spotlight: Youth Outcomes and Considerations*, published on 29 April 2026.[49]

Youth Specific Commitments

- Continue to implement Early Engagement with young people with disabilities and extend it to other cohorts.
- Target that at least 40% of Work Placement Experience Programme places, per annum until end 2025, will be taken up by young people.
- Reserving at least 2,000 Employment Scheme places for young people on Tús/Community Employment.
- Tailoring bespoke job promotion and local recruitment events for young jobseekers where reskilling and upskilling options will be outlined, and referrals made to the Education and Training Boards.
- Re-launch and deliver activities under the Employment & Youth Engagement Charter with a target of signing up 300 employers and benefitting 1,000 jobseekers from priority groups.
- Supporting, through Intreo, the progression and work placement of young people on the Garda Youth Diversion Programme.

Youth Related Commitments

[49] Department of Social Protection (2026) *Labour Market Update – Spotlight: Youth Outcomes and Considerations, 29 April 2026*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

- Increase the total number of new apprentice registrations to at least 10,000 per annum by 2025, in line with a commitment in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025.
- Increase take up of the Work Placement Experience Programme, with 2,000 starters by 2025.
- Continue to promote uptake of Nearly Zero Energy Building (NZEB)/ Retrofit courses delivered through ETB Centres of Excellence, including the NZEB Fundamental Awareness course which offers an entry route into the area, to over 7,000 enrolments during 2024.
- Host 150 Job Promotion Events (virtual or in person) each year to showcase employment opportunities and to facilitate the introduction of employers and jobseekers.
- Host two national Intreo Work and Skills Weeks each year (one virtual, one in person), each of which comprising a week of intensive job-focussed Job Promotion Events and seminars across the country.
- Promote jobs, apprenticeships and training options for critical sectors experiencing shortages, including construction and health. Host recruitment events nationally and internationally where appropriate, taking into account skills availability across EU/EEA member states and third countries.
- Deliver a bursary programme, as set out in the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, to fund up to 100 apprentices per annum who are experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and who are from target groups, including lone parents, people with disabilities, Travellers and Roma.

Appendix E: Active labour market policies oriented at young people currently being implemented.

The following list is taken from the Department of Social Protection's *Labour Market Update – Spotlight: Youth Outcomes and Considerations*, published on 29 April 2026.[50]

Intreo Employment Supports for young people

Young people under the age of 30 are prioritised for engagement with Intreo Employment Service. As such, they are called to attend earlier and more regularly than other jobseekers. Under the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, jobseekers under the age of 30 should receive a quality offer of employment, education, training or apprenticeship within four months of becoming unemployed.

Each person receives an individualised employment support service provided by an Employment Personal Adviser (EPA), who will work with the jobseeker to develop a Personal Progression Plan (PPP) and to identify suitable interventions such as matching to suitable employment opportunities, support with CV preparation or interview training, referrals to further education and/or training, apprenticeship or Employment Programmes. Eligibility to a number of Employment Programmes is reduced to allow access for young people after 4 months or more on the live register.

[50] Department of Social Protection (2026) *Labour Market Update – Spotlight: Youth Outcomes and Considerations, 29 April 2026*. Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

Statistical profiling of all new jobseeker customers determines their Probability of Exit (PEX) from the Live Register to employment within 12 months. The PEX score facilitates segmentation into those with a Low, Medium or High probability of exit to employment. Those under 30 most at risk of long-term unemployment will receive the most immediate and consistent support from their EPA.

In 2025, over 114,100 appointments were attended by around 53,500 customers aged under 30. There are currently 8,190 customers aged under 30 on caseloads with EPAs representing approximately 35% of all caseloaded customers with Intreo Employment Services. In 2025, Employment Services referred 15,786 customers, under 30, to 28,096 educational, training and employment schemes, supports and job vacancies.

Jobseekers who do not engage in this process can have their payment reduced or suspended completely. The total number of reduced rates applied in 2025 was 11,082 of which 4,888 or 44.1% were applied to payments made to 3,978 jobseekers under 30 years of age.

The Digital Pathways to Work is an online service for jobseekers working with the Intreo Employment Service offering information about employment services, as well as capturing relevant information about their education, work history, work preferences and to record where a jobseeker has complied with the actions in their personal progression plan. The DPTW Intreo also facilitates video conferencing between jobseekers and their EPA.

Intreo work with Employers

Employer Relations Officers engage with Employers to help match vacancies with jobseekers and to ensure employers are aware of the incentives available when employing people from the live register.

The Employment and Youth Engagement Charter was launched in 2024 and is a call to employers to commit to a range of activities to assist young jobseekers and other priority groups to find a pathway to employment.

As of March 2026, 326 companies signed the Charter, with 474 Charter activities to date. Pathways to Work set a target of 300 charter companies by end-2025.

Community Employment (CE) / Tús/ Rural Social Scheme (RSS)

The department recognises that these employment, activation and income support programmes enable youth participants to make a significant contribution to their communities whilst up-skilling themselves for prospective future employment, as appropriate.

At the end of February 2026, 1,939 people under the age of 30 were participating on a Community Employment scheme, 1,037 people under 30 years of age participating on Tús and participating in the Rural Social Scheme (RSS).

Persons aged under 25 years and who are in receipt of a reduced age-related Jobseeker's Allowance of €163.70 will receive the equivalent of the full personal rate of €254.00 plus €32.50 top-up while participating on CE and Tús.

Tús Pilot Programme

In 2024, a pilot programme allowed access to jobseekers aged 18 and profiled as most distant from the labour market to qualify for Tús without a waiting period.

Participation provides an opportunity to gain work experience while contributing to their local community. At the end of February, there were 152 people on this pilot initiative.

Jobsplus

Jobsplus has a reduced waiting period for jobseekers under 30, allowing access after four months unemployment, to support their pathway to employment.

Employers can avail of an incentive of €7,500 to employ a qualifying jobseeker. As of end of February 2026, there were 139 employers supporting 174 employees under 30, in payment on the Jobsplus Incentive.

Work Placement Experience Programme (WPEP)

WPEP has a reduced eligibility for jobseekers under 30 who can qualify for the scheme after 4 months unemployment.

There have been 220 WPEP placements approved as of March 2026, which is up 40% on Q1 2025. 114 or 52% of these participants are under 30 years of age.

Back to Education Allowance (BTEA)

The BTEA scheme is an educational opportunities scheme for customers in receipt of certain social welfare payments wishing to pursue courses at further level.

Those aged under 25 who are approved for BTEA are awarded an uplift to the maximum rate of their underlying qualifying payment.

At the end of December 2025, 2,007 participants of BTEA were under 30.

Back to Work Enterprise Allowance

The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance is available to those seeking to become self-employed. A person who takes part in the scheme can keep a percentage of their social welfare payment for up to 2 years.

In 2025 a total of 1,873 people participated in the scheme of which 136 were aged under 30.

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