

RETHINKING THE NEET CONCEPT: TOWARDS A MORE FLEXIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF ISTANBUL'S YOUTH DISENGAGEMENT

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Summary

Over the years the NEET concept as a measure of youth disengagement has grown in popularity and has even been adopted as an international standard as part of the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a simple idea measuring how many young people neither work nor study while simultaneously creating stigma not only on purportedly *lazy*, *hopeless* young people (fairly or unfairly), but also on everyone whose focus and time is devoted to non-market activities. This brief has the twofold aim of investigating the definition of "student" as well as the extent to which young people are involved in the care and the social economy, de facto opening the definitions of employment and studying to non paying activities. It is found that once we account for informal learning activities, intention to study in the near future, the care economy and the NGO sector, the NEET rate in our sample goes down from 35.5 per cent to 19.4 per cent. Moreover, we show that the care economy is rather small (2.7 per cent) among young (18-29) people, hardly explaining observed gender differences in labour force status, and the non-profit sector of Istanbul benefits from the time of 5.6 per cent of the survey respondents, although those who participate are mostly employed (two thirds vs one third).

Introduction

The "Not in Employment, Education or Training" indicator is now widely used as a measure of youth disengagement — whatever disengagement is intended to mean — for a group typically framed as

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those aged 15–24, 15–29, or similar age groups. According to Eurostat's definition, young people are supposed to either follow any formal or informal education or training during the last four weeks, or to be employed during the last week, for them not to be labelled as NEETs. This definition is designed to raise a red flag whenever long-term damage to someone's career trajectory is highly likely, with the intention of preventing the problem from becoming chronic and an increase in the future burden of a country's social services.

The term was coined in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s in the context of a dying manufacturing industry and an unemployed urban youth running after jobseeker's allowances and housing benefits. The expectation in the UK, and in many other Western economies, was simple: work or study, but do something productive and stay away from the streets. The measure was created to come up with a shortcoming of the unemployment rate, its severe composition effect during the early twenties and late teenage years rendering it unfit for measuring youth issues as a whole. Likewise, attendance rates beyond high school lack policy punch since schooling is no longer compulsory by then. As a result, the NEET concept looked like a clever solution: if someone neither studies nor works, the indicator leaves no escape route — the person is marked. It was designed to corner unproductive individuals with a single indicator in a specific social context.

What might have remained a useful even if imperfect tool for a narrow set of Western welfare states did not stay local for long. The NEET concept made it into the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and, in particular, became target 8.6 — carrying a Western societal norm all the way to global standard status. This move, perhaps well-intentioned, had a profound and underappreciated consequence. It cast stigma over a wide range of non-market activities that the 13th International Conference of Labour Statisticians — the very same ICLS whose framework provided the mathematical foundation for the NEET concept — had itself classified as productive work. Under the 13th ICLS framework, any activity that is not carried out for a fee but could have been performed by someone else carries recognised market potential. Care work, subsistence agriculture, household production: all of these are, by the standards of the international statistical community, forms of work. The NEET definition ignores this entirely. The pro-market bias that underlies national accounting has at least a pragmatic justification: money is a common denominator, measurable and aggregable in ways that a barter economy is not. Whatever its limitations, that bias has a coherent internal logic. Applying the same bias to measure social disengagement does not. There is no theoretical, empirical, or normative reason to conclude that a young woman spending eighty hours a week raising children, or a graduate studying forty hours a week for a competitive public examination, is disengaged from society. The NEET definition reaches that conclusion nonetheless.

All of a sudden, roughly 250 million people globally across very different contexts became NEETs, and

started to be targeted by youth activation policies designed for entirely different realities. Consider the following: the NEET rates of Türkiye, India, Bangladesh, Mexico, Zambia and South Africa are, respectively, 24.4%, 24.2%, 21.8%, 17.8%, 35.4% and 41.2% — yet the interpretation of each figure varies enormously. In Zambia, the elevated rate reflects a large share of young men engaged in non-market agricultural activities. In South Africa, it captures a rampant and chronically high unemployment rate. In India, Bangladesh and Mexico, the figures are driven primarily by women performing unpaid domestic and care work. Türkiye presents both simultaneously: a substantial rate of unemployment including discouraged job-seekers, and a large share of women facing societal norms that incentivize them to stay at home with childcare and household responsibilities. Similar figures, produced by the same formula, mean something entirely different in each case. It does not measure the same phenomenon. It does not call for the same response.

As a result, in treating any absence from formal employment or formal schooling as equivalent disengagement, the NEET definition ignores the wide range of productive, developmental, and socially valuable activities that fill the weeks of millions of young people who hold no paid job and sit in no classroom. It generates a false sense of emergency where none may exist, while simultaneously failing to distinguish genuinely marginalised youth from those making rational, socially productive choices within the constraints of their specific context.

This brief uses a representative household survey of Istanbul with 3,000 of the city's educated youth to build alternative definitions of disengagement adapted to the Turkish context. It documents the non-market activities — care provision, structured self-directed study for public examinations, and planned educational transitions — that the standard NEET measure systematically renders invisible, and it shows how recovering these activities from the NEET category transforms both the estimated rate and its policy implications.

1. Alternative definitions of disengagement

This research brief discusses the suitability of the term NEET to measure disengagement in Istanbul thanks to an ad-hoc module implemented in a household survey carried out in Istanbul during January and February 2026 among young people with at least vocational school. The questionnaire was designed to play with the definition of “student”, which is a core component of the NEET concept, and also to better understand the prevalence of certain non-market activities performed by Istanbul's young people including the care-economy and the NGO sector. In addition, a question about incoming plans to further study was asked to all participants, with a similar spirit to the question sometimes asked in LFSs of whether a person is planning to join a company in the coming weeks or not. This is also in line with the latest Turkstat changes in its HLFS questionnaire. Indeed, since 2021 Turkstat modified the answer to the question of whether a person is currently studying to also include those

on holidays and expected to return. The move is sensible, as historically the EUROSTAT definition had the potential of classifying teenagers on summer holidays as NEETs. Likely as a result of the abovementioned change, the official NEET rate of Turkstat shows a sizable break in series since 2021 of approximately 7 percentage points, rendering the long-term series of NEETs in Türkiye unsuitable for comparison. A move in a similar direction is intended in this brief, with the intention of opening up the NEET black box to allow for conceptual changes in its components. These changes include several definitions of what a “student” is and also includes certain non remunerated activities. Some of these new definitions of disengagement not only extend the concept of student but also bring the concept of “at work”, as developed by the ICLS, to the NEET definition. In fact, this brief can be seen as part of a broader criticism against accounting systems that favour market activities with the added concern that the NEET concept measures disengagement, which is far more controversial than economic exchanges from a societal standpoint.

For the purpose of comparing disengagement measures, the NEET rate is calculated as per Eurostat’s definition to include those that neither spent one hour in paid employment during the reference week and were not enrolled in a formal or informal course during the last four weeks prior to the interview. In addition to the official NEET rate, three more measures of disengagement are offered; the first one reclassifies informal students, ie those studying on their own,¹ and also survey internal contradictions regarding the student status. The former requires a threshold of at least 10 hours of weekly self-study to avoid hobby-like activities. The latter shows contradictions as a curious case of how a person may state not to have attended a school/academy during the last 4 weeks and yet argue to be in education when justifying why they are not actively seeking employment. The criteria of statistical agencies is to count them as NEETs. Not anymore in this measure. The second measure excludes as NEETs those that foresee joining formal or informal studies within three months² since the interview. This idea is in line with the above-mentioned Turkstat recent move of reclassifying students on holidays as non-NEETs and also follows a similar logic to the one applied in labour force surveys to individuals that do not seek a job and yet are classified as unemployed (instead of as economically inactive) because they have already found one and will be joining it soon. Furthermore, in terms of justifying the reclassification, if a person has got an exit to their NEET status already ahead of them, it is hard to argue in favour of the idea of a permanent scar due to their inactivity.

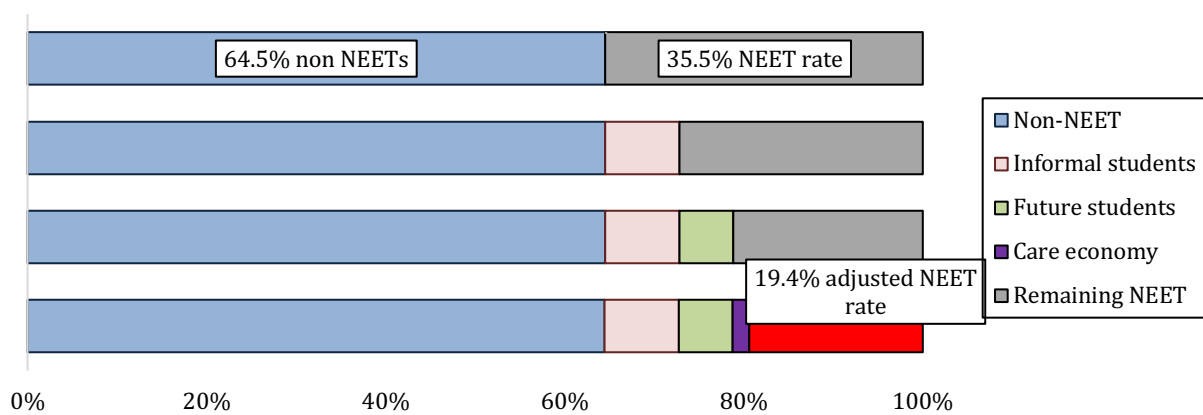
The third and last alternative definition of disengagement directly brings the concept of “at work” as developed by the 13th ICLS to the forefront of the NEET discussion. In this case, people who spend at

¹ The question in its original form was: “Son 1 ay içinde, haftada ortalama kaç saat KPSS, ALES, yabancı diller vb. alanlarda kendi kendinize öğrenim yaptınız?”.

² The question in its original form was “Kısa süre içinde (önümüzdeki 3 ay içinde) herhangi bir eğitim almayı düşünüyor musunuz?”.

least 10 hours a week caring about children, dependents or spending time as volunteers in NGOs are reclassified as non-NEETs. The 10 hour threshold is applied individually at each category, ie a person must spend at least 10 hours in a sole category, not as the sum of all three -a harsher criteria than the one imposed in the official definition, to qualify for the reclassification.

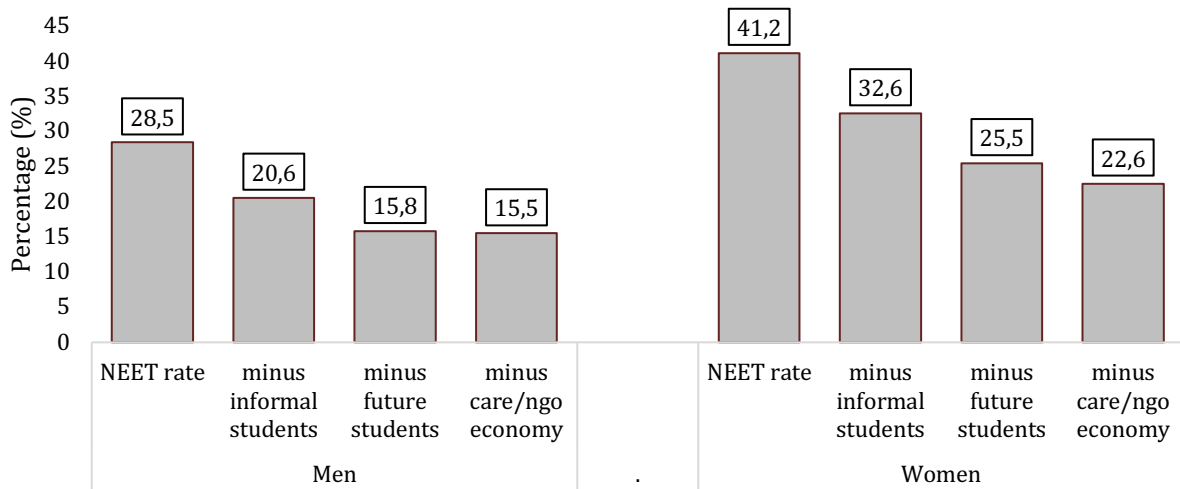
Figure 1. Official NEET rate and its disaggregation



Source: BETAM's own survey and author's own calculations. **Notes:** The figure shows the NEET rate of young people aged 18-29 with at least vocational school using the official definition of Turkstat and Eurostat. In addition, it splits NEETs into several categories based on their closeness to be a non-NEET. These categories are not mutually exclusive and an order of preference is made explicit, ie an informal student may also has plans to join a formal course of study in the short-term, yet being a current informal student is given preference.

According to the survey, the NEET rate of the subpopulation under analysis (individuals aged 18-29 years old with at least vocational school finished) is 35.5 per cent. Informal students account for 23.4 per cent of the official NEETs, and once subtracted lower the NEET rate by nearly 8 percentage points down to 27.4 per cent. The reclassification of "students to be" further lowers the rate down to 21.2 per cent and the elimination of individuals involved in the care economy and volunteers results in an even lower 19.4 per cent adjusted NEET rate, a drop of 16 percentage points in spite of the strict criteria used -imposing a threshold of 10 hours in at least a one separate activity- to warrant a reclassification.

Figure 2. Official NEET rate and other disengagement measures, by gender



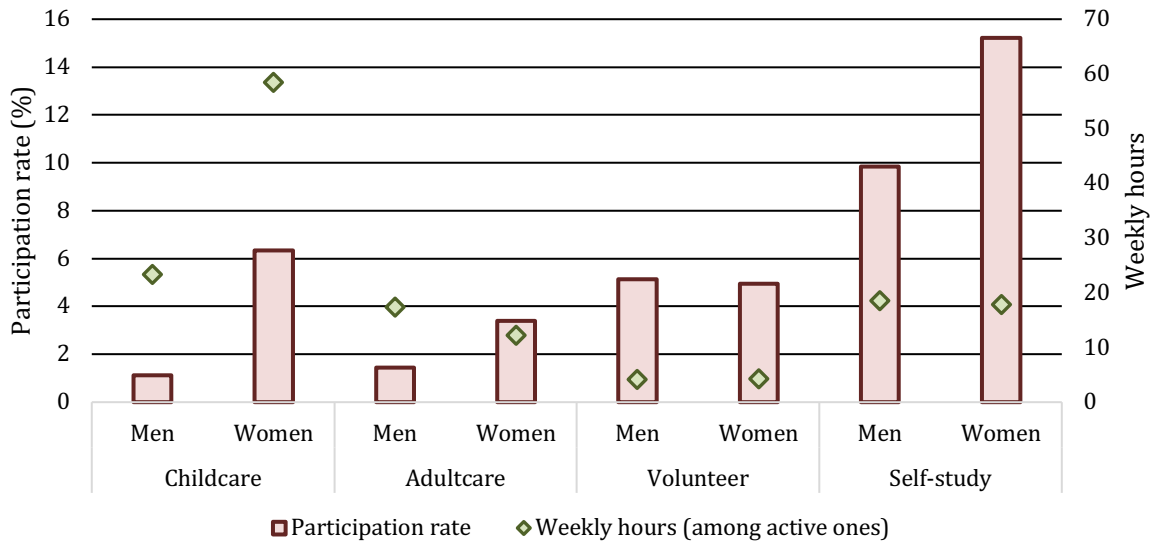
The changes by gender are even more dramatic, with the female NEET rate (see Figure 2) going down by nearly 20 points. More importantly, the rate did not go much down because of the care economy, rather because of the desire to continue studying. In this case, the perhaps expected mechanism whereby caring of others keep women away from employment does not seem to apply, at least among highly educated young Istanbul women.

2. Measuring non-market activities: Prevalence and intensity

In spite of their relevance, there are few time use surveys in Türkiye, with the last representative one dating back from 2014, and a mini time use survey implemented by BETAM in collaboration with ISPER in 2025 for Istanbul to measure unpaid care. Such effort by BETAM and ISPER continued in 2026 with questions expanded to non-market activities such as self-study and volunteering.

According to the survey results, 5.6 per cent of Istanbul's youth regularly volunteers, with more relevance found in education-related activities. The figure goes well with TÜSEV's estimate of 3.5 per cent for the adult population, since it is understood young people tend to be more involved in this kind of activity. It is also remarkable that two thirds of the volunteers of the sample are employed, ie those economically inactive or unemployed have less involvement, implying that volunteering behaves like a luxury good in Istanbul and those with more resources are the ones that can afford to carry it out.

Figure 3. Non-market activities, prevalence and weekly hours, by gender



The prevalence among young people regarding care to children and other adults, though dominated by women, is low nonetheless. Henceforth it cannot be used to explain the difference in labour force participation between men and women; it is not about women having children, not for that age group, not among Istanbul highly educated women that, in fact, tend to postpone marriage. Still, the differences in prevalence and intensity shows the existence of marked gender attitudes toward who is expected to take care of children, with women doubling men’s time devoted to this task. In other words, even if kids have not damaged their access to the labour market so far, it will likely be the case in their 30s. A gender gap is also found in adult care, but not just as profound as the one regarding childcare.

There is a, perhaps unexpected, gap in the share of NEETs devoting time to self-study, with women’s percentage raising to 15 per cent and men staying at 10 per cent. This gap is taken as an indicator of either women having a harder time accessing the labour market or pursuing careers in the public sector (due to their studies, desires, expectations) or both. No gender gap is found regarding volunteering, yet the professional composition shows that those with a background in teaching have a higher tendency to devote their time to social causes than others.

3 Conclusions

The NEET rate is a western construct that imports the pro-market bias of national accounting into a domain (disengagement) where that bias has no justification. In national accounts, privileging market transactions makes pragmatic sense: monetary values are observable, comparable, and aggregable in ways that non-market production is not. Disengagement, however, is not an economic concept — it is a social one. Measuring it with criteria designed for GDP accounting is a category error, and one with real

consequences for the millions of young people it misclassifies. This research brief uses an ad-hoc module from a household survey that took place in Istanbul in 2026 among young educated people to enumerate and measure some of the non-market activities that young people in the city perform on a regular basis, and also to show how much the NEET rate changes once those activities are taken seriously.

The results show that the NEET rate as calculated using the definition of EUROSTAT for the educated youth aged 18–29 in Istanbul stands at 35.5 per cent. Once informal learners — those studying on their own for at least 10 hours per week, including for competitive public examinations — are reclassified, the rate falls to 27.4 per cent. Accounting further for those with concrete plans to enter formal or informal education within three months brings it down to 21.2 per cent. Finally, incorporating those engaged in the care economy or volunteering in the NGO sector for at least 10 hours per week yields an adjusted NEET rate of 19.4 per cent — a reduction of 16 percentage points relative to the official figure.

The gender dimension is equally revealing. The female NEET rate falls by nearly 20 percentage points once these reclassifications are applied, and the main driver is not the care economy but rather the desire to continue studying. Contrary to what might be expected, care responsibilities do not appear to be the primary mechanism keeping young, educated, Istanbul women out of employment — at least not yet. However, the women who do have kids devote double the time to childcare compared to men, suggesting that the labour market penalty will likely materialise in their thirties. The care economy, while dominated by women, thus remains limited in prevalence among this age group, and cannot on its own explain observed gender gaps in labour force status.

Non-market activities are neither marginal nor invisible in Istanbul. Some 5.6 per cent of young people regularly volunteer, with two thirds of them already employed — suggesting that civic participation behaves more like a complement to employment than a substitute.

To sum up, the NEET concept was born in a specific institutional context — formal school-to-work transitions, limited extended family structures, minimal informal learning infrastructure — that does not map onto the realities of a city where family, informal education, and community are central organising principles of young adult life. Adapting the measurement framework to the city is not a methodological indulgence; it is a prerequisite for policies that actually reach the people who need them.

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