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Emerging adults facing the risk of professional and educational inactivity

**Wschodzący dorośli wobec ryzyka
braku aktywności zawodowej i edukacyjnej**

Abstract: The article addresses the transition of emerging adults from the educational system to the labour market. This issue falls within the deliberations on the trajectories of entering adulthood, which in the era of late modernity lose their linear character, become longer, fragmented and reversible. Particular attention is drawn to those falling into the NEET category (*neither in employment, education nor training*), whose situation can be considered as one variant of the adulthood transition trajectory. A survey, carried out on a random, nationwide sample of people aged 18-29 (n=330), categorised by gender and education, forms the empirical basis for this study. The analysis aims to answer questions about educational plans, differences between those who fall into the NEET category, and educationally and professionally active emerging adults, as well as factors that occur alongside the lack of activity in the aforementioned spheres. The results indicate low cultural and economic capital and residence in rural areas as factors which increase the risk of becoming a part of the NEET category. Polish emerging adults who follow the NEET model appear to represent, in Mertonian terms, the category of the withdrawn, rather than the rebellious.

Keywords: emerging adults, NEET, trajectories into adulthood, education, professional activity.

Introduction

In a social system, in which work is the primary means of securing livelihoods and accessing social services (Dahrendorf, 2012), economic and educational inactivity, especially among those entering the labour market, poses seemingly a significant challenge that requires in-depth research. The study, discussed in the following article, aimed to map the risk of economic and educational inactivity (NEET) among so-called emerging adults, i.e. the cohort of 18-29-year olds. The empirical basis consists of a survey, carried out on a random sample of 330 young adults. Research questions were posed about the educational plans of emerging adults. The inclusion of the educationally and professionally inactive group in the sample made it possible to analyse specific educational plans, as well as to identify relevant factors concurrent with educational and professional inactivity.

A substantial argument for addressing this issue, apart from its social significance, is the limited number of studies devoted to professionally and educationally inactive people at the age typical for the final stages of education and building a position on the labour market. The conclusions of the study may contribute to a better understanding of this group and thus translate into rational planning of social policies. As the analyses contained in the following part of the text show, the threat of educational and professional inactivity is particularly pronounced in relation to groups with a specific social status. In this regard, we can speak with a high degree of certainty about the risk, in which the depreciation of life opportunities associated with the characteristics of the family of origin is superimposed on the lack of activity to break the spiral of exclusion (Kleif, 2020; OECD, 2024).

Emerging adulthood

The term *emerging adulthood* as suggested by Jeffrey Arnett to describe a distinctive period in a person's development between adolescence and adulthood that is characterised by identity exploration, instability, self-centredness, a sense of being in-between, and a feeling of having possibilities or optimism (Arnett, 2000). This stage originally referred to adolescents aged 18-25 (Arnett, 2000), however, over time, due to transitions associated with an increasingly higher median age of entering marriage and having a child, this category has been expanded to 18-29 (Arnett 2014).

Arnett's concept is psychologically oriented and focuses on adaptive developmental processes towards normative outcomes (Bynner, 2005). Concurrently, it encompasses sociological determinants, which include such issues as occupational instability and the role of cultural conditions

(i.e. industrialisation, secularisation) on the formation of the emerging adults' experience (Tanner, 2006, p. 26) and the importance of structural and social factors (employment and educational opportunities). Thus, it extends beyond the characteristics of the age-limited stage to consider a range of trajectories that mark the transition between statuses, where each successive step is conditioned by previous decisions, personal, financial, social, cultural resources, to which the individual has access, and the institutional context in which he or she exists (Bynner, 2005).

A significant context for the study of emerging adults are the changes taking place in post-industrial societies. In the late-modern era, individuals face problems, which were previously solved at the collective level, the period of adolescence has lengthened, and it is increasingly dependent on personal preferences (Cote, 2002). These factors lead to the stage of emerging adulthood being described as one of the most heterogeneous stages of life with respect to employment, education, marital status, having children, living with or away from the family of origin (Gutiérrez-García, Benjet, Borges, Méndez Ríos and Medina-Mora, 2018). This is a stage of biography characteristic for young people's development in industrialised societies, especially in groups where deferring adulthood can bring advantages, e.g. in terms of future educational and professional careers, while, simultaneously, social pressures fail to encourage rapid assumption of adult roles (e.g. starting a family and taking up a permanent job) (Bynner, 2005).

Extended transition – diversity of transition trajectories

One of the effects of the changes associated with postponed entry into adulthood is the increase expectations of personal development and life achievements in late modern societies. At the same time, institutional support for the transition to adulthood is diminishing, creating gaps in the transition to adulthood, e.g. between education and work (Cote, 2002, p. 118). In addition, the way in which one transitions through the stage of emerging adulthood depends on diverse individual and social factors, including personality, family relationships as well as social and economic circumstances throughout childhood and adolescence (Schwartz, 2016).

Processes of progressive individualisation result in a growing spectrum of possible choices as well as their significance in the formation of individual biographies (Beck, 2002). Broader access to personal freedom, albeit an increasing uncertainty about the possibility of successful implementation of plans (Grob, Krings and Bangerter, 2001, p.188) translates into a multiplicity of strategies for entering adulthood (Arnett, 2006, p.4). Faced

with declining traditional social ties and patterns of behaviour, emerging adults confront the need to shape their own life paths, which are characterised by decreasing predictability (Cote, 2002). Dealing with uncertainty and being aware that the need to make decisions carries the risk of making a mistake and, consequently, of social exclusion, has become a new task in the transition to adulthood (Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco, 2003; Bynner, 2005). Moreover, such awareness, depending on the resources available to an individual, can either be a burden or a motivating factor (Cote, 2002, p. 118).

The variation in transition trajectories and sense of risk associated with biography formation may be analysed in the context of the socially recognised criteria of adulthood, which are changing. The traditional ones (referred to as the 'Big Five'), relating to the acquisition of social roles, include graduation from school, which used to mean secondary school, but now it usually corresponds to completing higher education; getting a job, leaving home, getting married and having children. These criteria aptly describe the process of entering adulthood in the mid-twentieth century, when the cultural imperatives and expectations associated with age and the sequence of reaching milestones conditioned the relatively rapid pace at which the aforementioned steps were completed (Settersten, Ottusch and Schneider, 2015). Nowadays, a prolonged transition from education to the labour market is accompanied by its prolongation also in other areas (family or setting up one's own household) (Winogrodzka and Sarnowska, 2019). Achieving independence has been separated from starting a family, while issues of autonomous decision-making, independence, including financial and housing, as well as responsibility for oneself have gained relevance (Arnett, 1998, p. 305). At each of these stages, young people have vastly different opportunities and experiences, in accordance with their background and family resources, thus the conventional markers of adulthood are no longer seen by emerging adults as indispensable features of becoming an adult in contemporary society (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, Carroll, Madsen, Barry, & Badger, 2007, p. 666).

The process of transition to adulthood has not only been extended, but also become de-standardised, and is increasingly characterised by reversibility. In contrast to previous linear models, today's emerging adults withdraw from the stages they have reached, either by personal choice or, for example, as a result of unemployment or breaking up a relationship (Walther, 2006). Transition to adulthood is no longer linear, in fact it becomes more fragmented (Winogrodzka and Sarnowska, 2019), and dependency situations, characteristic of youth and adult autonomy, may even coexist

(Walther, 2006). This type of transition also represents a coping mechanism, not only with new opportunities, but also with the risks that young people encounter (Winogrodzka and Sarnowska, 2019). The metaphorical term yo-yo transition is used to describe these de-standardised transitions between youth and adulthood. The individual creation of their own biographies, increasing reflection in their decision making and action strategies does not eliminate inequalities related to social background, education, gender, place of residence and ethnicity. These factors condition an individual's ability to negotiate the transition to adulthood and lead to various forms of yo-yo transitions, which, on the one hand, involve people with limited resources who depend on long-term parental support due to inadequate provision, and, on the other hand, people with considerable resources who can freely decide on their own according to their needs and preferences. In between these two categories are those balancing between precarious jobs, unemployment and training, and those who, despite their willingness to try new work and study arrangements, are forced to conform to standardised professional and educational pathways (Du Bois-Reymond and López Blasco, 2003, p. 23).

The phenomenon of NEETs – difficulties in the transition between education and work

The term NEET refers to young people who are *neither in employment, education nor training*¹. The term was first used in the 1990s in the UK as an alternative way of categorising young people who were not accumulating human capital through traditional formal means of work or learning. Usually, analyses refer to people between the ages of 15 and 29 (Eurofund, 2016; Eurostat; OECD, 2024)². The same age ranges are used in Polish public statistics. The definition used in the BAEL survey [en. LFS - Labour Force Survey] of the Statistics Poland [pol. Główny Urząd Statystyczny, GUS] identifies the NEETs as persons not in employment, formal or non-formal education for up to four weeks before the survey³. This phenomenon is analysed in the

¹ According to OECD guidelines, participation in education refers to those attending school part-time or full-time, but does not include those engaged in non-formal education and participating in very short duration educational activities. Employment, on the other hand, refers to people who have done paid work for at least one hour during the reference week of the survey or were temporarily absent from such work (OECD, 2024).

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training

³ <https://stat.gov.pl/metainformacje/slownik-pojec/pojecia-stosowane-w-statystyce-publicznej/4585,pojecie.html>

context of the transition from education to employment, i.e. the stage when emerging adults are exposed to particular uncertainty about their future career path (Klug, Drobnič and Brockmann, 2019).

NEET is a broad category, encompassing a heterogeneous group of people. This is due, among other things, to the nature of its definition, employment and learning, and the varied reasons for economic or learning inactivity (Redmond and McFadden, 2023). The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions includes in the NEET category people, who are about to return to employment, education or training, those who are unemployed for a short or long period of time, those who are economically inactive due to illness or disability, and those who have stopped looking for work because they believe there are no employment opportunities for them. In addition, one subcategory of the NEETs includes individuals who do not take up work or education because of family responsibilities – some have to care for family members and some voluntarily withdraw from the labour market or education to take up family commitments. Hence, in all countries of the European Union, women are found to be at higher risk of falling into the NEET category (Eurostat)⁴. Yet another group is identified, where the reasons for being part of the NEET group do not fit into the previous categories – the most heterogeneous group, consisting of those most at risk of exclusion, but also the most privileged and seeking alternative development paths (Eurofund, 2016). What is noticeable within each subcategory, is differentiation with regard to social and demographic characteristics (education, family environment, immigrant status, health factors), which largely determine the life situation of young people. Therefore, two subcategories characterised by distinct risk factors were identified: those NEETs susceptible to the risk of marginalisation, who also lack social, cultural and human capital, and those NEETs who are not vulnerable – with high levels of cultural, social and human capital; who, despite being among the NEETs, remain at a low risk of marginalisation (Eurofund, 2012, 2016). The outlined classification shows the variability of the determinants of being in the NEET category, and accentuates the contrast between those who do not work and learn of their own volition and those who, despite their efforts, cannot find employment. Some NEETs have little influence on their situation, while others do not look for a job or do

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training

not want to get an education, despite having no responsibilities or medical conditions (Rak, 2022).

The reasons for falling into the NEET category can be divided into micro-level factors, i.e. those relating to personal characteristics, meso factors – related to deficiencies on the part of educational institutions, which affect young people's motivation and commitment, and macro factors of a social and economic nature (Rak, 2022; Krause, 2016). Factors at the micro level include individual attributes such as self-esteem, resourcefulness, willingness to take action while studying or looking for a job, which is related to the level of motivation and readiness to make an effort, as well as social relationships, which, among others, are related to interpersonal skills (Rak, 2022). In addition, individual factors include gender, place of residence, immigration status, disability and illness (Bynner and Parsons, 2002; Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018). The risk of falling into the NEET category particularly affects women (especially during early motherhood), as well as those with a low level of education or low qualifications (Caroleo Rocca, Mazzocchi and Quintano, 2020). Moreover, low educational attainment and migrant background are associated with long-term NEET status (Klug et al., 2019).

The social and economic situation of young people, which translates into lack of opportunities to find employment, enter university or take part in other types of educational activities because of a lack of economic resources to continue education for example, is also mentioned among the micro-level factors. Attention is also drawn in this context to *dropping out* of school early as a potential cause of becoming a NEET, as well as a barrier to accessing higher education, which includes high tuition fees and costs of living (Redmond and McFadden, 2023), and to entering informal forms of employment and how unpaid work carried out in the household is perceived (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018). Factors related to the family environment are also of significance. Family capital in the context of early school drop-out relates to wealth situation, parents' level of education, reading books to children during childhood, parents' interest in children's education (Bynner and Parsons, 2002), and the ways in which educational influences shape a child's responsibility for their actions (Rak, 2022).

At the meso level, education-related factors, such as the lack of individualisation of the educational process and engaging teaching methods or the decision to drop out early due to discouragement by the school institution, are taken into consideration (Krause, 2016; Rak, 2022). In the case of macro factors, the impact of the value system and context is also identified. That is,

finding oneself outside of the main social institutions (education, training and employment systems) does not solely result from individual decisions, but is rather associated with shortcomings of the system of values to inspire young people, provide meaning as they move through the levels of education and enter the labour market (Drakaki, Papadakis, Kyridis and Papargyris, 2014; Caroleo, et al., 2020). Social and economic factors are also included, such as economic crises affecting the labour market, social acceptance to remain in the parental household for a long time (Rak, 2022).

All the aforementioned factors illustrate that underneath the seemingly homogeneous NEET category are vastly different situations. John Bynner's research has shown that extended participation in education and professional achievements accrues more often to groups with a high social and economic position and are closely correlated with obtained qualifications. A clear gap exists in this respect between those with and without such attributes (Bynner, 2005, p. 375). Therefore, the NEET issue is considered in terms of social exclusion (Kleif, 2020; OECD, 2024).

The characteristics associated with the emerging adulthood stage might also be analysed as risk factors for entering the NEET category: increased disorientation and uncertainty and, consequently, postponement of entry into adulthood, a state of limbo and identity crisis associated with the transition from education to active participation in the labour market (Szcześniak and Rondón, 2011; Rak, 2022). NEETs are also accompanied by a sense of being between adolescence and adulthood, which is typical for the emerging adulthood phase (Parola, Donsi and Parello, 2023). Another reason for a decision to take a break from education is to take a closer look at potential opportunities related to education or work (the so-called gap year) as well as alternative choices regarding life paths that exceed the traditional education-work pattern (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018).

Methodology

The survey was conducted in October of 2024 on a random sample of 18-29-year olds (n=330), stratified by gender and town size. The maximum error of proportion for the 95% confidence level was +/-5.8%. Computer Assisted Web-based Interview was used in the study. The distributions of the variables used for stratification – gender, age, education – were taken from the Statistics Poland's Local Data Bank (2022). The project received a positive opinion from the Ethics Committee of the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw.

Stratification by gender assumed, according to the data from the official GUS statistics, a dichotomous gender division; nevertheless, the respondents were able to specify their gender identity (including non-binary) in the questionnaire. Among the respondents, 52.7% were female, 47% were male and 0.3% identified themselves otherwise (Tab.1). The mean age of the respondents was 24.63 years old (Mdn=24 years, SD=3.18). At the time of the survey, 33% of the respondents were in post-secondary school or university and 53.9% were not continuing their education. Complete economic independence has been achieved by 46.4% of the respondents, 24.2% relied on occasional financial support, 13% on regular support and 16.4% were dependent on their parents. Regarding professional work, 73.7% of the respondents were working and 26.7% were not professionally active. In the six months preceding the survey, almost half of the respondents lived with their parents (49.7%), 12.7% lived independently in their hometown, 30.9% lived independently in another town or village, and 6.7% lived part time with their parents and part time on their own. The major group of respondents were in a stable, informal relationship (44.8%), 40.4% described themselves as single and 14.8% of respondents were married. 17.3% of respondents had children.

The study sample included 39 people who are not in employment or education (NEET). This group included 25 women, 13 men and one person with a different gender identity.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study sample

	n	%
gender		
men	155	47,0
women	174	52,7
other gender identification	1	0,3
total	330	100,0
age	M=24.6; SD=3.18	
education		
primary	17	5,2
middle	3	0,9
secondary	156	47,2
vocational	29	8,8
higher	125	37,9
total	330	100
learning		
primary school students	1	0,3
secondary / technical / vocational school students	42	12,7
post-secondary school or university students	109	33,0
persons who are not studying	178	53,9

total	330	100,0
professional activity		
working persons	242	73,3
non-working persons	88	26,7
total	330	100,0
financial autonomy		
persons who are entirely independent	153	46,4
persons who receive occasional financial support	80	24,2
persons who receive regular financial support	43	13
persons dependent on their parents	54	16,4
total	330	100
relationship status		
singles	133	40,4
persons in a stable, informal relationship	148	44,8
married	49	14,8
total	330	100
children		
persons who do not have children	273	82,7
persons who have children	57	17,3
total	330	100
housing situation		
persons living with their parents	164	49,7
persons living independently in their hometown/village	42	12,7
persons living independently in a town/village other than their family residence	102	30,9
people who live part time on their own, part time with their parents	22	6,7
total	330	100

Source: own study

Results

NEETs do not differ from the rest of the emerging adults in terms of gender proportions. There are also no statistically significant differences between these groups in regard to family situation, having children and plans to start a family ($p > 0.05$). Significant differences were noted, however, relating to subsistence and educational issues.

Financial support from parents is provided to nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of those in the NEET category (74.4%), and to half (50.9%) of those who are professionally active or during an education process ($\chi^2(2, N=330)=22.023$; $p < 0.001$). There are similar differences in the case of living with parents ($\chi^2(2, N=330)=10.813$; $p=0.004$). Among the NEETs, 74.4% of respondents still live with their parents and 23.1% have moved out of the family home (Table 2). In contrast, among other emerging adults – 46.4% live independently and as many still live with their parents. The remainder, during the six months preceding the survey, lived part time on their own and part time in the family home

(NEET – 2.6%, economically active or studying – 7.2%). The place of residence also distinguishes the NEETs – 59% of them live in the countryside, while among the interviewed respondents this percentage amounts to 37.1% ($\chi^2(1, N=330)=6.866$; $p=0.009$). NEETs and other emerging adults differ in their assessment of their material situation – 41% of the NEETs consider it to be bad, this is the opinion of 14.8% of respondents who are working and/or studying ($\chi^2(1, N=330)=16.139$; $p<0.001$).

Table 2. Livelihood and economic differences between economically and/or educationally active emerging adults and those categorised as NEETs

		NEET	persons studying and / o r working
housing situation **	persons living with their parents	74,3%	46,4%
	persons living alone	23,1%	46,4%
	persons living part time on their own and part time with parents	2,6%	7,2%
	total	25,7%	53,6%
place of residence **	urban residents	41,0%	62,9%
	rural residents	59,0%	37,1%
	total	100,0%	100,0%
financial situation assessment **	people with a good opinion of their material situation	59,0%	85,2%
	people with a bad opinion of their material situation	41,0%	14,8%
	total	100,0%	100,0%
use of parental financial support **	persons supporting themselves	25,6%	49,1%
	Persons relying on occasional support from their parents	12,82%	25,77%
	Persons relying on significant support from their parents	61,5%	25,1%
	total	100,0%	100,0%

** $p<0,01$

Source: own study

In case of the education aspect, significant differences between the NEETs and other emerging adults were noted observed the educational level of the respondents ($\chi^2(1, N=330)=11.802$; $p=0.001$) and their parents ($\chi^2(2, N=330)=22.242$; $p<0.001$) as well as their plans to continue their education ($\chi^2(1, N=330)=9.557$; $p=0.002$). For the variable regarding parental education level, the parent/guardian with a higher level of education was accounted for. Due to sparse indications of graduation from primary and middle school

education, these two categories were combined into one. Among the NEETs, the most frequently indicated highest level of education for parents was secondary education (80.6%), followed by primary and middle school education (13.9%), and third was higher education (5.6%) (Tab. 3). However, among other emerging adults, secondary education as the highest level of parental education was indicated by 47.2%, almost as many (46.5%) indicated higher education, and for primary and middle school education – 6.4%. Among those surveyed, 12.8% of those in the NEET category and 41.2% of those in the working and/or studying group (the latter group also includes those who are still studying) have obtained higher education.

Table 3. Differences in education between working and/or educationally active emerging adults and those categorised as NEETs

		NEET	persons studying and/or working
highest educational status in the family**	primary or middle school	13,9%	6,4%
	secondary school	80,6%	47,2%
	higher education	5,6%	46,5%
	total	100,0%	100,0%
plans to continue education**	Yes	30,8%	57,0%
	No	69,2%	43,0%
	total	100,0%	100,0%
educational level of the respondents **	Other	87,2%	58,8%
	Higher	12,8%	41,2%
	total	100,0%	100,0%

** p<0,01

Source: own study

69.2% of the NEETs do not plan further education, while in the remaining group of emerging adults this percentage equals to 43%. In both groups, most frequently indicated reasons for such a decision were lack of a need to reach a higher level of education, lack of financial resources and a family situation that does not allow for further education. Motivations for withdrawing from further education clearly differentiate the two fractions. Among active people, the declaration of consciously opting out of further education due to lack of need thereof was considerably more frequent (71% vs. 48%). On the other hand, among the NEETs, lack of financial resources (33% vs. 11%) and family situation (15% vs. 10%) prevailed.

The majority of the NEETs (27 out of 39) do not plan to return to education. This group is dominated by individuals with secondary education (18). An analysis of the reasons for such a decision, taking into account the attained level of education, showed that all of the NEETs with primary and higher education, who do not plan to continue their education, claim that they do not need a higher level of education. Among those with vocational education, 3 individuals also indicated such motivation and 1 pointed to a lack of financial resources to enable further education. In the case of secondary school graduates, 6 people believe that they do not need further education, 8 people cannot afford further education, 3 pointed to the family situation, 1 person could not give a reason for this decision.

A logistic regression model was constructed to test which factors are associated with educational and professional inactivity (Table 4). Two characteristics of the family of origin – parents' highest educational status and use of their support – were included as predictors. The first variable was calculated based on the respondents' declarations regarding the education of their father (male legal guardian) and mother (female legal guardian). The highest educational level attained was taken as an indicator. Similarly to the cross-analyses, primary and middle school level were combined into a single value due to small numbers. This resulted in a variable with three values (primary and middle, secondary and higher). Obtaining support was recoded to a dichotomous form – complete independence vs obtaining resources from parents or guardians. The individual characteristics of respondents included in the model are gender (in a dichotomous form due to only one indication of a third gender), size of place of residence (five values – village, town up to 20,000 inhabitants, town from 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, city from 100,000 to 0.5 million inhabitants and metropolises over 0.5 million inhabitants) and self-assessment of economic situation, dichotomised to a positive/negative form.

The explained variable is the NEET status. This indicator was derived from two variables: current educational and occupational status. Those who did not declare to be professionally or educationally active were coded as NEET.

The model was found to be well adapted to the data ($p < 0.001$ in the collective test of model coefficients and $p = 0.565$ in the Hosmer-Lemeshow test). It has an acceptable quality, providing an explanation for one-third of the variation in the NEET status ($R^2 = 0.333$). Having a parent with a higher education degree, relying on parental support and assessment of economic situation were found to be significant predictors. Among those

with at least one parent having a university degree, the probability of being professionally or educationally active is more than seven times higher than among other respondents (OR=7.363; $p=0.035$). Relying on parents' support reduces the probability of being active by 72% (OR=0.282; $p=0.011$). Almost identical values of the probability ratio were obtained for the assessment of the economic situation. If respondents rated their situation as bad, the probability of being active decreased by 72% (OR=0.284; $p=0.003$). All predictors are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Logistic regression model

		B	BS	Wald	df	p	OR
Highest educational status of parents	Primary or middle school			11,707	2	0,003	
	Secondary school	-0,576	0,648	0,791	1	0,374	0,562
	Higher education	1,996	0,946	4,455	1	0,035	7,363*
Use of support (1-T)		-1,264	0,495	6,523	1	0,011	0,282*
Gender(1-M)		0,611	0,425	2,067	1	0,151	1,841
Age		-0,105	0,073	2,099	1	0,147	0,9
Evaluation of the economic situation (1 – negative)		-1,26	0,426	8,73	1	0,003	0,284*
Size of the place of residence	Village			0,911	4	0,923	
	Small town (up to 20,000 inhabitants)	-0,39	0,583	0,448	1	0,503	0,677
	Medium town (from 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants)	0,14	0,556	0,064	1	0,801	1,151
	City (from 100,000 to 0.5 million inhabitants)	0,27	0,623	0,189	1	0,664	1,31
	Metropolises (over 0.5 million inhabitants)	18,645	5570,055	0	1	0,997	1,25E+08
Constant		5,378	2,076	6,709	1	0,01	216,519

Coding of the explained variable 1- economically or educationally active, 0 – NEET status * $p<0.05$

Source: own study

Conclusions

Our own research has shown that the NEET status among emerging adults is associated with a significant degree of economic dependence on parents, as manifested in the use of financial support and cohabitation. In this context, a question arises regarding the course of the process of entering adulthood. Financial independence and moving out of the family home are mentioned both among the traditional (so-called the 'Big Five') (Settersten, et al., 2015) and modified criteria for adulthood (Arnett, 1998; Walczak, 2023). In this situation, it can be hypothesised that the process of transition to adulthood has not ended in the case of the NEETs, especially those of them who have not achieved financial and residential independence from

their parents. The literature highlights that moving out of the family home entails a transformation of the parent-child relationship, which becomes more symmetrical than at the earlier stages (Knis, Bayers, 2010). Moreover, youth unemployment status affects perception of the transition into adulthood – young NEETs feel further away from adulthood than those who work (Parola et al., 2023).

The stage of suspension or unfinished transition to adulthood for emerging adults may be a manifestation of postponing the moment of entry into adulthood. The aspiration to postpone this moment in time is related, among other things, to the rise of expectations among contemporary, highly developed societies regarding life achievements (Cote, 2002). Postponing the entry into adulthood becomes, in this view, a strategy to cope with uncertainty related to the effects of decisions taken, among other things, in the context of one's own development. After leaving school, young people experience periods of significant instability and uncertainty, which has consequences in different areas of life and even in the transition to adulthood. The transition from school to work occurs at the same time as the individual is moving into adulthood, and work has been shown to be an important determinant of this transition (Parola et al., 2023).

In the literature and public statistics, gender is mentioned as one of the risk factors for falling onto the NEET category (Eurofund, 2016), as indicated by Eurostat data (2024). Surprisingly, our own research found no differences in this respect between working and/or learning emerging adults and those not engaging in these activities. A possible explanation for this discrepancy lies in the sample size, which included a proportional but nevertheless relatively small group of inactive people.

Our own research has shown that compared to educationally and/or professionally active emerging adults, the NEET category predominantly consists of people who live in rural areas, have a negative perception of their economic situation and low inherited cultural capital. Lower educational attainment and lack of plans to continue education result in a higher risk of social exclusion, especially in a knowledge-based society, where competences play a significant role (Bynner, Parsons, 2002).

The Eurofund analysis (2016) shows that, with the exception of economic crises, the probability of being in the NEET category decreases as the level of education increases. Education is therefore seen as a protective factor against unemployment and exclusion. Bynner and Parsons (2002) point out that *non-college bound youth* fall into the NEET risk category as

they are often on the margins of the labour market, moving between various short-term, unskilled jobs and unemployment.

Summary

The study in question is not free of certain limitations. The primary one consists in the sampling frame, from which the sample has been selected. Irrespective of its random nature, selection among people registered in a commercial research panel may generate an unquantifiable burden. At the same time, one of the more frequent objections to the implementation of surveys using the CAWI technique – the exclusion of people without Internet access – is inadequate here, as more than 99% of people in the surveyed age range use this tool of communication (CSO, 2023). An important limitation is the sample size. As mentioned earlier, it may significantly limit the possibility to draw conclusions about the NEET fraction.

One conceptual limitation is worth noting. Commonly accepted definitions of NEET recognise formal and non-formal education, however, they do not include informal education, which is, after all, a significant part of lifelong learning.

In conclusion, the NEET pattern among Polish young adults has evident links to the risk of social exclusion (Kleif 2020, OECD, 2024). The characteristics which prevail among the inactive representatives of this group, such as low inherited cultural capital, residence in localities which offer fewer educational and professional prospects, low level of economic capital indicate that we can hardly speak of NEETs by choice, discussed in the literature in relation to the privileged groups. Here, structural factors are largely responsible for inactivity – irrespective of the subjective decisions of the respondents. Inactivity in employment and/or education, as well as postponed transition to adulthood, may constitute a defence mechanism against possible failure, especially for those who fall into the less privileged group. Recalling the famous Mertonian typology, it can be argued that the NEET does not have the face of a rebel, but corresponds to the Mertonian model of withdrawal (Merton, 2002).

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