

**NEET Youth in Kazakhstan: Risk Factors and Government Response**

**Case study of Astana**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The current study explores NEET youth phenomenon, youth who are not actively working, studying or training, in Kazakhstan with emphasis on risk factors, policy related to the phenomenon and institutional constraints. While official NEET rates are relatively low, the problem is still serious because of the hidden types of inactivity and structural barriers that complicate the process of finding a job for young people. This research utilises a mixed methods approach, using quantitative data from the 2024 Labor Force Survey, alongside qualitative data generated by semi-structured interviews with NEET youth and institutional workers. Quantitative analysis revealed that the key risk factors for NEET youth included gender, marital status, presence of children, and education. Qualitative results provide insight into the specific cases of NEET youth and how Youth Resource Centers work. According to the study, NEET status in Kazakhstan is related to more than just the person. There is also a correlation to family dynamics, less work experience, and unclear career paths. The interviews also expose institutional issues such as the lack of awareness of government programs, reactive roles performed by Youth Resource Centers, fragmented governance, the absence of performance measures and a lack of resources. Overall, current policy response is not able to adequately address the complexity involved in the NEET problem. To solve the issue, we need a more focused approach, better communication between people, and new ways of measuring long-term results.

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## INTRODUCTION

Young people who don't study or work are a big problem for policymakers all over the world. The term "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) refers to a group of young people who are not in school, working, or training. The "On State Youth Policy" (2023) of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan says that the NEET category in Kazakhstan includes people aged 15 to 35, which is a wider range than the global standard of 15 to 24 years (United Nations, 2024). NEET status is different from short-term unemployment or inactivity. In contrast to unemployed young people looking for work or having taken a break from studies or work, NEET youth are frequently socially and economically isolated for a serious period of time, causing impact on economy and society at large (Abzhan et al., 2020).

In Kazakhstan, youth classified as NEET continue to have the problem even though the official statistics decline from 7.8% in 2011 to 6.5% in 2024 (Zhussupova & Erken, 2023; Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). Instead, official statistics may not represent the full extent of the problem as many young people who are actively looking for work but do not have registration with employment centers are not counted (Zhussupova & Erken, 2023). Hidden joblessness and informal work are some things that complicate matters further. Many young people prefer doing much of the searching online or on personal networks, and therefore hard to map them out. There is also changes in internal migration, demonstrating that the NEET youth need to be better classified and the government needed to provide better and targeted help. There is also the impact of gender differences, making the issue worse. Young females are more likely to remain unemployed (4.3%) than males (2.9%) due to their traditional gender roles, early marriage, also, a limited number of jobs in some domains (Alshanskaya, 2024).

Kazakhstan acknowledges that young people are the backbone of future civil society (Resolution No. 247, 2023) and thus implements various policies to prevent youth from falling into NEET category. For instance, the First Workplace project targets to improve the competitiveness of young people in the labor market and youth resource centers in professional orientation, job search and development of digital skills (Electronic Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023; Adilet, 2019). Even after these efforts, and a large amount of funding, existing initiatives struggle to reach wide ranges of young people, especially because of regional and socio-economic disparities. This study is important as it aims to identify specific risk factors and assess the extent to which existing measures address

all NEET categories. These findings may contribute to the development of more targeted strategies and raise awareness of the NEET issue among stakeholders, which, in turn, will contribute to strengthening social and economic stability and long-term development of Kazakhstan.

Despite the relevance of the problem, the phenomenon of NEET youth in Kazakhstan remains under-researched, creating a significant knowledge gap that requires attention. This study aims to identify the key risk factors that lead young people to fall into the NEET category and examine how current government support measures, particularly the creation of the Youth Resource Centers, addresses the needs of at-risk youth. To explore this issue in depth, the following research questions will be considered:

1. What are the risk factors for becoming NEET in Kazakhstan?
2. How do Youth Resource Centers prevent youth from becoming NEET?
3. What institutional gaps are limiting the effectiveness of Youth Resource Centers?

To address these questions, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative component is based on the nationally representative Labour Force Survey data and is based on descriptive statistical analysis and logistic regression. The qualitative part is applied as a case study of Youth Resource Centers in Astana, using the semi-structured interviews with NEET youth and experts, and institutional actors. The findings contribute to a better understanding of risk factors associated with NEET youth and provide policy-relevant insights for strengthening the role of Youth Resource Centers in supporting at-risk youth in Kazakhstan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction to NEET

#### *Definition of NEET and relevance*

The term NEET (“not in employment, education, or training”) originated in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s, when British researchers and policymakers introduced it to identify young people disengaged from both education and the Labour market. Since then, the concept has become widely used by international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to describe young people who are not building human capital through education, training, or employment (Alfani et al., 2023). Although definitions vary by country, NEET is generally associated with youth vulnerability during the school-to-work transition. In the European Union, NEET typically includes people aged 15 to 29, while Kazakhstan considers youth aged 14 to 35 (On State Youth Policy, 2023).

NEET is not a single group but a broad category that includes unemployed youth, discouraged jobseekers, caregivers, individuals with disabilities, and those facing social or economic disadvantages (Mascherini, 2018). These groups differ in their needs, barriers, and responses to policy interventions.

#### *Global trends*

Globally, NEET remains a persistent challenge across regions. According to the International Labour Organization, about one in five young people worldwide were NEET in 2023, with young women consistently representing a larger share due to childcare responsibilities and unpaid domestic work. NEET levels have also remained stable or increased in some regions since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education systems and labour markets (ILO, 2024).

Cross-country data indicate regional differences in NEET levels. In Europe, NEET rates increased following the 2008 financial crisis and remain high in Southern and Eastern Europe, where labour markets are affected by deeper structural problems (Mascherini, 2018). In OECD countries, young people face growing difficulties during the school-to-work transition because of unstable labour markets and changing skill demands (OECD, 2025).

Recent evidence from a large scoping review of 91 studies shows that NEET outcomes are influenced by several dimensions, including individual factors, family environment, and

broader structural factors such as economic instability, skills mismatch, and school-to-work transition system. In addition, a significant share of NEET youth are “inactive NEETs”, who are neither working nor seeking work due to caregiving responsibilities, illness, or mental health challenges (Rahmani & Groot, 2023).

### *NEET in Kazakhstan*

In Kazakhstan, 6.5 percent of youth fall under the NEET category (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). While this rate is lower than the global average, the issue remains relevant due to the long-term consequences associated with NEET status. Importantly, Kazakhstan is a demographically young country: according to the Bureau of National Statistics, as of early 2025, young people aged 14 to 34 made up 28 percent of total population, amounting to 5.8 million youth. This figure has been steadily increasing over recent years, which means that even moderate NEET levels translate into a large absolute number of young people at risk.

NEET rates in Kazakhstan also vary across gender and regions. According to data reported in Alimkhanova (2025), young women are significantly more likely to be NEET than young men, with female NEET levels reaching 11–15 percent in regions such as Mangystau, Akmola and Karagandy, compared with 3–5 percent among young men. According to the Bureau of National Statistics, regional NEET levels also differ: recent analyses indicate that the share of NEET youth exceeds 10 percent in Mangystau, Karaganda, and Turkestan, reaching 11.7 percent in Mangystau, one of the highest levels nationwide (Finprom, 2024). In contrast, West Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan and Pavlodar report considerably lower NEET levels. These differences reflect uneven labour market conditions and varying youth opportunities across regions.

In 2023, the Government of Kazakhstan expanded its NEET classification to include additional vulnerable categories such as university graduates, young people released from prison, those who completed military service, youth with alcohol and drug addictions, individuals with chronic illnesses, and homemakers involved in unpaid labor (Zhussupova & Erken, 2023). This updated classification better reflects the diversity of youth experiences and demonstrates that NEET is not limited to unemployed jobseekers and the need for targeted policy responses.

### **Risk Factors for Becoming NEET**

The popularity of the NEET concept is due to its potential to cover various factors related to lack of employment, disengagement, and difficulties in the transition from school to work (Balan, 2016). There are diverse reasons and risk factors for becoming NEET, and it is important to identify and understand them to make policies to reduce youth unemployment rates (Holmes et al., 2021). Individual, family, and educational characteristics influence the likelihood of becoming NEET (Rahmani & Groot, 2023). Studies conducted in developed and developing countries show similar findings regarding the risk factors for being NEET.

### *Individual factors*

Findings from different countries show that some of the most important individual characteristics affecting the risk of becoming NEET among youth are gender, marital status, and age. Women are the most vulnerable to becoming NEET (Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017; Varshavskaia, 2017; Yang, 2020). In addition, being married is also a risk factor, and for women this has a more significant correlation compared to their male counterparts (Yang, 2020). According to Yang, young people aged 22-25 are most vulnerable to becoming NEET (2020). This tendency is explained by the fact that this period is an important transition between formal education and work.

### *Family factors*

Family background is one of the strongest predictors of becoming NEET. Young people from low socioeconomic households face a higher likelihood because limited financial resources, parental unemployment and low parental education limit access to educational opportunities and weaken expectations about schooling and work. A study conducted in South Korea shows that low family income during adolescence increases the probability of becoming NEET later in life (Noh & Lee, 2017). Similar patterns appear across countries: young people from the most economically disadvantaged families consistently demonstrate the highest NEET rates, while higher parental education and stable financial conditions reduce this risk (Alfani et al., 2023; Pitkänen et al., 2019).

Early family formation is another risk factor for becoming NEET. A study in Mexico shows that domestic responsibilities are the main reason for being in the NEET group (Gutiérrez-García, 2018). Women are particularly vulnerable because they often bear the responsibility of the household (Abayasekara & Gunasekara, 2019). Research shows that the majority of housemakers are women (Gutiérrez-García, 2018). Among them, only 6.3% are housewives

by choice (Gutiérrez-García, 2018). Moreover, women with childcare responsibilities have a higher risk of remaining NEET (Abayasekara & Gunasekara, 2019; Zudina, 2022).

### *Educational factors*

Education also plays a central role in shaping NEET outcomes. Evidence consistently shows that young people with lower levels of education are more vulnerable to becoming NEET and to long-term social exclusion (Alfani et al., 2023; Ciccarelli & Fabrizi, 2017; Holmes et al., 2021; Varshavskaia, 2017; Vasile & Anghel, 2015; Zudina, 2022). Higher education protects youth from NEET status, especially young women, and is associated with shorter periods of unemployment (ILO, 2024 ). The study shows that while college-educated young people are unemployed for an average of one year, young NEETs who only completed high school are unemployed three times longer (Varshavskaia, 2017). In addition, living in a city where people have a higher level of education on average is a protective factor for becoming NEET (Yang, 2020). Poor school environments further increase this risk. Studies from South Korea show that school dissatisfaction at ages sixteen and seventeen predicts NEET status in early adulthood, and systematic reviews confirm that negative school climate and low engagement contribute to dropout (Noh & Lee, 2017; Rahmani et al., 2024 ).

A mismatch between the skills acquired in school and labour-market needs also makes the school-to-work transition more difficult. The ILO highlights that many young people lack the competencies required by employers, which increases their likelihood of becoming NEET during economic and technological changes (ILO, 2024 ). Finally, the absence of effective career guidance strengthens this vulnerability. Not having a clear career plan at the end of secondary school significantly increases NEET risk, while systematic reviews show that weak guidance and unclear pathways contribute to early leaving (Noh & Lee, 2017; Rahmani & Groot, 2023 ). Together, these factors demonstrate that both the level and the quality of education are critical in preventing NEET outcomes.

### *Institutional and Structural Factors*

While most studies emphasise individual and family characteristics, structural and institutional factors operate beyond young people's control and shape the wider conditions that influence NEET outcomes. In many countries school-to-work transition becomes difficult when labour markets do not generate sufficient entry-level opportunities for youth. Evidence from Turkey shows that economic instability and jobless growth have contributed

to rising NEET rates, as improvements in GDP were not followed by increased youth employment (Özdemir et al., 2024 ). Studies on Kazakhstan report similar concerns: weak labour-market demand, limited productive employment, and structural mismatches between skills and available jobs have all contributed to the growth of NEET youth (Alimkhanova, 2018; Alimkhanova, 2025). These findings underline that youth often struggle not because of individual shortcomings but because the economic environment does not provide adequate opportunities.

Institutional weaknesses in the school-to-work transition further contribute to NEET outcomes. Comparative evidence highlights several institutional barriers in the school-to-work transition. NEET youth often face insufficient vocational training opportunities and rigid labour-market structures that limit their ability to access meaningful employment pathways (Nopas, 2026). Weak coordination between education providers, employers and state institutions further constrains these transitions (Nopas, 2026).

Structural and cultural norms further shape NEET patterns, particularly for young women. In Turkey, traditional gender expectations and domestic responsibilities significantly reduce women's participation in the labour market, leading to higher NEET rates among young and especially married women (Özdemir et al., 2024). Studies from Kazakhstan report that young women face similar constraints, as unpaid household work and gendered social expectations limit their opportunities to pursue employment or further training (Alimkhanova, 2025). These findings highlight that gender norms operate not at the individual level but at the societal level, shaping opportunities in ways young people cannot independently control.

### **Policies addressing NEET in different countries**

Identifying risk factors for becoming NEET is essential to creating policies for young people to reduce the NEET rate. Different countries have a range of policies that can be applied to a wider population or targeted at specific vulnerable groups. For example, in 2016, South Korea introduced the Vision Plan Program, which targets disadvantaged young people, including young people from poor households or those living in single-parent families (Park et al., 2020). Preventing young people from becoming disengaged through social services is a more effective and less costly measure in reducing NEET youth than targeting already inactive individuals (Santos-Brien, 2018). Vision Plan Program has preventive and supportive components at individual, family, and community levels, varying depending on the age of the young people. For adolescents aged 14 to 19, psychological and academic preparation

programs are offered to help smooth the transition from school to work as a preventive measure against becoming NEET (Park et al., 2020). Young people aged 20 to 24 are offered career assistance in the form of training and education courses (Park et al., 2020). Vision plan program applies “multiple interventions” and “adopted a multifaceted integrated approach”, which allows for complex work with vulnerable groups (*Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training in Asia and the Pacific: Trends and Policy Considerations*, 2022). The results of the study show that this program reduced the likelihood of being NEET and increased the motivation and intentions of young people to find work (Park et al., 2020).

Compared to South Korea, the NEET youth-focused program introduced in Spain failed to lead to significant improvements. In 2013, when the unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 24 in Spain exceeded 50%, the Youth Guarantee policy was introduced in the European Union (Escudero & López Mourelo, 2017). This policy is an agreement between member countries that all young people should receive an offer of employment or training within 4 months of being unemployed or leaving their studies (European Council, 2013).

According to the results of this program, although the level of youth unemployment and NEET decreased, the program failed to achieve significant results (Cabasés & Úbeda, 2021). Most of the job contracts were temporary during subsidization (Cabasés & Úbeda, 2021). Thus, this policy did not significantly contribute to integrating young people into the job market. In addition, although EU policies acknowledge the existence of specific risk factors and problems of NEET youth, there is a lack of specifications for working with a heterogeneous group (Piqué et al., 2015). Individual and educational factors were not considered sufficiently to understand the needs of young people (Cabasés & Úbeda, 2021). In contrast, a more successful policy in South Korea was aimed at specific groups, taking into account their needs and problems.

### **Government state youth policies in Kazakhstan**

As for Kazakhstan, the number of NEET youth in the 3rd quarter of 2022 was 6.7% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2022). For the period of the 4th quarter of 2023, this figure was 7.1% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024), and for the 2nd quarter of 2024, 6.5% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). Despite the fact that this figure is relatively low compared to such countries as Russia, the USA and Italy (Official Information Resource of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023), it should be noted that this figure is subject to fluctuations, without a stable decrease. In addition, the mentioned statistics indicate that the

target indicator 3 aimed at reducing the youth from this category by 2024 to 6.2% from the government resolution “On approval of the Concept of the state youth policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029” (2023, March 28) was not achieved.

By designating young Kazakhstanis as the backbone of the future civil society (“On approval of the Concept of the state youth policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023- 2029”, 2023), Kazakhstan, like other countries, has certain policies aimed at preventing young people from becoming NEET. According to the article “Employment of university graduates” from the official government website Egov.kz (2023), one of the policies is the “First Workplace” project. It is aimed at increasing the competitiveness of people under 35 in the labour market by providing them with the necessary work skills and adaptation to the first job. The employer hires a participant for up to 18 months with a subsidy from the local budget.

Another popular policy in Kazakhstan is the policy “On approval of the model regulation on youth resource centers”, described in the official website of regulatory legal acts of Kazakhstan “Adilet” (2019). The main initiatives of youth resource centers (YRCs) are related to the promotion of volunteer activity among young people, support in career guidance and job search, as well as training in digital skills to adapt to modern technologies needed in many professions (Adilet, 2019). One of the priority areas of the center’s work is personalized support for young people, especially those who belong to vulnerable groups, including the NEET category (“On approval of the Concept of the state youth policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029”, 2023).

According to Masych (2024), the above policies are effective because the country has a low percentage of NEET youth. However, not all literature emphasizes the effectiveness of these policies. For example, the article by Sabirova et al. (2021) states that government regulation often fails to take into account the characteristics of different NEET categories and the factors that contribute to their displacement.

After analyzing the literature, we found that the problem of NEET youth in Kazakhstan is under-researched. There is insufficient information on the risk factors for becoming NEET in the context of Kazakhstan and the effectiveness of youth-related policies in the country. Thus, this paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by identifying key risk factors for becoming NEET youth in Kazakhstan and evaluating the effectiveness of state measures, including the “First Workplace” project and Youth Resource Centers. Based on these patterns

identified in the literature, this study develops specific hypotheses about the risk factors for NEET status in Kazakhstan, which are formally stated in the Conceptual Framework section below.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a mixed-methods research design, incorporating quantitative and qualitative analysis. This research design was chosen to identify key general patterns, risk factors, and profiles of NEET youth in Kazakhstan, and then analyze the extent to which government policies address key youth issues through in-depth analysis.

The quantitative component helps identify the key risk factors for becoming NEET in Kazakhstan. Microdata obtained by the BNS through the Labor Force Survey were used for this purpose. Data was requested for 2024, as 2025 was not fully available at the time of request. This study utilized data only for the 15-34 age group, as this is the youth age group in Kazakhstan. Based on a literature review, variables from this survey that determine NEET status were selected. The survey data allowed for regression analysis to identify risk factors and create a descriptive profile of NEET youth.

The Labor Force Survey, rather than a survey, was chosen because random sampling is impossible in our context. NEETs are a relatively hidden group, and youth in this group are difficult to identify. Conducting the survey created the risk of biased results. At the same time, the Labor Force Survey is a large-scale survey in Kazakhstan and provides a higher level of random sampling. Since this study aims to analyze government support measures, it is essential to understand the profile of NEET youth as objectively as possible. This will allow us to design recommendations that best address the specifics of NEET status in Kazakhstan.

In order to deeper understand why some young people are becoming NEET and how the government responds to this issue, this research adopts qualitative research methods. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to allow respondents to share their experiences in more detail, while also keeping the discussion focused on the developed key research questions. The qualitative data were presented through a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to recruit the respondents. The study focused on two primary categories of participants. The first group was made up of people between the ages of 18 and 35 who were not working, going to school, or taking part in professional training programs at the time of the interview. Some respondents were chosen using snowball sampling through informal networks, and others were chosen from contacts given by Youth Resource Centers. They provided valuable context regarding individual experiences that are difficult to comprehend through statistics.

The second group was made up of professionals and experts who work in the youth policy field. These are representatives from the Ministry of Culture and Information, the staff of Youth Resource Centers, workers from the Scientific Research Center “Youth,” and an academic investigator who has previously worked on the issue of NEET in Kazakhstan. The respondents were chosen given their direct involvement either in the development of youth policy or the implementation of NEET youth-centered programs. They were particularly useful in our analyses of how organisations perceive the issue and what constraints they encounter in practice.

While for the regression analysis, the LFS data from all regions of Kazakhstan was used to be nationally representative, the qualitative part was focused only on Astana. The reasons for that are constraints in access to respondents, including NEET youth and YRC workers. Qualitative findings may not fully represent regional variation, and this is a limitation of our study and one of the directions for future research.

### **Conceptual Framework & Formal Hypotheses**

The conceptual framework for this study was developed based on the analysis of existing literature on risk factors for becoming NEET and on public policy measures. The model connects three main components: risk factors, NEET status, and government response.

Risk factors associated with NEET status, being the first component, include four groups, where the first three categories reflect the socioeconomic background of young people: individual, family, and educational factors, and the fourth group is defined by structural characteristics of the labor market (availability of jobs, required skills, and labor market conditions). Taken together, these risk factors influence the likelihood of becoming NEET in this framework.

The quantitative part of this research covers socioeconomic background of young people, while structural characteristics of the labor market are analyzed through the qualitative part (interviews). For identifying NEET profile and risk factors, micro-data from Labor Force Survey 2024 in Kazakhstan was used for descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression analysis. The dependent variable is NEET status, and the independent variables include sex, age, marital status, educational attainment, place of residence (urban/rural), the presence of a child aged 0-3, and interaction variables. Based on the literature, the study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Women are more likely to be NEET than men.

H2: A higher level of education reduces the likelihood of being NEET.

H3: Family formation factors (marriage, having children) increase the likelihood of being NEET.

H4: The effects of education and marital status on NEET status differ by gender: education is more protective for men, while marriage has a stronger association with NEET status for women.

Next, government support measures address the NEET youth issue. Government programs, including Youth Resource Centers (YRCs) as part of the Youth Policy in Kazakhstan, aim to mitigate the negative impact of risk factors on NEET status among young people. By providing training, counselling, support, and education for young people the government tries to target risk factors for specific groups and at various levels: some interventions are preventative in nature, while others facilitate re-entry into education, training, or the labor market.

Overall, this conceptual framework guides the study to identify key risk factors for NEET status and describe and evaluate existing policy measures (YRCs) addressing this issue. This helps to further design policy recommendations for improving existing Youth Policy. *Figure 1* provides a visual representation of this model.

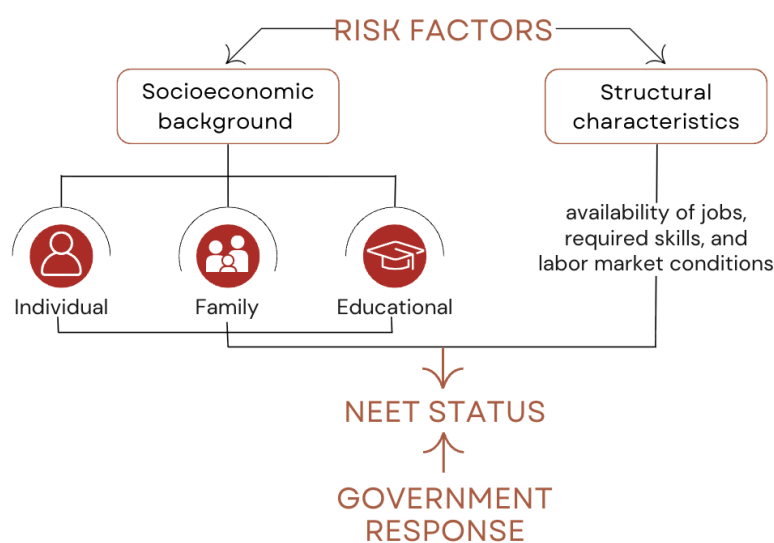


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

## Data

This study used two primary data sources: the Labor Force Survey (conducted in Kazakhstan in 2024) and semi-structured interviews conducted by this study's authors.

For the quantitative study, data collected by the BNS through the Labor Force Survey (form T-001) were used. This survey includes questions related to personal characteristics, employment, education, and reasons for being unemployed. For the purposes of the study, the data was limited to ages 15-34 (as this is the official age considered youth in Kazakhstan). Therefore, the final sample for this category consisted of 133693 observations.

For the qualitative part of this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with NEET youth and institutional actors involved in youth policy. In total, the study included 15 interviewees, among them 7 participants were young individuals classified under the NEET category, and 8 experts and policymakers from the Ministry of Culture and Information, Youth Resource Centers, and researchers at the Scientific Research Center "Youth". The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed following participants' agreement for analysis. Due to ethical considerations, participants were notified of the purposes of the study, of voluntary participation, and all quotations were anonymized in order to protect participants' identities.

## Analysis

In this mixed-methods study, the analysis was conducted in two stages, as the quantitative and qualitative components required different types of analysis. Microdata from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) was used for descriptive statistics and regression analysis. Since the NEET group is heterogeneous, descriptive statistics was first used to identify its main demographic and socioeconomic profile. Then, binary logistic regression was used to determine which characteristics are associated with NEET status and, accordingly, to identify the main risk factors for becoming NEET among youth in Kazakhstan.

The baseline logistic regression model is specified as follows:

$$\text{Logit}(P(\text{NEET}=1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{age} + \beta_2 * \text{age\_sq} + \beta_3 * \text{female} + \beta_4 * \text{married} + \beta_5 * \text{edu\_general\_secondary} + \beta_6 * \text{edu\_vocational} + \beta_7 * \text{edu\_higher\_plus} + \beta_8 * \text{rural} + \beta_9 * \text{Child}$$

To test gender differences in the effects of marriage and education, an extended model with interaction terms was estimated:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Logit}(P(\text{NEET}=1)) = & \beta_0 + \beta_1*\text{age} + \beta_2*\text{age\_sq} + \beta_3*\text{female} + \beta_4*\text{married} + \\ & \beta_5*\text{edu\_general\_secondary} + \beta_6*\text{edu\_vocational} + \beta_7*\text{edu\_higher\_plus} + \beta_8*\text{rural} + \\ & \beta_9*\text{Child} + \beta_{10}*(\text{female}*\text{married}) + \beta_{11}*(\text{female}*\text{edu\_general\_secondary}) + \\ & \beta_{12}*(\text{female}*\text{edu\_vocational}) + \beta_{13}*(\text{female}*\text{edu\_higher\_plus}) \end{aligned}$$

The dependent variable in the regression analysis is a binary indicator of NEET, which was calculated as the proportion of youth not employed, not in education, or not in training relative to all youth (coded as 1 if a young person is not in employment, education, or training, and 0 otherwise). Independent variables include age, age squared, sex, marital status, level of education, place of residence (urban/rural), child status (whether the respondent has children aged 0-3). In addition, interaction terms between gender and selected predictors were included to test whether the effects of marriage and education differ between men and women. The regression results are reported as average marginal effects (AMEs), which show the average change in the predicted probability of being NEET associated with a one-unit change in each explanatory variable.

The qualitative data collected through the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. This method has been selected due to its ability to discover commonalities and meanings in qualitative material while preserving the variability of the perspectives of the respondents. Analysis took place in multiple steps. First, all interview recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were then read several times during this process in order to become familiar with the data. Second, the transcripts were coded line by line. At this level, they identified common ideas, problems and concepts that were recurring in the responses from the respondents. Third, similarly expressed codes were aggregated into broader analytical categories. This information was systematically clustered and the categories evolved into broader themes that encapsulated key patterns emerging from the interviews. At last, these themes were developed and clustered into a number of analytical themes, corresponding to the primary research questions observed in the results section. Some of them are as follows: definition problems and ambiguity of the NEET category, hidden NEET youth and informal employment, motivation and lack of career direction, the role of parental education and family background, structural barriers such as lack of work experience, low awareness and

limited engagement with government programs, institutional fragmentation and absence of KPI indicators, and resource and sustainability constraints within youth policy institutions.

The qualitative dimensions associated with this study correspond effectively with its theoretical framework. The framework suggests that the NEET issue arises from a combination of risk factors and is addressed by policy responses. Interviews with NEET youth highlight the significance of both individual and societal factors (e.g., insufficient work experience, uncertainty regarding career trajectories, and familial obligations). Interviews with policymakers also show that the government is already trying to solve these problems by using job programs, training programs, and institutions that help young people. On the other hand, the results also show that institutional problems like fragmented governance systems, lack of data, and lack of resources can affect how well the policy works. Understanding these kinds of institutional dynamics is important to help design interventions to strengthen the policies to protect young people from the risk of becoming NEET.

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative findings: Socio-demographic characteristics and risk factors

#### *Socio-demographic characteristics of NEET youth*

The profile of NEET youth in Kazakhstan was identified based on the 2024 LFS results.

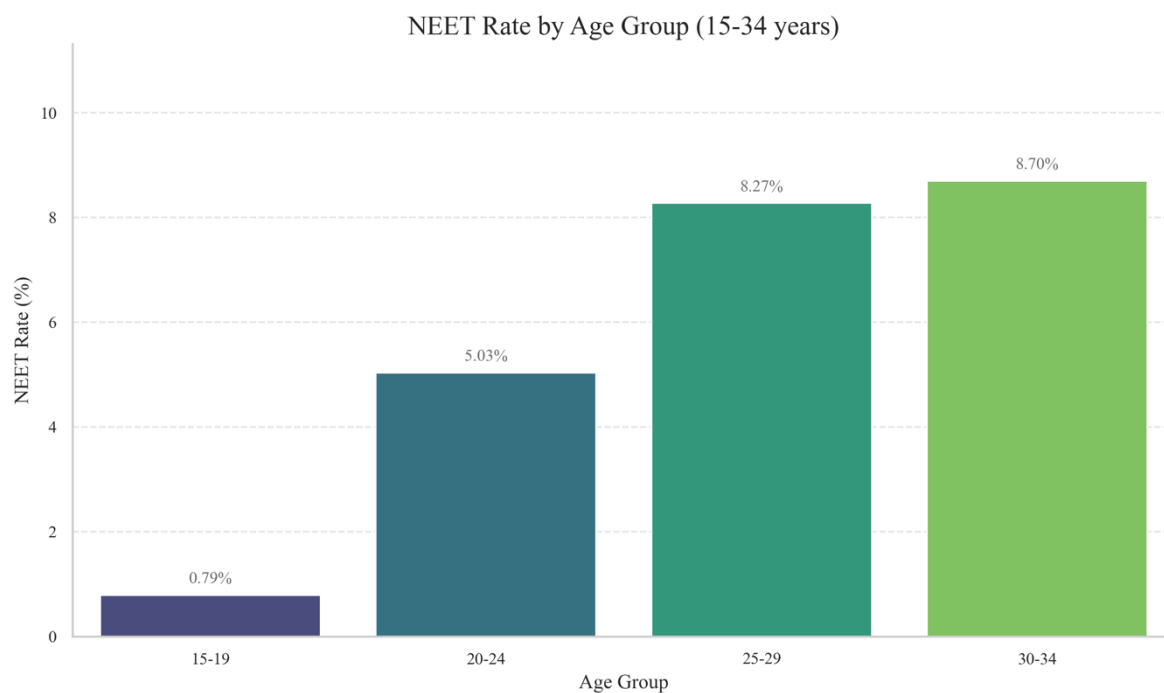
Table 1 demonstrates the main socio-demographic characteristics of NEET youth.

Socio-demographic characteristics	All Youth	NEET
Sex		
Male	49.4	26.8
Female	50.6	73.2
Age group		
15-19	19.3	3.7
20-24	24.2	20.6
25-29	23.4	30.5
30-34	33.1	45.2
Marital status		
Never married	52.8	32.7
Married	43.9	62.8
Widowed	0.3	0.6
Divorced	3	3.9
Residence		
Urban	47.5	50.2
Rural	52.5	49.8
Has children (aged 0-3)		
Yes	19.3	35.7
No	80.7	64.3
Education level		
Primary or less	10.6	3.3

General secondary	18.4	18.7
Vocational education	39.2	46
Higher education and above	31.8	32

*Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of NEET youth.*

According to the quantitative study, NEET youth account for 6.5% of the total youth population, which is equal to the BNS statistics for 2024 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). Of these, almost 74% are women (although the number of respondents aged 15-34 in the survey is almost equal for men and women). More than half of NEET youth are married (63%), and 36% have children aged 0-3 years. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of NEET youth increases with increasing age groups.

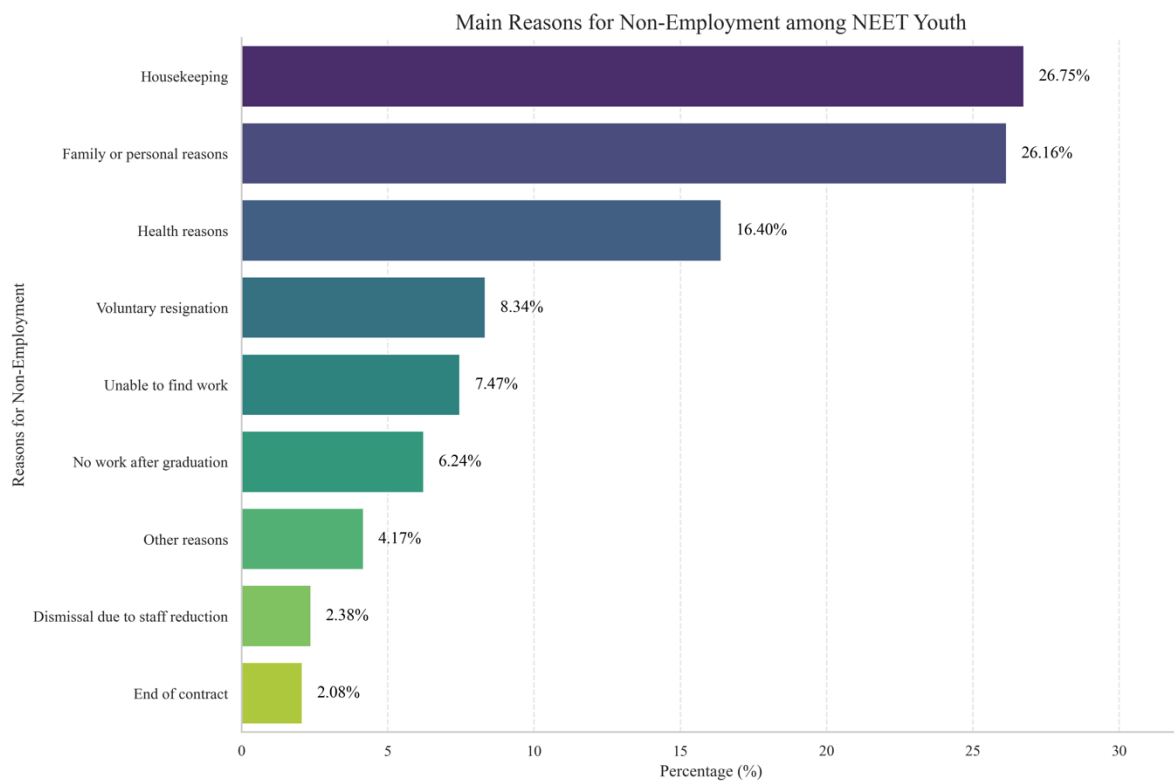


*Figure 2. Neet Rate by Age Group*

### *Reasons for being NEET*

Figure 3 shows the main reasons for unemployment among young people (the need to complete education and training was excluded, as they are not included in the NEET definition). As can be seen from this graph, the top three reasons include housekeeping responsibilities, family or personal reasons, and health reasons. Thus, the main factors behind

unemployment are related to family circumstances and health, rather than a general lack of suitable employment.



*Figure 3.* Main Reasons for Non-Employment among NEET Youth

Figure 4, Job Search Status, shows that nearly two-thirds of young people are not looking for work. The main reasons for not looking for work, reflected in Figure 5, include housekeeping responsibilities, family or personal reasons, and health reasons, which is consistent with previous findings on the reasons for being unemployed. Thus, young people who are neither working nor looking for work do so primarily for three main reasons: housekeeping responsibilities, family or personal reasons, and health reasons.

Job Search Status among NEET Youth

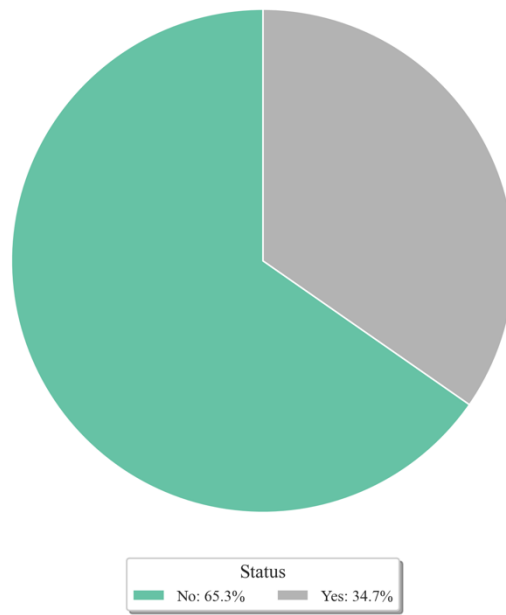


Figure 4. Job Search Status among NEET Youth

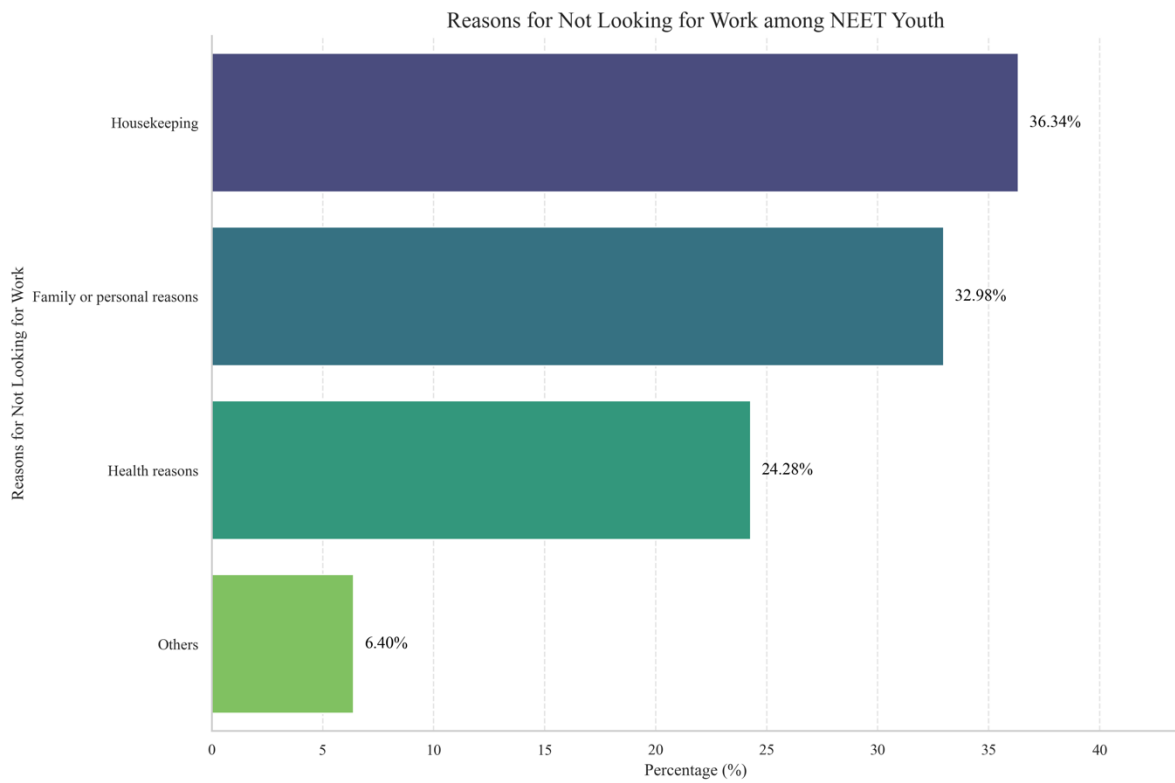


Figure 5. Reasons for Not Looking for Work among NEET Youth

Among youth seeking employment, 25% have been searching for less than a month. This is an important finding because, according to the global calculation method, NEET is defined as

young people who have not been in education, employment, or training for the past four weeks. This questionnaire, the data from which the BNS uses to calculate NEET statistics, only asks whether a person worked in the past week. This means it is impossible to confirm that they have not been employed for the past four weeks. Among those surveyed who are interested in work, a quarter said they had been searching for work for less than a month. This group may include various categories of people, but it is also possible that it includes those who have been unemployed for less than four weeks but are still classified as NEET. Consequently, the proportion of NEET young people may be lower.

*Risk factors associated with NEET status*

Variable	Model 1: Baseline OR	Model 2: Interaction OR	Model 1 AME	Model 2 AME
Age	2,8791	2,6966	0,0603***	0,0558***
Age squared	0,9825	0,9837	-0,0010***	-0,0009***
Female	2,8683	0,7563	0,0601	-0,0157**
Married	0,9953	0,3087	-0,0003***	-0,0661***
Secondary education	0,7580	0,6200	-0,0158***	-0,0269***
Vocational education	0,3210	0,2289	-0,0648***	-0,0829***
Higher education	0,2215	0,1926	-0,0859***	-0,0927***
Rural	0,8552	0,8229	-0,0089***	-0,0110***
Having child aged 0-3	1,7678	1,8781	0,0325***	0,0355***
Female x Married		5,1669		0,0924***
Female x Secondary education		1,5566		0,0249***
Female x Vocational education		1,9393		0,0373***
Female x		1,4825		0,0221***

Higher education				
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*Table 2. Odds Ratios and Marginal Effects*

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$   
 Dependent variable: NEET = 1, otherwise 0.

Logistic regression analysis shows that NEET status among youth in Kazakhstan is associated with gender, age, social status, education level, presence of children, place of residence (rural or urban), and gender interactions. The results are reported as average marginal effects (AMEs), which can be interpreted as changes in the predicted probability of being NEET (in percentage points). All of these variables (except marital status in the first model) show statistically significant results.

**H1:** Women are more likely to be NEET than men.

The first hypothesis was not supported because the result for female variable in Model 1 is not statistically significant.

**H2:** A higher level of education reduces the likelihood of being NEET.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. Education has a strong protective effect on NEET status. In this regression analysis, the variable low education was used as the reference category against which higher levels of education were compared. General secondary education is associated with a lower probability of being NEET, while vocational and higher education show even stronger protective effects (reducing the probability of being NEET by 6.5 and 8.6 percentage points, respectively, based on Model 1).

**H3:** Family formation factors (marriage, having children) increase the likelihood of being NEET.

Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. Individuals who have a child aged 0-3 years are more likely to be NEET. On average, respondents with a young child are about 3.3-3.6 percentage points more likely to be NEET than those without a child (depending on Model 1 or Model 2). However, Model 1 shows that marriage is negatively associated with NEET status, though the coefficient is very small. This is explained by the gender effect.

**H4:** The effects of education and marital status on NEET status differ by gender: education is more protective for men, while marriage has a stronger association with NEET status for women.

Hypothesis 4 was supported. Model 2 (adding interaction terms) reveals that the association between gender and NEET status depends on marital status and education. Being married is a protective factor for becoming NEET for men (reducing the probability of being NEET by 6 percentage points), but the relationship between women and being married is positive in the second model. This suggests that married women are more likely to be NEET than married men.

In addition to the previous findings, age is associated with NEET status in a nonlinear manner. As the regression results table shows, the age variable has a positive coefficient, while age squared has a negative coefficient. Taken together, these indicators demonstrate that the probability of becoming NEET increases with age, but at a decreasing rate. This is also confirmed in Figure 2.

Living in a rural area is associated with a lower probability of being NEET than living in an urban area. This finding differs from literature from various countries. However, the difference is very small compared to other variables, but still statistically significant.

Based on these findings, the main risk factors associated with NEET status in Kazakhstan are family formation (mostly for women) and lower levels of education. Vocational and higher education demonstrate the strongest protective effect.

### **Qualitative Findings: Themes identified from Interviews**

From the thematic analysis, the findings exposed several key patterns which help to explain both why young people belong to the NEET category and the operation of current policy responses. When considering these issues together, the findings indicate a closer connection between individual experiences, institutional practices, and structural limitations.

The themes are clustered according to the three principal research questions of this study. For the first component, the analysis identifies major risk factors for entering the NEET category, such as unclear labour market entry, limited guidance, and family background. Second, it describes how Youth Resource Centers engage young people, highlighting challenges related to awareness and engagement. Next, it identifies institutional gaps in how these interventions

are implemented, emphasizing fragmentation of responsibilities and the absence of clear evaluation mechanisms. Combined, these results present a more grounded understanding of how the NEET question functions in practice, beyond formal policy design.

### **RQ1: What are the risk factors for being NEET in Kazakhstan?**

#### *Theme 1: Definition Problems and Hidden NEET Youth*

One of the key issues that became clear during the interviews is that the definition of NEET itself affects how the problem is understood. The phrase "young people who are not working, not studying, and not in training" seems simple and does not actually reflect the complexity of the issue. A number of respondents stated that the formal definition does not reflect the true economic condition of young people. Indeed it is particularly noticeable with informal employment. Young people do work but without formal contracts, meaning they are still classified as NEET in statistics. That had been well explained by an academic expert:

"If a person has not worked or studied in the last four weeks, they are automatically classified as NEET. But this does not mean they are entirely passive; a lot of them are actually working informally, it is just not accounted for or documented anywhere." (Interviewee #1, 15.06.2025)

This illustrates the mismatch between official statistics and real life, which is important from a policy perspective, because the NEET category means that some of these young people do not need the same level of support as those who are actually not working or studying. A researcher from a "Youth" research center also noted that this leads to a partial understanding of the problem:

"They are working but not formally earning cash payments, and the state just does not recognize them. We don't know, as a result, the scale of the real problem." (Interviewee #2, 30.09.2025)

An additional problem is that the NEET category contains very different people, with not comparable cases. For example, young mothers who are temporarily at home may fall in the same category as young people without work experience. A policy expert who works at "Youth" research centre elaborates the following:

"A young mother staying at home with a child can be thrown into the NEET category even though her profile could not be more different from that of one who is out of work and actively seeking employment."(Interviewee #3, 25.08.2025)

This makes the category too general and makes it a less useful model for developing targeted policies. In other words, before risk factors are even considered, there is already a challenge in identifying who precisely constitutes this group.

### *Theme 2: Motivation, Career Uncertainty and Parental Education*

A further important group of risk factors relates to motivation and lack of direction. The conversations that emerge from the interviews show that this is about more than individual attitudes, it is about structural and social conditions. Several young people talked about a lost sense of motivation over time, their motivation had worn off, largely because they were repeatedly unsuccessful in the job search. At first, they are actively searching for opportunities, but soon give up. One respondent described this process straightforwardly:

"I was looking for a job, going to interviews, sending CVs, but in every interview they needed experience. After some time you just give up, it was pointless."(Interviewee #9, 13.11.2025)

This indicates that what can at first appear as low motivation is usually a result of repeated rejection.

Another issue is the lack of clear career direction. Several respondents mentioned that they do not know what kind of job they want or how to get there:

"I don't really understand what kind of job I should choose. I want something stable, but I don't know how to get there or where to even start."(Interviewee #10, 20.12.2025)

Family background becomes an important factor here, especially parental education.

Interviews suggest that young people whose parents do not have higher education or stable career paths often lack guidance and information about possible pathways. An expert in academia described this:

"When the parents do not have the experience of higher education or sustained career tracks, the young people without a point of reference are likely to have a lack of direction. They just don't know how to make their way through education and the labour market."(Interviewee #1, 15.06.2025)

The same was evident in youth interviews as well. One respondent said:

"Nobody went to university in my family, so I never seriously thought about it. After school, I began searching for work but nothing worked out."(Interviewee #10, 20.12.2025)

Another added:

"My parents simply tell me to get a job, but they are incapable of really explaining how to create a career or what I should do. You're basically on your own."(Interviewee #11, 25.12.2025)

This indicates that motivation is significantly influenced by environment. Younger people are more likely to get lost and become disengaged over time if they do not have the right guidance, information, or role models.

### *Theme 3: Experience Gap*

Apart from the individual and family factors, interviews indicated clear structural constraints in the labour market. One important of them is the scarcity of work experience among young people. This leaves what many respondents referred to as a "closed loop»: young people cannot gain experience without being hired. The issue was well explained by a Ministry of Culture and Information representative:

"The problem is, graduates don't actually have professional experience; employers are expecting just that. It creates a closed loop."(Interviewee #4, 31.10.2025)

From a young generation's point of view, this is a very concrete and immediate problem. One respondent explained:

"I think after I graduated, I came to realize there isn't enough of a diploma. They go everywhere looking for experience, yet there is no place to find this if no one hires you without it."(Interviewee #12, 07.01.2026)

This mismatch between education and labour market expectations makes the transition from school or university to jobs especially tough. Consequently, many young people are stuck in a temporary period of inactivity that eventually turns into a longer-term NEET status.

## **RQ2: How do Youth Resource Centers prevent youth from becoming NEET?**

### *Theme 4: Low Level of Awareness and Engagement*

When looking at how Youth Resource Centers function, the first challenge that emerges is that young people are unaware of what existing programs can help them. Many young people just do not know about those programs, institutional respondents said. And when information is accessible, that also does not always translate to participation. A staff member at a Youth Resource Center put the situation as:

"NEET youth are basically not interested in anything, and they do not seek opportunities themselves."(Interviewee #5, 03.11.2025)

Consequently, Youth Resource Centers need to depend on engagement strategies, rather than waiting for young people to show up. They contact young people directly by going to markets or any other informal places:

"We go to markets, we talk to young people directly, hand out brochures and invite them to participate in programs."(Interviewee #2, 30.09.2025)

However, awareness alone is not able to solve the problem. Interviews with youth also indicate the skepticism about how effective those programs are. One respondent explained:

"I've heard about some programs, but I don't really know how to apply, and honestly I am not sure they would change anything."(Interviewee #10, 20.12.2025)

A second respondent expressed a similar perspective:

"Even if there are trainings, it feels like they don't lead anywhere. You go, listen, and then you're back in the same situation."(Interviewee #9, 13.11.2025)

This may reflect that the problem is not simply about the awareness, but also about trust and perceived quality.

#### *Theme 5: Youth Resource Centers as a Reactive Model*

Another major limitation within Youth Resource Centers that needs consideration is that their work is largely reactive rather than preventive. In practice, this means that they mostly interact with young people who already show some level of initiative, while those who are most disengaged remain outside the system. One of the workers of Youth Resource Center explained this explicitly:

"We mostly work with those who come to us themselves. But the main problem is that the most vulnerable youth simply never come."(Interviewee #2, 30.09.2025)

Even though YRCs offer training and job placement services, these programs usually only benefit those who are already somewhat motivated. As yet another staff member described:

"We train young people, we try to connect them with employers, and even follow up after employment, but this works mainly for those who are already somewhat motivated."(Interviewee #6, 12.10.2025)

This has caused a gap: the individuals who need the biggest support are often the least likely to engage with existing programs.

### **RQ3: What institutional gaps limit the effectiveness of Youth Resource Centers?**

#### *Theme 6: Institutional Fragmentation and KPI Problem*

One of the deeper structural problems identified in the interviews is the fragmentation of responsibilities across different institutions. Youth policy, employment policy, and social support are handled by different ministries, each with its own priorities and reporting systems. While this division might seem logical on paper, in practice it creates coordination problems. A representative from a "Youth" research center explained:

"Youth policy is managed by one ministry, employment by another, and each of them has its own functions and priorities." (Interviewee #5, 03.11.2025)

Because of this division, it becomes unclear which institution is ultimately responsible for reducing the number of NEET youth. All stakeholders operate individually, and there is no single institution that follows the whole process: from identifying young people at risk to actually helping them find stable employment. Each organization does its work on its own, so it is difficult to see the bigger picture and understand who takes full responsibility for the final result.

This is closely linked to another issue that came up in the interviews - the absence of clear KPI indicators. A representative from the Ministry of Culture and Information responsible for youth policy pointed out that there is currently no proper way to measure whether Youth Resource Centers are actually effective:

"At the moment, there are no clear indicators that would allow us to measure how effective Youth Resource Centers are in reducing NEET youth." (Interviewee #4, 31.10.2025)

What is important here is that this is not just a technical issue. Because responsibilities are divided between institutions, it becomes unclear what things and how exactly should be measured and who should be responsible for the outcome. In other words, even if everyone is doing their part, there is no shared system that shows whether these efforts actually work. In practice, this means that Youth Resource Centers are mostly evaluated based on what they do, not what changes. They can report how many trainings they organised or how many people attended, but this does not show whether those young people actually found jobs or stayed employed over time.

Fragmentation also affects how data is handled. A representative from "Youth" research center explained that different institutions collect their own data separately:

“Different systems are not fully integrated, and because of that we cannot track young people consistently or understand what happens to them after they go through these programs.”  
(Interviewee #5, 03.11.2025)

Without a shared data system, it becomes even harder to introduce meaningful indicators, because there is simply no reliable way to track long-term outcomes.

#### *Theme 7: Resource Constraints*

Another big limitation is the lack of resources and staff in Youth Resource Centers. It is evident from interviews that there is a clear imbalance between the scale of the issue and the capacity of institutions. In Astana, a small number of staff need to cover a very large youth population. As one Youth Resource Center employee put it:

"We have around 25 staff members for hundreds of thousands of young people. It is physically impossible to work with everyone individually."(Interviewee #2, 30.09.2025)

This directly affects the type of support that can be given. Institutions are often limited to more general activities such as group trainings or information campaigns instead of personalized, long-term actions. The same respondent also highlighted:

"The workload is very high, there are not enough specialists, and salaries are not always competitive. This limits what we can realistically do."(Interviewee #2, 30.09.2025)

As a result, even well-designed programs may not be implemented as effectively as intended.

#### *Theme 8: Sustainability Issues*

Finally, interviews also found that most of the existing projects do not have long-term stability. Most programs are short-term, for example, with training courses or temporary employment support. While these are effective, they may not lead to long-term effects. A Youth Resource Center practitioner said:

"We are able to train somebody or even help them find a job, but there is no system to back them up afterward or keep them employed."(Interviewee #5, 03.11.2025).

Similarly, one expert in youth policy told:

"Programs do exist, but they are often one-time initiatives. Someone can get back into the same situation after some time."(Interviewee #7, 23.01.2026).

It suggests that the problem is not a lack of programs at all, but a lack of their continuity. For young people without follow-up support, even after joining the present systems they still risk getting the NEET status after.

## DISCUSSION

When the quantitative results are analyzed alongside the interview findings, the NEET situation in Kazakhstan appears more complex than it may initially appear from official statistics. The data show not only who is NEET, but also how this status is measured and how it works in real life. These differences imply that existing policies may not consistently succeed in effectively addressing the most vulnerable populations. Evidence from both datasets shows this gap. Some young people who are counted as NEET are temporarily inactive or engaged in informal work, while others who face more serious barriers remain difficult for institutions to find and help.

The quantitative data indicate that NEET youth in Kazakhstan are not evenly distributed throughout the population. Women are significantly overrepresented among NEET youth. The probability of being NEET increases with age, and factors such as marriage, child-related responsibilities, and lower levels of education are strongly correlated with a higher likelihood of disengagement. Descriptive statistics reveal that a significant number of NEET youth are neither employed nor actively seeking employment. The primary reasons for their non-employment include housekeeping duties, family or personal obligations, and health-related issues. These findings suggest that NEET status in Kazakhstan is significantly associated with labor market exclusion, care responsibilities, family factors, and overall social vulnerability.

The qualitative findings reveal the reasons behind this mismatch. Interview respondents consistently underscored that the NEET population is markedly heterogeneous, containing young mothers, temporarily unemployed graduates, discouraged jobseekers, and youth involved in informal employment. Because of this, the category includes young people who are very vulnerable and need different kinds of help. Interviews revealed that official statistics may inadequately reflect the reality of youth disengagement, as certain economically active young individuals in informal contexts may still be classified as NEET, while others requiring assistance remain beyond institutional visibility.

When both parts of the analysis are taken together, three policy problems that are linked to each other become clear. First, the current NEET category is too broad to clearly tell the difference between temporary inactivity and more long-term forms of exclusion. Because of this, it's hard to tell which young people need more focused and intensive help. Second, a lot of interventions depend on young people going to institutions on their own. This means that

the people who are least informed, least motivated, or most disconnected are also the hardest to reach. Third, success is often measured by whether someone gets a job, goes to school, or joins a program. There is much less focus on whether they stay involved over time or go back to being inactive.

These three issues reveal why existing policies might demonstrate apparent engagement in program participation without guaranteeing sustainable results. Youth Resource Centers and similar programs are important and do a lot of good work, but the interviews show that they often have to deal with a lot of rules and restrictions from their institutions. Youth Resource Centers can't give consistent and personalized support because responsibilities are split up between ministries, implementation is uneven in different regions, and institutions don't have enough staff or money to do their jobs. This shows that there are not only operational problems, but also a bigger implementation problem: even though youth policy is officially recognized at the state level, this recognition does not always lead to enough institutional capacity at the local level. In these cases, institutions usually care more about short-term results that are easy to measure than about longer-term reintegration. As a result, youth policy may effectively promote short-term engagement while being less effective in reducing long-term disengagement.

The findings indicate that the primary concern is not simply the scale of current programs, but their alignment with the problem's structure. The analysis identifies three significant gaps: the challenge of differentiating among various categories of NEET youth, the ability to engage those who remain disconnected from institutional support, and the oversight regarding the sustained engagement of young individuals following initial assistance. Addressing these issues requires changes not only in what programs are offered, but also in how they are targeted, delivered, and followed up. These factors will be employed for assessing the policy options in the next section.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings suggest that the NEET situation in Kazakhstan is driven by three closely connected issues: how young people are identified within the category, limited reach to those who are most disengaged, and weak long-term effects of existing programs. Some individuals classified as NEET are actually working in informal jobs, others are only temporarily inactive, and a part of the group is completely outside institutional reach. Even when young people do participate in support programs, many return to inactivity after a short time.

Because of this, the NEET problem cannot be solved through one general reform. It requires different responses depending on the level and type of disengagement. The next section outlines three policy directions focused on identification, outreach, and retention.

### **Recommendation 1: Improving Measurement and Targeting of NEET Youth**

The analysis indicates that the present NEET category inadequately represents true levels of disengagement. Interviews show that young mothers, graduates who are temporarily unemployed, and youth who work informally are often included, even though they are all very different levels of vulnerable. Because of this, policy resources are spread out among groups with different support needs, and those who are likely to be excluded for a long time may not be given priority.

There are three main parts to the reform. First, the operational definition employed for policy targeting necessitates refinement. The statistical definition can stay the same for the sake of comparison, but administrative practice should separate caregiving inactive youth, informally employed youth, and youth who have been disengaged for a long time, with the last group getting the most attention. This is particularly important for ensuring that policies better reflect the needs of young women who are inactive due to care responsibilities.

Second, the observation period for policy targeting should be extended beyond the four-week reference rule currently employed in labor force surveys. A short reference period only shows short-term changes, like a short job search or a short gap after graduation, not longer-term inactivity. Extending monitoring to approximately three months would allow institutions to better distinguish between short-term transitions and sustained disengagement.

Third, data integration across institutions should be strengthened. There are already separate databases for the job market, education, and social protection. Giving Youth Resource Centers access to an integrated dashboard would help them find at-risk youth more quickly. Pilot implementation in selected regions could precede national rollout and would require coordination between relevant ministries and local-level institutions.

The main advantage of this option is that it improves targeting without requiring major institutional restructuring. More accurate identification would help focus resources on young people who are having trouble staying engaged. But it doesn't directly lower the number of people who join NEET, instead, it focuses on making the current programs work better. The option is fairly feasible because it can be carried out within current institutional frameworks and aligns with ongoing digitalization efforts. Costs are expected to be moderate and mainly related to data integration and staff training.

### **Recommendation 2: Active Outreach Through Mobile Youth Support Teams**

The research shows that most of the time, institutions only work with young people who come to them on their own. The most disengaged young people are still not able to take part in programs. International experience shows that just providing services isn't enough to lower NEET levels. Countries like Finland and Denmark, where young people are not very inactive, use active outreach models where specialists go out and find and talk to young people outside of formal institutions.

This option suggests adding mobile outreach teams to the current Youth Resource Center system. Instead of expanding infrastructure, the reform changes the operational model and performance indicators. Teams made up of a social worker, a career advisor, and a peer mentor would work outside of offices in places like neighborhoods, shopping centers, gaming venues, and online platforms. Their task would be early identification of disengaged youth, quickly assess their needs, and assignment to an individual pathway (back to education, to work, to training, or social support).

Crucially, the effectiveness of these teams depends on revising current performance metrics. At present, institutional evaluation often prioritizes the number of consultations or registered

participants. Under the outreach model, KPI logic would shift toward successful engagement of previously unregistered youth and successful referral completion. Such indicators are used in the Finnish Ohjaamo youth guidance model, which has demonstrated improved access to hard-to-reach young populations.

The main advantage of this option is that it directly addresses the access gap identified in the analysis and enables earlier intervention before they lose interest for a long time. It can be implemented for a relatively low cost because it mostly involves changing the roles of current staff members instead of building new institutions. But outreach by itself doesn't guarantee long-term integration, and it only works if there is support available after the initial engagement.

In terms of feasibility, this option is moderately favorable. It does not require major legislative change but may face organizational resistance, as it requires changes in staff roles, performance evaluation, and working practices. Pilot teams could start implementing the plan in certain cities, and then it could be expanded based on how well it works.

### **Recommendation 3: Post-Placement Retention Support**

Interview respondents noted that some young people leave jobs or training soon after starting, which may lead to a return to inactivity. Current monitoring usually stops shortly after placement and program success is measured by entry into employment or education rather than ongoing participation. This creates a gap in retention, where initial engagement does not guarantee continued involvement.

This option offers follow-up support after young people start working or training. Instead of stopping support at placement, participants would continue to receive light follow-up for a limited time, around six to twelve months. This could include periodic check-ins, help with early workplace or training issues, and guidance during the initial adjustment period. Employers could also reach out to a case advisor if problems come up during the early stages of employment.

Implementation can build on existing programs such as First Workplace and Youth Practice schemes. Employment subsidies could be partially linked to retention over a minimum period, encouraging both employers and institutions to support longer-term integration rather

than short-term placement. Similar retention-based approaches are used in European employment services to reduce repeated transitions between employment and inactivity.

The main advantage of this option is that it strengthens the long-term impact of existing programs by reducing repeated disengagement. However, its effects are gradual and depend on sustained monitoring capacity. In terms of feasibility, the option is moderately favorable, as it builds on existing program structures but requires adjustments in monitoring systems and staff workload. Costs are expected to be moderate and related primarily to extended case management and follow-up support. Implementation could begin with selected programs before broader rollout.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study looked at the factors related to NEET status in Kazakhstan and assessed how Youth Resource Centers help young people at risk of disengagement. The quantitative analysis found several groups more likely to be NEET, including women, older youth, those with lower education levels, and individuals with family or caregiving responsibilities. These results indicate that NEET status in Kazakhstan is closely tied to labor market conditions as well as social and family factors that affect young people's ability to engage in work or education.

The study also looked at how Youth Resource Centers deal with these risks. The results show that Youth Resource Centers are important because they offer consultations, referrals, and access to existing programs. But most of the time, their work depends on young people going to institutions on their own. Because of this, people who don't know as much, aren't as motivated, or face more complicated problems are less likely to receive support. In practice, this limits the ability of Youth Resource Centers to reach the most disengaged groups.

The study identified gaps in institutions that lower the effectiveness of Youth Resource Centers. These gaps include a broad definition of NEET youth, limited outreach efforts, and weak follow-up after young people start jobs, education, or training. In this context, policy success is often measured by participation rates. However, less focus is given to whether young people stay engaged or fall back into inactivity. This reduces the overall effectiveness of existing programs.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The quantitative study relies on data from the Labour Force Survey for a single year (2024), which makes it impossible to compare other time periods or the identification of trends in NEET risk factors. The survey also determines employment status based on the previous week, which, as discussed in the findings, may classify some temporarily inactive individuals as NEET and potentially overestimate the actual share of persistently disengaged youth. Second, the qualitative part of this study focuses only on Youth Resource Centers in Astana. Because of this, the results may not fully reflect how YRCs operate in other regions, where working conditions, available resources, and local labour markets can be quite different. The interview sample was enough to identify key themes, but it did not include all groups within the NEET category, such as young people with disabilities or those working informally. In addition, the study does not use longitudinal data, so it is not possible to see whether individuals move in and out of NEET status over time. Future studies could improve this by comparing different regions, following young people over a longer period, and including a broader range of NEET subgroups.

Overall, the findings show that youth policy in Kazakhstan depends not only on formal programs, but also on how Youth Resource Centers work in everyday practice. Better identification of at-risk youth, more active outreach, and support after placement could help more young people access programs and remain engaged. Closing these gaps would make existing policies more responsive to the needs of young people at risk of NEET status.

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