

# ***Social Vulnerability: The Case of Young People Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs)***

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## **Abstract**

If the traditional dynamics of social exclusion were characterized by consistency and duration, to be analyzed from a micro perspective, the today's dynamics are inextricably linked to phenomena at the macro level. The aim of this paper is to highlight the relevance of the dynamics related to the characteristics of a specific territorial system. Indeed, the paper provides an ecological analysis of the NEET phenomenon, i.e. a specific and particularly worrying form of exclusion, which is closely associated with the risk that the effects on youth of a prolonged economic crisis could take root, thereby becoming a structural problem that is more difficult to tackle. By means of a survey carried out according to the CATI method on a representative sample of NEETs registered at the Job Center of Massa Carrara, the study compared the characteristics of these NEETs, from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view, with those of the average Italian NEET, highlighting trends and specific processes peculiar to a worldwide phenomenon. The obtained results may very well qualify in order to review the setup of certain public programs dedicated to combating this phenomenon that, on the contrary, remain anchored to the micro perspective.

**Keywords:** *NEET, social vulnerability, social exclusion, ecological approach.*

***La vulnerabilidad social: el caso de los jóvenes que ni estudian ni trabajan.***

## **Resumen**

*Si la dinámica tradicional de la exclusión social se presenta con carácter de consistencia y duración, y se presta a ser investigada por una perspectiva micro, los procesos de fragilización contemporáneos, con todo el drama que conllevan, muestran una conexión muy estrecha con fenómenos a nivel macro.*

*Con la intención de poner en evidencia la relevancia de las dinámicas más amplias relacionadas con las características del sistema territorial, el artícu-*

*lo propone un análisis ecológico del fenómeno Neet, considerado un específico proceso de exclusión de especial preocupación; en efecto, está fuertemente asociado con el riesgo de que los efectos económicos de una crisis prolongada en el empleo juvenil se afiancen, lo que resultaría en problemas estructurales más difíciles de tratar.*

*A través de una encuesta, llevada a cabo con el método CATI sobre una muestra representativa de los jóvenes Neet inscritos en el Centro de Empleo, el estudio compara las características cuantitativas y cualitativas de los Neet en un contexto local confrontado con los de la media italiana, destacando las tendencias y procesos específicos que caracterizan de manera muy peculiar un fenómeno universal.*

*Los resultados merecerían ser considerados para una revisión programática de algunos programas públicos dedicados a la lucha contra este fenómeno, que, por el contrario, permanecen anclados a una perspectiva micro.*

**Palabras clave:** *Neet, vulnerabilidad social, exclusión social, enfoque ecológico.*

## **1. Introduction**

The current economic crisis afflicting the world, and its heavy impact on local economies, is a powerful factor in the widening of the gap (Rigney, 2010) between those who have more and those who have less; it is also reorganizing the international balance of power and the social and economic structures of advanced economies.

The extensive use of temporary contracts, the collapse of the “classic” wage model, the gradual breakdown of extended family networks, all within a welfare system developed on a model that is no longer aligned with modern social risks, have favored the gradual erosion of the benefits once guaranteed to the middle classes (Castel, 1995). An increasing number of people now find themselves in an even weaker position: a position of non-inclusion in or disconnection from the labor market – which is not only a source of income, but also an identity and a form of social integration – and the loss, weakening or absence of informal networks (1995, 1997).

The old vertical inequalities, based on group membership, are now being replaced by new horizontal inequalities, devoid of ascriptive characteristics (i.e. class) and distributed transversely because of the strength of the ties connecting the individual to the labor market and proximity networks (i.e. “biographisation of poverty”; Leisering, Leibfried, 1999).

In view of these dynamics, the crisis has acted and continues to act as a powerful multiplication and radicalization factor of social stratification, which decreases ascendant mobility and increases descending mobility. The result is a *rapid shift* that affects those generations now entering the labor market. It is for this reason that the current crisis is referred to as a “generational crisis”, in order to highlight the process of radicalization of the generational imbalance. The latter was a well-known fact throughout Europe even before the crisis, at which time the distribution of wealth was inversely proportional to age and there was a negative profit trend for young people (Bartiloro, Rampazzi, 2013; Rubella, Torrini, 2007).

What is of interest but also of concern is the situation of young people who fall into the category of NEET (*Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training*). Unemployment or inactivity in the transition period to work is particularly worrying, as it can have permanent negative effects that reduce future prospects for employment and income, through the so-called “scarring effect” (Arulampalam, Booth, Taylor, 2002). Because of this mechanism, the consequences on youth employment of a prolonged economic crisis are likely become entrenched and to become structural problems that will be more difficult to deal with. On an individual level, these young people may become trapped in inactivity or unemployment and/or underemployment, with a high probability of social exclusion. Furthermore, the need to reduce public spending and the shift to a social system based increasingly on insurance, further penalize the younger generation, who risk not being protected and living in poverty when they become adults or older.

Due to these trends, the European Commission introduced, as one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy – which will once again place the EU on a path of economic growth and rising employment – the reduction, by at least 20 million, of the number of people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Among the tangible indicators identified to ensure the achievement of the aforementioned target, one that deserves to be emphasized and which relates to the focus of this paper, is the reduction of youth unemployment and the improvement of their qualifications (COM, 2010).

On the eve of the new European Programming Period and of the introduction of new targeted initiatives (i.e. *The Youth Guarantee Programme*) – which are designed to support the entry of young people into the job market through investments in active guidance policies, education and training, and job placement – this paper, by making its findings known, aims to highlight the importance of the ecological variable in the marginalization of young people through training and work, in order to provide policy-makers with useful tips and guidelines.

Indeed, if the traditional dynamics of social exclusion marked by consistency and duration warranted a *microanalysis*, then today’s dynamics of weaken-

ing, and the drama surrounding the problem, highlight how marginalization is related to the dynamics of the *micro-macro* connection.

The risk of a person's autonomy and self-determination being permanently threatened by an uncertain insertion in the main systems of social integration and resource distribution and by the progressive and often silent deterioration of their skills and work (Ranci, 2002) is closely linked with the ability of a person to act in relation to the opportunities and constraints deriving from a given social context (Sen, 1985).

The research conducted to date highlights how NEETs pay the price, at the *micro* level, for the tensions and frictions of the *macro* connection between school and work (Szczesniak, Rondon, 2012), and at the *meso* level, for the influence of socialization patterns characterized by a strong imbalance favoring material needs and neglecting other aspects (Mazzuchelli 2006; Parry, 2006). The consequences of *macro* phenomena are well-documented in research conducted in Spain, where there has been an exponential increase in the number of NEETs. This increase is the result of the so-called "Golden Decade", during which consumerism and wellness peaked, meaning that people became accustomed to having a lot, without doing much (Staff Analysis, 2020 in Szczesniak, Rondon, 2012).

Based on the hypothesis of research, on the importance of the local context and, therefore, of the ecological variable in the definition of specific forms of social vulnerability, the purpose of the study carried out is to highlight the importance of the *micro-macro* connection, emphasizing the relevance of the *macro* level through the detection of specific quantitative and qualitative features, and collocating the NEET phenomenon in a specific local context. In short, the aim is to reveal the constraints of the local context, in relation to the local labor market and welfare system, both of which, by reducing or increasing young people's opportunities and independent decision-making abilities, help or hinder the risk of them experiencing cumulative forms of exclusion in their lifetimes.

The study has been divided into three sections. The first is devoted to the characteristics of the phenomenon, compared at national level. The second section examines national statistics, used to identify the area featured in the case study, whilst the third section looks at the research project itself. A brief summary of the main findings is provided in the final section of the paper.

## 2. NEETs in Italy: Size and Characteristics of an Emergency Phenomenon

The issue of young people aged 15-29 and not in education, employment or training assumed a certain importance in the European public debate only a few years ago, when the problem was brought to the attention of policy-makers due to the crisis. Albeit said problem was exacerbated by the economic climate, it actu-

ally appears to be a structural dilemma in many European countries, especially in Italy. Indeed, if at the beginning of the Nineties, the percentage of young people excluded from work and training was almost that of most European countries (+/- 10%-15%), in recent years, there has been an increase almost everywhere, an increase that shows the exponential dynamics of the phenomenon in Italy and those countries with a Southern European welfare system.

A comparison at European level shows a significant territorial disproportion; indeed, in 2012, according to data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, the percentage of NEETs in Italy was 22.1% and 20.4% in Spain. Numbers were considerably lower in Britain and France (both at 14.6%), and particularly in Germany (10.7%).

Upon closer examination, it became clear that Italian NEETs have peculiar characteristics that are common to other countries, such as Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Indeed, as is the case in Italy and in said countries, there is a stronger presence of female NEETs, of inactive and discouraged young people without any work experience and, ultimately, of a higher number of young people with a high level of education.

The data published by ISTAT, the Italian National Institute for Statistics, provide additional information. Indeed, if it is true that there are more female NEETs, this is especially evident in the southern regions, where there is a high number of housewives with children, while in the regions of the North there is a high number of foreign women, mostly Moroccan and Albanian, with children. Instead, if we only consider the young people still living live at home, then the percentage of NEETs is higher among males than among females. In addition, diachronic studies covering the last four years show an increasing trend in the incidence of NEETs, especially amongst the males of the youth population (ISTAT, 2013).

Unlike other countries, in Italy the condition of NEETs is not linked solely to unemployment: only one in three NEETs is actively looking for work (compared to one in two in the EU27). However, the proportion of Italian NEETs potentially entering the labor market is significantly higher (ISFOL, 2012). The percentage of NEETs represented by unemployed persons is particularly high among men (49% vs. 33.1% of women), while women who do not work and do not study are to be considered inactive and, in particular, removed from the labor market (ISTAT, 2013).

As shown in the studies of the Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers (ISFOL), permanence in a NEET state, which between 2005 and 2006 was 58.7%, increased by 7% in 2009-2010, reaching 65.2%, thus proving the increasing difficulty for young people to find work or to study. Between 2005 and 2006, 26.8% of NEETs were able to find work; however, between 2009 and 2010, this number fell to 19.2% (ISFOL, 2012).

As a direct result of reduced employment opportunities, there has been a slight increase in the transition to student (12.9% of young people decided to go back to school). At the same time, an alarming number of young people have gone from actively seeking employment to inactivity (+ 1.7%). The number of those NEETs who go from being inactive to looking for work has decreased, going from 13% in the period between 2005 and 2006, to 12.5% between 2009 and 2010 (ISFOL 2012).

Eurofound study results (2012) also reveal that it is possible to identify several factors which have a negative effect and increase the probability of becoming part of the NEET group: a disability (those who have some kind of a disability are 40% more likely to become NEETs than others); immigrant status (immigrants have a 70% greater chance of becoming NEETs than locals); low level of education (young people with poor qualifications are three times likelier to become NEETs than those with a tertiary education); geographical location (living in remote areas or in small towns increases the likelihood by up to 1.5 times); low-income families; parents' qualifications; parents' employment status (those with unemployed parents have a chance of up to 17% of becoming NEETs).

The geographical variable is relevant, revealing a strong correlation between the incidence of the phenomenon and the local gradient of development. Indeed, the percentage of NEETs reaches its highest levels in the South with 31.9% (which is almost twice that of Central and Northern Italy). At 35%, Campania and Sicily are the regions with the highest numbers, followed by Calabria and Apulia, with values of 31.8% and 29.2% respectively (ISTAT, 2012).

However, despite the fact that the highest number of NEETs are indeed concentrated in the southern provinces, the latest data available at provincial level (dating back to 2009) reveal the presence of two provinces, in the central part of Italy, with values higher than the national average Massa-Carrara and Frosinone (Italia lavoro 2011: 31). Having considered said data, the decision was made to select the province of Massa-Carrara for this case study, which is geographically located on the border between Central and Northern Italy, as opposed to Frosinone, which lies on the border between Central and Southern Italy.

### **3. Methodological Reflections**

In view of the objectives of the study, including that of determining the evolution of the phenomenon and any singular ecological characteristics compared to those found at the national level, a quantitative approach was adopted.

### 3.1. Assessment of the Phenomenon at Local Level

The first requirement of the study was to assess the size of the phenomenon at the local level in more recent years, both in order to highlight any specific trends related to the years in which the crisis has had its worst effects and to proceed with a judgmental or purposive sampling.

Not having up-to-date data at provincial level, estimates were made, based on local numbers and related phenomena. Indeed, by the very definition of the NEET phenomenon, a proxy can be provided for the number of NEETs in a given territory, by means of the employment figures and the number of students of the same age group that are not working. By subtracting the workers and students from the total number of residents in the same age group, the number of NEETs can be calculated.

However, despite having ISTAT's annual provincial employment rates, the number of students was not available. ISTAT has only published the number of national and regional students for 2009 and 2010. Therefore, the regional rate was applied at provincial level for the same years and the subsequent years (2011 and 2012) were estimated, on the basis that in the province of Massa-Carrara, as in the rest of Italy, the difficulty for young people in finding work led to an increase in the number of students (ISFOL, 2012). By comparing the percentage of NEETs that would have been recorded in the absence of an increase in the number of students (the variation in the employment rate of 2010 was based on the 2009 estimation of NEETs), it was estimated that between 2009 and 2010 there was an increase of 2.4% for boys and 7.4% for girls (for a total increase of 4.8%). However, considering that after 2010 this transition dropped, the above increase was halved for each year. A time- and gender-based breakdown of this phenomenon was therefore re-constructed (See Table 1.).

TABLE 1. ESTIMATE OF NEET RATES (15-29 YEARS)  
IN THE PROVINCE OF MASSA-CARRARA

	Employment Rates			NEETs (MS)		
	M	F	Tot	M	F	Tot
2009	45.3	37.7	41.6	18.4	25.6	21.9
2010	39.8	31.9	36.0	15.3	27.2	21.1
2011	30.0	36.9	33.3	<i>23.9</i>	<i>18.5</i>	<i>21.4</i>
2012	30.6	21.2	26.1	<i>21.5</i>	<i>28.65</i>	<i>25.0</i>

The estimates for 2011 and 2012 are in italics. The data provided by ISTAT are in oblique type.

This table shows the homogeneity of the NEET phenomenon in the years immediately following the crisis, despite significant gender divergence. This consistency was interrupted in the last year, during which a dangerous increase was recorded.



## **3.2. Research Methodology: Data Sources, Sampling and Detection Strategies**

After estimating the size of the phenomenon, it became necessary to identify the distinctive traits of this group of the population. A structured questionnaire was therefore put together, to identify the characteristics of the NEETs in Massa-Carrara, compared to those discovered at national level.

### **3.2.1. The Questionnaire**

The survey was conducted by means of CATI, the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing mode.

Given the time and resources available, CATI represented the best possible tool to contact individuals who, as in this case, cannot be met at specific times and in specific places, without distorting the sample.

The questionnaire, which included closed-ended questions, was compiled in order to assess the characteristics of the phenomenon, starting from the evidence published in related literature. Starting with personal data, required to measure the main reference variables (age, sex, education, residence), the questionnaire was designed to ascertain: a) training courses and/or professional careers; b) the household, in terms of communication and relationships; c) current or past problems related to health or the need for homecare; d) support networks and friendships.

### **3.2.2. Characteristics of the Source**

The empirical research in question was carried out thanks to the only available data source on the cohorts of the target population, i.e. the database of the Job Center of the Province of Massa-Carrara. Such a source undoubtedly offers a number of advantages, but also has more than one limit. Firstly, it is a useful source for sampling in a CATI survey, as it allocates a contact number (landline or mobile phone) to the personal data of each subject. It is the only database to do this. However, there are certain limitations that come with this advantage, and which need to be carefully considered.

Firstly, this is a voluntary registration list. Subjects are not inserted automatically. Inclusion in the list or otherwise is therefore a personal choice, based not only on work orientation, but also on the outcome of the matching capacities of this kind of public service. At present, only 3.4% of current jobs have been found thanks to the Job Centre; this percentage drops to 1.3% for graduates (Mandrone, Radicchia, 2011). We can therefore assume that the rate of registration with the Job Center reflects the expectations of young people with regard to its effectiveness: for this



reason, it is higher among young people with poor qualifications, and lower with highly-educated people. Also, an additional trend of downward segmenting must be considered, i.e. the percentage of subjects with a household disposable income of less than 1,000 Euros/month and registered at the Job Center is significantly higher than the average of the Italian population (*ibidem*).

Thanks to a survey carried out by Italia Lavoro, we know that the dynamics behind young people being discouraged from including themselves in such lists differ throughout Italy. Registration is indeed higher in the South and lower in the North of the country. Specifically, the number of NEET residents in Central Italy who have never consulted a Job Center is around 50.3%. Therefore, because of the sample source, only one in two NEETs was accessible (Italia Lavoro, 2011). Unfortunately, the survey did not include any information related to the structure of the two population groups (NEETs registered or not registered with the Job Center), or any distinguishing features, which would have been most useful to establish the standards for the extensibility of the results.

Therefore, the incoincidence, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, of the NEETs and those on the lists of the Job Center must be considered. As a result, representation was limited to the population included in the lists, rather than to the scope of references.

It is worth mentioning that the information included in the Database of the Center has an additional limit: the information related to the individual (e.g. residence, education and occupational status) is not automatically updated by the system. Indeed, the system is not even linked to the information systems of other agencies (it is linked to the system of Italy's Social Security and Welfare Institute – INPS – but not to educational institutions and universities, or municipal registries), meaning it is unable to record any changes in the position of the persons listed.

### **3.2.3. Sampling Strategies**

The sample lists were compiled by the employees of the Job Center, who isolated the subjects corresponding to the target age group.

The issue of the target age group warrants mention, as it has been the subject of extensive debate, which limited the choice of the categories of interest. Traditionally, the target group selected, at national and international level, was the age group between 15 and 29 years, which, however, cannot be considered homogeneous, even from a documented perspective. According to national and international legislation on the right/duty to education and on access to the labor market, minors are not “free” to access the labor market, because in Italy and elsewhere, education is compulsory. In Italy, education is compulsory for those under 16, whilst those between 16 and 18 years of age must receive training (Law

296/2006 and Decree 76/2005). The NEETs between 15 and 18 represent another phenomenon, i.e. early school leavers, instead of the difficulty of accessing the labor market. It must be said that Europe has included said phenomenon in its new policies to revitalize continental development.

For this reason, and in an endeavor to maintain consistency with the age groups established by the primary statistical surveys, this empirical survey focused on cohorts aged between 20 and 24 and between 25 and 29. From a quantitative point of view, these two cohorts are, in 2013, 88% of the entire population of NEETs in Central Italy (i.e. 332,406 people of a total of 379,281; ISTAT, ISTAT Database, 2014). The local NEET population is estimated at 6,722 (25% of the resident population between 15-29 years of age), whilst the population of the age group of interest stands at about 5,916, half of whom are registered at the Job Center (approximately 2,940 subjects, if the average registration rate in Central Italy of approximately 49.7% is applied).

The sum of the data obtained were analyzed, starting with the personal data of the subjects recorded in the database, in order to compile a stratification based on certain fundamental characteristics: age, sex, education and place of residence. The data were then used to create a sample of 10% of the reference population (equal to 294 subjects).

Once the stratification criteria and sample size were established, a random sample of each stratum was extracted via the Bernoulli Method. The method was used for the numbering of the first line corresponding to a first name to be included in the sample and for the extraction of the subsequent names.

## 4. Results

Firstly, this study highlights the different distribution of NEETs residing in the territory of reference, based on level of education, which requires special consideration in relation to the risk profile associated with education level. Indeed, compared to the national average, where the level of educated NEETs is much lower than the rest of the population belonging to the same age group (Italia Lavoro, 2011), NEETs in Massa-Carrara feature more young people with a secondary education (the difference compared to the rest of the population is about 7 percentage points).

TABLE 2. EDUCATION OF SAMPLE NEETS VS EDUCATION OF REFERENCE POPULATION (20-29 YEARS; 2012)

	Tuscany		Sample	
	a. v.	%	a. v.	%
Primary or less	4,559	24%	56	20%
Secondary	12,158	64%	200	71%
Tertiary	2,280	12%	25	9%
Total	18,997	100%	281	100%

Source: Eurostat

Both those with poor qualifications, whose numbers are significantly low (-4%) and those with a tertiary education (-3%) are at an advantage. The first data, in particular, are rather significant, considering the distortion expected because of the characteristics of the source used for sampling, which, for the reasons outlined above, tends to favor a higher concentration of individuals belonging to the lower social classes. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the under-representation of people with poor qualifications can be deemed a characteristic element of NEET status in the territory.

In view of the data, and of the segmentation resulting from the data source, it is safe to say that in the current provincial labor market, secondary education constitutes an additional risk factor (over 3/5 of the total respondents have a high school diploma of 2-3 or 4-5 years).

TABLE 3. PERCEPTION OF THE ADEQUACY OF DISPOSABLE INCOME: SAMPLE VS TUSCAN POPULATION

	Sample	Tuscany*
Excellent	0%	0,8%
Adequate	61%	52,4%
Scarce	27%	40,4%
Insufficient	11%	5,6%
Missing	1%	0%
Total	100%	100%

\*Source: ISTATDATAWAREHOUSE (2013)

Let it be said that, compared to the average, adequate family income does not appear to mitigate the risk of becoming a NEET. If just over half of the Tuscan population feels that the family has adequate resources, the portion of young people among the responding NEET who share this opinion reaches 61%. Indeed, more than 3/5 of NEETs come from families with adequate income. Compared to the average of the Tuscan population, more than double of the NEETs come from families with low incomes, while the number of NEETs coming from families

with limited financial resources is considerably lower, indeed, 27% compared with an average of 40% amongst the population of Tuscany.

Conversely, a comparison of the ascriptive elements identified as characteristic of Italian NEETs and non-NEETs (Italia lavoro 2011) with those found in the sample reveals further elements that need to be duly considered. Indeed, the situation in Massa-Carrara is very unusual compared to the national average, which shows a high protective capacity of parents' qualifications, especially of the mother.

In Italy, 71.6% at the most of NEET fathers have finished middle school. This percentage drops to 45.4% for non-NEET fathers. The differences for mothers are even more significant: 73.6% (NEET mothers) and 44.3% (non-NEET mothers). Still at national level, only 22.4% of fathers and 22.6% of mothers have a high school diploma, compared to an average of 40% and 41.4% respectively in non-NEET parents. Lastly, only 4% of NEET fathers and 3.8% of NEET mothers have a Bachelor's Degree, compared to the significantly higher incidence of non-NEET parents with the same qualifications (14.6% and 14.3% respectively).

The situation detected locally is heterogeneous compared to the national average, even for other variables. The values extracted for the purposes of this sample correspond to the distribution of non-NEETs rather than NEETs. Given that the territory taken under examination is not characterized by a distribution of degrees higher than the national average, this figure shows all the difficulties of the local families in relaying those values and skills best suited to meet the demands of the labor market at a time of "interregnum" (Bauman 2006).

TABLE 5. DISTRIBUTION OF DEGREES AMONG NEET MOTHERS AND FATHERS:  
STUDY SAMPLE VS ITALIAN NEETs AND NON-NEETs.

			Primary or less	Secondary	Tertiary
Mother	Italy*	Non-NEET	44.30%	41.40%	14.30%
		NEET	73.60%	22.60%	3.80%
		Study Sample	44.70%	39.40%	15.90%
Father	Italy*	Non-NEET	71.60%	24.40%	4%
		NEET	45.40%	40.00%	14.60%
		Study Sample	39.50%	41.80%	18.70%

\*Source: Italialavoro 2011: 85

Once again, this is probably connected to the labor market of the territory, which is characterized by the under-employment of parents with higher qualifications. However, in the absence of information at national or sub-national level, it is impossible to make any additional comments or a direct comparison. Nevertheless, what is evident is the high concentration of fathers employed as blue-collar

workers or merchants. The sample also shows a significant number of unemployed fathers (about 10%).

In the case study area, as at the national level, there is a male predominance among NEETs living at home with their parents. If, in fact, the proportion in the sample is 3 males for every 2 females, then it may be assumed that among NEETs not included in the lists of the Job Center, the model of an extended family prevails among both males and females (because of the higher education and higher household income which are risk factors for young people living at home). The proportion given may reduce the existing gap between NEETs registered and not registered at the Job Center.

In about 1 out of 5 cases, the NEETs who participated in the survey are young people who have left school early, and possess all the indices of deprivation of *early school leavers*. Considering that the incidence of these people on the young population is roughly 1:10, it is clear that the ratio of 1:5 detected in the sample highlights an additional risk. Leaving school early doubles the chances of becoming stuck in a sort of limbo between training, which is prematurely interrupted, and a professional career, which, in more than one case, was launched early but without continuity.

Contrary to a report by ISTAT on workforce, which identifies 44.3% of NEETs in search of their first job (i.e. they have never worked before), in the sample created for this study, this percentage drops to half. Indeed, more than 4 in 5 respondents said that they had already had contact with the labor market (81.8%). There is no evidence of segmentation by age or level of education among the people with work experience and the rest of the respondents. Again, the reasons for this peculiarity can be found in the characteristics of the local labor market. In about 80% of cases, respondents reported that they had stopped working for a period not exceeding two months (the period between time spent searching for work and the end of September).

The characteristics of the local labor market favor early access due to seasonal demand, but in the absence of dynamism and alternatives, this situation – based on the balance between work (in summer) and school (in winter) – tends to feel restrictive, becoming a trap from which it is difficult to escape.

A lack of economic resources is the reason preventing these young people from going to live alone or with their partners. This aspiration is very present in the NEETs over 25, while the share of respondents who said they feel good about living at home is found mainly in the age group between 20 and 24, where, however, there is also a strong movement toward independent life.

Of course, intergenerational solidarity is a social shock absorber. In almost all cases in which subjects reported that they live alone or with their partner, parents or grandparents assist by adding to the family income.

It is also interesting to note that the observed population is divided among those who left school a year or less ago, those who left school more than one year but less than three years ago, and those who left school more than three years ago. Again in this case, there is no direct correlation between age, education level, and the period spent not studying.

Although in most cases many respondents have difficult educational backgrounds – among those who have at least a high school degree, the percentage of failures is approximately 60%; it drops to 53% for those with a Bachelor's Degree – these young people, especially males, are highly frustrated because of the expectations they had of the training they carefully chose as a means to enter the labor market.

Realizing the ineffectiveness of the means selected to find a job, established when starting high school, may lead these young people to believe that in order to get ahead in life and find their place in the world, they need to follow their passions and put their skills to use.

Worth highlighting is the spread of discouragement, which may be defined as short-term discouragement: almost all respondents indicated their willingness to work, immediately if possible, but almost all of them believe this to be unlikely because of the economic crisis. Most young NEETs (20-24 years) tend to be more optimistic, especially if they have completed their primary or secondary education; they tend to think they can escape the stalemate in which they find themselves through personal commitment (many of these young people were about to start training courses).

Conversely, those over 25 find themselves in a situation of discouragement defined as *structural*, because it is related to the structural elements of the local economy. These young people have a positive image about other, more developed areas of the country, or about other countries (especially those with tertiary qualifications).

Over and beyond the influence of socialization, there is a high segmentation of the peer group. Groups of friends reflect the qualifications and status of NEETs, although there are those who hang out with people who work or study. What is interesting is that, in most cases, the friends who do work are in low profile jobs, with atypical contracts.

The involvement of young people in intermediate social bodies – volunteer organizations, associations, etc. – is rare. Their use of the media, however, for social reasons, is significantly higher. Indeed, the media were seen as a sort of daily friend-in-arms by the majority of the respondents.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

This study identified a number of peculiarities, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view.

In terms of quantitative results, the estimates for the last two years show that, despite being higher than the national average, the number of NEETs was stable; however, in the last year, a sudden increase was recorded. At the time of the survey, it was estimated that one in four young people was in this situation (i.e. more than one point higher than the Italian percentage).

The qualitative results are even more significant. The presence of inactive and discouraged subjects (13%) is significantly lower than the national average (60%) and the average in Central Italy (44%). Among these, the “short-term discouraged” seem to prevail, especially in the 20-24 age group. Said group may be defined as those young people who believe that the difficulties encountered when trying to enter the labor market will be reduced significantly as soon as the economic situation improves. The other cohort is characterized by a “systemic discouragement” that forces them to plan their futures elsewhere.

When analyzing the number of NEETs with previous work experience, the contextual constraints emerge as conditioning factors. The high number of low-skilled job offers associated with the dynamics of seasonal work favors early entry into the labor market (more than 80% of respondents said they had had work experience, compared to a national average of half that). However, it is highly likely that this will be the only opportunity for entry into the job market, and that this will turn into a trap from which it is difficult to escape.

This trend must be considered on the basis of the distribution of qualifications among these young people. The number of NEETs with a tertiary education falls within the Italian average (10%), but there was a significantly higher number of young people with a secondary education (71%). This result is particularly worrying if the distortion of the source data is taken into account – as has already been pointed out, the data used for the sample is characterized by a downward distortion, which means the respondents with a primary education are over-represented.

The young people living in Massa-Carrara are paying a higher price than anyone else because of the increasing polarization of the labor market, which has led almost everywhere to an increased demand for high-skilled and low-skilled professions, and a considerable decrease in jobs corresponding to intermediate qualifications (Ricci 2011; Abburrà 2012; Oliver, 2012).

The differences, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, in the phenomenon at local and national level confirm the hypothesis of this study, and invite the reader to carefully consider the specific dynamics of exclusion determined by an ecological context. Indeed, it is rather different when supply and demand are unit-



ed for reasons not related to the lack of balance between skills that are required and offered, compared to those cases where work is low-skilled or seasonal.

Therefore, the interpretation of the actions of the Youth Guarantee Programme warrants criticism. The Programme foresees a series of actions supporting the matching process and based on a *micro*-approach for NEETs between 20 and 29 years of age. The Programme is based on an individual statistical index that aims to estimate the “distance from the labor market” of each subject. It therefore risks underestimating the role of the local labor market. Hence, it is easy to imagine the resulting increase in divergences.

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