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## School-to-work transition: the case of Spanish NEETs

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### ABSTRACT

The school-to-work transition in Spain has become much more difficult and extended than before, with many young people today experiencing long periods of temporary employment, unemployment or inactivity. This article investigates the main socio-demographic characteristics of Spanish young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). It also aims to compare them with their non-NEET counterparts in terms of social capital and family background. Analyses were based on a representative sample, corresponding to the year 2016, of Spanish young individuals ages 18–35 years ( $n = 1.826$ ). All analyses were stratified by gender and age group. Overall, the Spanish NEETs had lower educational levels, were mainly unemployed and married, except for NEETs between 18 and 24 years, who were rather inactive and single. They also experienced previous unemployment, had more unemployed friends, and were coming from poorer family backgrounds in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts.

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Family background; NEET; school-to-work transition; social capital; unemployment; young people

## Introduction

The concept of school-to-work transition has been developed to account for change, waiting and periods of uncertainty in young people's route from compulsory schooling to full-time and stable employment (Ryan 2001). This transition is often depicted as much more difficult and extended than in previous generations, with many young individuals today experiencing long periods of temporary employment, unemployment or inactivity (Ryan 2001; Chen 2011).

High unemployment rates and macroeconomic difficulties have been linked to high inactivity in young people. Young people are more likely to drop out of the labour force when there is a severe job shortage, while those who are already inactive tend to be less motivated to look for a job (Ryan 2001; Quintini, Martin, and Martin 2007; Expósito 2015). Low and unequal wages, low educational achievement, extended parental support and inadequate labour market programmes have also been emphasised as possible determinants of young people's high inactivity (Ryan 2001; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Calvo 2002; Vallejo Peña 2013; García López 2014; Bacaria, Coll, and Sánchez-Montijano 2015). In this framework, the term NEET (not in employment, education or training) has increasingly been used to refer to young people disengaged from both work and formal channels of education.

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Although NEET individuals have received an increased attention lately from policy actors and researchers, there is still confusion in terms of definition, extension and nature of this phenomenon among different age groups. In Spain, the recent economic crisis has increased the number of NEETs. This anomic and difficult employment situation of Spanish young people under 30 years of age has incited many scholars (Vallejo Peña 2013; Bacaria, Coll, and Sánchez-Montijano 2015) to label them as a 'lost' or 'excluded' generation, in the sense that they share the characteristics and circumstances of an economic and labour market transition that hinders their employment and economic stability. The main objective of this article is to analyse the situation of Spanish NEETs by comparing them with their non-NEET counterparts in terms of socio-demographic characteristics like gender, age and level of education as well as family background and social capital.

Transition to adulthood, understood here as the entrance to stable employment, marriage and parenthood, is nowadays a heterogeneous life period and, for most individuals, intensifies in the mid-twenties and is generally achieved by age 30 (Arnett 2000; Arnett and Padilla-Walker 2015). Nevertheless, in many European countries, transition to adulthood is extended even beyond the age of 30 (De la Fuente 2011). In this article, we focus on young people between 18 and 35 years of age in order to account for a possible extension in reaching adulthood due to macroeconomic difficulties. We distinguish three specific age groups to grasp the differences between different phases of 'emerging adulthood': from 18 to 24, when the majority of young people have already finished their full-time studies; from 25 to 29, when most young people are already employed and married; and from 30 to 35 to explore a possible later transition to adulthood. Distinguishing the main characteristics and needs of these three groups might help policy makers to advance inclusive education and labour market policy frameworks.

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the NEET concept through previous empirical findings to then focus on the NEET phenomenon in Spain. We then define our data and methods of analysis to finally evaluate and interpret the data. We conclude the article with reflections and suggestions for future research.

### *The NEET concept*

The term NEET was introduced for the first time at the political level in the UK in 1999 to reclassify young people under the age of 18 who were not participating in any form of employment, education or training, and thus replace more discriminating terms such as 'inactive' or 'Status Zero' (Furlong 2006; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Furlong 2017). General European economic crisis has led to an extension of this status among young people up to 29 years old, or even beyond (Furlong 2006; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Pemberton 2008; Chen 2011; Munsech 2014). NEET has been linked to different age groups of young people who currently do not have a job, are not enrolled in training or education, and are thus disengaged from major institutions (Furlong 2006; Eurofund 2012; Baggio et al. 2015).

Different categories of experiences have been aggregated under the umbrella of the NEET concept (Furlong 2006). Accordingly, a 'NEET' individual might be a young unemployed person, a young person whose parental or caring responsibilities represent a key barrier to work, a young individual with physical disabilities or behavioural difficulties, a young person on a break period before entering the university or one who has

dropped out of college and not yet decided on their next steps. The NEET group, besides being a heterogeneous one, it is also a very dynamic one, as many young people within the group are moving in and out at a rapid pace, while the overall number of NEETs tends to remain broadly static (Scottish Executive 2006; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Chen 2011; Eurofund 2012).

Nevertheless, some young people are at greater risk of being NEETs than others. Individual and family characteristics such as gender, educational level, age, origin and place of residence, socio-economic background or health are important factors determining young people's transitions from education to employment, and thus contributing to the NEET status (Raffe 2003; Quintini, Martin, and Martin 2007; Eurofund 2012; Bardak, Maseda, and Rosso 2015; Expósitos 2015). Intergenerational or educational factors (parents' educational level, parental interest in children's education and aspirations, parenting style, early educational attainment of children) also seem to influence NEET status (Bynner, Joshi, and Tsatsas 2000; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Rennison et al. 2005; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Pemberton 2008; Alfieri et al. 2015).

Some of the short and long-term consequences of the NEET status at an individual level are extended unemployment and idleness, parenting at a young age, poor physical and mental health, greater unhappiness, drug and alcohol misuse, and even criminal activity (Ryan 2001; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Chen 2011; Sellström, Bremberg, and O'campo 2011; O'Dea et al. 2014; Alfieri et al. 2015; Baggio et al. 2015; Goldman-Mellor et al. 2016). However, the NEET condition also entails specific social and economic consequences such as loss of trust in institutions, less participation and interest in politics, lower social participation and interaction, as well as decrease in productivity and economic return (Chen 2011; Eurofund 2012; O'Dea et al. 2014; Expósitos 2015).

Research has begun to question the extent to which the term NEET effectively articulates and defines the needs of the variety of young people included in this category (Furlong 2006; Maguire and Thompson 2007). Many scholars thus endorse the need for a clearer definition of NEETs in order to establish general trends and make international comparisons possible, as well as to determine specific and effective public policy interventions (Furlong 2006; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Elder 2015).

### *The NEET phenomenon in Spain: previous empirical evidence and theoretical approach*

The recent economic crisis that has spread across various European countries has led to a substantial decrease in labour market demand and this, in turn, has determined an increase in unemployment rates, particularly among young people. This recession has hit southern European countries (Madsen et al. 2013) and Spain particularly hard. Youth unemployment rate of the EU-28 countries has increased from 15.5% in 2007 to 20.3% in 2015. In Spain, the youth unemployment rate raised from 18.1% in 2007 to 48.3% in 2015, for both men and women ages 15–24. For 2014, the early school-leaving rate in Spain reached 25.0% among men and, respectively, 18.1 among women ages 18–24 (Eurostat 2016a).

Since the onset of the economic and financial crisis, the share of young people neither in employment nor in education or training has increased. The NEET rate<sup>1</sup> for young

people aged 20–34 in the EU-28 countries rose from 17.6% in 2006 to 18.3% in 2016, an increase of 1.7 percentage points. The latest data available for 2016 shows that NEET rates in the EU-28 were 16.7% for people aged 20–24, 18.8% for those aged 25–29, and 19.1% for those aged 30–34. In Spain, the NEET rate registered in 2016 an approximate value of 23% for young people aged 20–34. When discriminating by age group, the lowest NEET rate was for Spanish people aged 20–24 (21.2%), followed by those aged 30–34 (22.9%). Spanish people aged 25–29 registered in 2016 the highest NEET rate (24.2%) (Eurostat 2017).

Young women, and as they become older, are more likely to be NEET. The empirical data show that there is a considerable difference by gender in relation to the proportion of young NEET people. In 2016, almost one quarter (22.7%) of young women (aged 20–34) in the EU-28 were NEETs in comparison with only 14% of men. This means a difference of approximately 9 percentage points between the two subgroups. Moreover, an analysis for three different age groups of young people (20–24; 25–29; 30–34) shows that the EU-28 gender gap for NEETs increased as a function of age in 2016.

In Spain, the NEET rate in 2016 was higher for women than for men for the age groups 20–24 (21.7% for men, respectively 25.3% for women) and 30–34 (18.3% for men, respectively, 26.7% for women). For the age group 25–29, the NEET rate for men (21.8%) was slightly higher than for women (20.7%). The gender gap in the NEET rate has been explained by various factors such as a higher importance placed on women's role within the family and on men's role in the workplace, careers advice that reinforce gender labour segregation, employers preferring to hire young men over young women, assimilation difficulties for women when returning to work after childbirth, young women being more likely to have low-paid jobs or precarious employment (Eurostat 2017).

Young NEET women are more likely to be inactive, while young NEET men are more likely to be unemployed. In 2016, a higher proportion of NEET women aged 20–34 in the EU-28 were economically inactive (not actively seeking work) compared with NEET men of the same age, who were predominantly unemployed. This gender difference may be partly attributed to family structures, as a higher proportion of young women than men spend time caring for children and/or other family members (Eurostat 2017). Although NEETs profile tends to vary among Spanish regions, it is mostly feminine (Eurostat 2017), related rather with unemployment or inactivity (Eurostat 2017).

In 2016, 76.9% of young NEET men aged 20–24 were unemployed, while 23.1% were inactive. In contrast, the share of young NEET women aged 20–24 who were unemployed was 65.5%, while 34.5% were inactive. This difference was much higher for the age group 30–34: 79.8% of NEET men in this age group were unemployed, while just 20.2% were inactive; instead, 55.3% of NEET women were unemployed, while 44.7% were inactive. As such, more than twice of NEET women aged 30–34 were inactive in comparison with NEET men of the same age (Eurostat 2017).

With a general unemployment rate of 22.1% and a youth unemployment rate of 48.3%, we can also find tertiary school individuals among the Spanish NEET population. In 2015, 3.1% of men and, respectively, 5.2% of women had a tertiary school degree, in front of 1.6% of men and 3.8% of women in the UE-28 countries. Yet, Spain was the country with the second highest unemployment rate among tertiary school graduates (35.9%), in comparison with 15.4% in the UE-28. The unemployment rate among secondary

school and vocational graduates has almost tripled since 2007, reaching 45.0% in 2015; compared with 18.1% in the UE-28 countries, where the increase was only of five percentage points (Eurostat 2016c).

According with Becker's (1964, 1994) human capital theory, education and training are the most important investments in human capital. Empirical evidence associates higher education levels with higher probabilities of finding work and earning more money. This inverse relationship between education and unemployment is especially relevant for young people, given that for most, educational attainment is the only way to exhibit skills and knowledge in the labour market (Munsech 2014). On-the-job training is another important source of the increase in earnings as workers gain greater experience at work (Becker 1964, 1994). Accordingly, in times of economic crisis, investment in education and training, in particular for secondary education and university level students, seems even more reasonable. In Spain, instead, there has been an increase in university taxes and a decrease in the number of scholarships due to tougher access requisites, while vocational educational training and internship programmes are still in a reforming phase.

Families also influence the knowledge, skills, values, and habits of their children. Parents have a large influence on the education, marital stability, and many other dimensions of their children's lives. Empirical evidence shows that parents' and children's earnings are positively related: richer families tend to spend more money on their children's education and training than poorer families. Also family spending per child is negatively related with the number of children (Becker 1964, 1994). In Spain, there is no student loan system that might compensate for unequal socio-economic family statuses. Moreover, children tend to live far beyond the age of 30 with their parents because of economic impediments for individual emancipation.

Once out of employment, education and training, young people stop accumulating human capital through formal channels and may be at risk for poverty and social exclusion (Chen 2011; Eurofund 2012; Alfieri et al. 2015). Specific policy measures have been introduced at the EU level to promote young individuals' potential and tackle the problem of unemployment and inactivity. Special emphasis has been put on promoting return into education and training, increasing contact with the labour market, improving labour market opportunities and thus enabling smooth transitions to work (Eurofund 2012). This article attempts to shed more light on the NEET phenomenon in Spain to better inform Spanish policy makers of about its extent and characteristics.

## Data and methods

### *Design, population, and sample*

The present study is based on data from a cross-sectional survey conducted in 10 European countries. In Spain, the survey was carried out between March 2016 and June 2016 with a representative sample of young adults between 18 and 35 years ( $n = 1.826$ ). An online access panel was used for survey implementation. The sample of young adults was randomly stratified and proportional to the general Spanish population in terms of geographical region (NUTS 2), employment situation (employed, unemployed inactive), gender (male, female) and age group (18–24; 25–29; 30–35).

## Measures and variables

We assessed young individuals' *current employment situation* by asking them the following question: 'Which of these options best describes your employment situation in the last month?' Answers were aggregated in employed (including all people in some form of paid work, even those working part-time), education or training (including participants doing an internship or in training, in military service or civic service) and NEET (youth no longer in employment, education or training). We constructed a broad category of NEET that comprised young people between 18 and 35 years of age, who were no longer studying and were out of work (in the last month),<sup>2</sup> including participants currently looking for a job and those not looking for a job (e.g. jobless, sick leave, caring responsibilities). Consequently, a person identified as a NEET was either unemployed or economically inactive.

*Education* was measured through the seven categories of the International Standard Classification of Education (ES-ISCED). We created a three level category variable: low education (comprising ES-ISCED categories I and II); medium education (comprising ES-ISCED categories IIIa, IIIb, and IV); and high education (comprising ES-ISCED categories V1 and V2).

*Family background* was modelled via parental migration status, educational attainment, employment situation, economic self-sufficiency, and interest in children's educational attainment. For parental educational attainment, we combined information from both mother and father, and used the higher of the two attainment levels. Parental employment situation was measured by a categorical variable indicating if mother/father were working (paid employment and self-employment), not working (including retirees, those unable to work because of health issues and those with caring responsibilities), or unemployed (when respondent was age 14). Parental economic self-sufficiency was measured through two indices: the first captured parents' capacity to afford basics (e.g. housing) when the respondent was age 14; the second referred to parents' capacity to afford extras (e.g. trips, hobbies) when the respondent was age 14. Both indices were calculated as the average of two items measured on a four-point scale. The parental migration status was measured through a dummy variable, indicating if at least one parent was born outside of Spain.

*Work experience* was measured through a dummy variable indicating if the respondent had ever been unemployed for six or more months, and a dummy variable indicating if the participant has had a paid job for one year or more. *Social capital* was modelled via social networks, level of trust in people and participation in voluntary organisations. Participants' social network was measured through a battery of four items asking if participants' friends were employed, unemployed or studying. Participants' trust in people was measured through the question 'Would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can not be too careful in dealing with people?' (values ranged from 0 to 10). Finally, we captured if participants were involved in voluntary work through the question 'How many hours per week were you involved in charities, environmental organizations, sport clubs, cultural organizations?' We recoded this ordinal variable in a dichotomous one: active; and not active.

Finally, we included *socio-demographic characteristics* such as gender, age and respondents' migration status (Spain/other).



## Statistical analyses

Study variables were described as sample counts and percentages. Differences between NEET and non-NEET individuals were calculated for the overall sample and according to socio-demographic characteristics, family background, work experience, and social capital. The differences were compared with the Pearson chi-squared statistic for categorical variables (the level for statistical significance was determined to be  $< 0.05$ ).

We used multivariate logistic regression models to assess the variables that predicted the NEET status. All variables achieving significance at  $p < 0.05$  in the univariate analysis were introduced in the models. Three models were estimated: model 1, adjusted for educational attainment, caring responsibilities; model 2, adding family background characteristics; and model 3, further adjusted for work experience and social capital. We present only the last model. All statistical analyses were stratified by gender and age group (18–24, 25–29 and 30–35).

## Results

### *Socio-demographic characteristics*

The study sample included 933 women and 893 men. A third of the total sample had tertiary education and almost a quarter had low educational level. The vast majority were born in Spain (92.8%), single (70%) and with no caring responsibilities (63%). Compared to men, more women had tertiary education, were married, and with caring responsibilities and children.

These characteristics varied between age groups (see [Table 1](#)). Few respondents ages 18–24 years had tertiary education (18.8% women and, respectively, 17.9% men), and most of them were rather single (93.5%) and with no caring responsibilities (over 78%) or children (over 97%). Just over 11% of both women and men in this age group were NEET. Overall, NEET respondents between 18 and 24 years presented lower educational levels and more of them had immigrant origins, in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts.

More respondents ages 25–29 years had tertiary education (47.4% women and, respectively, 45.8% men), were married and with caring responsibilities and children than in the previous group. Around 22% of women and, respectively, 15% of men in this age group were NEET. NEET women between 25 and 29 years presented significant lower educational levels and had more caring responsibilities and children, in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts.

A higher proportion of women ages 30–35 years had tertiary education and caring responsibilities and children in comparison with the other two age groups. There were fewer men highly educated in this group (33.3%) in comparison with the age group 25–29 (45.8%). A higher percentage of respondents were NEET in this group (34.6% women and, respectively, 21.3% men). Comparison between NEET and non-NEET presented the same differences found in the middle age group: lower educational levels, and more caring responsibilities and children, particularly in the case of NEET women).

### *Current employment situation*

In terms of employment status, NEET respondents were mostly unemployed (73.5% of women, respectively, 82.2% of men), though inactive individuals were overrepresented



**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics by gender, age and NEET status, *n*(%).

		Women				Men			
		Total	Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value	Total	Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value
18–24									
Total		271	240 (88.6)	31 (11.4)		280	248 (88.6)	32 (11.4)	
Education	Low	65 (24.0)	50 (20.8)	15 (48.4)	0.003*	67 (23.9)	51 (20.6)	16 (50.0)	0.001*
	Medium	155 (57.2)	144 (60.0)	11 (35.5)		163 (58.2)	152 (61.3)	11 (34.4)	
	High	51 (18.8)	46 (19.2)	5 (16.1)		50 (17.9)	45 (18.1)	5 (15.6)	
Born in Spain?	Yes	247 (91.5)	221 (92.5)	26 (83.9)	0.107	261 (94.2)	236 (95.9)	25 (80.6)	0.001*
Marital status	Married	8 (3.7)	5 (2.6)	3 (12.5)	0.047*	7 (2.9)	5 (2.3)	2 (6.5)	0.419
	Divorced	6 (2.8)	5 (2.6)	1 (4.2)		11 (4.5)	10 (4.7)	1 (3.2)	
	Single	202 (93.5)	182 (94.8)	20 (83.3)		226 (92.6)	198 (93.0)	28 (90.3)	
Caring responsibilities	Yes	58 (21.4)	52 (21.7)	6 (19.4)	0.768	61 (21.8)	52 (21.0)	9 (28.1)	0.356
Having children	Yes	7 (2.6)	6 (2.5)	1 (3.2)	0.811	6 (2.1)	4 (1.6)	2 (6.3)	0.088
25–29									
Total		266	208 (78.2)	58 (21.8)		271	230 (84.9)	41 (15.1)	
Education	Low	49 (18.4)	25 (12.0)	24 (41.4)	0*	63 (23.2)	48 (20.9)	15 (36.6)	0.088
	Medium	91 (34.2)	75 (36.1)	16 (27.6)		84 (31.0)	73 (31.7)	11 (26.8)	
	High	126 (47.4)	108 (51.9)	18 (31.0)		124 (45.8)	109 (47.4)	15 (36.6)	
Born in Spain?	Yes	249 (94.0)	193 (93.2)	56 (96.6)	0.349	254 (95.1)	215 (95.1)	39 (95.1)	0.998
Marital status	Married	30 (12.7)	21 (11.2)	9 (18.4)	0.308	16 (6.9)	15 (7.7)	1 (2.8)	0.451
	Divorced	15 (6.3)	11 (5.9)	4 (8.2)		11 (4.8)	10 (5.1)	1 (2.8)	
	Single	192 (81.0)	156 (83.0)	36 (73.5)		204 (88.3)	170 (87.2)	34 (94.4)	
Caring responsibilities	Yes	86 (32.3)	54 (26.0)	32 (55.2)	0*	58 (21.4)	51 (22.2)	7 (17.1)	0.463
Having children	Yes	45 (16.9)	25 (12.0)	20 (34.5)	0*	16 (5.9)	14 (6.1)	2 (4.9)	0.762
30–35									
Total		396	259 (65.4)	137 (34.6)		342	269 (78.7)	73 (21.3)	
Education	Low	90 (22.7)	34 (13.1)	56 (40.9)	0*	97 (28.4)	65 (24.2)	32 (43.8)	0.001*
	Medium	110 (27.8)	69 (26.6)	41 (29.9)		131 (38.3)	103 (38.3)	28 (38.4)	
	High	196 (49.5)	156 (60.2)	40 (29.2)		114 (33.3)	101 (37.5)	13 (17.8)	
Born in Spain?	Yes	368 (92.9)	241 (93.1)	127 (92.7)	0.897	318 (93.8)	252 (94.4)	66 (91.7)	0.396
Marital status	Married	155 (43.7)	97 (40.8)	58 (49.6)	0.249	100 (32.4)	86 (34.8)	14 (22.6)	0.419
	Divorced	28 (7.9)	21 (8.8)	7 (6.0)		28 (9.1)	19 (7.7)	9 (14.5)	
	Single	172 (48.5)	120 (50.4)	52 (44.4)		181 (58.6)	142 (57.5)	39 (62.9)	
Caring responsibilities	Yes	202 (51.0)	116 (44.8)	86 (62.8)	0.001*	138 (40.4)	114 (42.4)	24 (32.9)	0.142
Having children	Yes	168 (42.4)	95 (36.7)	73 (53.3)	0.001*	97 (28.4)	82 (30.5)	15 (20.5)	0.903

Differences compared with Pearson chi-squared test (*p*-value reported).\*Significant *p*-value at < 0.05.

in the age group 18–24 (38.7% women and, respectively, 31.3% men) compared to the other age groups (supplementary table S1). Overall, there were more inactive women than men in the three age groups. Among NEETs ages 25–29, as well as those ages 30–35 years, women were overrepresented in doing housework in comparison with men of the same age (see supplementary table S2).

When participants were asked to indicate what they were willing to do for a job (supplementary table S3), overall a higher proportion of NEET women responded that they would accept worse working conditions or lower earnings, compared to non-NEET women. This difference was particularly significant for the age group 30–35. Nevertheless, a lower proportion of NEET women, when compared with their non-NEET counterparts, answered they would accept moving to another country or within the same country. Again, this divergence of opinions was significant in the case of women ages 30–35.

### *Family background*

Table 2 presents family characteristics by gender, age and NEET status. NEET men between 18 and 24 years were more likely to have at least one parent born outside Spain, though less likely to have both parents employed at age 14, compared with non-NEET men. Parents' expectations in terms of educational achievement of their children at age 14 tended also to be lower for NEET than for non-NEET men in this age group.

NEET women ages 25–29 years were more likely to come from less educated and poorer families, or families where both parents were unemployed when the respondent was age 14, in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts. NEET women between 30 and 35 years of age were also more likely to come from poorer families. NEET men between 30 and 35 years of age were more likely to have both parents unemployed at age 14 and with clear difficulties in affording extras.

### *Work experience and social capital*

Table 3 presents the work experience and social capital by gender, age and NEET status. NEET men ages 18–24 were less likely to have previous work experience in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts. In terms of social capital, NEET men were also more likely to have more unemployed friends or out of education/training. NEET women ages 18–24 were less likely to be involved in civic organisations in comparison with non-NEET women.

NEET women between 25 and 29 years of age were more likely to have experienced previous unemployment as well as to have more unemployed friends or out of education/training, in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts. They were also less likely to trust in people. NEET men of the same age were less likely to have more employed friends or be involved in civic organisations in comparison with non-NEET men. Both NEET men and women ages 30–35 years were more likely to have experienced previous unemployment, as well as to have more unemployed friends. NEET men of this age were also less likely to trust in other people.

### *Predicting the NEET status*

Table 4 presents the results of the logistic regression predicting the NEET status by gender and age. The results show that, for respondents ages 18–24 years, the educational level

**Table 2.** Family characteristics by gender, age and NEET status, *n*(%).

		Women			Men		
		Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value	Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value
18–24							
Parental highest level of education	low	106 (45.7)	15 (53.6)	0.679	97 (42.2)	17 (54.8)	0.41
	medium	56 (24.1)	5 (17.9)		66 (28.7)	7 (22.6)	
	high	70 (30.2)	8 (28.6)		67 (29.1)	7 (22.6)	
Parental Employment situation (when participant was age 14)	Both unemployed or inactive	13 (5.6)	1 (3.2)	0.343	11 (4.5)	0 (0.0)	0.006*
	At least one parent working	87 (37.2)	8 (25.8)		80 (32.9)	19 (61.3)	
	Both working	134 (57.3)	22 (71.0)		152 (62.6)	12 (38.7)	
Parental immigration background	Born in Spain	197 (83.5)	24 (82.8)	0.922	218 (89.3)	22 (71.0)	0.004*
Parental financial situation (afford basics)	Bad	37 (17.1)	5 (17.2)	0.98	41 (17.9)	6 (19.4)	0.844
Parental financial situation (afford extras)	Bad	85 (38.6)	11 (36.7)	0.835	96 (41.6)	7 (23.3)	0.055
Respondent's Mother expectations (education)	Not very involved	8 (3.3)	1 (3.2)	0.432	6 (2.4)	3 (9.7)	0*
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	33 (13.8)	7 (22.6)		29 (11.7)	11 (35.5)	
Respondent's Father expectations (education)	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	198 (82.8)	23 (74.2)	0.932	212 (85.8)	17 (54.8)	0.009*
	Not very involved	21 (9.0)	2 (6.9)		19 (7.9)	5 (15.6)	
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	31 (13.2)	4 (13.8)		34 (14.1)	10 (31.3)	
	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	182 (77.8)	23 (79.3)		188 (78.0)	17 (53.1)	
25–29							
Parental highest level of education	low	98 (47.6)	37 (66.1)	0.013*	111 (50.2)	24 (66.7)	0.142
	medium	43 (20.9)	12 (21.4)		41 (18.6)	6 (16.7)	
	high	65 (31.6)	7 (12.5)		69 (31.2)	6 (16.7)	
Parental Employment situation (when participant was age 14)	Both unemployed or inactive	3 (1.5)	4 (7.1)	0.003*	10 (4.3)	2 (5.0)	0.46
	At least one parent working	85 (41.3)	32 (57.1)		81 (35.2)	18 (45.0)	
	Both working	118 (57.3)	20 (35.7)		139 (60.4)	20 (50.0)	
Parental immigration background	Born in Spain	184 (89.8)	48 (87.3)	0.598	197 (88.7)	37 (90.2)	0.777
Parental financial situation (afford basics)	Bad	24 (12.6)	14 (25.9)	0.017*	41 (18.8)	9 (24.3)	0.434
Parental financial situation (afford extras)	Bad	64 (34.2)	32 (61.5)	0*	82 (38.0)	20 (54.1)	0.065
Respondent's Mother expectations (education)	Not very involved	13 (6.3)	4 (6.9)	0.852	15 (6.5)	4 (9.8)	0.739
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	35 (16.8)	8 (13.8)		38 (16.5)	6 (14.6)	
Respondent's Father expectations (education)	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	160 (76.9)	46 (79.3)	0.419	177 (77.0)	31 (75.6)	0.115
	Not very involved	23 (11.4)	7 (12.7)		23 (10.4)	9 (22.0)	
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	37 (18.4)	6 (10.9)		35 (15.8)	6 (14.6)	
	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	141 (70.1)	42 (76.4)		163 (73.8)	26 (63.4)	

30–35								
Parental highest level of education	low	138 (53.9)	87 (65.4)	0.073	146 (56.2)	50 (70.4)	0.093	
	medium	44 (17.2)	20 (15.0)		52 (20.0)	9 (12.7)		
	high	74 (28.9)	26 (19.5)		62 (23.8)	12 (16.9)		
Parental Employment situation (when participant was age 14)	Both unemployed or inactive	7 (2.7)	6 (4.4)	0.176	9 (3.4)	7 (9.9)	0.002*	
	At least one parent working	116 (45.0)	71 (52.6)		118 (44.5)	42 (59.2)		
	Both working	135 (52.3)	58 (43.0)		138 (52.1)	22 (31.0)		
Parental immigration background	Born in Spain	227 (90.1)	121 (88.3)	0.59	240 (93.4)	63 (90.0)	0.336	
Parental financial situation (afford basics)	Bad	27 (10.7)	23 (18.1)	0.045*	42 (16.7)	12 (17.1)	0.925	
Parental financial situation (afford extras)	Bad	82 (34.7)	64 (52.5)	0.001*	105 (43.0)	40 (58.8)	0.021*	
Respondent's Mother expectations (education)	Not very involved	15 (5.8)	6 (4.4)	0.69	19 (7.2)	6 (8.2)	0.943	
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	37 (14.3)	23 (16.9)		42 (15.8)	12 (16.4)		
	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	207 (79.9)	107 (78.7)		204 (77.0)	55 (75.3)		
Respondent's Father expectations (education)	Not very involved	28 (11.2)	13 (9.6)	0.878	34 (13.2)	10 (14.7)	0.819	
	Wanted me to achieve at least the same level of education	34 (13.5)	18 (13.2)		58 (22.5)	13 (19.1)		
	Wanted me to achieve a higher level of education	189 (75.3)	105 (77.2)		166 (64.3)	45 (66.2)		

Differences compared with Pearson chi-squared test (*p*-value reported).

\*Significant *p*-value at < 0.05.

**Table 3.** Work experience and social capital by gender, age and NEET status, *n*(%).

		Women			Men		
		Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value	Working / Studying	NEET	<i>p</i> -value
18–24							
Work experience							
Had ever had a work for a year or more	Yes	54 (22.5)	4 (12.9)	0.22	52 (21.0)	2 (6.3)	0.047*
Had ever been unemployed for a year or more	Yes	150 (62.5)	18 (58.1)	0.632	153 (61.7)	23 (71.9)	0.262
Social capital							
How many friends are: Employed	Some / Most / All	55 (22.9)	3 (9.7)	0.091	72 (29.0)	8 (25.0)	0.635
How many friends are: Unemployed	Some / Most / All	191 (79.6)	28 (90.3)	0.153	181 (73.0)	29 (90.6)	0.03*
How many friends are: Running own business	Some / Most / All	4 (1.7)	1 (3.2)	0.544	7 (2.8)	2 (6.3)	0.301
How many friends are: In education/training	Some / Most / All	208 (86.7)	24 (77.4)	0.167	216 (87.1)	26 (81.3)	0.363
Are you involved in charities, etc.	Yes	138 (57.5)	11 (35.5)	0.02*	149 (60.1)	17 (53.1)	0.451
Trust in people	Yes	95 (39.6)	10 (32.3)	0.431	104 (41.9)	12 (37.5)	0.632
25–29							
Work experience							
Had ever had a work for a year or more	Yes	123 (59.1)	27 (46.6)	0.087	124 (53.9)	18 (43.9)	0.237
Had ever been unemployed for a year or more	Yes	127 (61.1)	53 (91.4)	0*	162 (70.4)	36 (87.8)	0.21
Social capital							
How many friends are: Employed	Some / Most / All	121 (58.5)	23 (39.7)	0.017*	144 (62.6)	16 (39.0)	0.05*
How many friends are: Unemployed	Some / Most / All	130 (62.8)	47 (81.0)	0.009*	138 (60.0)	31 (75.6)	0.79
How many friends are: Running own business	Some / Most / All	9 (4.3)	0 (0)	0.106	8 (3.5)	1 (2.4)	0.732
How many friends are: In education/training	Some / Most / All	111 (53.6)	20 (34.5)	0.01*	120 (52.2)	15 (36.6)	0.066
Are you involved in charities, etc.	Yes	102 (49.0)	24 (41.4)	0.302	127 (55.2)	15 (36.6)	0.028*
Trust in people	Yes	83 (39.9)	15 (25.9)	0.05*	115 (50.0)	16 (39.0)	0.195
30–35							
Work experience							
Had ever had a work for a year or more	Yes	234 (90.3)	109 (79.6)	0.03*	233 (86.6)	55 (75.3)	0.019*
Had ever been unemployed for a year or more	Yes	157 (60.6)	122 (89.1)	0*	165 (61.3)	64 (87.7)	0*
Social capital							
How many friends are: Employed	Some / Most / All	213 (82.2)	82 (59.9)	0*	204 (75.8)	43 (58.9)	0.04
How many friends are: Unemployed	Some / Most / All	96 (37.1)	86 (62.8)	0*	124 (46.1)	51 (69.9)	0*
How many friends are: Running own business	Some / Most / All	24 (9.3)	7 (5.1)	0.143	34 (12.6)	9 (12.3)	0.943
How many friends are: In education/training	Some / Most / All	68 (26.3)	25 (18.2)	0.074	78 (29.0)	16 (21.9)	0.23
Are you involved in charities, etc.	Yes	129 (49.8)	55 (40.1)	0.067	137 (50.9)	35 (47.9)	0.651
Trust in people	Yes	98 (37.8)	40 (29.2)	0.086	119 (44.2)	20 (27.4)	0.009*

Differences compared with Pearson chi-squared test (*p*-value reported).\*Significant *p*-value at < 0.05.

**Table 4.** Predicting NEET status: Odds Ratios (95% CI) of being NEET. Logistic regression model (adjusted by sociodemographic variables, family characteristics, work experience and social capital) by gender and age group.

	18–24		25–29		30–35	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Education: medium	0.23 (0.09; 0.59)*	0.29 (0.11; 0.72)*	0.63 (0.10; 0.69)*	0.88 (0.32; 2.46)	0.54 (0.28; 1.04)	0.61 (0.30; 1.23)
Education: high	0.29 (0.08; 0.93)*	0.47 (0.13; 1.47)	0.43 (0.17; 1.09)	0.88 (0.33; 2.44)	0.22 (0.11; 0.42)*	0.33 (0.14; 0.75)*
Caring responsibilities (yes)	0.43 (0.13; 1.20)	1.22 (0.46; 2.98)	2.80 (1.33; 6.01)*	0.68 (0.24; 1.69)	1.96 (1.18; 3.30)*	0.48 (0.25; 0.91)*
Parents' economic self-sufficiency (extras)	1.15 (0.71; 1.86)	1.84 (1.09; 3.15)*	0.53 (0.33; 0.83)*	0.97 (0.60; 1.55)	0.91 (0.67; 1.23)	0.75 (0.52; 1.07)
Unemployment experience (yes)	0.57 (0.24; 1.38)	0.93 (0.38; 2.40)	4.84 (1.69; 17.6)*	3.40 (1.00; 14.97)	4.02 (2.11; 8.20)*	3.65 (1.60; 9.43)*
Unemployed friends (more)	3.01 (0.91; 13.84)	2.83 (0.87; 12.90)	1.97 (0.80; 5.20)	3.70 (1.48; 10.4)*	1.84 (1.10; 3.08)*	2.19 (1.14; 4.32)*
Friends in education/training (more)	0.50 (0.18; 1.46)	0.65 (0.21; 2.28)	0.57 (0.26; 1.24)	0.41 (0.18; 0.93)*	0.66 (0.35; 1.21)	0.71 (0.33; 1.46)
Trust in people	0.53 (0.20; 1.27)	0.45 (0.12; 1.73)	0.97 (0.43; 2.18)	0.53 (0.24; 1.14)	1.09 (0.64; 1.88)	0.70 (0.35; 1.37)

\*Significant OR at  $p < 0.05$ .

determines the NEET status. As higher the educational level, as lower the likelihood of being a NEET, particularly in the case of women. In the case of men of this age, parents' capacity to afford extras increases the likelihood of being a NEET. A possible explanation in this case would be that youth from wealthier families have more opportunities to delay their education or work life in order to explore their personal fulfilment through other activities such as travelling or volunteering.

For respondents between 25 and 29 years of age, we found significant differences by gender in predicting the NEET status. For women, a higher education level and parents' capacity to afford extras decreases the likelihood of being a NEET. Also having caring responsibilities and unemployment experience increases the risk of being a NEET woman. For men, having unemployed friends increases the likelihood of falling into the NEET condition while having friends in education or training decreases this probability.

For respondents between 30 and 35 years of age, education level decreases the likelihood of being a NEET: as higher the educational level as less likely to be a NEET. Having caring responsibilities increases the risk of being a NEET woman, while decreases the risk of being a NEET man. Having previous unemployment experience and unemployed friends increases the likelihood of being a NEET for both men and women.

## Conclusions and future lines of research

The aim of this article was to provide a better picture of the main characteristics of Spanish NEETs, by using data from a cross-sectional survey carried out with a representative sample of young individuals between 18 and 35 years of age ( $n = 1.826$ ). We focused on socio-demographic characteristics including gender, age, educational level and origin as well as other factors such as family background and social capital.

Overall, the Spanish NEETs were mainly unemployed had lower educational levels and experienced more prior periods of unemployment in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts. These findings are consistent with results from previous studies (Furlong 2006; Eurofund 2012; Munsech 2014; Bardak, Maseda, and Rosso 2015; Eurostat 2016b, 2017).

We focused on three age groups (18–24; 25–29; 30–35) and identified different key attributes of Spanish NEETs according to age and gender. A higher proportion of respondents, mainly women, ages 25–29, as well as 30–35, were NEET. NEETs between 18 and 24 years had generally lower educational levels, and were rather inactive than unemployed in comparison with non-NEET counterparts or the other two age groups. This last result suggests that younger NEETs tend to be less motivated to look for a job or that are still trying to find their vocation. Various explanations can account for this result such as a poor educational level, shortage of low-skilled jobs on the labour market, extended parental support, inadequate labour market programmes or professional guidance for young individuals of this age (Ryan 2001; Bynner and Parsons 2002; Calvo 2002; Vallejo Peña 2013; García López 2014; Bacaria, Coll, and Sánchez-Montijano 2015).

NEET respondents between 25 and 35 years were more likely to have experienced previous unemployment and have more unemployed friends. In the multivariate model, the educational level, having caring responsibilities or children, having experienced unemployment and having unemployed friends predicted the NEET status, for both men and women.



More NEET than non-NEET women between 25 and 29, as well as those between 30 and 35 years had caring responsibilities or children, and were rather inactive and doing housework. In the multivariate model, having caring responsibilities increases the risk of being a NEET woman while decreasing it for men. This result, and the higher percentage of NEET women older than 25 years, shows that traditional gender roles are still pervasive in our society (Carrasco and Recio 2001). This may also be related with increasing difficulties to access the labour market, due to high unemployment rates and failure to reconcile personal and professional lives (Davia and Legazpe 2014). NEET women were also more likely to lower their expectations of working conditions and earnings in order to get a job in comparison with their non-NEET counterparts. This result is troublesome as it may lead to an increasing precarization of employment in the case of women and exacerbate the gender-based division of labour.

In general, the family background of NEET respondents was characterised by a higher proportion of unemployed parents (both or one), with lower education and poorer economic self-sufficiency for the three age groups. This finding is consistent with results from previous studies (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Pemberton 2008; Alfieri et al. 2015). However, in our case, these variables were not statistically significant in the multivariate model. Accordingly, we did not find significant evidence of intergenerational factors such as the importance of parents' level of education, or the identity capital derived from family circumstances and experience (see Bynner and Parsons 2002).

The results of this study show that, whether because of education barriers, previous unemployment periods, family instability, or other factors, Spanish young individuals are not being adequately prepared for work. In order to tackle this situation, some studies have highlighted the importance of multi-component interventions combining work-based placements and basic skills provision with the involvement of local employers and accredited courses, respectively (Department for Education 2014). Other studies have identified the importance of partnership arrangements, effective management and organisation, personalised learning, and clear progression routes (Hodgson, Spours, and Stone 2010).

Targeting potentially important psychological barriers to work engagement (e.g. enhancing confidence, reducing distress) were also found to be beneficial for intervention (Department for Education 2014). Nevertheless, sub-group differences in terms of age, gender or ethnicity should be properly tackled in terms of recruitment to, and engagement with specific educational and labour market interventions. Individual and family background characteristics as well as contextual factors such as the political and economic landscape and time of delivery might also influence intervention effectiveness (Cave et al. 1993).

Policy makers should thus acknowledge the need to support and fund rigorous re-engagement interventions for NEET individuals. Beside economic and social policy approaches, policy makers should also consider engaging behaviour-change relevant expertise when designing intervention approaches. Innovation at the local level should be promoted, accompanied by practice evaluations to identify nuances in delivery between different local sites. The NEET population should be monitored in order to assure an adequate public and political attention to this phenomenon, and technological approaches to service delivery and support should be further developed (Mawn et al. 2017).

The present study has three major limitations. Firstly, we are dealing with a cross-sectional study and therefore we cannot confirm the direction of causality in the association

between NEET status and other variables. Secondly, although this study is based on a representative sample of 1.826 young individuals, the overall numbers of young individuals who were NEET and were subsequently sub-divided by gender and age groups were relatively small. Results of sub-groups analyses have thus to be interpreted with some caution. Thirdly, the use of an online access panel for the survey implementation has some disadvantages, above all, possible survey fraud. However, survey implementation was carefully supervised and the final sample was representative of the Spanish young population aged 18–35 (see Economically Active Population Survey, INE 2016).

A longitudinal approach to this phenomenon would allow for a process view emphasising possible changes over the course of different ages. For example, it would be interesting to analyse different ‘pathways’ that young NEETs can undertake (e.g. engaging in even short periods of activity/training, initiating alternative and somehow compensatory activities such as volunteerism, etc.). Moreover, it would allow us to test the model described here by investigating antecedent and consequent variables over time, for example, to better understand whether social networks influence NEET status or whether, vice versa, NEET status influences social networks. The use of a multi-method approach would be useful to probe some of the findings that emerged in this study (for example, the quality of social relationships).

Nevertheless, the present study has two main strengths. First, it deals with a reasonably large sample, representative of the Spanish young population. Second, it provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the NEET phenomenon in Spain. Given the existent literature demonstrating the impact of youth unemployment and of the NEET status on the mental health of young individuals, the high proportion of NEETs found in this study is worrisome from a public health point of view. The exhaustive description of three different age groups of Spanish NEETs might help policy makers to advance towards more inclusive and differentiated labour market and education policies.

## Notes

1. This indicator presents the share of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET), as a percentage of the total number of young people in the corresponding age group, by gender. Young people in education include those attending part-time or full-time education, but exclude those in non-formal education and in educational activities of very short duration. Employment is defined according to the OECD/ILO Guidelines and covers all those who have been in paid work for at least one hour in the reference week of the survey or were temporarily absent from such work (OECD 2016).
2. We used the International Labour Organisation’s timeframe (the four weeks preceding the survey) to measure the proportion of NEET individuals (see Elder 2015)

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