

A HARDER START

Generational Inequality in First-Job Entry Across Europe

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KEY MESSAGES

- Across 11 European countries, **63% of adults aged 20–34 reported obstacles finding their first job, versus 47% of those aged 35–65** – a 15-point gap.
- Young adults were also substantially slower to find their first job: 46% took a month or more, versus 37% of older adults.
- These results suggest a deterioration of early-career opportunities over time.
- A majority of young Europeans (54%) say equal-opportunity policies for youth **have not gone far enough** – providing support for strengthening the Reinforced EU Youth Guarantee.

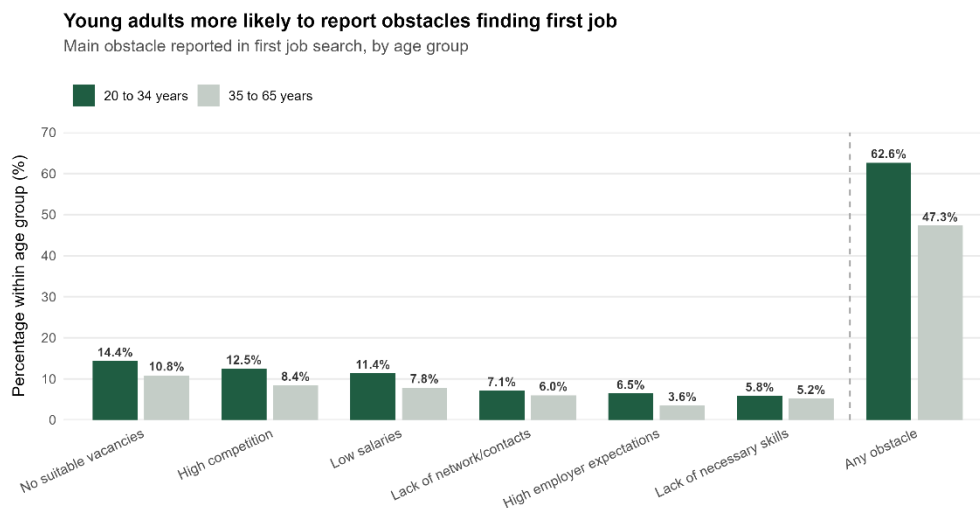
WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Youth unemployment in the EU reached **15.3% in February 2026** — more than 2.5 times the overall rate — with 2.96 million young Europeans jobless. In 2024, 11% of 15–29-year-olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET). The European Parliament’s Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL) is currently finalising its own-initiative implementation report on the *Reinforced Youth Guarantee (2025/2184(INI))*, making the present moment decisive for shaping the EU’s youth employment agenda.

The implications are long-term. A substantial research literature documents *scarring effects* of early-career unemployment: earnings penalties of up to 20% persisting for as long as 20 years, alongside elevated risks of future unemployment, poorer physical and mental health, and reduced life satisfaction. Prolonged youth labour market precarity is also linked to delayed family formation, reduced political trust, and rising support for anti-system parties. A difficult first-job transition is not a short-term setback — it shapes life trajectories and structural outcomes for decades.

FINDING 1: YOUNG EUROPEANS FACE MORE OBSTACLES ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET

Analysis of the CRONOS-3 panel (Wave 3, January–February 2025, N = 7,328) shows that **62.6% of young adults aged 20–34 reported encountering an obstacle when finding their first job, compared with 47.3% of older adults** (Rao-Scott F(1, 7327) = 62.12, p < .001). The most frequently cited obstacles among young respondents were lack of suitable vacancies (14%), high competition (12%), and low salaries (11%) – each elevated relative to older respondents. The pattern points to labour market saturation and inadequate matching infrastructure, not individual deficits.



Source: CRONOS-3 Wave 3, Jan-Feb 2025.

Scope: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia.

Post-stratification and non-response weights applied; countries weighted equally. Rao-Scott F(1, 7327) = 62.12, p < .001 (any obstacle vs none).

Figure 1. Weighted estimates for obstacles in finding a first job from CRONOS-3 Wave 3.

The gap persists across all 11 countries studied but varies substantially.

Young adults more likely to report obstacles finding first job across Europe

Share of population reporting any obstacle when finding first job, by country and age group

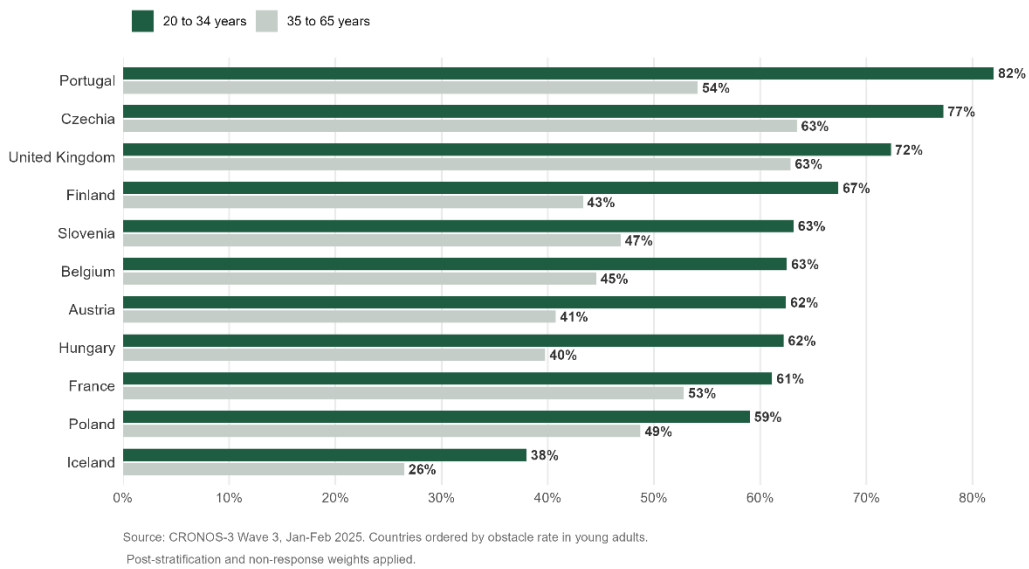


Figure 2. Weighted estimates for obstacles in finding a first job by country CRONOS-3 Wave 3.

FINDING 2: YOUNG EUROPEANS TAKE LONGER TO FIND THEIR FIRST JOB

Among those who actively searched, young adults were substantially less likely to find their first job within a month (54.2% vs. 63.0%) and correspondingly more likely to search for 1–6 months or longer (design-based Wilcoxon rank test: $t = -4.32$, $p < .001$). This matters because early intervention within the first months of unemployment is the strongest predictor of successful Youth Guarantee outcomes — prolonged search periods reduce activation measure effectiveness and increase scarring risk.

Young adults take longer to find their first job

Time taken between starting active search and finding first job, by age group

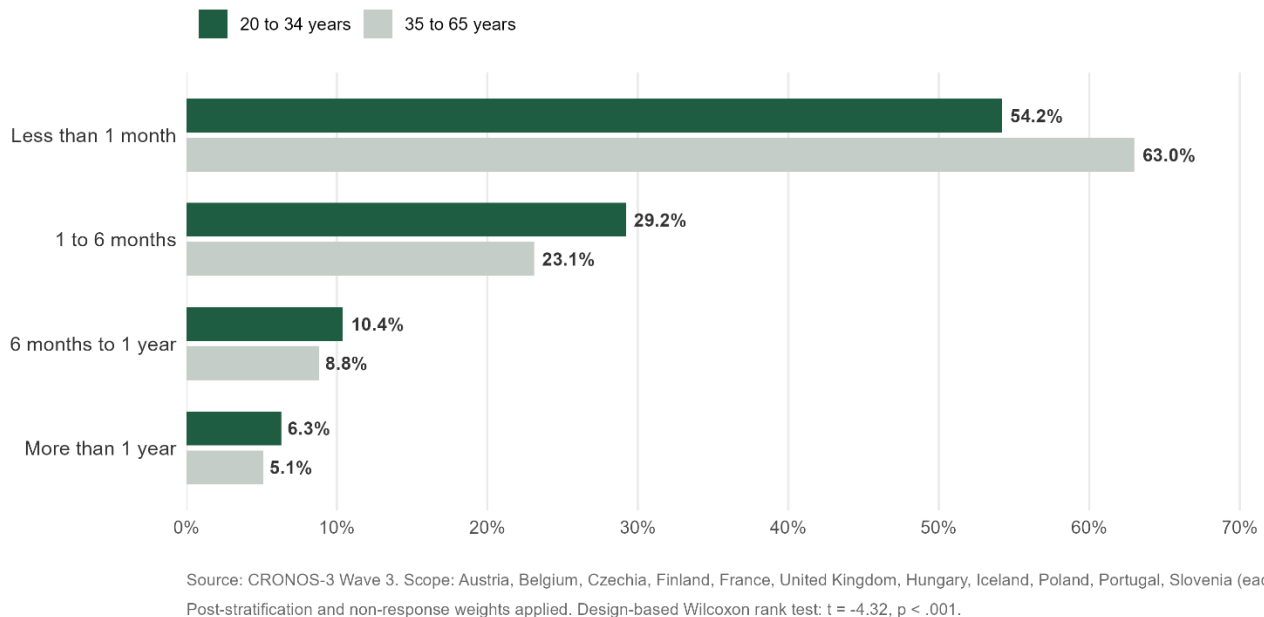
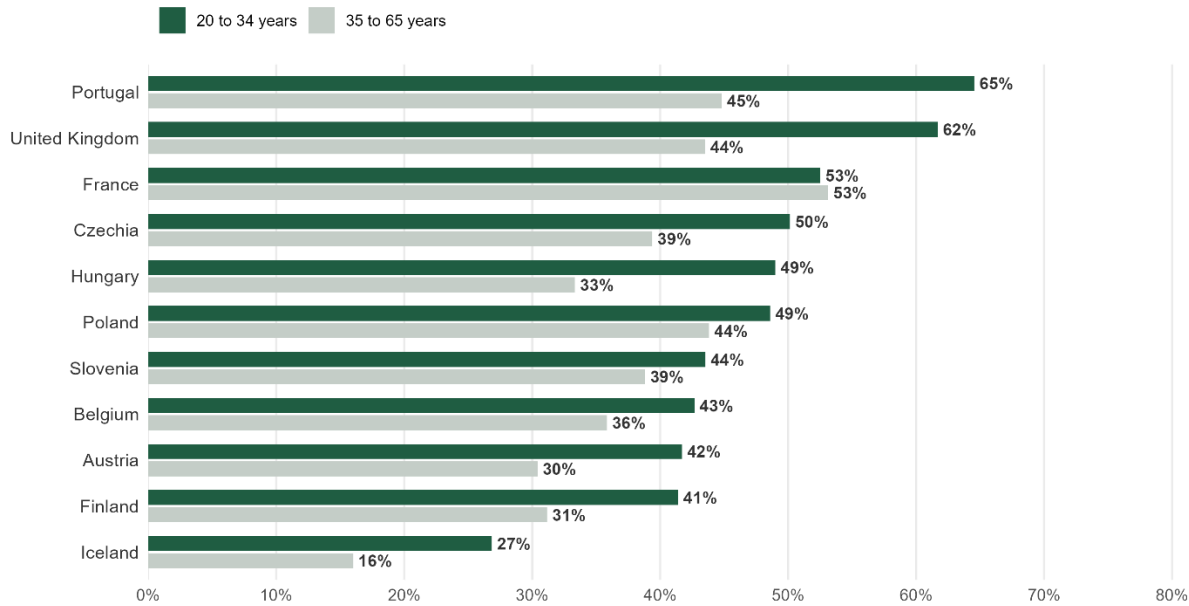


Figure 3. Weighted estimates for duration of first job search.

Young adults take longer to find their first job across Europe

Share of population taking 1 month or more to find first job after starting active search, by country and age group



Source: CRONOS-3 Wave 3, Jan-Feb 2025. Countries ordered by share among young adults. Post-stratification and non-response weights applied.

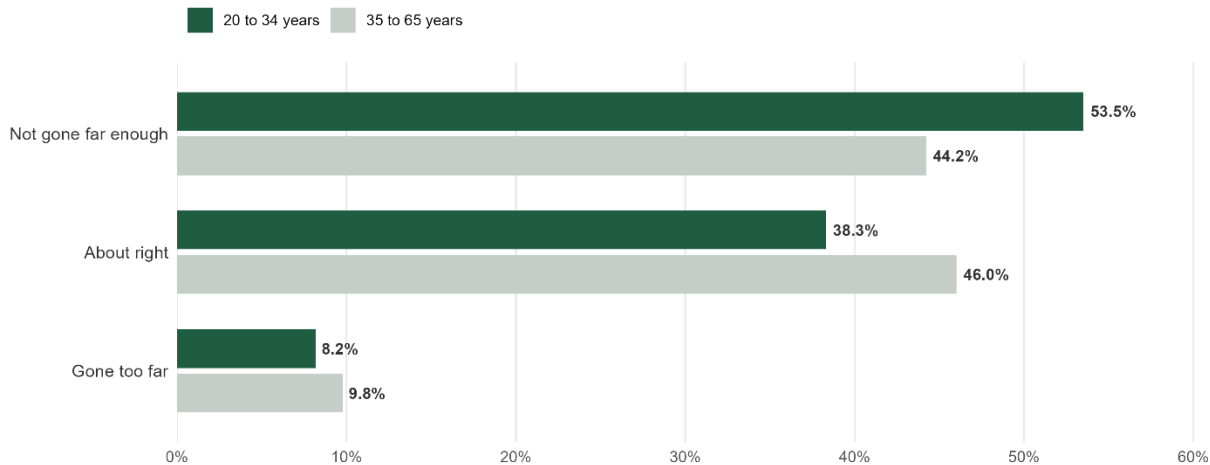
Figure 4. Weighted estimates for duration of first job search by country

FINDING 4: YOUNG EUROPEANS THEMSELVES DEMAND STRONGER POLICY ACTION

A majority of young adults (53.5%) believe equal-opportunity policies for young people *have not gone far enough*, compared with 44.2% of older adults (Wilcoxon rank test: $t = -4.15, p < .001$). Only 8–10% in either age group think policies have gone too far. Beneficiary groups do not always support policy expansion in their own favour; here, young Europeans are unambiguous. This provides **direct democratic legitimacy** for strengthening — not scaling back — the Reinforced Youth Guarantee.

Young adults more likely to support more equal-opportunity policies for youth

Views on whether policies giving equal opportunities to young people (15-24) have gone too far or not far enough



Source: CRONOS-3 Wave 3. Scope: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia (each weighted equally). Post-stratification and non-response weights applied. Design-based Wilcoxon rank test: $t = -4.15, p < .001$.

Figure 4. Weighted estimates for support for equal-opportunities policies.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY PRIORITIES

Young Europeans are not imagining a harder start — they are living one. Across 11 countries, young adults report more obstacles in finding a first job and longer searches than older generations. The young generation affected is asking, by majority, for more policy action.

The Reinforced Youth Guarantee is the right instrument; the ongoing EMPL implementation report is the opportunity. Four priorities follow directly from the evidence: **(1)** adopt **binding quality criteria** on remuneration, duration, and skills relevance for Youth Guarantee offers, ending the practice of unpaid internships; **(2)** expand **Public Employment Service capacity** — mentoring, subsidised first-job placements, targeted outreach — to compensate for weak professional networks; **(3)** require **binding national improvement plans** in Member States with above-average NEET and youth unemployment rates; and **(4)** secure **dedicated youth employment funding** — linked to measurable NEET reduction targets — in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework.

Policy responses must treat first-job entry as a structural transition requiring sustained public investment — not as an individual challenge to be navigated alone. The evidence is clear, the democratic mandate is present, and the moment is now.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Data: CRONOS-3 Wave 3 panel survey, fielded January–February 2025 across 11 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Hungary, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, United Kingdom) as part of the Horizon Europe Infra4NextGen project (grant agreement No. 101131118), within the "Make it Strong" theme. **Methods:** Post-stratification and non-response weights (w3pspwght), with each country weighted equally. Statistical tests are design-based (Rao-Scott chi-square and Wilcoxon rank tests). **Limitations:** Findings compare young adults' current first-job experiences with older adults' retrospective accounts. Recall biases most plausibly cause older respondents to understate historical difficulties, meaning the observed generational gap is a conservative lower bound. **Replication:** Full R analysis code available from the authors. CRONOS-3 data: ess.sikt.no. **Authors:** Bulgarian Institute of Sociology.

