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Youth and the just transition

A profile of young NEET in Mpumalanga



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Youth and the just transition

A profile of young NEET
in Mpumalanga

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Abstract

With one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, South Africa's planning for a just transition needs to take into account the vulnerabilities of its youth cohorts, especially those that can be qualified as not in education, employment or training. This paper provides a profile of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in Mpumalanga province, the region with the highest exposure to the coal exit. Using data from the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), the Census and the General Household Survey (GHS), our findings show that Mpumalanga has had a NEET youth rate of over 37% for the past decade – representing over 638 947 young people between the ages of 15 to 35, with almost three-quarters of them living in income-poor households. Contrary to popular belief, our findings dispel the misconceptions that young NEETs are disinterested or unwilling to work, as more than 640.000 of these youth expressed wanting to work.

However, our analysis also reveals that a significant portion of unemployed young NEETs are new entrants to the labour market – meaning they have never worked before – who have been persistently searching for employment for extended periods of more than five years.

Additionally, the study identifies key factors associated with being NEET, such as gender, household income and household adult employment.

Notably, being female and living in income-poor households emerged as the factors most influential on the likelihood of being NEET among Black youths in Mpumalanga. The results also highlighted a pronounced gender dimension; being married and having children under the age of seven significantly elevated the probability of being NEET among Black female youths. Our findings underscore the need for a nuanced approach in developing targeted policies and interventions that align with NEET youth aspirations, considering the evolving landscape of the energy sector. In a country where access to the labour market explains the highest share of inequality, not giving enough focus to one of the most vulnerable populations such as the NEET youth in the process of a structural transformation will only increase socioeconomic inequalities.

Keywords

NEET, youth, education, unemployment, inactive, Mpumalanga, South Africa

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Résumé

Avec l'un des taux de chômage des jeunes les plus élevés au monde, la planification d'une transition juste en Afrique du Sud doit prendre en compte les vulnérabilités de ses cohortes de jeunes, en particulier ceux qui peuvent être qualifiés de non scolarisés, sans emploi ou sans formation. (NEET – d'après la formulation d'usage en anglais). Cet article dresse un profil des jeunes qui ne suivent pas d'études, d'emploi ou de formation (NEET) dans la province de Mpumalanga, la région la plus exposée à la sortie du charbon. À partir des données de l'enquête trimestrielle sur la force de travail (QLFS), du recensement et de l'enquête générale sur les ménages (GHS), nos résultats montrent que la province de Mpumalanga a connu un taux de jeunes NEET de plus de 37 % au cours de la dernière décennie, ce qui représente plus de 638.947 jeunes âgés de 15 à 35 ans, dont près des trois quarts vivent dans des ménages à

faible revenu. Contrairement à la croyance populaire, nos résultats réfutent les idées fausses selon lesquelles les jeunes NEET sont désintéressés ou ne veulent pas travailler, puisque plus de 640.000 d'entre eux ont exprimé leur désir de travailler.

Cependant, notre analyse révèle également qu'une part importante des jeunes chômeurs NEET sont de nouveaux entrants sur le marché du travail – ce qui signifie qu'ils n'ont jamais travaillé auparavant – qui ont été à la recherche d'un emploi pendant des périodes prolongées de plus de cinq ans.

En outre, l'étude identifie des facteurs clés associés au fait d'être NEET, tels que le sexe, le revenu du ménage et l'emploi de l'adulte au sein du ménage. Notamment, le fait d'être une femme et de vivre dans un ménage à faible revenu est apparu comme le facteur le plus influent sur la probabilité d'être NEET parmi les jeunes Noirs de

Mpumalanga. Les résultats ont également mis en évidence une dimension sexospécifique prononcée : le fait d'être marié et d'avoir des enfants de moins de sept ans augmente de manière significative la probabilité d'être NEET chez les jeunes femmes noires. Nos résultats soulignent la nécessité d'une approche nuancée dans l'élaboration de politiques et d'interventions ciblées qui répondent aux aspirations des jeunes NEET, compte tenu de l'évolution du paysage du secteur de l'énergie. Dans un pays où l'accès au marché du travail explique la plus grande part des inégalités, ne pas accorder suffisamment d'attention à l'une des populations les plus vulnérables, comme les jeunes NEET, dans le processus de transformation structurelle, ne fera qu'accroître les inégalités socio-économiques.

Mots-clés

Jeunesse, éducation, chômage, inactifs, Mpumalanga, Afrique du Sud

Introduction

Youth unemployment is a major concern globally, especially as the post-pandemic labour market rebound seems to have happened most for the non-youth segment of the population (UN-DESA, 2023). Among the countries with reliable statistics, South Africa stands out as having the highest youth unemployment rate reaching 59% in 2023 (Stats SA, 2024), a number whose magnitude strikes even more when compared to the global youth unemployment of 16% (ILO, 2024). The problem of these lingering high rates throughout the last decades has often been qualified as a 'ticking time bomb' and has recently been at the centre of policy initiatives such as the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative and its different programs. But this aggregate national figure hides even more worrying numbers such as the 61% unemployment rate for 15-24 year-olds and the 43% rate of the youth population in the country not being in education, employment or training (NEET). This NEET status is a form of labour underutilization that has been shown to have negative long-term impacts in terms of earning and employment probabilities (ILO, 2020).

There has been evidence that there is hysteresis in unemployment in South Africa

through the human capital mechanism and insider-outsider mechanism (Adams and Yu, 2022). This entails that demand shifts could further entrench unemployment. As a highly climate-vulnerable country with a low carbon tax, South Africa fits into the characterization of the economies that are likely to suffer disruptive effects, specifically on the demand side, from climate-related events and climate policies (Ciccarelli and Marotta, 2024). While slightly more than 200 000 jobs are at risk in the coal value chain, these numbers will go up when taking into account at-risk sectors such as agriculture and automotive industries. With youth being among the most vulnerable to the scarring effects of unemployment, but also being left behind from the policy focus on job losses, it is crucial that policy orientations take into account the specificities of this subpopulation and strive for their economic integration.

Mpumalanga is the region that concentrates the coal mines, but also the coal plants that are reaching the end of their life cycle and are being shut down, which makes it the region at the centre of the discussions on just transition and economic diversification. Bhorat et al. (2024) provide an extensive analysis of the

socioeconomic impacts of the transition on the coal communities in Mpumalanga and highlight that the coal mining industry workforce is relatively youthful and will need specific supporting measures. In this paper, we focus rather on those who are not directly under the spotlights of the just transition debates but whose future employment perspectives are likely to be impacted by them – the youth that are not in employment, education or training. We provide a detailed profiling of this subpopulation, young people aged 15 to 35 years who are NEET over the period 2013

– 2023 for the province of Mpumalanga, to highlight their specificities and so that we can inform policy planning.

The next section gives an overview of NEET youth in South Africa and places the Mpumalanga context in a broader national one. After briefly reviewing the data sources, section 3 proceeds with the profiling of the NEET youth in the province and section 4 dwells into the key factors associated with the NEET status, while section 5 concludes.

1. Overview of NEET youth¹

The South African labour market for youth has been significantly underperforming over the last decade and the issue of young people who are NEET remains a major concern in public and policy discussions in the country (Mudiriza et al., 2023). Recent statistics show that a staggering 9.4 million young people between the ages of 15 to 35 are NEET, representing 43.2% of the youth population in the country. Among these NEET youth, the majority are unemployed, with 4.9 million (52.8%) actively searching for work and 1.9 million (20.7%) discouraged job seekers. Of those actively searching for work, 2.9 million (59.0%) are new entrants who have never worked before. Alarming, over 1.7 million of these new entrant NEET youths (60.9%) have been searching for work unsuccessfully for three or more years. Meanwhile, nearly a third of NEET youth (26.5%) are inactive and disengaged from the labour market, with over half (53.8%) citing caregiving responsibilities as the reason for their inactivity. It is important to note that those inactive due to caregiving responsibilities are distinct from those who are inactive simply because they choose not to participate in the labour market. Notably, 85.8% of those citing caregiving responsibilities as their reason for inactivity are female.

Furthermore, there are significant differences in the prevalence of young NEETs across South Africa's nine provinces, ranging from 33.4% in the Western Cape to 52.1% in the North West province in 2023. The prevalence of young NEETs is equally high in Mpumalanga province, with a rate of 45.9% in the same year, exceeding the national average of 43.2%. In other words: almost half of the young people in Mpumalanga are jobless and out of school. Mpumalanga is situated in the eastern part of South Africa and is the second smallest in South Africa after Gauteng, covering an area of 76,495 square kilometers. Despite its size, it has a dynamic and diverse landscape, encompassing both urban centers and rural communities with diverse ethnicities. One of the key driving forces of Mpumalanga's economy is its mining industry, which contributes significantly to both the provincial and national GDP (MDEDT, 2022).

However, the province is currently undergoing a crucial transition as the country embraces the green energy revolution. Coal-fired power stations and associated coal mines, concentrated mainly in Steve Tshwete and Emalahleni municipalities are undergoing significant phase-outs.

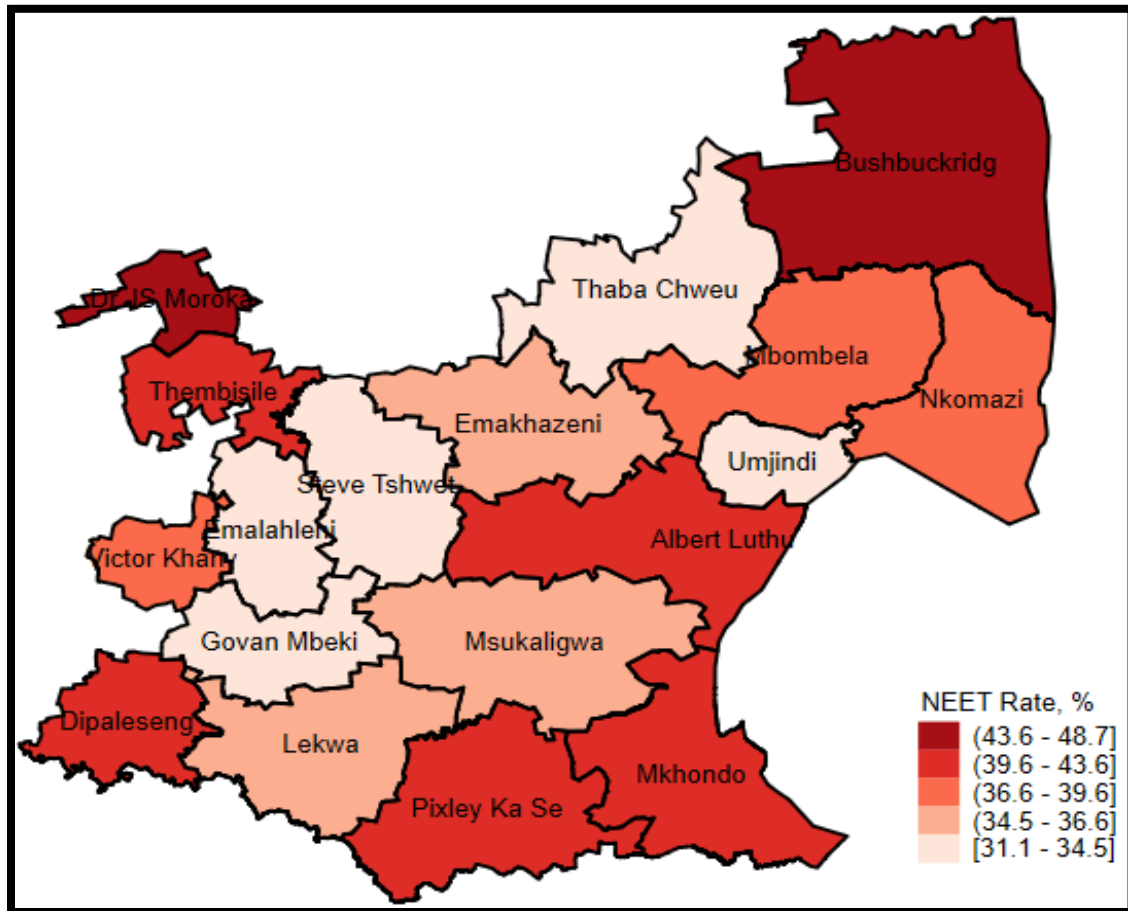
¹ The statistics in this section were derived by the authors using 2023 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) first-quarter data. While we have used the expanded definition of youth, 15-35 years, it is important to recognize the substantial differences in the profile of young NEETs aged 15-24 and those aged 25-35. These differences should be taken into account when formulating policies targeting young people.

This transition is anticipated to lead to significant job losses, affecting not just the mining sector but also businesses providing services to it. This situation poses a challenge as it may lead to an increase in the already high unemployment and NEET rates in the province. Accordingly, to help inform policy and program interventions aimed at facilitating young people's transition to employment, education or training opportunities, there is a need to profile and understand the NEET youth cohort in Mpumalanga.

To highlight the disparities evident within Mpumalanga, we resorted to the 2011 Census data since the QLFS cannot be disaggregated below the provincial level. Despite its age, the 2011 Census data remains relevant, offering a broad understanding of the geographic distribution of NEET youth in the province, which might have seen little change since 2011. Figure 1 shows that the provincial rate of 39.3% masks substantial disparities across Mpumalanga.² This provincial average conceals more dire situations in municipalities such as Bushbuckridge (48.7%), Dr JS Moroka (46.2%), Pixley Ka Seme (43.6%), and Thembisile (43.6%), all reporting rates higher than the provincial average. Conversely, certain municipalities perform relatively better, with NEET rates below the provincial average. For instance, Emalahleni-MP (34.5%), Govan Mbeki (34.5%), Umjindi (33.8%), Thaba Chweu (31.2%), and Steve Tshwete (31.1%) display considerably lower NEET rates, suggesting comparatively more favourable conditions for young individuals in these areas. Further evidence shows that young NEETs are disproportionately concentrated in specific areas within the province. Notably, Mbombela (15.3%), Bushbuckridge (12.8%), Emalahleni-MP (10.4%), and Nkomazi (10.2%) stand out as regions with higher concentrations of NEET youth.

² On the map, darker colours indicate municipalities with higher rates of NEET youth, while lighter colours depict those with lower rates.

Figure 1. NEET rate for youth aged 15–35 years across municipalities in Mpumalanga



Notes: Author's calculations based on 2011 census data aggregated to 18 municipalities in Mpumalanga. Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

These varying rates across the province underscore the need for well-targeted, place-based policies and interventions aimed at addressing the challenges faced by young people in different areas.

2. Profile of the NEET youth in Mpumalanga

2.1. Data sources

The study relies on three data sources gathered by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) to conduct an in-depth analysis of the NEET youth cohort in the province. To begin, we utilise data from the first quarter of the 2013–2023 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) as this dataset offers valuable insights into the labour market situation of the NEET youth population, shedding light on their employment status. Additionally, we use 2011 Census data to examine the spatial disparities in young NEET rates across different municipalities in Mpumalanga. This allows us to understand the variations in NEET prevalence based on geographical locations within the province. To conclude, we incorporate data from the 2013 and 2021 General Household Survey (GHS). The GHS data provides valuable information at the household level, which allows us to explore contextual factors such as household income poverty and adult employment status among NEET youth, enriching our analysis of their circumstances.

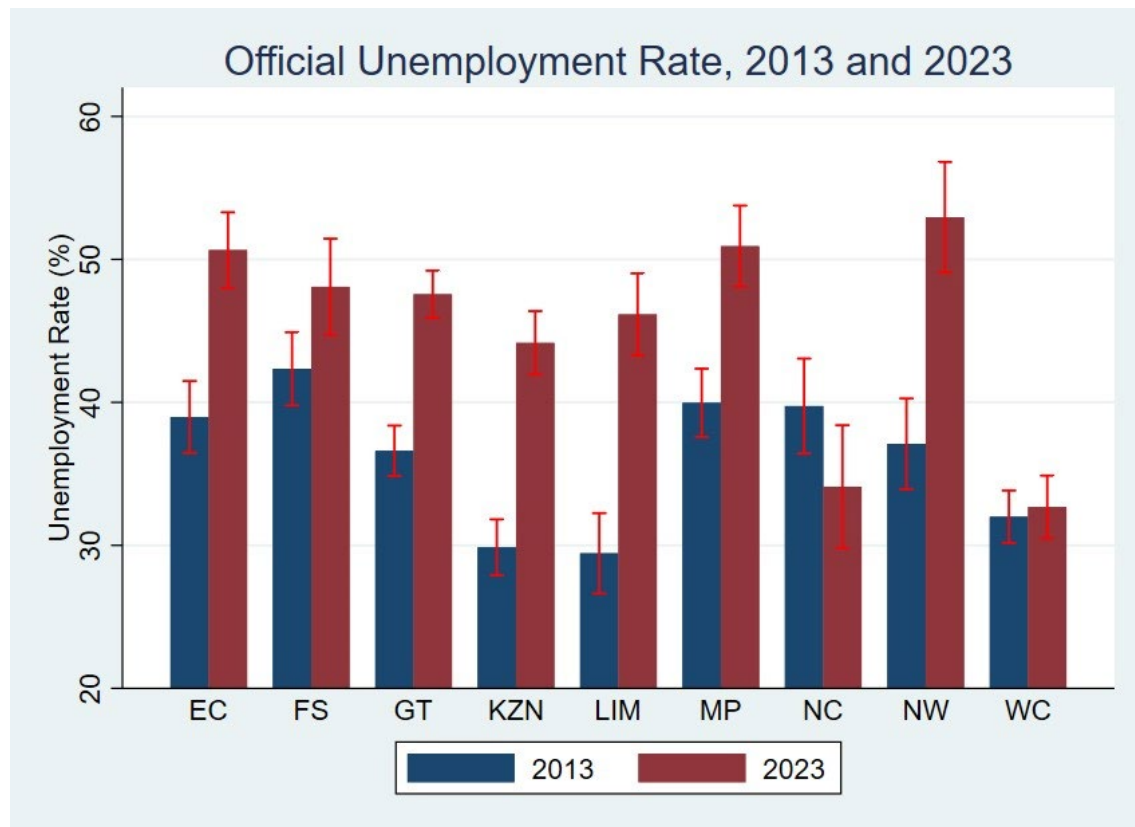
The availability of GHS data also enables us to conduct regression analyses, allowing for a deeper exploration of the individual and household factors associated with being NEET among young people in Mpumalanga. It is important to note that all descriptive estimates presented in this study have been weighted using the personal weights provided in the QLFS, Census, and GHS datasets. This weighting ensures that our findings accurately represent the broader youth population in Mpumalanga, enhancing the reliability and generalisability of our conclusions.

2.2. Activity status of young people in Mpumalanga

Mpumalanga is home to more than 1.7 million young people between the ages of 15 to 35 in 2023. This youth cohort constitutes 37.7% of the total population, making it the biggest demographic group in the province. This youth bulge presents a valuable opportunity for Mpumalanga as young people are generally considered potentially pivotal drivers of economic growth through their innovative ideas and entrepreneurial endeavours. However, as elsewhere in the country a large proportion of these youth are not participating in productive activities, contributing to alarming unemployment and NEET rates within the province. As indicated in Figure 2, over the past decade, Mpumalanga has consistently experienced a youth

unemployment rate surpassing the national average and by 2023 it has the second highest unemployment rate at 50.9% just after North West at 52.9%.³ This situation is expected to worsen as the province faces the consequences of job losses in the mining industry.

Figure 2. Official unemployment rate among young people aged 15–35 in Mpumalanga and other Provinces (QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023)



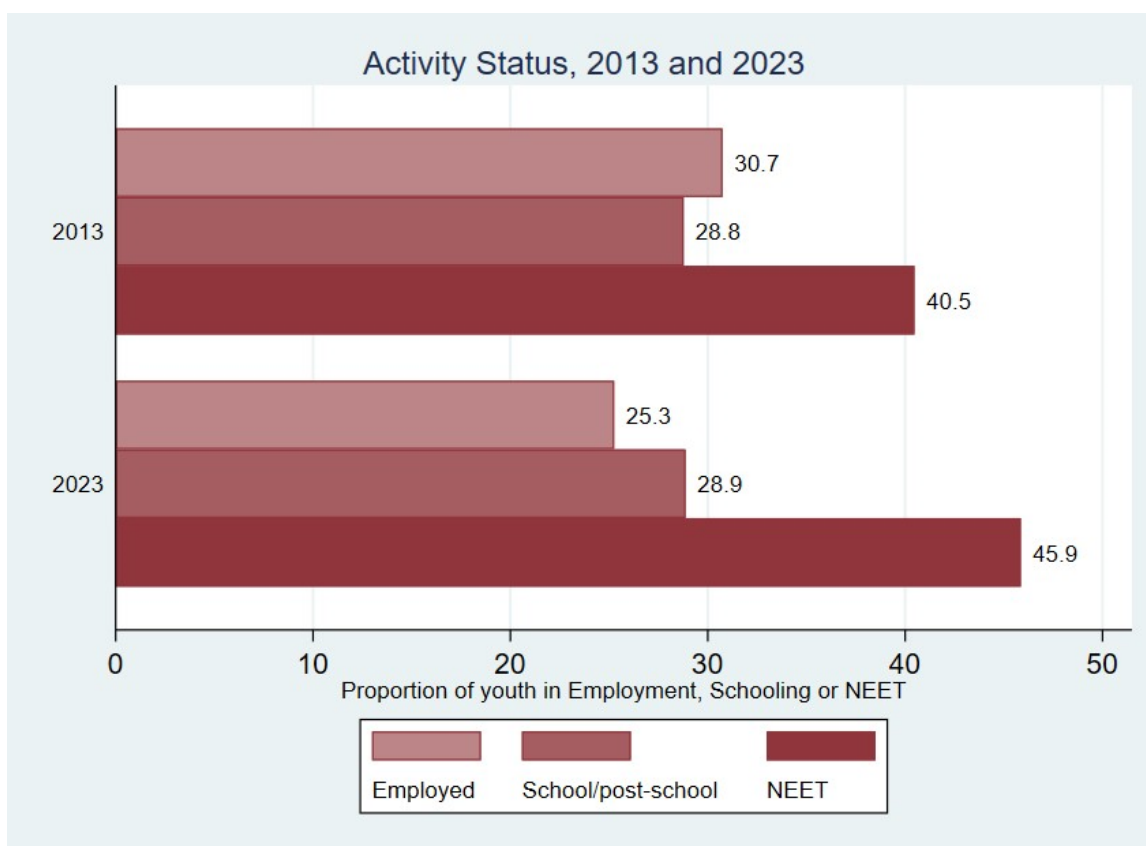
Notes: WP – Western Cape; EC – Eastern Cape; NC – Northern Cape; FS – Free State; KZN – KwaZulu-Natal; NW – North West; GT – Gauteng; MP – Mpumalanga and LIM – Limpopo. Point estimates are weighted using person weights. 90% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are displayed and if the CIs overlap it suggests that the differences between 2013 and 2023 are not statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level.

To have a comprehensive understanding of the activities young people in Mpumalanga are engaged in, Figure 3 indicates the share of young people who are NEET, alongside those who are employed, and those in schooling. While the proportion of young people engaged in

³ The national official unemployment rate for youth was 35.3% in 2013 and it increased to 45.5% in 2023.

schooling has remained relatively stable – 28.8% in 2013 and 28.9% in 2023, the proportion of NEET youth has increased as employment decreased significantly.⁴ This significant decrease can be attributed to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to widespread job losses not only in South Africa but also globally (Casale and Posel, 2021). There was a slight, although statistically insignificant, increase in employment to 25.3% in 2023, which might indicate the early stages of a recovery period following the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. Activity status of young people in Mpumalanga, 2013 and 2023



Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

In addition to only a small proportion of young people in the province being in employment, a majority of those youths who are employed, are in precarious jobs that often offer low wages and lack essential formal work arrangements, including written contracts, job security, benefits,

⁴ When we break down the data by age group, we observe that the majority of those who are employed fall within the 25–35 age-group. Furthermore, a gender-based disaggregation reveals that a smaller proportion of females are employed in comparison to their male counterparts.

and social protection. As shown in Table 1, 62.9% of employed youths are in precarious jobs such as elementary occupations (29.2%), service and sales-related positions (18.2%) and craft and related trades (15.5%).⁵ These statistics too have remained relatively consistent over the past decade, underscoring the vulnerability of young workers in Mpumalanga. The significance of these precarious jobs cannot be understated, as they have become a vital source of income for a considerable number of young workers, but the high proportions of these types of jobs does point to the economy's inability to create substantial formal employment that would further alleviate poverty. They also again present a reality that needs to be taken into account within the broader energy transition: youth who are in precarious jobs now may not be able to fall back on social protection measures if these jobs cease to exist.

Table 1. Youth employment by occupation in Mpumalanga, 2013 and 2023

Main occupation	2013		2023	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Elementary Occupation	145 805	29.2	128 652	29.2
Service and sales related work	88 402	17.7	80 206	18.2
Craft and related trades work	67 502	13.5	68 420	15.5
Plant and machine operators	44 546	8.9	48 295	11.0
Clerks	55 000	11.0	38 774	8.8
Technical and associate professionals	28 729	5.7	33 691	7.7
Professionals	13 510	2.7	17 739	4.0
Domestic workers	23 519	4.7	12 730	2.9
Legislators; senior officials and managers	30 687	6.1	11 171	2.5
Skilled agricultural and fishery worker	2 498	0.5	567	0.1
Total	500 197	100	440 246	100

Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

⁵ The situation is further compounded by the prevalence of informal employment. In 2023, approximately 30.5% of young workers were employed in the informal sector, while a concerning 26.5% of young workers were employed without a job contract.

Nonetheless, the most concerning issue in the province is the alarming proportion of young people who are NEET. While the percentage of NEET youth was 40.4% in 2013, it has increased significantly, reaching a distressing peak of 47.8% in 2022, before decreasing slightly to 45.9% in 2023. Although the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly contributed to this rise by disrupting major economic activities as well as education, it is important to note that the share of NEET youth in the province had already been increasing before the pandemic's onset.

Overall, Figure 3 clearly shows that the majority of young people in the province are not participating in any productive activities, as they are neither employed nor in education or training. In the subsequent sections of this study, we will examine the NEET youth cohort in more detail, seeking to better understand their diverse characteristics and the key factors contributing to the NEET status.

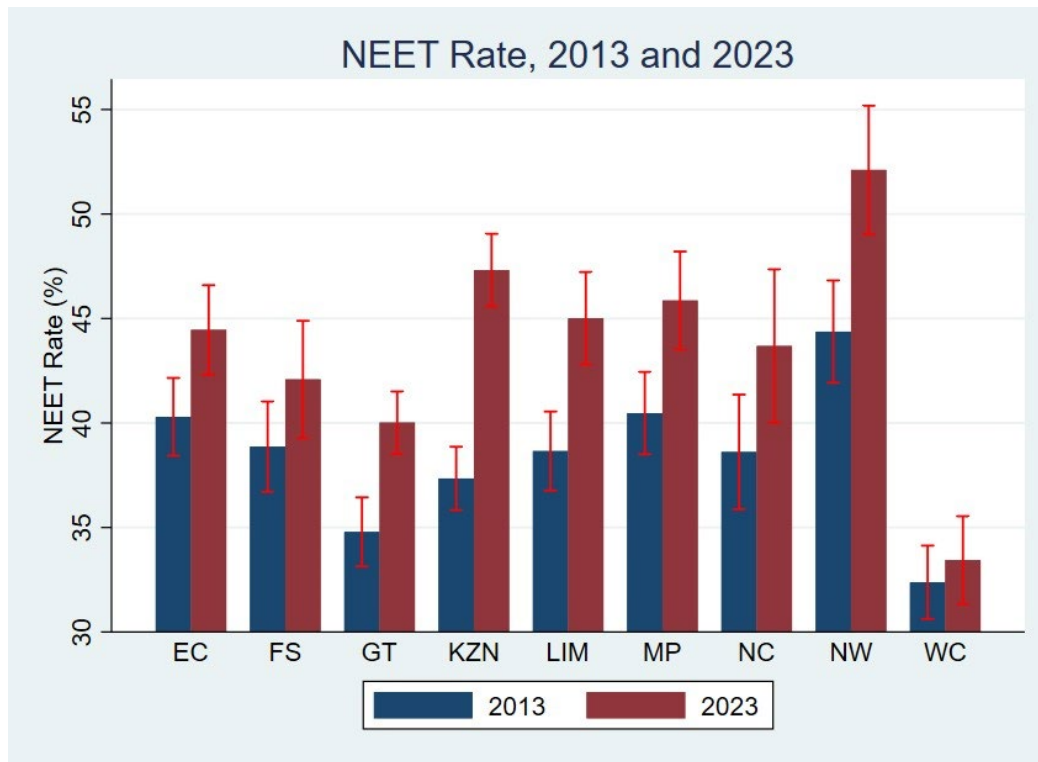
2.3. Youth NEET rate by various characteristics in Mpumalanga⁶

Figure 4 presents the youth NEET rates across provinces, demonstrating how Mpumalanga compares to South Africa's national average and other provinces. The national NEET rate was 37.6% in 2013 and it increased to 43.2% in 2023. However, the national rates mask significant variations across provinces. For instance, provinces like the Western Cape reported rates of 32.4% in 2013 and 33.4% in 2023, while the North West had rates of 44.3% and 52.1% during the same period.

Examining the NEET rates in various provinces, we note that Mpumalanga has consistently experienced one of the highest rates in the country, registering a rate of 40.5% in 2013, and an increase to 45.9% in 2023. This represents a staggering number of over 620,000 young individuals aged 15–35. Throughout the study period, Mpumalanga's rates have consistently surpassed the national average, making it the province with the third-highest NEET rate in 2023, after North West and KwaZulu-Natal.

⁶ The rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET rate) is defined as the number of young persons who are not in education, employment or training as a percentage of the total youth population aged 15–35 years old.

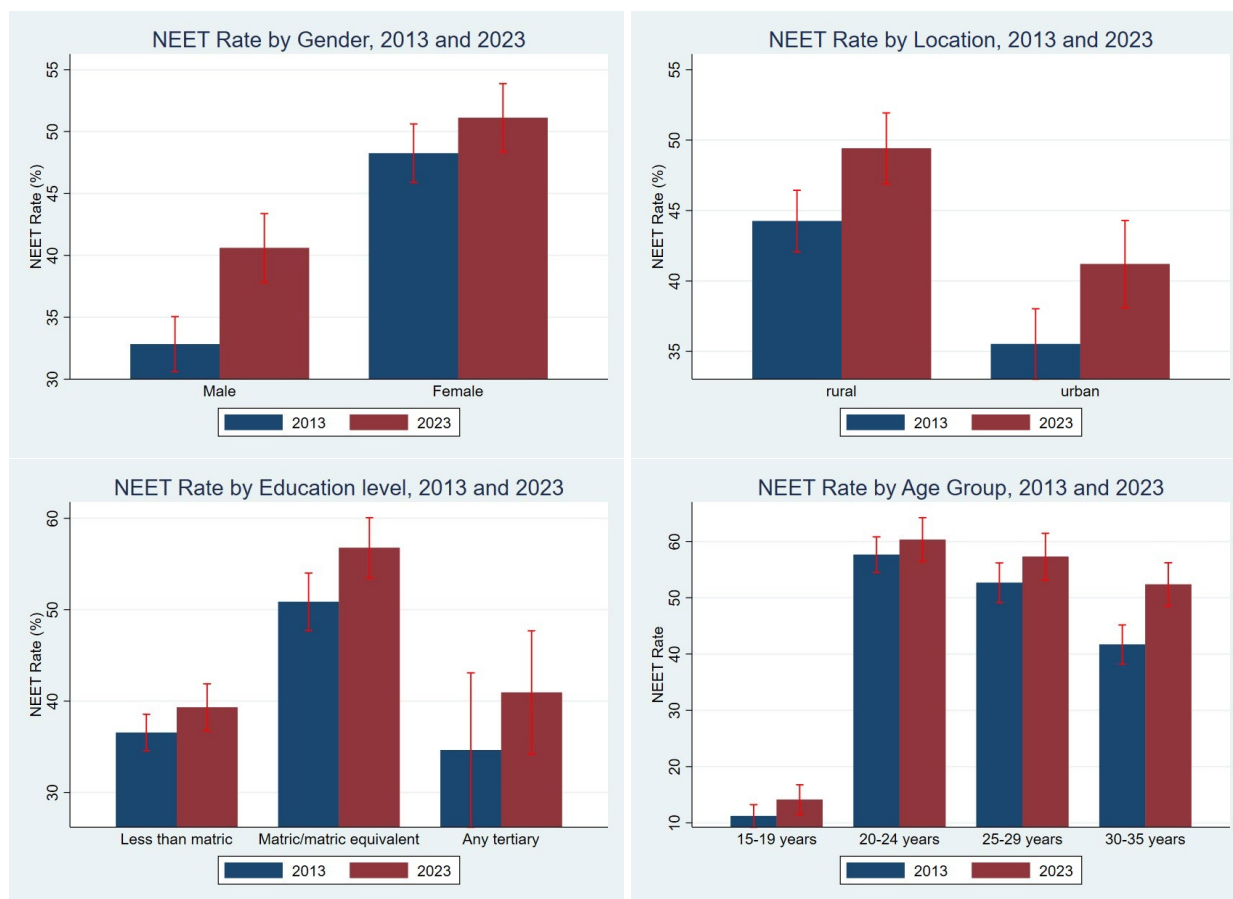
Figure 4. Proportion of young people who are NEET in Mpumalanga and other Provinces (QLFS Q1 data for 2013–2023)



Notes: WP – Western Cape; EC – Eastern Cape; NC – Northern Cape; FS – Free State; KZN – KwaZulu-Natal; NW – North West; GT – Gauteng; MP – Mpumalanga and LIM – Limpopo. Point estimates are weighted using person weights. 90% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are displayed and if the CIs overlap it suggests that the differences between 2013 and 2023 are not statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level.

Figure 5 further presents the NEET rates by gender, rural/urban division, education levels and age group in Mpumalanga. Higher than national average rates are observed for females, rural youths, those with matric education, and those in the 20–24 year age group. Analysing the NEET rate by gender reveals that females consistently experienced higher rates than males over the study period. In 2013, 48.3% of young women were NEET compared to 51.1% in 2023. In contrast, young men showed 32.8% NEET in 2013, rising to 40.6% in 2023. However, it is noteworthy that the female rate increased by only 2.8 percentage points between 2013 and 2023, which is not statistically significant. In contrast, the male rate saw a more significant increase of 7.8 percentage points during the same period, indicating a closing gender gap over time, with a worsening of the situation for young men.

Figure 5. Proportion of young people who are NEET by various characteristics in Mpumalanga (QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023)



Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights. 90% Confidence Intervals (CIs) are displayed and if the CIs overlap it suggests that the differences between 2013 and 2023 are not statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level.

The location of young people also plays a crucial role, as rural areas consistently reported higher NEET rates compared to urban areas. Moreover, the NEET rate varied based on education levels, with individuals with matric education consistently facing higher rates compared to those with less than matric or tertiary education. However, what is particularly concerning is the relatively high and increasing NEET rate among young people with some form of tertiary education. This trend highlights the apparent inability of the local economy to accommodate these youths, regardless of their attainment of higher education levels. The impending just energy transition might exacerbate this situation further. Additionally, the NEET rate was highest among youth aged 20-29 years and lowest among those aged 15-19 years.

2.4. Who are the young NEETs in Mpumalanga?

Table 2 profiles the NEET youth cohort in Mpumalanga over the course of a decade, from 2013 to 2023. In 2013, the number of NEET youth in Mpumalanga stood at approximately 658,353, accounting for 40.5% of the total youth population aged 15 to 35 years. However, by 2023, the number of NEET youth increased to 799,292, representing a notable and worrisome rise to 45.9% of the total youth population.

**Table 2. Overview of NEET youth in Mpumalanga
(QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023)**

	Indicator	2013		2023	
		Total number	%	Total number	%
Population	Total youth (15–35 yrs.)	1 626 688		1 742 851	
	NEET youth (15–35 yrs.)	658 353	40.5	799 292	45.9
Of those young people who are NEET	Status				
	Unemployed	323 157	49.1	443 105	55.4
	Discouraged job-seeker	180 565	27.4	199 890	25.0
	Inactive	154 632	23.5	156 296	19.6
	Gender				
	Male	269 517	40.9	353 434	44.2
	Female	388 836	59.1	445 858	55.8
	Race				
	Black/African	637 447	96.8	779 720	97.6
	Geo type				
	Urban	250 283	38.0	310 575	38.9
	Rural	408 070	62.0	488 717	61.1
	Age category				
	15 – 19	46,669	7.1	61,428	7.7
	20 – 24	232,656	35.3	253,612	31.7
	25 – 29	203 172	30.9	228 289	28.6
	30 – 35	175 856	26.7	255 963	32.0
	Education level				
	Less than matric	401 867	61.5	372 877	46.8
	Matric	228 800	35.0	364 320	45.7
	Any tertiary ⁷	23 251	3.6	59 489	7.5

Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

⁷ Youth with “Any tertiary” education are those youths with at least 13 years of education; these youths have the following qualifications: 13 years – Certificate with grade 12/ Std. 10, diploma with grade 12/ Std. 10, N5/NTC 5, N6/NTC 6, Higher Diploma; 15 years – Post Higher Diploma (Masters; Doctoral Diploma), Bachelors Degree; 16 years – Bachelors Degree and Post Graduate Diploma, Honours Degree and 18 years – Higher Degree (Masters/PhD).

Examining various characteristics of NEET youth, the analysis not only reveals persistent heterogeneity but also highlights a persistent trend in the profile of the NEET youth cohort in the province. This is particularly evident for unemployment status and educational attainment. In 2013, a gender disparity was evident, as the majority of NEET youth were female, constituting 59.1% of the total NEET population. Over the ten-year period, this gender gap has narrowed, with the proportion of female NEET youth decreasing to 55.8%. Additionally, the bulk of NEET youth in both 2013 and 2023 were Black/African (more than 95%) and predominantly located in rural areas (more than 60%).

The analysis also shows that in 2013, the highest concentration of NEET youth was within the 20-24 years age group, constituting 35.3% of the NEET youth population. However, in 2023, the highest proportion of NEET youth shifted to the 30-35 years age group, making up 32.0% of the NEET youth population. Further analysis of education levels reveals that in 2013, the majority of NEET youth had less than matric education (61.5%), followed by matric at 35.0%, and any tertiary education at 3.6%. However, in 2023, there was a notable shift with the proportion of NEET youth holding less than matric education decreasing to 46.8%. Simultaneously, those with matric increased to 45.7%, and those with any tertiary education rose to 7.5%. These shifts seem to indicate that higher levels of education no longer protect against NEET status in the province and raise questions about the changing role and effectiveness of the matric certificate, and even of post-school education – as a protective factor against disengagement over the past decade.

Table 2 further shows that for the past decade, the majority of NEET youth have had an orientation towards the labour market as more NEETs are unemployed, which includes those actively searching for work and discouraged job seekers. In 2013, 49.1% were searching unemployed, 27.4% were discouraged job-seekers, and 23.5% were inactive. However, by 2023, more young NEETs were actively searching for work, with the proportion of searching unemployed youth increasing to 55.4%, discouraged job-seekers decreasing to 25.0% and inactive youth decreasing to 19.6%. These numbers are encouraging as, over the ten-year period, more young NEETs are actively seeking employment opportunities in Mpumalanga but also point at the urgent need to provide such opportunities for these young people and to buffer against further job losses in the future.

2.5. Labour market engagement among young NEETs

In this subsection, we take a closer look at the labour market engagement among the NEET youth cohort in the province. Table 3 presents a breakdown of young NEETs into two groups: those actively engaged in the labour market (i.e., those who indicate they want to work – we include both searching unemployed and discouraged job seekers) and those disengaged (inactive, or unavailable to work). The results reveal that over the decade, a significant proportion of NEET youth who were engaged in the labour market were experiencing long-term unemployment, defined as actively seeking employment for more than a year. In 2013, the proportion of long-term unemployed NEET youth was 44.0%, and by 2023, it increased to 48.4%. This indicates a concerning trend of prolonged joblessness among this vulnerable group and is of concern as research indicates that longer periods of ‘NEET-hood’ increase the risk of mental ill health and further poverty traps among young people (see, for example, Branson et al., 2019).

**Table 3. NEET youth by unemployment and inactive sub-groups
(QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023)**

		2013		2023	
		Total number	%	Total number	%
Engaged	Short-term unemployed	101 754	20.2	131 119	20.4
	Long-term unemployed	221 403	44.0	311 986	48.4
	Discouraged	180 565	35.9	199 890	31.0
	Seasonal workers	0.00	0.00	1 289	0.2
Engaged Total		503 721	100	644 284	100
Disengaged (‘inactive’)	Homemakers	60 226	45.0	46 631	39.6
	Health reasons	33 044	24.7	34 646	29.4
	Other inactive	40 620	30.3	36 510	31.0
Disengaged Total		133 890	100	117 786	100

Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights. The total number of NEET youths in the Engaged and Disengaged categories does not add up to the total number of NEET youths who are unemployed and inactive because we excluded from this analysis the following youths: those (1) who reported being students under the reasons for being inactive; (2) who did not give a reason for why they did not want to work; (3) who gave a reason that was specified as other reasons and (4) who gave as a reason that they had retired or were too old to work – the latter of which seems incompatible with the age group under consideration.

The analysis further shows that while the proportion of NEET youth in short-term unemployment has remained roughly constant over time, the proportion of discouraged job seekers has decreased from 35.9% in 2013 to 31.0% in 2023.⁸ This reduction might be indicating some progress in rekindling hope and motivation among the NEET youth but might also indicate that the levels of deprivation and despair have gotten so high that more youth NEETs are driven to actively look for work again.

Table 3 further shows that of the young NEETs who are disengaged from the labour market (inactive), 39.6% are inactive due to homemaker responsibilities in 2023, a decrease from 45.0% in 2013. Of significance, is that all the inactive young homemakers in 2013 were female (100%), but this proportion decreased to 94.7% in 2023, suggesting a possible shift in gender roles and responsibilities. Another noteworthy finding is that in 2013, 24.7% of the inactive NEET youth cited health reasons for their disengagement from the labour market, and in 2023, this proportion increased to 29.4%. The rise in the number of NEET youth facing health-related barriers requires further investigation but is concerning, as ill health directly impacts young people's overall well-being and future opportunities for re-engagement in the labour market or education.⁹

Table 4 presents a breakdown of unemployed NEET youth based on their unemployment status. One striking trend is the considerable proportion of new entrants joining the labour market among the searching unemployed NEET youth. In 2013, this group accounted for 59.7% of the total searching unemployed NEET youth but decreased to 51.9% in 2023. Despite this decrease, a huge number of searching unemployed NEET youth were in the labour market for the first time.

⁸ The findings reveal a shift in the distribution of NEET youth between long-term unemployment and discouraged job seekers over the decade.

⁹ The 'Other inactive' group, consists of young people who are inactive because they are pregnant, lack money to pay for transport to look for work or are voluntarily not working.

Table 4. NEET youth by unemployment status
QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023

Unemployment Status	2013		2023	
	Total Number	%	Total Number	%
Job loser	78 160	24.2	130 186	29.4
Job leaver	19 508	6.0	11 177	2.5
New entrant	192 847	59.7	229 779	51.9
Re-entrant	20 042	6.2	4 722	1.1
Other – last worked > 5 years ago	12 600	3.9	67 241	15.2
Total	323 157	100	443 105	100

Note: Sample restricted to NEET youths who are *searching unemployed*.
Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Table 4 further reveals intriguing trends in the job loser and Other – last worked > 5 years ago categories, showing a sizeable surge over time. The proportion of NEET youths in the job loser category increased from 24.2% in 2013 to 29.4% in 2023, while the Other category surged from 3.9% in 2013 to 15.2% in 2023.¹⁰ These striking increases indicate a growing number of young individuals who are becoming unemployed, leading to NEET status, and also suggest that NEET individuals who have previous work experience are struggling to secure employment.

Table 5 presents a breakdown of the new entrant NEET youth cohort, based on their duration of job searching. It reveals a concerning trend: nearly half (48.4% in 2023) of these new entrants actively seeking employment have been doing so for over five years. These statistics are worrisome, signaling the difficulty young people encounter in gaining access to job opportunities. The just energy transition might exacerbate this situation further.

¹⁰ Additionally, Table 4 shows that the job leaver group experienced a substantial decline, dropping from 6.0% in 2013 to a mere 2.5% in 2023. This decline suggests that fewer NEET youth voluntarily left their jobs over the past ten years, potentially due to a more cautious approach to job transitions or limited opportunities for voluntary separations.

**Table 5. New entrant NEET youth by time in the labour market looking for work
QLFS Q1 data for 2013 and 2023**

Time in the labour market looking for work	2013		2023	
	Total number	%	Total number	%
Less than 3 months	18 612	9.7	23 804	10.4
3 months – less than 6 months	5 804	3.0	3 432	1.5
6 months – less than 9 months	278	0.1	0.0	0.0
9 months – less than 1 year	3 712	1.9	1 783	0.8
1 year – less than 3 years	41 446	21.5	48 498	21.1
3 years – 5 years	32 371	16.8	41 125	17.9
More than 5 years	90 260	46.9	111 136	48.4
Total	192 484	100	229 779	100

Notes: Sample is restricted to NEET youths who are searching unemployed and new entrants in the labour market. Point estimates are weighted using person weights.

Our findings challenge the popular belief that the majority of NEET youth would be disinterested or unwilling to work. On the contrary, the data indicate that NEET youth are genuinely eager to work and are actively seeking employment. The findings demonstrate the persistent efforts of a large number of young NEETs to secure employment without success. This situation increases the risk of long-term exclusion from work opportunities, leading to scarring effects and underscores the urgency of finding effective ways to support these young people in their quest for (re)connection to the labour market.

2.6. Young NEETs living in income-poor households¹¹

We draw on the 2013 and 2021 General Household Survey (GHS) data to further enhance our understanding of the NEET youth cohort in Mpumalanga. The data from both the QLFS and GHS reveal a consistent trend: a steady increase in the overall youth population and the proportion of NEET youth between 2013 and 2021. Moreover, the analysis in Table 6 shows that in 2013, 53.9%

¹¹ We rely on GHS data to measure income poverty since the QLFS data does not collect household information, such as household income.

of young people were living in income-poor households, and by 2021, this proportion had risen significantly to 64.9%.¹² Furthermore, among all NEET youth, 67.8% were classified as living in income-poor households in 2013, and this proportion increased to a staggering 73.7% in 2021. This indicates that a substantial portion of NEET youth is facing significant economic challenges, exacerbating their already vulnerable status. This is particularly concerning as previous research has indicated the difficulties associated with breaking out of NEET status when living in poverty (Noh and Lee, 2017; Branson et al., 2019).

Additionally, the analysis reveals that in 2013, 35.9% of NEET youth lived in households with no other employed adults; by 2021, this had increased to 44.7%. This rise could be indicative of broader economic struggles within households, which in turn may affect young people's access to education, employment opportunities, and overall well-being. Residing in households without an employed adult translates into a deficiency in social, cultural, and financial capital, all of which feed a vicious cycle of exclusion of young NEETs from the labour market and educational opportunities (see Thompson and Dahling, 2019, for more).

¹² To determine the proportion of NEET youth who live in income-poor households, we use Statistics South Africa's upper-bound poverty line of 2021 of R 1335, which refers to the food poverty line plus the average amount derived from non-food items of households whose food expenditure is equal to the food poverty line (Stats SA, 2021).

**Table 6. Overview of NEET youth by household income-poor status
GHS data 2013 and 2021**

	Indicator	2013		2021		
		Total number	%	Total number	%	
Total SA youth population	Total youth (15-35 yrs)	1 621 919		1 765 192		
	NEET youth (15-35 yrs)	620 638	38.3	924 644	52.3	
	Income-poor youth (15-35 yrs)	871 571	53.9	1 139 049	64.9	
Of those NEET youth	Income-poor	418 867	67.8	665 614	73.7	
	No employed adult	222 967	35.9	413 282	44.7	
Of those young NEETs who are income poor	Status	Unemployed	198 329	47.4	500,058	75.1
		Discouraged	49 316	11.8	37 090	5.6
		Inactive	171 221	40.9	128 466	19.3
	Gender	Male	173 342	41.4	288 853	43.4
		Female	245 525	58.6	376 761	56.6
	Race	Black/African	417 572	99.7	665 614	100
	Geo type	Rural	305 341	72.9	433 706	65.2
		Urban	113 526	27.1	231 908	34.8
	Age category	15 – 19	51 239	12.2	37 752	5.7
		20 – 24	150 691	36.0	174 743	26.3
		25 – 29	123 394	29.5	211 729	31.8
		30 – 35	93 542	22.3	241 390	36.3
	Education level	Less than matric	280,271	67.0	345 212	52.5
Matric		120 529	28.8	291 819	44.4	
Any tertiary ¹³		17 318	4.1	20 565	3.1	

Notes: Point estimates are weighted using person weights. The total number for the different sub-groups might not add up to the total youth population due to missing information in some sub-groups.

Focusing on young NEETs living in income poverty over the past decade, our analysis shows that these youths were predominantly female, Black/African, had less than matric educational level and resided in rural areas. Further, the majority of young NEETs living in income poverty were strictly unemployed. Examining changes over the ten-year period, we found significant shifts in some groups. In 2023, a staggering 75.1% of young NEETs living in income poverty were unemployed, marking a substantial rise from the 47.4% recorded in 2013. This sharp increase highlights the challenges and obstacles faced by these vulnerable youths in accessing the job

¹³ Youth with “Any tertiary” education are those youths with at least 13 years of education; these youths have the following qualifications: 13 years - Certificate with grade 12/ Std. 10, diploma with grade 12/ Std. 10, N5/NTC 5, N6/NTC 6, Higher Diploma; 15 years - Post Higher Diploma (Masters; Doctoral Diploma), Bachelors Degree; 16 years - Bachelors Degree and Post Graduate Diploma, Honours Degree and 18 years - Higher Degree (Masters/PhD).

market. There was, however, also a notable decrease in the proportion of inactive youth among this cohort of NEET youth living in income poverty, declining from 40.9% in 2013 to 19.3% in 2021. This decline might be explained possibly by a shift by NEET youth to searching unemployed and perhaps re-engagement in education and training and may be an indication of the absolute desperation of youth to find ways to earn an income.

Additionally, we observe changes in the educational attainment of young NEETs in income poverty. In 2013, the majority (67.0%) had less than a matric level of education, but this proportion decreased significantly to 52.5% in 2021. On the other hand, those with a matric qualification accounted for 28.8% in 2013 and increased substantially to 44.4% in 2021 – again indicating the earlier mentioned loss of the protective factor of a matric certificate in the labour market, and an urgent need to look at ways to absorb these youth into opportunities. While this situation is alarming, having larger numbers of youth with a matric out of employment, might present an opportunity to begin to attract and build new industries that need higher levels of education as the energy transition gets underway.

3. Understanding the factors associated with being NEET among young people

The preceding sections of this study provided valuable insights into the profile of the NEET youth population in Mpumalanga and their geographical location. To enhance our understanding, we now move on to utilizing 2013 and 2021 General Household Survey data to explore the factors associated with being NEET among Black/African youth in Mpumalanga.¹⁴ We estimate a pooled multivariate logistic regression model where the probability of being NEET among young Black people is modelled as follows:

$$\Pr(NEET_i = 1|X) = \beta_0 + \sum_{i=1}^k \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where $NEET_i$ is a binary outcome variable equal to one if the individual youth is NEET and zero otherwise; X_i is a set of individual and household-related characteristics likely to influence the probability of being NEET among young people. β_i is a set of parameters to be estimated and ε_i is the random error term.

The choice of potential factors included in Equation (1) draws guidance from the body of existing literature that has investigated various individual and household attributes associated with the propensity of young people being NEET. Among them, Quintano et al. (2018), Salvà-Mut et al. (2018), De Lannoy and Mudiriza (2019), Malo et al. (2021), Caroleo et al. (2022), Rahmani and Groot (2023), and Mudiriza and De Lannoy (2023). For individual factors, we include age, gender, marital status, education level and area of residence, while for household factors, we incorporate household size, number of children under 7 years in the household, household income-poor status and household adult employment. The integration of these diverse factors into our regression model provides a nuanced understanding of their collective contributions to the likelihood of young people being NEET. For the specific definitions of these variables, please see Table 7.

¹⁴ We have chosen to focus our sample exclusively on Black/African youths for the regression analysis. This decision is based on the significant representation of Black/African youths among the NEET youth population in Mpumalanga. In 2013, they comprised 99% of this group, and this representation increased to 100% in 2021.

Table 7. Definition of key variables

Variable	Variable definition
NEET	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual is NEET and 0 otherwise.
Age group	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual is aged 15–19 and 0 if aged 20–24.
Gender	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual is female and 0 if male
Race	Categorical variable equal to 0 if the individual is Black, 1 if Coloured, 2 if Indian or Asian and 3 if White.
Marital status	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual is married and 0 otherwise.
Residence	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual lives in an urban area and 0 if residing in rural area.
Education	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual has any tertiary education and 0 otherwise.
H/h employed adult	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual lives in a household with an employed adult and 0 otherwise.
Household size	Continuous variable in levels which indicates the number of people in each household.
Children under 7 years	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual lives in a household with children under the age of 7.
Income–poor	Dummy variable equal to 1 if the individual lives in an income–poor household and 0 otherwise.
Time dummy	Dummy variable equal to 1 if year is 2021, a period capturing the COVID-19 period and 0 if year is 2013, a period capturing the pre-COVID-19 period.

Notes: The regression model uses the zero category as the reference group for each variable.

Multivariate logistic regression results¹⁵

The results from the estimation of Equation (1) are reported in Figure 7, which displays the odds ratios (aORs) and the corresponding 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for the independent variables. Through these odds ratios, a nuanced understanding of the strength of the associations between each variable and the likelihood of being NEET is revealed. A value greater than 1 signifies an increased propensity for being NEET, whereas a value less than 1 signifies a reduced likelihood. On the other hand, values converging towards 1 indicate a negligible correlation. Statistically significant factors are represented by CIs that do not cross the vertical red line. Holding all other factors constant, an independent factor positioned above this red line is statistically significant and associated with an increased probability of being NEET, while an independent factor positioned below the red line is statistically significant and associated with a diminished probability.

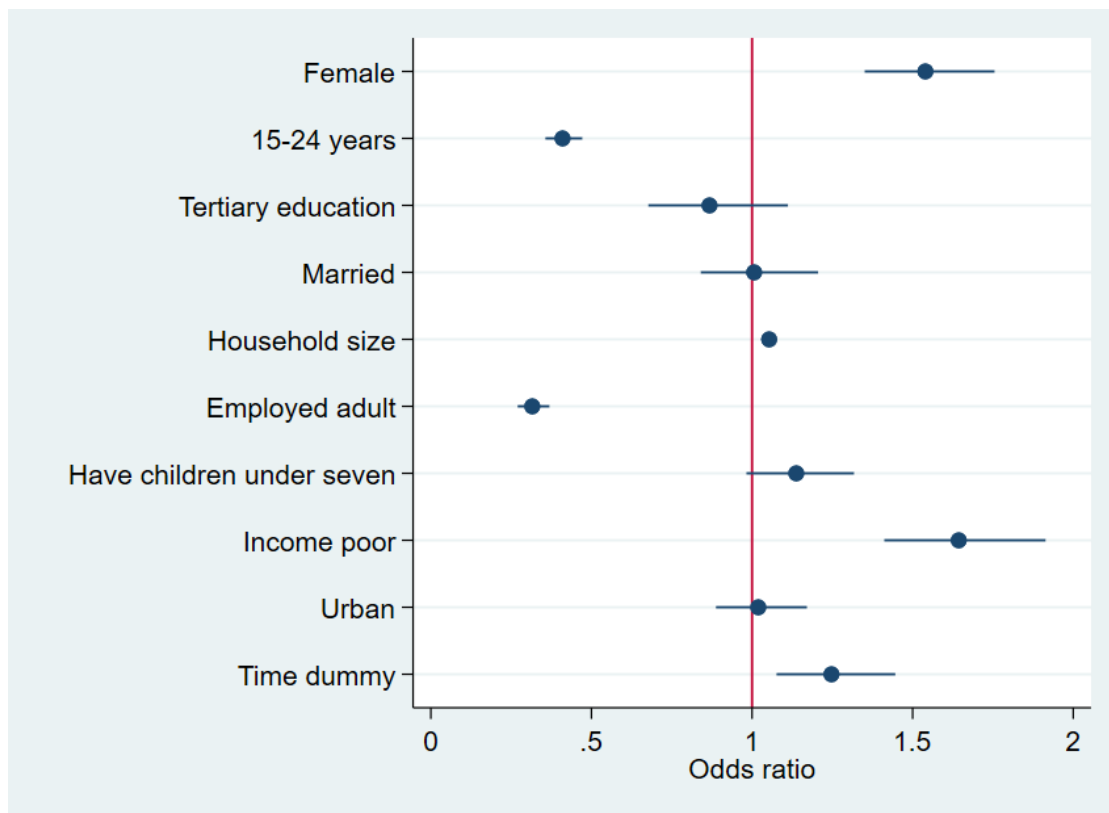
Our findings corroborate our earlier national-level results (see Mudiriza and De Lannoy, 2023).¹⁶ Focusing on individual factors, our study highlights that while gender and age are statistically significant, education, marital status, and urban status do not exhibit such significance.¹⁷ Diving into the specifics, our analysis reveals that females face a 54% higher probability of being NEET compared to their male counterparts. This outcome might be attributed to the influence of societal expectations and gender norms, which may lead women to prioritise domestic responsibilities over pursuing educational or employment opportunities (Comblon, 2017; Nieunhuis, 2018; Perr et al., 2022).

¹⁵ To ensure the robustness of our results, we conducted additional analysis using linear probability models and the results led to similar conclusions. Therefore, we chose not to include the results of the linear probability models in this report.

¹⁶ The national-level results indicate that being female, having children under seven, and residing in low-income households are significant factors contributing to being NEET. Additionally, marriage is identified as a key driver of NEET status at the national level, while in the context of Black youth in Mpumalanga, the significance of marriage is not observed. However, it is essential to emphasize that making a direct comparison between these two studies is challenging due to the differences in the age ranges and race studied. In Mpumalanga, the focus was on Black youth aged 15–35, while the national analysis concentrated on youth aged 15–24.

¹⁷ The absence of statistical significance in relation to education is rather counterintuitive, given the initial expectation that individuals with tertiary education would exhibit a diminished likelihood of being NEET. However, this outcome could be attributed to the difficult transitional phase that young individuals face as they transition from the realm of education to the practical landscape of work. This transitional period, marked by the pursuit of securing suitable employment subsequent to completing higher education, can indeed be prolonged, especially in an economy like South Africa characterised by subdued growth rates. Also, the complex interplay of factors, such as job market dynamics, industry demands, and skill mismatches might extend the journey from education to meaningful employment. Thus, while education is undoubtedly an asset that should ideally contribute to reducing the chance of being NEET, its influence might be dampened by these transitional challenges.

Figure 7. Adjusted odds ratios with a 95% CI for factors associated with NEET youth status among youth 15–35 years



Notes: Based on the variable definitions given in Table 7, the regression model uses the zero category as the reference group for each variable. For Gender: Male, Education: No tertiary education, Marital status: Not married, Employment status: Household has no employed adult, Children under 7 years: Household has no children under 7 years, Income poor: Live in income-poor household, Urban: Residence in rural area and Time dummy: Pre-COVID-19 period (2013).

Furthermore, being in the 15–24 age band reduces the odds of being NEET by 59% in contrast to older youths aged 25–35 years. This phenomenon can potentially be explained by the fact that a considerable number of younger people remain actively engaged in education and training, setting them apart from their older peers.

Our analysis further reveals that young individuals residing in income-poor households have a 64% higher likelihood of being NEET. This aligns with previous research, affirming that income poverty erects barriers to education and restricts access to resources pivotal for job search, job retention or career advancement (MacDonald et al., 2020). Limited financial resources can

impede the ability of young individuals to find and pursue higher education or training programs, leading to reduced skill acquisition and thereby limiting their chances of securing stable employment.

Furthermore, our findings indicate that there is a 14% increased likelihood of being NEET among young individuals living in households with children under the age of seven. However, it is important to note that this observed difference reaches statistical significance only at the 10% level. The presence of young children in a household may necessitate increased childcare responsibilities, or the re-allocation of funds within the household to the smaller children, all of which could limit the capacity of older siblings or younger family members to pursue education, training, or employment opportunities.

In addition, household size is also significantly associated with higher odds of NEET status. For every unit increase in household size, there is a 5% higher likelihood of being NEET. A possible explanation is that as the number of household members increases, available resources might be stretched thin, again possibly hindering the attainment of education or job search for young individuals within the household. Furthermore, the dynamics within larger households might divert attention and energy away from education and employment goals due to responsibilities like caring for younger siblings or contributing to household tasks.

Importantly, living in a household with an employed adult has a mitigating effect as it reduces the likelihood of being NEET among Black youths in Mpumalanga. Particularly, the results show that a young person living in a household with an employed adult has a 68% lower probability of being NEET compared to their counterparts residing in households without any employed adult. This finding reflects the complex dynamics of social and cultural capital, household support and economic stability on young people. An employed adult can serve as a role model, inspiring educational and employment pursuits, while also offering practical knowledge, guidance, and personal insights on how the education system and the labour market function. Additionally, an employed adult is more likely to possess financial resources that contribute to creating a conducive environment for education and skill development among young household members.

Lastly, the analysis incorporates a time dummy variable to capture the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Results reveal a 25% upsurge in the likelihood of being NEET during the pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic phase. This finding aligns with global and national trends, as the pandemic triggered widespread spikes in unemployment and income poverty (Martin et al., 2020; Casale and Posel, 2021; Tekgüç et al., 2023; Mudiriza and De Lannoy, 2023). The

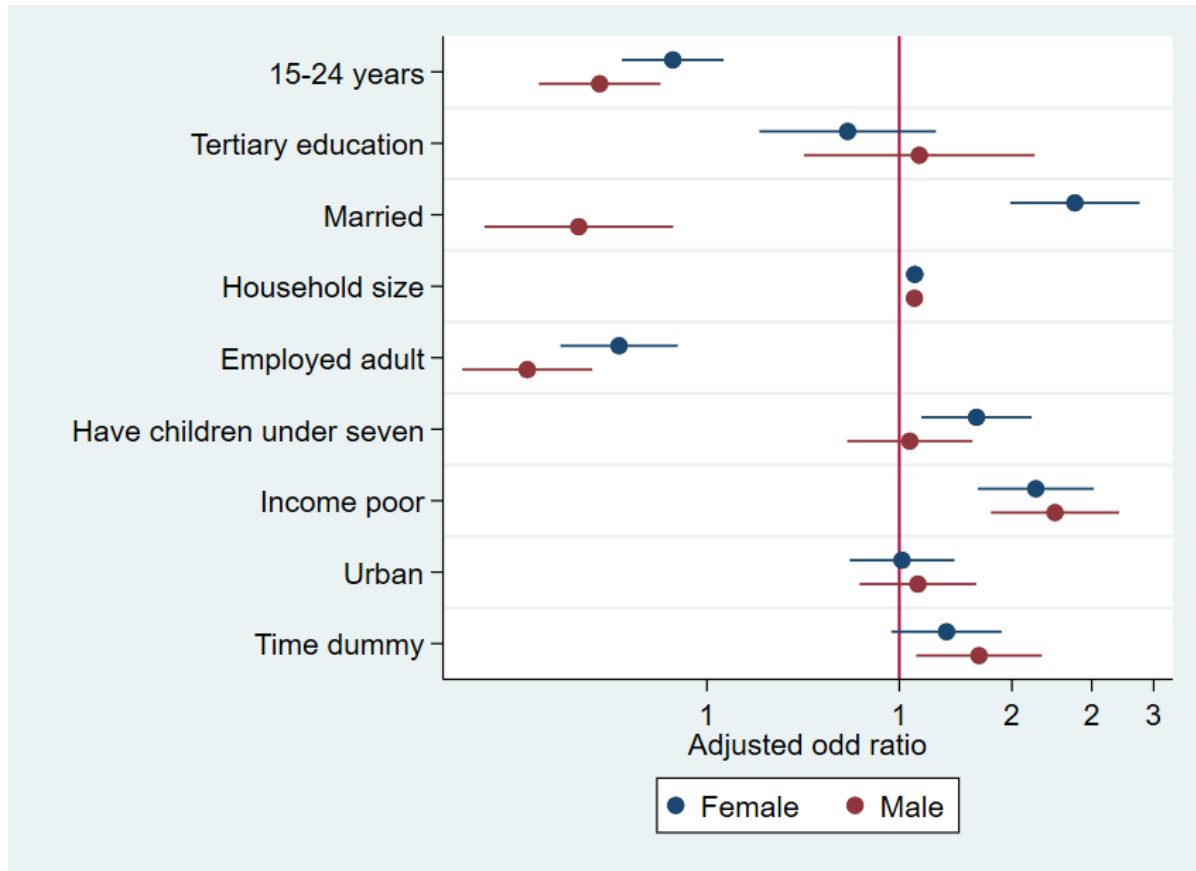
substantial effects of the pandemic on NEET rates underscore the need for targeted interventions and support to mitigate its long-term effects on young people's educational and employment prospects.

Some of our findings have defied expectations. For instance, the absence of statistical significance in relation to education is unexpected, considering the initial anticipation that young individuals with tertiary education would inherently display a reduced likelihood of being NEET. However, this outcome could be attributed to the difficult transitional phase that young individuals face as they transition from the realm of education to the practical landscape of work. This transitional period, marked by the pursuit of securing suitable employment after completing higher education, can indeed be prolonged, especially in an economy like South Africa characterised by subdued growth rates. The complex interplay of factors, such as job market dynamics, industry demands, and skill mismatches might extend the journey from education to meaningful employment. Thus, while education is undoubtedly an asset that should ideally contribute to reducing the chance of being NEET, its influence might be dampened by the challenges inherent in their transitional process.

Moreover, although marital status lacks statistical significance, we opt to re-evaluate equation (1) for male and female youths separately. This re-examination aims to uncover any gender-specific effects of marriage and other factors, particularly having children under seven years, which is likely to exert a robust gendered effect. This analytical approach will enhance our understanding of how various factors interact and influence NEET status differently for young males and females.

The results in Figure 8 show that our earlier findings of an insignificant influence for marital status and a slightly significant influence for having children under seven years were strongly influenced by gender dynamics. Specifically, being married significantly increases the likelihood of being NEET among women by 88% while it reduces the chances of being NEET among men by 69%. Furthermore, residing in a household with children under 7 years also amplifies the probability of being NEET among female youth by 32%, whereas its effect on young men is not statistically significant. Consequently, being married and having children under seven years significantly impacts the likelihood of being NEET among young women. Overall, these results show that being married and having children under seven years reinforces the positive impact of being female on the likelihood of being NEET.

Figure 8. Adjusted odds ratios with a 95% CI for factors associated with female and male NEET youths



Notes: Based on the variable definitions given in Table 7, the regression model uses the zero category as the reference group for each variable. For Education: No tertiary education, Marital status: Not married, Employment status: Household has no employed adult, Children under 7 years: Household has no children under 7 years, Income poor: Live in income-poor household, Urban: Residence in rural area and Time dummy: Pre-COVID-19 period (2013).

Despite slight variations in the coefficients for age, household adult employment, household size, and income status, it is noteworthy that these factors retain their statistical significance, aligning consistently with the observations in Figure 7. To elaborate, among both male and female Black youth, being younger and residing in a household with employed adults diminishes the probability of being NEET. Conversely, living in larger households and income-poor households elevates the likelihood of being NEET.

Overall, these findings shed light on the complex interplay of being female, having caregiving responsibilities and living in poverty in keeping Black young women in Mpumalanga excluded. These results highlight the pressing need for targeted interventions and policy measures that address these multifaceted challenges comprehensively, ultimately working towards the inclusion and empowerment of Black young women in Mpumalanga. In the context of the just energy transition, these insights also hold critical implications. If women face heightened barriers to accessing education and job opportunities, their participation in the evolving energy sector might be severely limited. Gender disparities could deepen as a result, amplifying the existing challenges faced by young Black women in Mpumalanga. Addressing these issues becomes pivotal not only for gender equality but also for ensuring the equitable inclusion of marginalized communities in the changing energy landscape.

4. Conclusions and implications of the findings

This study aimed to profile young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in Mpumalanga province, South Africa, to understand the trends, attributes and factors influencing NEET status. Our results showed that over the past decade, Mpumalanga consistently registered higher youth unemployment and NEET rates compared to the national average and other provinces. By 2023, the province's alarming statistics reached 50.9% for strict unemployment rate and 45.9% for NEET rate. Our analysis further revealed that the provincial average masked substantial disparities across the 18 local municipalities in Mpumalanga and also showed that young NEETs were concentrated in a few municipalities.

The analysis showed that Mpumalanga's NEET youth cohort is a highly diverse group, dominated by females, Black youth, those in rural areas, those slightly older within the age bracket of 25 to 35 years, those who have attained a matric or lower level of education, those unemployed as well as those residing in income poor household and households without an employed adult. Within the NEET youth cohort, these individuals stand out as the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Our findings further showed that the majority of NEET youth were actively seeking employment opportunities, with a substantial number being new entrants into the labour market who have been searching for work for extended periods. Contrary to popular belief, these findings challenged the notion that NEET youth are disinterested in working; instead, they demonstrated earnest efforts to secure employment, many enduring prolonged periods of unemployment spanning several years. In addition, our analysis showed evidence of an increase in the proportion of NEET youth living in income-poor households and in households without a working adult.

Furthermore, our analysis revealed the key factors associated with being NEET among Black youths in Mpumalanga. The findings indicated that being female, living in income-poor households and residing in households with a child under seven years were associated with an increased likelihood of being NEET. Conversely, residing in a household with an employed adult was associated with a reduced likelihood of being NEET. Notably, being female and living in income-poor households emerged as the most influential factors on the likelihood of being

NEET among Black youths in Mpumalanga. The results also highlighted a pronounced gender dimension; being married and having children under the age of seven significantly elevated the probability of being NEET among female youths. These factors, thus reinforce the effects of being female on the likelihood of being NEET.

In light of these findings, there is an urgent need for targeted interventions that extend beyond merely re-engaging young NEETs in the labour market or education. These interventions must be tuned to align with the unique characteristics of the diverse NEET youth population in Mpumalanga. Central to these efforts is the facilitation of smoother transitions from education to employment, also, and perhaps especially for young people living in income poor households. This calls for a concentrated focus on initiatives that bring services closer to young people, and that provide skills development, ensuring that the talents and proficiencies of these young individuals are nurtured to meet the demands of the job market, especially amidst the transition within the energy sector. Moreover, the creation of an environment that actively supports job seekers is pivotal. Recognizing the remarkable resilience exhibited by these young NEETs as they endeavour to secure employment in a challenging landscape, the provincial government needs to direct efforts towards harnessing their commitment to work and channeling it into opportunities that align with young NEET's aspirations and the evolving landscape of the energy sector.

Furthermore, there is a need for initiatives tailored to address the economic vulnerabilities particularly prevalent among NEET youth from income-poor households. Priority must be given to interventions that lift these individuals out of financial precarity, thereby affording them the stability required to pursue education and employment opportunities. Localised strategies that account for disparities across municipalities are essential for such a targeted approach. Moreover, policies fostering gender equality, early childhood development, and family support are pivotal, considering the gender-specific barriers underscored by our findings. These policies should aim to create an equitable environment, ensuring that young women have equal opportunities to participate fully in economic and educational endeavours, including those emerging within the evolving energy landscape.

Overall, this study's findings underscore the need for a multifaceted and tailored policy approach to address the challenges faced by the diverse group of young NEETs in Mpumalanga, with a keen emphasis on gender considerations and regional disparities. Ultimately, these policy efforts have the potential not only to empower NEET youth but also to dismantle structural barriers, steering Mpumalanga and South Africa towards a more inclusive and prosperous future, aligning with the transitions expected in the energy sector.

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