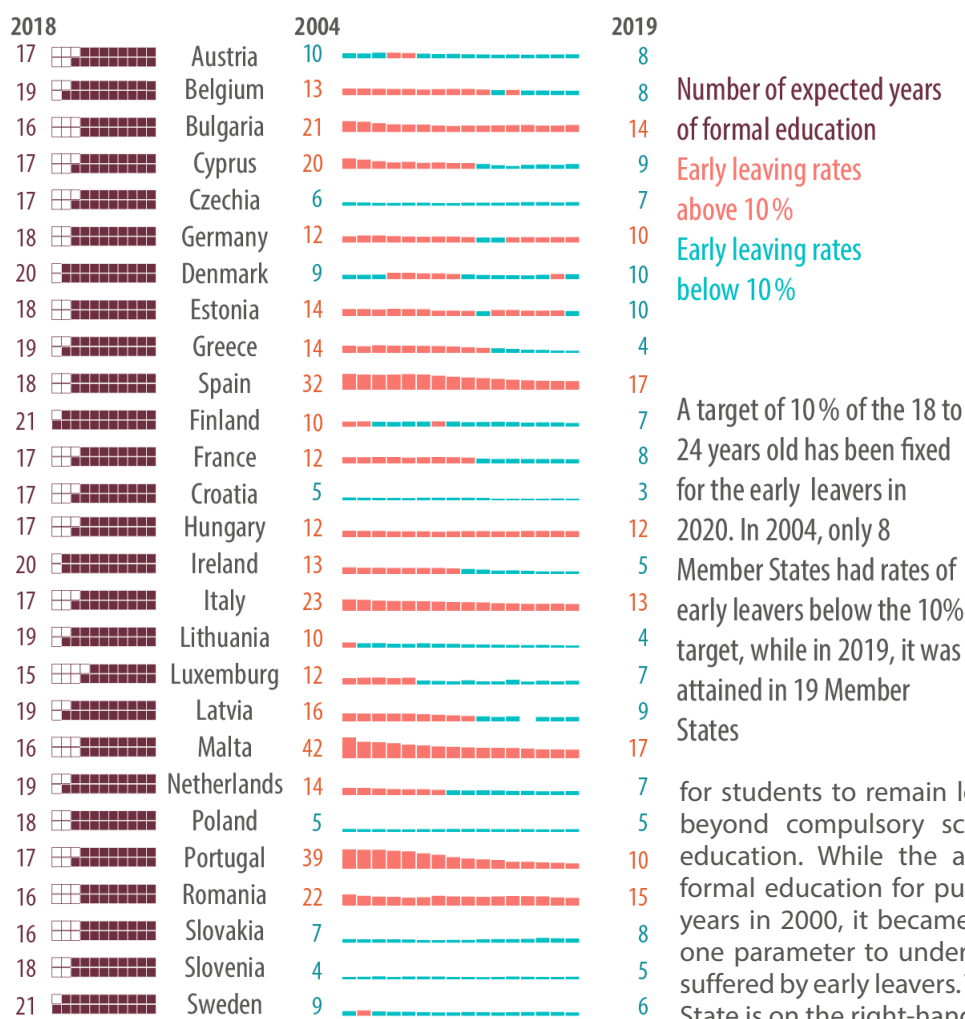


# Early leavers from education and training

Young adults whose highest level of education is at or below lower secondary school level are considered early leavers from education and training. Policy efforts have brought down their numbers to ratios that are very close to the EU target. Nevertheless all those who fall into this category suffer considerable disadvantage as they are more likely to be out of employment and less likely to engage in further education and training than others of their age group with a higher level of education. The EU supports Member States through policy coordination, and programmes such as the Youth Guarantee.

## Leaving early or spending time at school

Figure 1: Number of expected years of formal education and evolution of rates of early leavers of 18 to 24 years of age



Students who leave early from education or training are a concern for policy-makers as time spent learning at school relates positively to school achievement, even after considering other factors such as the quality of instruction. In effect, disadvantaged students tend to benefit even more from greater exposure to school, while a [study](#) for the European Parliament indicates that the effects of labour market conditions on years of studies are strongest on students with a disadvantaged socio-economic status. Students in the EU spend between 8 and 12 years attending compulsory schooling. Moreover, there was a tendency between 2000 and 2018

Number of expected years of formal education

Early leaving rates above 10 %

Early leaving rates below 10 %

A target of 10 % of the 18 to 24 years old has been fixed for the early leavers in 2020. In 2004, only 8 Member States had rates of early leavers below the 10 % target, while in 2019, it was attained in 19 Member States

for students to remain longer in formal education, beyond compulsory schooling and into tertiary education. While the average expected years of formal education for pupils and students was 16.2 years in 2000, it became 17.2 years in 2018. This is one parameter to understand the educational gap suffered by early leavers. The breakdown by Member State is on the right-hand side of Figure 1.

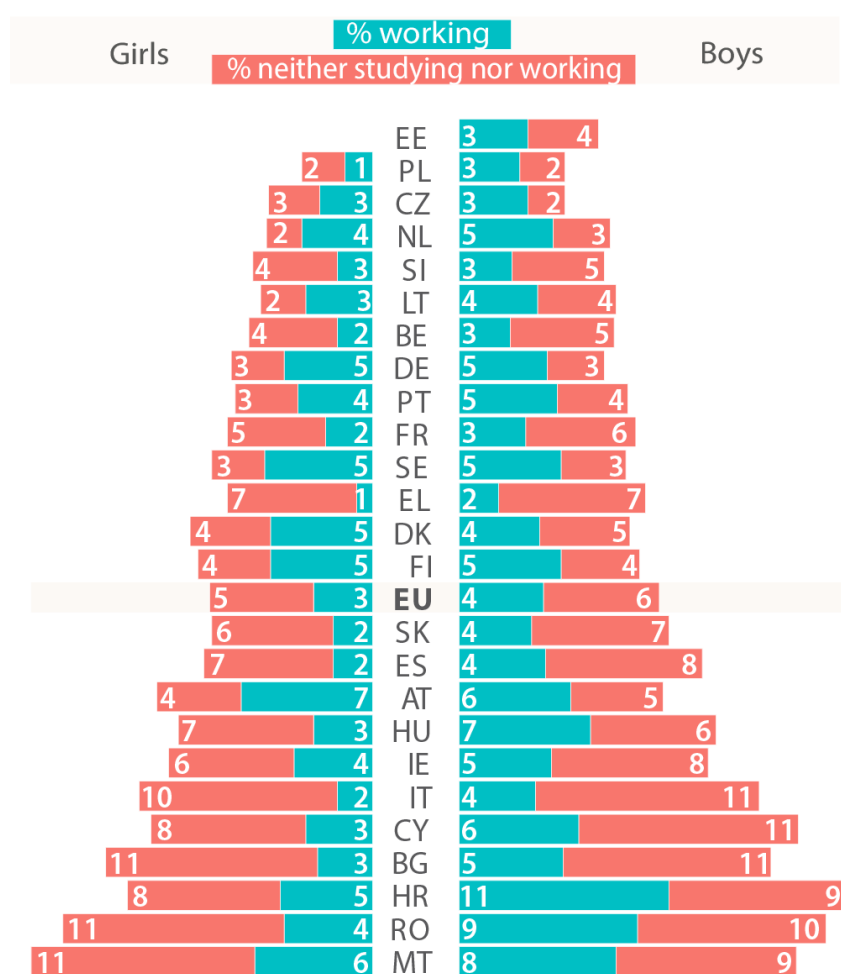


This infographic is one in a [series on Lifelong Learning](#). You can access the whole series including our animated infographic by scanning this QR code.



[Eurostat](#) defines ‘early leavers from education and training’ as 18-24 year olds who have reached, at most, lower secondary education and are not in further education or training. This target group first became a priority for the European Commission in 2003, after the European Council had adopted five EU-level benchmarks for education and training to be achieved by 2010. This target is an average of Member State [targets](#), which could be more or less ambitious, depending on national circumstances. Still, the target of lowering early leaving to not more than 10% had to be retained in the subsequent [cooperation agreement](#) between the Member States on education and training, to be achieved by 2020. The benchmark was also a target in the [Europe 2020 strategy](#) for economic recovery, which made it a subject covered by the [European Semester](#). This monitoring mechanism strengthened the impetus for action and recent statistics (Figure 1) show a trend that is well on track. Yet as a [thematic fiche](#) of the European Semester pointed out in 2016, this success is no reason for complacency, given that the number of early leavers still amounts to several million persons.

Figure 2: Gender breakdown of 15-19 year olds who were neither studying nor working, and of those who were working but not studying, 2019



Some students cut their education short and do not necessarily join the labour market (NEETs, not in employment, education or training). On average, in 2019 these represented 5.6% of young people in the EU (Figure 2). A much smaller group do find employment. In 2019, early leaving rates were generally higher for boys than for girls, except in Austria and Denmark, where they are higher for girls. In these same two Member States, the shares of girls at work who had left education early were slightly higher than those of boys. Czechia, Finland, Germany and Sweden reported no gender differences. In almost all Member States, girls between 15 and 19 years old are more likely still to be in education, and also less likely to be neither in education nor employed. The EU average [participation](#) in education and training is 91.7% for girls and 89.8% for boys, while the EU average for NEETs stands at 5.3 % for girls and 5.9 % for boys. There is a relationship between under-achievement, leaving school early and unemployment, meaning that participation rates

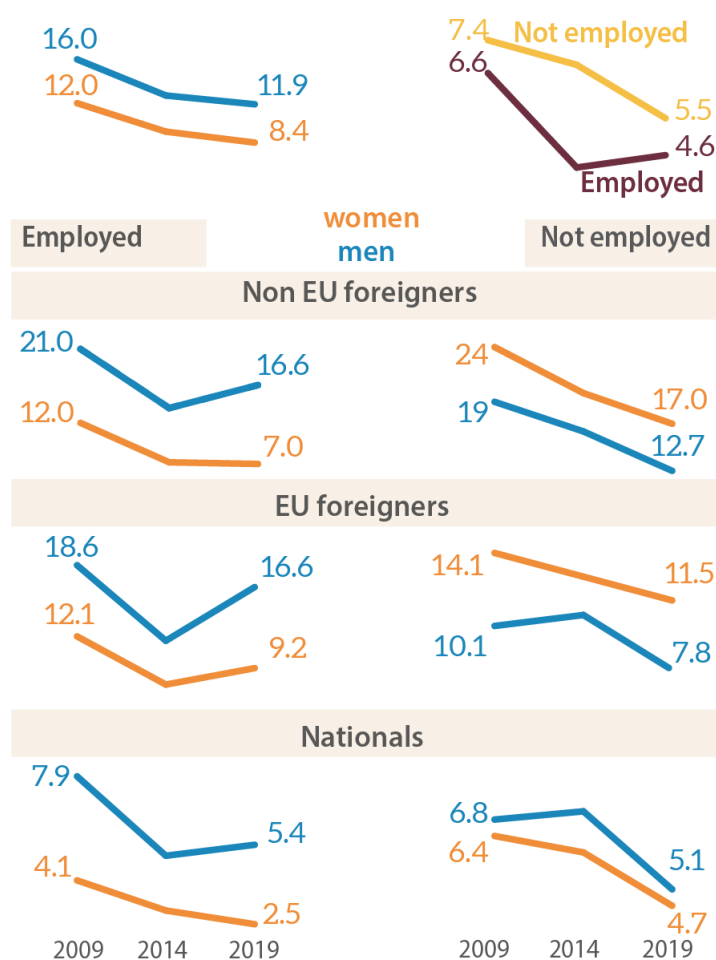
in education and training and the percentages of NEETs are two aspects of a complex phenomenon.

## Effects of leaving education and training early

While [studies](#) indicate that socio-economic status is the [factor](#) with the biggest impact on early leaving, and the [final report](#) of 2013 by the thematic working group on early leaving recommends that data and information should cover socio-economic status, as yet, data do not cover this factor in the same way as they cover other factors such as gender and country of origin. This matters, as monitoring is one way the EU helps Member States tackle the issue.

Figure 3: Ten-year trends in the percentage of early leavers (18-24 years) by category (combinations of gender, citizenship and work status)

Early leaving rates have declined steadily between 2009 and 2019 for both young men and women. Yet while women's rates had been below the target since 2014, those of men were still above target in 2019. However, the disparity between the two genders narrowed since 2009. Early leavers were consistently less likely to be in employment, but the biggest gap between employed and unemployed early leavers was in 2014. This narrowed significantly in 2019. The bottom six graphs in Figure 3 show the 10-year trend in the percentage of men and women early leavers who were employed (right hand column) or not employed (left hand column) depending on whether they are non-EU citizens, EU citizens or citizens of the reporting Member State. The graphs in Figure 3 indicate that the ratios of male early leavers among the employed of the same population are consistently higher than the ratios of female early leavers, irrespective of citizenship. Yet for both genders, while the highest proportion of employed early leavers is among third-country citizens, the differences with non-national EU citizens is not large. In all cases, the percentage of employed youths who are early leavers is diminishing. Studies indicate that while the early leaving rate of [foreigners](#) is higher than that of the local population, [children](#) who migrate when they are 16 years or older are more at risk of becoming NEETs.



Citizenship has a clear impact on non-employment of both genders. Only in the case of nationals are ratios for male early leavers not in employment higher than those of female early leavers. Yet in all categories, the ratios of female early leavers who are not in employment are consistently higher than the ratios of female early leavers who are employed. In all six graphs trends for women are flatter and more even in their downwards decline, indicating that economic and labour market fluctuations may have less of an impact on their evolution.

## Policies tackling early leaving from education and training

One way the European Commission supports Member States in tackling early leaving from education and training is through an annual monitoring exercise known as the Education and Training Monitor. This monitor [classifies](#) measures under three categories, prevention, intervention and compensation. Preventive measures aim to reduce the risk of early leaving before problems start. They include strong early childhood education provision, language support, measures to ease the transition to the next educational level, and the provision of alternative and flexible pathways as examples. While vocational education at secondary level often forms part of alternative pathways, an OECD [study](#) noted that completion rates of upper secondary education are higher in general programmes than in vocational programmes.

Intervention measures aim to improve the quality of education and training at institutional level by providing targeted support to those at risk. This includes collecting national data to monitor absenteeism and early leaving patterns, and strengthening education and career guidance. The monitor highlights parental and community involvement as an important tool to tackle early leaving even though this is not among the benchmarks (Figure 4).

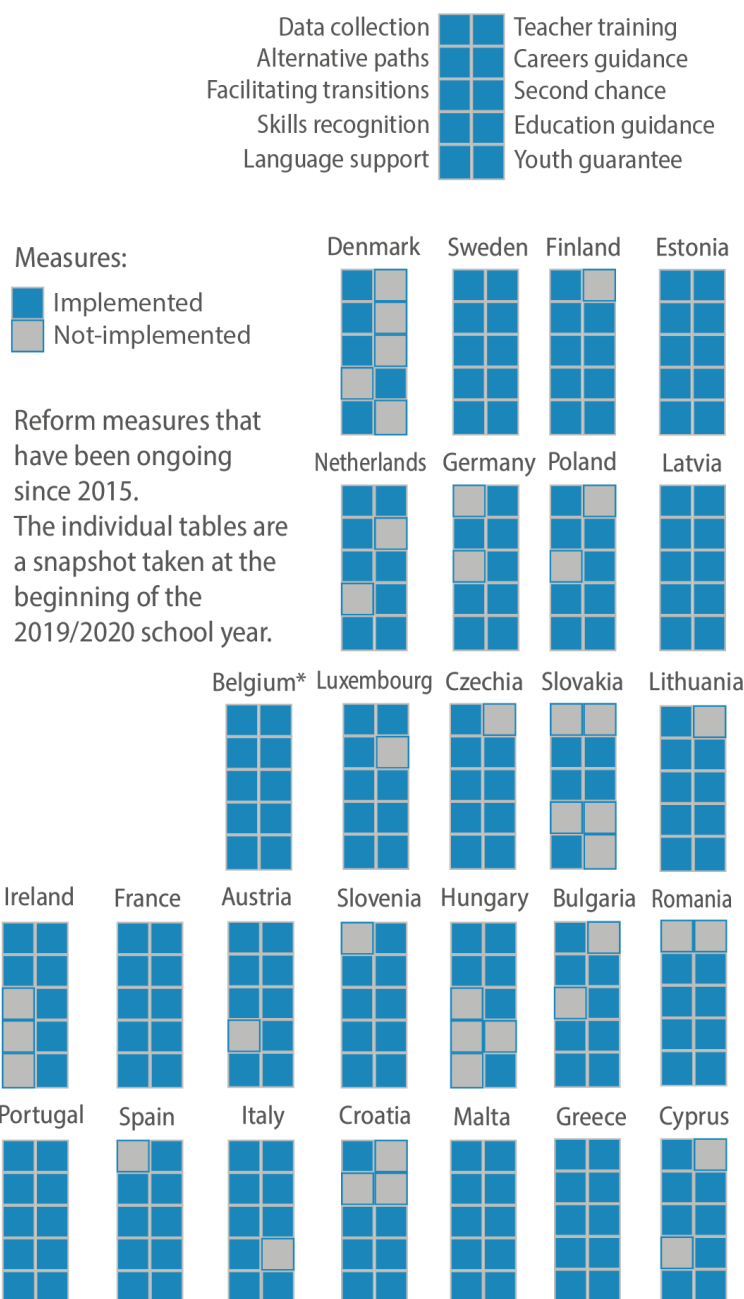
The description of the benchmarks however, points out that teacher training should equip teachers to work with parents to improve educational equity and inclusion.

Compensatory measures aim to re-engage those who left early from education and training. These measures include offering second chance programmes, providing alternative routes to mainstream education as well as recognising and validating prior learning.

A Eurydice [report](#) indicates that currently there are a range of policies tackling early leaving in the Member States. Most of them focus on language support, alternative education and training pathways, and second chance education. Policies on informing teachers regarding early leaving issues and the recognition of skills to permit early leavers to re-enter formal education are less common.

Tackling early leaving is a priority for the European Union, as early leaving is an extreme form of [low achievement](#) and the target of reducing early leaving contributes towards greater inclusion and educational equity. Through the Youth Guarantee, the EU offers young people under 25 years who are out of education and out of a job an opportunity to work, train or re-enter education. The European Parliament [called](#) for more funds to support this programme for the years 2021-2027.

Figure 4: Reforms of the national education and training systems



Sources: Figure 1 - Eurostat, [\[educ\\_uoe\\_enra07\]](#), [\[edat\\_lfse\\_01\]](#), Figure 2 - Eurostat, [\[edat\\_lfse\\_18\]](#), Figure 3 - Eurostat [\[edat\\_lfse\\_01\]](#), Figure 4 - [Structural Indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe 2019](#), Overview of major reforms since 2015, Eurydice, 2019, ELET summary tables 1 and 2.

#### Notes:

Figure 1: Expected years of formal schooling for Estonia refer to 2012. Figure 4: Information for Belgium does not cover the German-speaking community. Country codes: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Cyprus (CY), Czechia (CZ), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (GR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Slovakia (SK), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE).

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[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu) (contact) [www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu](http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu) (intranet) [www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank) (internet) <http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)