

## People In A Special Situation on The Labour Market In Poland –Problems, Support Instruments And Economic Implications\*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on analysing the situation of people in a vulnerable position on the labour market in Poland, with particular emphasis on young adults (up to 30 years of age), the long-term unemployed and people over 50. The main objective of the study is to identify the difficulties faced by representatives of these groups in the labour market. Despite the growing number of studies on unemployment, there is still a lack of comprehensive analyses that take into account both statistical data and the perspective of those concerned. The study aims to fill this gap by providing a multidimensional diagnosis of the problems faced by these groups and their economic consequences.

The study analysed statistical data from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy for the years 2019–2023 and conducted in-depth individual interviews (IDI) with 78 people meeting the statutory criteria for groups in a special situation on the labour market. This made it possible to diagnose both structural and subjective factors contributing to difficulties in accessing employment.

The results indicate diverse problems for different groups: young adults struggle with skills mismatch and job insecurity, people aged 50+ experience age discrimination and outdated qualifications, while the long-term unemployed struggle with loss of motivation and psychological barriers. The article emphasises the need to develop individualised and long-term support programmes to reduce the effects of professional exclusion.

**Keywords:** labour market in Poland, problems, groups in a special situation on the labour market

### Introduction

The contemporary labour market in Poland is characterised by complexity and dynamic changes, resulting both from globalisation processes and from technological, demographic and social changes. Therefore, it is particularly important to identify the problems of particular social groups that participate in the labour market, often experiencing different problems in access to employment. Identifying the they face barriers is important for several reasons.

Firstly, identification of difficulties faced by various groups - including young people, people 50+, long-term unemployed - makes it possible to design individualised support instruments. Universal solutions, although important from the point of view of general stabilisation of the labour market, often turn out to be insufficient in the context of the needs of specific groups at risk of professional exclusion. Adapting activation and support measures tailored to problems can increase their effectiveness.

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Secondly, the identification of problems in the labour market serves to reduce structural inequalities. The labour market operates under specific socio-economic conditions that can lead to the marginalisation of certain groups. Lack of access to employment often results in permanent social exclusion, poverty and loss of human capital. For this reason, identifying factors that impede labour market participation becomes not only an economic issue, but also a social one.

Another important aspect is the need to raise the level of labour force participation, especially in the context of ageing societies and the decreasing number of people able to work. Including hitherto inactive people in the labour market - by removing institutional, social or cultural barriers - can respond to demographic challenges and labour shortages in certain sectors. The key here is not only to activate the inactive, but also to create conditions conducive to staying in the labour market.

It is also important to note that understanding of the problems of social groups in the labour market supports more effective educational planning, both formal and non-formal. The mismatch between competences and labour market needs is one of the main factors of structural unemployment. Therefore, identifying deficits in qualifications and competences can be useful in adapting the educational offer to the real needs of the labour market.

In summary, identification of the problems faced by different social groups in the labour market in Poland is a basic condition for conducting effective and sustainable employment policies. These actions have not only an economic but also a social dimension, contributing to building a more inclusive labour market and reducing the phenomena of professional exclusion.

## **Consequences of exclusion from the labour market**

Unemployment is a phenomenon that affects different people at different rates. It is possible to distinguish groups of people who are more exposed than others to remaining outside the labour force. This means that the chances of finding a job are determined not only by the economic situation, but also by the socio-demographic characteristics of the unemployed (Staszewska, 2016). Identifying these groups - referred to in legislation as persons in a special situation on the labour market - is the starting point for finding and preparing instruments to help combat unemployment. Persons in a special situation on the labour market constitute a group, which requires specific instruments of activation policy. The Employment Promotion and Labour Market Institutions Act of 20 April 2004 specifies the criteria qualifying individuals for this category, which, according to Article 49 of the said Act, includes:

- unemployed persons under 30 years of age, i.e. unemployed persons who have not reached the age of 30 by the date of application of labour market services or instruments to them;
- the long-term unemployed, i.e. persons remaining in the register of the Poviat Employment Office (PUP) for a total of more than 12 months over the last 2 years, excluding periods of internship and professional preparation of adults;
- unemployed over 50, i.e. people who are over 50 on the day when labour market services or instruments are applied to them;
- unemployed people in receipt of social assistance benefits,
- unemployed persons with at least one child up to the age of 6 or at least one disabled child up to the age of 18,
- unemployed disabled,
- those seeking employment who are not in employment or other gainful employment carers of a disabled person, excluding carers of a disabled person collecting a nursing benefit or special carer's allowance under the provisions on family benefits, or a carer's allowance under the provisions on the establishment and payment of carer's allowances.

The aforementioned document points to the need for comprehensive solutions supporting social and professional integration, aimed not only at restoring professional activity, but also at reducing the negative effects of marginalisation that affect the functioning of the entire social security system.

The social and professional exclusion of specific groups in the labour market is a significant challenge for the state's economic and social policies. As Sadowska (2018) emphasises, the marginalisation of certain categories of people, contributes to their economic and social degradation, which leads to negative consequences in both the micro- and macroeconomic areas.

Exclusion from working life results first of all in a reduction of income and possibilities to satisfy needs, limits access to the consumption market and labour market institutions, but also to the health care system, education and culture (Golinowska et al., 2007). Despite the development of society and civilisation, work is still - as R. Dahrendorf (1993) put it - an "entry ticket" to many resources and many opportunities, and its absence means their blockage and inability to satisfy many economic, social, cultural or psychological needs. Work is an important aspect of an individual's life and role in the social structure, and its absence leads to negative consequences in psychological and sociological dimensions as well (Sadowska, 2018).

Unemployment has serious consequences for an individual's mental health. Being unemployed negatively affects self-esteem and self-confidence, and creates feelings of failure and shame, which can result in lower life satisfaction. In addition, unemployment increases the risk of anxiety and depressive disorders, which is associated with long-term stress related to insecurity. Job loss also affects withdrawal from social relationships, which can result in deepening loneliness, feelings of exclusion and further psychological deterioration (Frasquilho et al., 2016; Andreeva et al., 2015, Marchi et al., 2023).

Lack of employment has also serious sociological consequences that go beyond the economic sphere and affect various aspects of an individual's social life. In addition to the aforementioned social isolation, job loss can lead to conflicts within the family and, consequently, to breakdown (Brand, 2015).

In an economic context the absence from the labour market of a large number of people of working age adversely affects the overall productivity of the economy and the loss of potential GDP. The employment rate of people with disabilities in Poland remains one of the lowest in the European Union, which limits the productive capacity of the economy reduces total labour productivity. As a consequence, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) remains below the value possible with full utilisation of productive capacity including human capital. Okun's law, well-known in economics (Kliber, 2017, Mowczan, 2023), assumes an inverse relationship between changes in the unemployment rate and the rate of real economic growth. It was formulated on the basis of an empirical study Okun (1962), in which the author observed that an increase in unemployment by each percentage point above the natural rate of unemployment leads to an increase in the GDP gap (i.e. a decrease in GDP) by 3%. The exclusion of potential employees from the labour market is also directly linked to a reduction in budget revenues from income taxes and social security contributions (Malec, Tyrowicz, 2017). The unemployed do not generate taxable income, which leads to a reduction in the state's ability to finance social policy and public investment. At the same time, exclusion from the labour market entails high public expenditure on social benefits and assistance programmes. These costs include, among others, benefits for the unemployed, disability pensions, activation allowances or subsidised employment. Thus, the social and professional reintegration of these people is a necessary step to reduce the fiscal burden on the state.

Long-term professional exclusion leads to the gradual disappearance of competences and skills of people outside the labour market. Persons excluded from the sphere of professional contacts for longer than 12 months show significant difficulties in returning to employment due to, inter alia, outdateding of their qualifications, knowledge, loss of habits related to the performance of professional duties. Unsuccessful job search also leads to discouragement and, consequently, to the so-called discouraged worker effect (Galecka-Burdziak, Kucharski, 2018; Galecka-Burdziak, Gromadzki, 2018), as a result of which an unemployed person stops looking for work becoming professionally inactive.

## **Objective and research methods**

The aim of this paper is to identify the problems of groups in a particular situation on the labour market. The paper uses data from the Ministry of the Family, Labour and Social Policy reports on the labour market for the years 2019-2023 in Poland. Selected indicators of economic activity of young people of particular groups remaining in a difficult situation on the labour market were analysed. The statutory solutions of labour market policy aimed at economic activation of young people were also reviewed.

In order to identify problems in the labour market, individual in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted with 78 people who met the criteria of being in a particularly difficult situation in the labour market. The in-depth interview

is a classic example of a qualitative method and is most often used as a complement to quantitative methods (Nicpoń, Marzecki, 2010). The individual interviews were a source of important information and opinions, and allowed us to learn about the problems faced by the unemployed. The participants were informed about the objectives of the study. Interviews were conducted with 32. people under 30 years of age, 19. long-term unemployed people, and 27. people over 50 years of age. The interviews were conducted in April and May 2024. They took the form of personal, individual meetings. The unemployed persons came from the West Pomeranian and Mazovian provinces.

## Findings

Pursuant to the applicable legal regulations - Article 49 of the Act on Promotion of Employment and Unemployment (Journal of Laws 2024, item 475), people in a special situation on the labour market are the first to be covered by support measures on the labour market. Both in the literature on the subject and in legal acts, different classifications of problem groups are adopted, but for the purposes of this study, only the three largest collectivities, which are at the same time in the most difficult situation, were included in the study . These are the groups of people under 30, people 50+ and the long-term unemployed.

In Table 1 changes in the number of unemployed people in Poland in 2019-2023 are presented, taking into account three selected groups in a particular situation on the labour market. In each of the analysed years, the number of total unemployed and the size of the indicated groups are presented.

The data shows that the highest total number of unemployed was recorded in 2020 (1 046 432 people), correlating with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic crisis. In the following years, the number gradually decreased, reaching 788 229 people in 2023.

In the case of young people (under 30), the highest level of unemployment was also in 2020 (271,158 people), followed by a systematic decrease - to 189,674 people in 2023. A similar trend can be seen among people over 50, whose number of unemployed people decreased from 268,763 in 2020 to 211,317 in 2023.

The largest and most numerically stable group were the long-term unemployed. Their number reached a maximum in 2020 (515,776 people) and then, despite a decrease, remained at a relatively high level (385,871 people in 2023). This indicates the particular difficulty of this group in returning to the labour market and requires deeper analysis and appropriately targeted labour market policy intervention.

**Table 1: Number of unemployed persons by groups in special situation on the labour market in 2019-2023 in Poland**

Specification	Years				
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total unemployed	866 374	1 046 432	895 203	812 301	788 229
Including:					
Persons under 30 years of age	222 972	271 158	210 910	194 496	189 674
People over 50 years of age	235 672	268 763	240 814	218 918	211 317
Long-term unemployed	432 438	515 776	506 454	419 680	385 871

Source: own compilation based on: Central Statistical Office. Local Data Bank. <https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/BDL/start>, Central Statistical Office. (2023). Number of registered unemployed in 1990-2023. <https://new.stat.gov.pl/publikacje/liczba-bezrobotnych-zarejestrowanych-w-latach-1990-2023>

## Problems faced by people under 30

Young people are a socio-occupational group for whom the market places particularly high demands. Employers are looking for skilled workers with experience and work experience, which young people, often just out of education, for obvious reasons do not possess. Youth unemployment entails a number of undesirable social and individual costs. Expenditure on education becomes a loss-making investment, and the unused potential of intellectual capital becomes a lost benefit. Youth unemployment can result in poverty, marginalisation or even social exclusion. It may also result in the appearance of pathological behaviours, such as crime, alcoholism, drug

addiction. In addition, the occurrence of youth unemployment is accompanied by other labour market problems affecting this age group. These include lower wages and career development problems (Rak, Marcysiak, 2017).

Analysis of selected economic activity indicators (tab. 2) indicates that the situation of young people on the labour market depends to a large extent on the level of education. The majority of the unemployed registered in labour offices - in the analysed period - are persons with post-secondary and secondary vocational education. The duration of unemployment is particularly important in the case of young people. In the analysed period, the most numerous group are persons remaining unemployed for 1-3 months. Short job tenure can be equated with lower level of experience, lack of work practice, and this puts young people in a less favourable position in comparison with experienced employees in the company. The latter are more difficult to attract to the market through recruitment, and the cost of hiring them is significantly higher than workers without experience. Employers therefore value more experienced employees, especially in positions requiring high qualifications and competence.

**Table 2: Number of unemployed people under 30 years of age in 2019-2023 in Poland  
(as at the end of the year)**

Specification		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Length of unemployment in months	up to 1	33 600	27 437	25 806	28 160	26 188
	1-3	58 235	60 969	48 049	54 702	53 004
	3-6	41 209	51 091	34 287	37 101	36 794
	6-12	32 075	55 957	31 711	25 228	28 374
	12-24	29 601	44 029	37 675	22 837	24 443
	over 24	28 252	31 675	33 382	26 468	20 871
Age	18-24 years	106 145	130 815	100 597	100 373	100 763
	25-34 years	116 827	140 343	110 313	94 123	88 911
	35-44 years	x	x	x	x	x
	45-54 years	x	x	x	x	x
	55-59 years	x	x	x	x	x
	60 years and over	x	x	x	x	x
Education	higher	34 549	39 710	27 975	25 062	24 052
	post-secondary and secondary vocational/professional	59 298	73 089	57 506	53 366	53 836
	general secondary education	42 374	53 115	40 714	35 851	35 022
	basic vocational/professional	40 169	47 739	38 133	40 699	39 134
	lower secondary/primary and below	46 582	57 505	46 582	39 518	37 630
Total length of service	up to 1 year	73 879	90 454	70 275	62 441	62 064
	1-5 years	77 121	93 351	70 882	67 416	63 996
	5-10 years	10 558	12 569	10 119	9 889	10 102
	10-20 years	266	273	212	234	270
	20-30 years	x	x	x	x	x
	30 years and over	x	x	x	x	x
	without seniority	61 148	74 511	59 422	54 516	53 242
Total		222 972	271 158	210 910	194 496	189 674

Source: own compilation based on Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy labour market reports 2019-2023

Based on the interviews, the main problem of young people on the labour market, in their opinion, is the competency mismatch. According to interviewees, their knowledge and skills do not match those required by employers. They indicate difficulties in finding employment because they do not meet employers' expectations in terms of their knowledge, skills or work experience. According to young people, what makes it difficult for them to find a job is their lack of practical skills. They indicate that they often have difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge in practice. They also emphasise that in fear of entering the labour market, they decide to prolong their education in order to achieve the highest possible level of education and gain a competitive advantage on the labour market, as a result of which they start work much later. Young people also indicate a lack of awareness of the labour market situation at the beginning of their education. Very often among this collective is dominated by the conviction that higher education is a guarantee of employment. The current situation in the economy, lack of adjustment of the educational offer to the needs of the market and high competition among candidates for one position encourage them to gain experience already during their studies.

Young people also indicate that what makes it difficult for them to enter the labour market is that their expectations of their future employer are too high. People under 30 are a specific group, striving to achieve a harmonious and satisfying life in all areas of functioning. Changing attitudes to work, claiming attitudes to work, attitudes to leisure time have revolutionised young people's view of work. The approach work - life balance as well as flexible forms of employment and working time are currently one of the most motivating solutions for young people. Respondents are aware that this is a factor, which may hinder their functioning on the labour market.

Another problem that young people believe hinders their entry into the labour market is the type of contracts concluded. In interviews, they reported that mainly rely on unpaid internships, after which in many cases the employment is not continued or contracts, which often constitute circumvention of labour law and tax regulations. This is particularly dangerous in the case of young people who face unemployment at the very beginning of their career. It should be emphasised that the age of up to 30 is associated with different developmental tasks. People at this age aspire to financial independence and often plan to start a family. Contracts that do not guarantee job stability often affect their non-work-related life plans.

A problem in assessing young people is also that they are guided by stereotypes in their assessment. The experience of young jobseekers shows that employers prefer older workers, equating age with work experience. Furthermore, they perceive young people as emotionally immature, demanding, not very committed, avoiding responsibility and expecting ready-made solutions.

In conclusion, it is worth emphasising that a properly functioning education system should lead to a reduction in the level of competence mismatch between employees and employers. Many researchers point out that this problem is related to the too rapid increase in the number of university graduates in relation to market needs. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of skills among university graduates is also an important problem. The problem is therefore not too many university graduates, but rather the issue of the skills that new employees lack despite having a university degree.

## **Problems faced by the unemployed 50 +**

In the realities of contemporary, highly developed societies, the issue of economic activity of older people is gaining importance in the context of dynamic demographic changes. On the one hand, a systematic increase in life expectancy and the period of so-called active old age, characterised by a relatively high level of psychophysical fitness, is observed. On the other hand, the downward trend in fertility rates continues. As a result, the old-age dependency ratio is increasing, which means increasing pressure on economically active people to maintain the post-working age population.

Table 3 presents data on the number of unemployed people over 50 in Poland in 2019-2023. The number of people over 50 was the highest in 2020 and amounted to almost 269 thousand people. In the following years, a clear decrease in this indicator was observed, which in 2023 reached 211 thousand people. This may indicate a gradual improvement in the situation of this group in the labour market after the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the analysed period, the largest category in terms of numbers were unemployed people remaining without employment for more than 24 months. Although their number fluctuated - from 88.4 thousand in 2021 to 70

thousand in 2023 - they invariably constituted a significant percentage of the unemployed 50+ population. Compared to this group, the number of unemployed people unemployed for less than 6 months remained at a lower but relatively stable level.

From the point of view of the age structure, the most numerous groups were the unemployed in the 45-54 and 55-59 age brackets, with the highest values observed in 2020, 93.8 thousand and 107.4 thousand people respectively. On the other hand, the group of people aged 60 and over was slightly lower in numbers, although still significant overall, with a downward trend in this category as well.

In terms of education level, the largest number of unemployed people vocational had basic or trade education, as well as primary or lower educationsecondary. These groups exceeded a total of more than 150,000 people per year in the first years of the period under study, which may indicate a relatively higher risk of unemployment among those with lower levels of education. Those with tertiary education accounted for the smallest proportion of the surveyed population, which may suggest greater stability of employment in this group.

In terms of job tenure, those with work experience of between 10 and 30 years predominated. These groups totalled more than 100,000 people per year, confirming that the unemployment problem also affects people with many years of work experience. In contrast, those with no work experience at all constituted a small but constant part of the collective.

**Table 3: Number of unemployed over 50 years of age in 2019-2023 in Poland (as at the end of the year)**

Specification		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Length of unemployment in months	up to 1	20 343	15 788	14 852	15 789	15 030
	1-3	37 190	33 987	29 779	32 878	32 803
	3-6	29 955	33 208	24 156	26 139	26 424
	6-12	36 769	54 320	35 006	32 193	34 356
	12-24	36 102	51 478	48 656	30 590	32 661
	over 24	75 313	79 982	88 365	81 329	70 043
Age	18-24 years	x	x	x	x	x
	25-34 years	x	x	x	x	x
	35-44 years	x	x	x	x	x
	45-54 years	78 278	93 831	84 056	78 381	78 901
	55-59 years	97 221	107 382	94 967	85 001	80 837
	60 years and over	60 173	67 550	61 791	55 536	51 579
Education	higher	13 725	16 081	15 105	15 008	14 983
	post-secondary and secondary vocational/professional	42 759	48 267	42 750	38 768	36 599
	general secondary education	10 708	12 735	11 810	10 875	10 900
	basic vocational/professional	84 564	98 330	86 701	77 915	75 893
	lower secondary/primary and below	83 916	93 350	84 448	76 352	72 942
Total length of service	up to 1 year	21 220	24 742	23 910	22 146	22 172
	1-5 years	23 031	27 503	26 975	25 629	26 502
	5-10 years	30 308	35 799	34 132	31 945	32 109
	10-20 years	61 395	69 047	61 760	55 324	52 806

	20-30 years	61 305	67 898	56 974	49 570	46 152
	30 years and over	27 022	31 330	25 204	21 567	20 112
	without seniority	11 391	12 444	11 859	12 737	11 464
Total		235 672	268 763	240 814	218 918	211 317

Source: own compilation based on Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy labour market reports 2019-2023

On the basis of in-depth interviews, it can be concluded that people over 50 face numerous challenges on the contemporary labour market, which result from both their individual professional experience and social and economic trends. In particular, they often face age discrimination, which manifests itself in difficult access to employment and problems with career advancement. Stereotypes about lower productivity, lack of flexibility or difficulties in adapting to new technologies mean that these people are often overlooked in recruitment processes.

Another major problem identified by people 50+ is their education and professional being outdated or less attractive to qualifications employers. This may be due to the fact that many people who have worked in one industry or position for a long time have had limited opportunities to update their skills. Also important is the rise of new technologies, which means that older people may find it difficult to adopt modern solutions, making them less competitive in the market.

People 50+ during the interviews also that they are a problem emphasised negative attitudes of employers towards this group. Many companies fear that employees over 50 may take sick leave more often, which leads to lower productivity at work. In addition, employing people of pre-retirement age may involve higher costs for the employer, both in terms of pension benefits and pre-retirement protection. Such concerns lead to a situation where these workers are perceived as less attractive on the labour market, despite having work experience.

Integration of 50+ people in teams is also a problem, according to the respondents, especially when the company is dominated by younger people. Clashing generations, differences in approach to work and communication, and different life values can lead to a sense of exclusion, as well as difficulties in teamwork.

People 50+ also indicated that they experience professional burnout. Lack of motivation to develop or strive for promotion makes them engage less in their daily duties. This is also due to the fact that for many people at this age other aspects of life, such as family, health or passions, become more important than a professional career. This, in turn, can be poorly perceived by employers and perpetuate negative beliefs about hiring older people.

In summary, people 50+ in the labour market face numerous difficulties which require both actions on the part of employers and systemic solutions supporting their functioning in the labour market. Programmes, which enable them to gain new qualifications or improve the current ones, as well as to change social attitudes which will positively influence the perception of this age group in the context of work, may prove helpful.

## Long-Term Unemployed

Another group in a difficult situation on the labour market are the long-term unemployed. The long duration of unemployment is associated with many difficulties in returning to professional activity.

Table 4 contains data on the number of long-term unemployed in Poland in 2019-2023. In the analysed period, the largest group in the structure of the duration of unemployment was people unemployed for more than 24 months. Their number systematically increased from 2019, reaching its highest level - 248 thousand - in 2021, before declining to 183.1 thousand in 2023. The second most numerous category was those unemployed for 12 to 24 months. In total, the unemployed for more than 12 months dominated the structure of the total long-term unemployed, which is in line with the accepted definition of this category in labour market statistics.

When analysing the age structure, the highest number of long-term unemployed was recorded in the 25-34 and 35-44 age groups, which may indicate the particular vulnerability of these age groups to long-term exclusion from the labour market. Although younger people (18-24 years) and older people (55 years and older) were represented to a lesser extent, their share was significant and showed relative stability over time.

An analysis of the level of education shows that long-term unemployment was most prevalent among those with lower secondary education, primary education or less, and basic vocational or trade education. Together, these groups accounted for more than half of all long-term unemployed. In contrast, people with tertiary education

belonged to the least numerous categories in the structure, which may indicate a correlation between education level and vulnerability to long-term unemployment.

In terms of job tenure, the largest group was made up of unemployed people with work experience of 1 to 5 years and those with very short tenure, up to 1 year. At the same time, people with no work experience remained an important category in terms of numbers, exceeding 60,000 in 2019-2021. With the length of work experience, the number of people affected by long-term unemployment decreases, suggesting that people with very long work experience are relatively less at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market.

The total number of long-term unemployed peaked in 2020 at 515,776, likely related to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the labour market. In the following years, a gradual reduction in the number of long-term unemployed was evident, falling to 385 871 in 2023. This may indicate a partial recovery of the labour market, but the still persistently high share of people unemployed for more than two years poses a challenge for labour market policy.

**Table 4: Number of long-term unemployed from 2019 to 2023 in Poland (end of year)**

Specification		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Length of unemployment in months	up to 1	12 106	8 124	11 426	11 483	9 532
	1-3	29 130	20 975	26 156	27 671	23 937
	3-6	25 683	19 593	18 712	23 566	21 284
	6-12	38 826	54 024	25 432	30 931	33 789
	12-24	127 300	190 635	176 728	107 542	114 212
	over 24	199 393	222 425	248 000	218 487	183 117
Age	18-24 years	28 727	37 143	33 752	25 131	25 103
	25-34 years	109 220	130 972	122 994	96 252	83 731
	35-44 years	108 419	133 905	134 769	112 021	102 948
	45-54 years	87 376	105 533	108 509	94 218	90 460
	55-59 years	59 031	64 159	63 005	54 163	49 449
	60 years and over	39 665	44 064	43 425	37 895	34 180
Education	higher	50 690	63 730	64 281	52 264	47 741
	post-secondary and secondary vocational/professional	89 337	107 137	105 408	87 768	81 245
	general secondary education	44 473	55 568	55 215	45 769	42 467
	basic vocational/professional	116 857	137 027	132 024	110 222	101 859
	lower secondary/primary and below	131 081	152 314	149 526	123 657	112 559
Total length of service	up to 1 year	91 035	110 316	110 206	92 410	85 598
	1-5 years	103 346	129 553	128 057	106 826	98 541
	5-10 years	65 492	79 735	78 955	65 888	61 205
	10-20 years	64 818	75 798	74 426	61 884	56 058
	20-30 years	36 004	40 090	38 367	30 777	26 990
	30 years and over	9 868	11 250	11 149	9 064	7 768
	without seniority	61 875	69 034	65 294	52 831	49 711

Total	432 438	515 776	506 454	419 680	385 871
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Source: own compilation based on Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy labour market reports 2019-2023

The long-term unemployed indicated that one of their main problems on the market labour is the obsolescence of qualifications. Changing technologies, working methods and standards make several years of inactivity a barrier to entering the labour market. This state of affairs exacerbates the feeling of professional uselessness and difficulties in adapting to market requirements.

Another problem reported by people in this group was high competition in the labour market. Unemployed people who have spent a long time out of the labour market often become part of a larger group of job seekers, causing them to compete with each other for the same positions. Moreover, in times of high unemployment and a large supply of candidates, finding a job becomes even more difficult.

The long-term unemployed also indicated psychological problems, mainly fear of returning to work. Long-term inactivity can exacerbate fears of re-entering and functioning in organisational structures. This kind of anxiety can be further reinforced by a low sense of professional usefulness, when the long-term unemployed begin to doubt their skills and ability to perform at an appropriate level.

People who have been unemployed for a long time may become used to this state, which can lead to learned helplessness. This phenomenon is the result of unsuccessful attempts to get a job in the past and can result in the belief that there is no point in making further efforts. Often there is also the comfort associated with living without a job - the lack of work obligations, flexible time and lack of pressure can make a return to activity seem unattractive. This can affect the lack of motivation to change, which is one of the key difficulties in returning to the labour market.

Another difficulty, which was rarely at a conscious level with the interviewees, concerns the belief that it does not pay them to work because of welfare benefits. For some people, this is an argument for not being motivated to work, as they do not see the financial benefits of working compared to the stability that benefits offer. These often reported people fear of losing benefits, which is another barrier to work activation.

Interviews with the long-term unemployed showed that work is not an autotelic value for them, because in their work experience it has not been a source of satisfaction or fulfilment. If work has not been perceived as an autotelic value in itself for many years, these individuals may view it only as a means of obtaining a livelihood, rather than as the fulfilment of their aspirations or life goals. This phenomenon is often replicated in families, where adults who have experienced unemployment pass on their beliefs and attitudes to the younger generation. In this way a family pattern is created in which the absence of work is natural.

In summary, the long-term unemployed face numerous difficulties, which are due to both outdated skills and psychological barriers, such as fear of change, which results in lack of motivation. In order to effectively support their re-entry into the labour market, it is necessary both to provide access to training and support for updating skills and to take action to change the social and psychological attitudes of these people.

## Support instruments and economic implications

Young people, people aged 50+ and the long-term unemployed belong to the category of people in a special situation on the labour market, characterised by a greater risk of permanent professional and social exclusion. Their situation poses a significant challenge for labour market policy, as it affects not only the individual well-being of these groups, but also the stability of the social security system and the potential for economic growth.

For young people, measures to support a smooth transition from education to employment are crucial. Instruments such as apprenticeships, vocational training, subsidising first employment or individual career counselling aim to strengthen practical competences and increase the chances of gaining first work experience. Cooperation between the education market and employers to adapt curricula to labour market requirements is also important.

People over 50, on the other hand, require support aimed at sustaining economic activity and counteracting age discrimination. Effective forms of support include, *inter alia*, subsidised employment, tailored retraining, flexible forms of employment and mentoring programmes that exploit the potential knowledge and experience of this group.

The long-term unemployed, regardless of age, are a special group requiring integrated activation and reintegration measures. This group is one of the most difficult in terms of professional activation. In their case, not only typically professional tools are necessary (e.g. qualification enhancement courses, socially useful work), but also psychological, motivational and social support, especially in cases of accumulation of barriers (e.g. low level of education, health problems, lack of mobility).

From an economic point of view, the insufficient integration of these groups into the labour market leads to a number of negative consequences. Reduced labour force participation translates into reduced potential labour supply, increased public expenditure on social benefits and lower tax and contribution revenues. Moreover, long-term unemployment promotes the depreciation of human capital, which further reduces the competitiveness of the economy in the long term.

In view of the above, labour market policy should be based on a comprehensive, coherent approach to supporting people in a particular employment situation. This implies the need for cooperation between labour market institutions, the education system, social assistance and non-governmental organisations. The long-term economic effects of measures supporting people remaining in a difficult situation on the labour market should be analysed not only through the prism of short-term employment effectiveness, but also in the context of reducing social costs and increasing the inclusiveness of the labour market. An effective policy in this respect should also take into account the individual needs of these groups, offering "tailor-made" support with cross-sectoral cooperation.

## Summary

Based on statistics from 2019-2023 and in-depth individual interviews, the main barriers that hinder these groups from fully participating in the labour market were identified. Among the most frequently indicated difficulties are: competence mismatch, low motivation, age stereotypes, outdated qualifications and psychological barriers. It is worth emphasising that the consequences of low professional activity of these groups are felt both at the individual level (poverty, marginalisation, social exclusion) and at the macroeconomic level (lower productivity, increased social expenditure, reduced tax revenues).

In view of the above, it is worth considering in-depth research on the difficulties of particular groups remaining in a difficult situation on the labour market. The information obtained may facilitate the introduction of individualised activation programmes based on a comprehensive diagnosis of the professional and social situation of participants. Special attention should be paid to people over 50, promoting flexible forms of employment and counteracting age stereotypes. In turn, young people should be supported by mentoring, internship programmes and career counselling implemented already at school level. In the case of the long-term unemployed, it will be important to integrate psychological support with professional activation and cooperation between labour market institutions, social assistance and third sector organisations.

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