

# NEET Youth as an Actor in the Social Economy: A Legal Perspective

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**Abstract:** **Background:** The legal framework does not extensively discuss the topic of NEET young people, and works dedicated to this issue in the context of the social economy remain rare. This may come as a surprise, given the assumption that the social economy specifically tackles exclusion in the labor market. **Research objectives:** Therefore, the text primarily aimed to establish whether the legal regulations on the social economy currently in force in Poland address this heterogeneous NEET phenomenon and, if so, to what extent. **Research design and methods:** The research primarily encompassed statutory material specific to the social economy in Poland. The authors used the dogmatic method. **Results:** The research determined that the law provides a basis for social economy entities to impact NEET youth, albeit to varying degrees, due to their diverse nature. **Conclusions:** The NEET group itself is also diverse, and the volitional sphere influences how one understands the law's impact on NEETs. Although the research question received a clear answer, the analysis of regulations revealed a critical issue in legal studies: the absence of a legal definition of NEET youth.

**Keywords:** NEET, social economy, unemployment, administration law

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The issue of NEET youth (not in education, employment, or vocational training) carries significance for several reasons. Young people constitute “an essential resource for all economies and societies” (Kurzawa, 2018, p. 151). NEET joblessness generates direct economic costs, such as unemployment benefits, and indirect ones, such as lost opportunities in the form of unpaid taxes (Kurzawa, 2018, p. 159). One must also consider the difficult-to-measure but important potential for entrepreneurship and innovation. Work matters for another reason: Poland’s aging society requires labor force participation, including that of young people. From the viewpoint of the individual – not only the young, incidentally – lack of work generally deprives people of various needs, often accompanying or causing other personal problems. Unemployment ranks among the reasons for social exclusion (Małecka-Łyszczek & Mędrzycki, 2021, p. 25).

Recognizing the postulate of axiological-normative unity, one should regard work (employment) as a value, since the legislator introduces legal instruments to counteract the phenomenon of unemployment. A key regulation in this context, the Act of April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 475, as amended), governs instruments of employment support and vocational activation. In anticipation of fur-

ther discussion, this legal act has already gained significant attention in Polish legal literature. However, the issue of NEET youth has not yet attracted wider interest from the perspective of social economics within legal sciences (cf. Małecka-Łyszczyk, 2017; Lipowicz et al., 2024). Therefore, deepening the analysis of this relationship appears justified and constitutes the primary goal of the study. The European Union institutions have recognized the relationship between NEET youth and the social economy in non-normative (political) acts (European Economic and Social Committee, 2021).

## Literature Review

It seems particularly noteworthy that legal academics, including those in administrative law, have so far shown little interest in the legal situation of NEET youth. A review of Polish literature reveals only a limited number of legal references to the topic. Although scarce, these references support the following thesis: scholars predominantly examine the NEET youth category through the prism of labor market institutions and, more broadly, labor law. Research on social economics – whose provisions mostly have an administrative-legal character, at least in Polish literature – rarely appears in discussions of the NEET phenomenon. This evident tilt toward labor market law, combined with the overall paucity of legal studies dedicated to the subject, makes it both necessary and feasible to draw on the existing body of labor law scholarship at this juncture.

Counteracting the NEET phenomenon is one of the major challenges for the education system and the labor market. ... In the case of young people (aged 16–24) who remain in education and/or employment, competencies increase with age while for NEETs – there is a regression. The most frequently cited reason for youth unemployment is a lack of practical skills and professional experience. Despite the low percentage of young people who do not continue their education, some of the young people included in the NEET group do not register with labor offices and remain excluded from the labor market primarily because they have not completed their formal education and thus lack professional qualifications. These individuals often show no interest in seeking employment because they do not see the need, or they are unwilling to engage in training or further education. They can be particularly difficult to activate. Hence, there is an initiative to reach out to them by using specific methods and incorporating them into labor market policy measures. (Męcina, 2018, pp. 508–509)

The NEET youth situation has attracted attention from both the International Labour Organization and European Union institutions (Surdykowska, 2014).

Additional references to the labor market in the literature allow for several significant conclusions. Youth unemployment remains persistently high relative to total unemployment, posing a major challenge for employment policy – “people are not equal when facing the threat of unemployment.” This reality partly justifies the need to recognize a “right to first employment” for young people entering the labor market (Staszewska, 2020, p. 11; see also Góral, 2002, p. 193; Góral, 2006, p. 103). In line with European Union guidelines (Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on a Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee 2020/C 372/01), the age range of individuals requiring increased support in finding their first job should expand, reflecting a prolonged transition period from education to employment (Staszewska, 2020, p. 12). Furthermore, the literature notes that “difficulties for young people entering the labor market – namely inadequate education, lack of skills, and insufficient professional experience – must be taken into account in designing labor market instruments aimed at

promoting youth employment.” These difficulties also correlate with risks borne by employers, who may hesitate to accept them, thus prompting the idea of subsidized employment through “wage subsidies, bonuses associated with hiring, reductions in social security contributions, or tax relief” (Staszewska, 2020, p. 12).

Given the nature of research objectives in legal scholarship, the analysis of the essence of this phenomenon and the NEET group’s characteristics requires drawing on insights from other fields, such as the social sciences and economics. Difficulties in explicating the problem seem to stem not only from the NEET group’s heterogeneity, which lawyers also recognize (Surdykowska, 2014, p. 235), but also from the significant lability of the labor market, driven increasingly by technological variables and destabilizing factors such as war, economic crises, and biological threats (Kurzawa, 2018, p. 160; Giemza, 2024).

Defining NEET youth may appear straightforward at first glance. According to the acronym’s expansion, it refers to young people or individuals who are not in education, employment, or vocational training, where all three conditions occur simultaneously. However, the term NEET does not constitute the only description of this sociological phenomenon. Other expressions remain in use, such as *generación ni-ni* (“neither-nor generation”) or the Italian *bamboccioni* (“big babies”) (Kurzawa, 2018, p. 151), as well as Polish equivalents like “passive generation” (Giemza, 2024, p. 26). From the outset, the concept of NEET has applied specifically to young individuals; hence, the literature frequently employs designations such as “young person belonging to the NEET category” or “NEET youth” (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). As noted in the literature (Susz, 2022, p. 121), the NEET category appears not only in policy and strategic-planning documents but has also evolved into a formal legal category, owing to its inclusion in a derivative act of European Union law. The EU legislature retains the original meaning of this category as individuals not studying, not working, and not in vocational training (Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013, Article 2(ii)). Polish policy documents also recognize the NEET category, sometimes linking it to social exclusion (Resolution No. 165) or, explicitly, to the social economy (Resolution No. 164).

As we will discuss further, the so-called volitional sphere plays a crucial role.

The NEET group includes not only young individuals who meet the criteria for being unemployed but also those who leave education prematurely, do not seek work, remain—sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity—financially dependent on their parents, or engage in socially disapproved activities. ... Among NEETs, there are both relatively well-educated young people who are unable to find jobs commensurate with their qualifications and those with lower levels of qualification because they left school too early. ... Some NEETs resort to socially unacceptable, alternative income-generating activities, which bring them into conflict with the law. ... Thus, the NEET group comprises both individuals who do not work of their own volition and those who are unable to find employment despite their efforts. (Serafin-Juszczak, 2014, pp. 46–48)

This category includes both healthy individuals and persons with disabilities (Serafin-Juszczak, 2014, p. 48). Scholars often stress that – in spite of the group’s heterogeneity – its members ultimately “live at someone else’s expense” (Suszka, 2022, p. 122). However, such terminology may evoke the dark era of criminalizing non-engagement in work, referred to as “social parasitism” (Dukiet-Nagórska, 1979). Such an approach contradicts the modern concept of a democratic state of law, which does not mean that the state of not working despite available employment opportunities is socially and legally irrelevant.

Notably, unambiguous delimitation of the NEET phenomenon proves complicated by ambiguous criteria for group inclusion, in spite of their apparent clarity. However, a fundamen-

tal feature in describing NEET appears to be the lack of employment. The latter may result from continuous education or vocational training: individual pursuing educational or training opportunities do not classify as NEET.

The multiplicity of variables, combined with the absence of normative criteria, produces a heterogeneous sociological profile of the group. Consequently, research aimed at deconstructing the NEET group and identifying determinants of membership, or investigating possible reasons for belonging to this group, holds particular value (Giemza, 2024; Suszka, 2022, p. 123). As indicated in the abovementioned British report, “the NEET situation does not arise out of nowhere”; it stems from numerous factors observable at earlier development, such as school-related difficulties, family environment, and lack of support (Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16–18 Year Olds Not in Education, Employment or Training, 1999, pp. 6ff.). Nevertheless, research on the NEET youth profile should also consider geographical factors (Simões et al., 2022; Jongbloed & Giret, 2021).

Given the qualitatively diverse image of NEET youth, one may ask whether the legal regulations on the social economy currently in force in Poland address this heterogeneous NEET phenomenon, and if so, to what extent. Importantly, the objective here does not lie in reiterating or conducting new studies on labor market instruments but rather in focusing on the social economy. Our article posits that the legislator has not formulated a legal definition of NEET youth, which complicates interpretation and may hinder efforts to counter this phenomenon.

## Research Method and Material

Considering the research question posed, the article adopts the dogmatic research method. This method serves as a fundamental tool in the science of law, enabling analysis of both the content of a legal norm and the relationship between various components of a legal text and their systematics. In the case of the social economy, applying this method proves important not only due to the legal regulation of the matter but also because of the legal material's far-reaching fragmentation. As indicated in the literature (Lipowicz et al., 2024, pp. 58, 172), the Act of August 5, 2022, on the Social Economy (Journal of Laws, 2022, item 1812) has not fulfilled the hopes regarding the consolidation of normative material on the social economy in Poland. Thus, in addition to the abovementioned law, the research material includes the following acts: the Act of April 24, 2023, on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1491, as amended); the Act of April 27, 2006, on Social Cooperatives (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 802, as amended); the Act of June 13, 2003, on Social Employment (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 2241, as amended); and the Act of August 27, 1997, on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and the Employment of Persons with Disabilities (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 44, as amended). Although these are not the only legal sources cited herein, they represent the core regulations relevant for this study.

The social economy comprises a diverse category of entities, which in Poland generally include: a) social cooperatives; b) occupational therapy workshops and vocational activity establishments; c) social integration centers and social integration clubs; d) worker cooperatives, including cooperatives for persons with disabilities, cooperatives for the visually impaired, and agricultural production cooperatives; e) non-governmental organizations, as defined in Article 3(2) of the Act of April 24, 2003, on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 571), with the exception of political parties, European political parties, trade unions and employer organizations, professional self-governments, foundations

established by political parties, and European political foundations; and f) entities referred to in Article 3(3)(1), (2), or (4) of the Act of April 24, 2003, on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism.

Given the qualitative profile of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) phenomenon, one should consider whether the social economy entities listed above help prevent or eliminate a) lack of work; b) lack of education; and c) lack of vocational training. The discussion begins with education and vocational training.

In principle, a broad understanding of “learning” – acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies – covers many social economy forms. The statutory concept of vocational and social reintegration assumes the acquisition of skills, new qualifications, and competencies (Article 2(7) and (8) of the Act on the Social Economy). However, if one treats “learning” strictly as a natural consequence of remaining within the formal education or higher education systems, this conclusion changes. Social economy entities do not form part of the education system under Article 2 of the Act of December 14, 2016, the Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 737, as amended) or the system of higher education and science under Article 7(1) of the Act of July 20, 2018, the Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1571, as amended). Consequently, these entities do not perform the educational or instructional functions attributed to those systems.

Determining the meaning of “vocational training” presents a somewhat more complex task. One may interpret it very broadly to encompass any practice – such as training programs or internships – that develops professional skills, or more narrowly, in the context of lifelong learning as described in Article 117 of the Education Law. Lifelong learning may involve: 1) a qualifying vocational course; 2) a vocational skills course; 3) a general competency course; 4) a theoretical retraining course for young workers; 5) an industry vocational training course; or 6) another course that enables individuals to obtain, expand, or change their knowledge, skills, or professional qualifications. Vocational training offered in the lifelong learning framework leads to the acquisition of professional qualifications. Generally, conducting such activities does not fall within the primary scope of social economy entities, with an exception under Article 170(2) of the Education Law, which concerns the concept of vocational training as an activity carried out by a non-governmental organization. Both legislation and legal doctrine unanimously recognize non-governmental organizations as social economy entities (Małecka-Łyszczek & Mędrzycki, 2021, pp. 242–254). Still, the Education Law does not govern this type of training (Article 117(4) of the Education Law).

Vocational activity establishments and occupational therapy workshops may play a supportive role in developing employment-relevant skills, especially for individuals with disabilities. According to Article 10a of the Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and the Employment of Persons with Disabilities, an occupational therapy workshop constitutes an organizationally and financially separate facility that allows people with disabilities – who are unable to take up employment – to undergo social and vocational rehabilitation aimed at acquiring or restoring the skills necessary to enter the labor market.

Therefore, these workshops address persons with disabilities who currently lack the competencies required for employment. Notably, this group includes persons “incapable of taking up employment,” for whom participation in the workshops offers social and vocational rehabilitation to obtain or regain professional skills. Pursuant to paragraph 2 of this provision, an occupational therapy workshop achieves its primary objective by “using occupational therapy techniques.” While the legislator does not specify these techniques, it clarifies that among other things, they should support developing vocational skills that enable participation in vocational

training or taking up employment, which, incidentally, constitutes the main purpose of the interventions described in the provision (Wrocławska, 2023, Article 10(a)).

Paragraph 3a of the abovementioned Act stipulates that, based on an individual rehabilitation program, a participant in an occupational therapy workshop may take part in unpaid work placements with an employer – including a social cooperative or a social enterprise referred to in the Social Economy Act – for up to 15 hours per week over a period of up to three months, with the possibility of extension to six months.

In the context of vocational training, it is important to consider vocational reintegration, understood as activities aimed at rebuilding and maintaining the ability to perform work on the labor market among individuals participating in the programs of a social integration center or social integration club. A social integration center provides services for acquiring professional skills and apprenticeship, retraining, or improving professional qualifications, which directly relate to the broad meaning of professional training (training) (Article 2(5) and Article 3(1)(2) of the Social Employment Act). A social integration club may offer activities that aim to organize employment or traineeships, as referred to in the provisions on employment promotion and labor market institutions (Article 18 of the Social Employment Act). The Act on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions defines a traineeship as the acquisition of practical skills by an unemployed person for work through performing tasks in a workplace, without establishing an employment relationship with the employer (Article 2(1)(34)).

According to Iwona Sierpowska, it is the responsibility of the state to prevent processes of social alienation. In addition to combating material poverty, the state should – through social work – stimulate the activity of people at risk of social exclusion and support their integration – or more precisely, reintegration – into the professional and local environment (Sierpowska, 2004, p. 298). The objectives of these efforts vary. In the case of professional reintegration, activities aimed at restoring or maintaining the ability to work independently are of key importance. Conversely, social reintegration involves actions intended to preserve the individual's ability to participate in local community life and fulfill social roles in their place of residence, stay, or work (Maciejko & Zaborniak, 2008, pp. 58–69).

As previously noted, any analysis of the social economy in the context of education and vocational training must also consider the category of work. It is well established that the social economy serves to maintain employment opportunities and relates to work. Of course, certain entities, such as social cooperatives, seem particularly predisposed to this role. According to the referenced definition of the social economy, it targets people at risk of social exclusion. However, not every social economy entity provides employment for this group. For example, a social integration club does not fulfill this function.

Nevertheless, the following discussion highlights issues that give rise to interpretative problems when linking the social economy to NEET youth.

In Article 2(6) of the Social Economy Act, the legislator identifies twelve groups recognized as persons at risk of social exclusion. These include: a) the unemployed, as referred to in Article 2(1)(2) of the Act of 20 April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 735, 1429, 1723, and 1737); b) the long-term unemployed, pursuant to Article 2(1)(5) of the Act of April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions; c) jobseekers, as referred to in Article 2(1)(22) of the Act of April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions, without employment – aged up to 30 and over 50 – or not performing other gainful employment, as defined in Article 2(1)(11) of the Act of April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions; d) per-



sons with disabilities within the meaning of Article 1 of the Act of August 27, 1997, on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and the Employment of Persons with Disabilities; e) graduates of social integration centers and clubs, as referred to in Article 2(1a) and (1b) of the Act of June 13, 2003, on Social Employment; f) persons who fulfil the criteria outlined in Article 8(1)(1) and (2) of the Act of March 12, 2004, on Social Assistance (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 901, 1693, 1938, and 2760); g) persons entitled to a special care allowance, according to Article 16a(1) of the Act of November 28, 2003, on Family Benefits (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 390, 658, and 1429); h) independent persons, as outlined in Article 140(1) and (2) of the Act of June 9, 2011, on Support for the Family and the System of Foster Care (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 1426 and 1429) and Article 88(1) of the Act of March 12, 2004, on Social Assistance; i) persons with mental disorders, as referred to in Article 3 (1) of the Act of August 19, 1994, on Mental Health Protection (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 2123, and of 2023, item 1972); j) persons deprived of liberty, person leaving a penal institution and adult persons leaving a correctional institution; k) older persons, as defined in Article 4(1) of the Act of September 11, 2015, on Older Persons (Journal of Laws item 1705); and l) persons granted refugee status or subsidiary protection in the Republic of Poland.

By its very nature, a comprehensive discussion of the scope of Article 2(6) of the Social Economy Act is not possible here; for detailed interpretation, one should consult the available commentaries (Stachowicz et al., 2023; Małecka-Lyszczek & Mędrzycki, 2023). The statutory catalogue of persons at risk of social exclusion does not explicitly include NEET youth. However, the literature recognizes NEET youth as persons vulnerable to social exclusion (Serafin-Juszczak, 2014). The subordination of the statutory classification of persons at risk of social exclusion to the regulation of social enterprises partly justifies the absence of this group. Therefore, one should not consider this catalogue a holistic classification corresponding to the differentiation of social exclusion (Stachowicz et al., 2023, p. 14). However, during the development of the draft law on the social economy, stakeholders emphasized the need for a broad coverage of social exclusion factors (Explanatory Memorandum, 2022). Currently, the scope of the statutory concept of persons at risk of social exclusion coincides with the scope of persons who can establish a social cooperative (Article 4(1) of the Act on Social Cooperatives), except for the requirement for cooperative founders' legal capacity as the mandatory element (with variations in Article 4(2) of the Act on Social Cooperatives).

The subject analysis of Article 2(6) of the Social Economy Act supports the conclusion that potentially many of the categories of persons indicated therein can be implicitly classified as NEETs. However, an extremely important factor involves, on the one hand, the age of the person in question, and on the other hand, their volitional sphere. For example, the legal understanding of an unemployed person as a person over the age of 18 excludes the possibility of recognizing that the statutory category of an unemployed person proves adequate for NEET youth under the age of 18. Conversely, jobseekers over 50 or older people do not fall into this category either. In other words, the social economy does not exclusively aim to help NEET young people.

According to the Social Economy Act, a person at risk of social exclusion means an unemployed person as defined in Article 2(1)(2) of the Act of April 20, 2004, on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 735, 1429, 1723, and 1737). The normative picture of this legal reference remains extremely broad. Apart from the great subjective diversity of this group, the factor that unites it – and which also proves relevant to

the considerations made here – is the “ability and willingness” of the unemployed to take up employment.

As Zbigniew Góral (2016) states, the concept of ability can refer to both legal capture – for example, age – and a person’s psychophysical abilities.

The ability to take up employment (or other gainful work) must be accompanied by a readiness to change one’s status. This should be understood as a genuine willingness to work and being in a situation that enables the commencement of work within the framework of an employment relationship, service relationship, commissioned work agreement, or other civil law contract. This is confirmed by the case law of administrative courts .... Thus, unemployed persons can only be those who have the will to take up work. The verifier of such readiness is primarily remaining available to the employment office, which means reporting to the office without undue delay and utilizing the services provided by that office. (Góral, 2016, Article 2(2.3))

One should also remember that another qualifying condition for the status of being unemployed involves the search for employment or other gainful work. Here as well,

although the legislator does not explicitly indicate this, it also involves taking one’s own actions that increase the chances of obtaining employment (or other gainful work). Therefore, an unemployed person must demonstrate personal activity aimed at losing their current status. (Góral, 2016, Article 2(2.4))

Similar considerations apply to a long-term unemployed person – also classified as a person at risk of social exclusion – namely, an individual who remains registered with a district labor office for a total period of more than 12 months within the last two years, excluding periods of internship and vocational training for adults.

In the current geopolitical situation, one should not underestimate the fact that the legislator, in the cited Article 2(1)(2) of the Act on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions, defines the concept of the unemployed by limiting its subjective scope only to the persons explicitly indicated, to whom the provisions of this Act apply. This means that the status of an unemployed person may be granted to Polish citizens and foreigners. At the same time, however, foreigners whose employment in Poland requires a work permit cannot obtain this status (Staszewska, 2012).

The category of jobseekers provided for in the Social Economy Act proves even more problematic in relation to NEET young people. Initially, this category can include those who currently have a job, those who are in education, and those who are neither in education nor in employment (Góral, 2016, Article 2(2.4-2.6)). However, the Social Economy Act specifies that it concerns people who remain “unemployed” and do not perform other gainful employment. Notably, we focus on the category of people under 30. However, the category certainly does not include people who passively seek to change their occupational situation. As already noted, such a volitional premise characterizes some NEET young people. Recognizing that the NEET phenomenon involves a person’s unwillingness to study, work, and train allows a different view of the outcome of the legal analysis. The next section of the article will present these results.

## Results and Discussion

The literature on NEET youth and social economics has not overlapped extensively to date, resulting in a lack of representative research results linking these issues – a situation that is not unique to Polish literature. In Poland, representatives of various research disciplines successfully explore these two areas, but the topics of social economics and NEET youth essen-



tially function separately, including in scientific legal discourse. The article does not investigate the reasons for this state of affairs. It only signals possible explanations (hypotheses) without resolving their veracity.

As a rule, scientific legal discourse draws mainly on substantive normative material, divided by branch. The social economy, although it obviously includes employment issues, belongs to public law with strong connections to administrative law and public economic law. However, NEET youth topics closely relate to unemployment and fall within labor law. Thus, one can suspect that the lack of research branch integration leads those working in the social economy to underestimate the research potential of NEET topics. Another possible reason is that scholars consider NEET youth issues characteristic of economic and sociological sciences, and less so of legal science. The lack of a broader distinction of the NEET category in legal acts certainly fosters looking at this category as a “foreign body” in legal science. Dependence on normative sources remains self-evident in legal research. Finally, public law scholars’ low interest in the NEET phenomenon may stem from the relatively limited attention devoted to the social economy itself compared to other topics.

The findings show that Polish social economy legislation does address the NEET phenomenon. Nevertheless, due to the chosen research method, this article does not examine the actual manifestations or effectiveness of this legal response. The social economy entities discussed here can carry out activities related to employment, education, and vocational training to varying degrees, though their modes of intervention differ across the sector. However, legal analysis of potential interventions supports the conclusion that the legal framework for social economy entities in Poland responds to the qualitative “picture” of the NEET phenomenon.

A different set of results emerges when examining the entities eligible to benefit from social economy initiatives, usually described as individuals “at risk of social exclusion.” The situation becomes different when a person is economically inactive and shows no interest in changing this status – then, from the perspective of labor law, classifying this person as unemployed may prove problematic due to lack of readiness to work. This situation also differs when a person seeks to change their status in the labor market. In addition, one should remember that no legal obligation exists to use the services of social economy entities.

## Conclusions

The factors that determine belonging to the analyzed group constitute a very important element influencing the results of legal research in the context of NEET youth. In legal considerations, the so-called volitional aspect may play a particularly important role. The will remains the decisive factor here. Notably, legal research, determined by the dogmatic method, relies on normative material as it exists. This does not preclude the possibility of making *de lege ferenda* references; however, one of the foundations for such references must be the legal text itself. The inadequate legal coverage of a diverse social phenomenon seems equally important. Although the law influences this sphere, it does not regulate the expansion of the NEET category to include the precariat, “an increasingly distinct group of people who fall into poverty despite continuous work, albeit in different forms” (Lipowicz, 2017, pp. 121–122). The problem of low-paid junk contracts serves as an example. Even though such individuals do not comprise the NEET group by definition, prolonged insecurity can deprive them of the sense of belonging to a group of professionally successful people. This deprivation may result in apathy, characteristic of some NEETs. Conversely, an objective approach must also take into account

cases in which young people consciously choose not to engage in employment. This choice is illustrated by a growing trend in Sweden referred to as the “soft girl” (*hemmaflickvän*) (Syuleymanova, 2024), where a person remains dependent on a partner.

Undoubtedly, the absence of a legal definition of this social group influences the scope of legal research on the NEET youth phenomenon in the context of the social economy. This becomes especially visible when considering both those who are unemployed in spite of their efforts and those who do not want to work. The question of what causes individuals to enter the NEET group – and whether the social economy can help address those causes – remains an open topic for further exploration. This research confirms the thesis of the article.

Despite achieving the research objectives set forth in this text, we aim to initiate a discussion within the legal sphere on the NEET phenomenon from the perspective of the social economy. We also see a need for more integrated research that involves labor law experts and scholars from non-legal disciplines.

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R.M., S.S.: conceptualization; R.M., S.S.: writing, original draft preparation; R.M., S.S.: writing, review, and editing; R.M., S.S.: supervision.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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