

# Advancing inclusive growth in cities for youth



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Across the OECD and the EU, young people in cities face particular challenges in accessing quality jobs, affordable and adequate housing, essential services, and urban amenities. Addressing these challenges requires urgent action through people-centred, place-based and integrated approaches to foster inclusive growth for youth, ensuring that all young residents can contribute to and benefit from economic development in cities. This policy paper provides an overview of the challenges faced by young people in cities, as well as strategic guidance to support local and national policymakers in designing and implementing effective inclusive growth strategies tailored to youth. Drawing on evidence from a diverse range of cities, the paper highlights actions across five policy areas – education, employment, housing and the built environment, infrastructure and services, and climate action – as well as key enabling factors for effective implementation. It emphasises the importance of stronger co-ordination between policy departments rather than siloed approaches, providing early interventions and supporting young people through key life transitions, and adopting proactive outreach strategies that bring policies and services directly to where young people live, study and work.

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# Foreword

This policy paper is one of three policy papers that are part of the broader OECD/EC What Works for Inclusive Growth in Cities project. The other two policy papers focus on people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (AROE) and people with a migrant background. Drawing on a two-phase survey of EU cities (2024-2025), selected good practices from respondent cities and dedicated policy workshops, these policy papers reflect both evidence on effective policy approaches and practical insights from implementation. These inputs underpin the policy paper findings and recommendations, ensuring that they combine “what works” with actionable guidance on how to deliver inclusive growth in practice. The insights gathered from across the project have also been synthesised in a practical Roadmap for Inclusive Growth in Cities, which provides a guide for taking action on Inclusive Growth at the local scale. This analysis primarily focuses on cities in the EU, complemented by selected examples from other OECD cities, in particular those participating in the OECD Champion Mayors for Inclusive Growth Initiative, as well as additional cases of good practices with clear relevance for EU cities

The policy paper on inclusive growth for youth in cities builds on a substantial body of OECD and European Union work on youth and inclusive growth in cities. It draws on a range of recent reports, policy frameworks and analytical tools that have shaped the current policy agenda, including the EU Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (2022), the EU Union of Skills (2025) and the European Democracy Shield (2025). It also reflects evidence and insights from key European Commission publications, notably the Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion (2024), The Situation of Young People in the European Union (2024), Investing in Education (2025), the Education and Training Monitor (2025), and recent work on youth access to affordable and quality housing (2026). In parallel, the analysis is informed by OECD work on youth inclusion, including the joint OECD-European Commission work The Missing Entrepreneurs 2023, Creating Pathways to Success for Young People (2024), the OECD Youth Policy Toolkit (2024), and the Policy Pointers from the Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy (2025). Together, these contributions provide a robust evidence base and policy foundation for the policy paper, situating it within a broader international effort to support young people’s inclusion, resilience and long-term prospects in urban areas.

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# Table of contents

|                                                                                                             |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Foreword                                                                                                    | 3  |
| Acknowledgements                                                                                            | 4  |
| 1 Challenges, needs and opportunities for youth in cities                                                   | 9  |
| Framing the issue                                                                                           | 9  |
| Trends and challenges affecting youth in EU cities                                                          | 9  |
| Why inclusion of youth matters for growth in cities                                                         | 17 |
| 2 Policies and good practices to support youth and promote inclusive growth in cities                       | 18 |
| Introduction                                                                                                | 18 |
| Education                                                                                                   | 18 |
| Labour market                                                                                               | 20 |
| Housing and the built environment                                                                           | 22 |
| Public infrastructures and services                                                                         | 24 |
| Fair climate action                                                                                         | 26 |
| 3 Enablers of effective action for youth in cities                                                          | 29 |
| Introduction                                                                                                | 29 |
| Building coherent youth policy through vertical co-ordination and cross-sectoral action                     | 29 |
| Empowering young people as partners in local public policy design                                           | 30 |
| Building robust data systems to design and evaluate effective inclusive growth policies for youth in cities | 32 |
| Strengthening youth policy delivery through innovative financing tools                                      | 33 |
| Building the capacity to deliver youth-centred policies                                                     | 34 |
| Harnessing youth perspectives and digital tools for inclusive policy evaluation                             | 35 |
| Engaging youth and local stakeholders to foster trust and political support                                 | 36 |
| 4 Conclusions and considerations                                                                            | 38 |
| Policy priorities to support youth in cities and foster inclusive growth                                    | 38 |
| Enabling conditions to support sustained reductions youth exclusion in cities                               | 39 |
| Annex A. Trends and challenges affecting youth in EU cities                                                 | 41 |
| Annex B. EU recommendations and policies                                                                    | 46 |
| References                                                                                                  | 47 |
| Notes                                                                                                       | 55 |

## FIGURES

|                                                                                                                                                       |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure A A.1. The share of young people declined in almost all EU countries                                                                           | 41 |
| Figure A A.2. Demographic shifts are expected to play out unevenly across EU regions                                                                  | 42 |
| Figure A A.3. Education and training offers a strong safeguard against youth long-term remaining outside the labour market long term and unemployment | 43 |
| Figure A A.4. Youth in the EU face higher risks of poverty than the total population                                                                  | 43 |
| Figure A A.5. The share of NEETs in the EU was lowest in cities and highest in rural areas                                                            | 44 |
| Figure A A.6. Young people experience a disproportionate housing cost burden compared to the total population                                         | 44 |
| Figure A A.7. Capital-city regions in the OECD are leading the shift toward greener jobs                                                              | 45 |

## BOXES

|                                                                                                                             |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Box A B.1. EU recommendations and policies to strengthen foundational and civic skills through integrated education systems | 46 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

# Executive summary

Addressing the challenges faced by young people in cities requires urgent, people-centred, place-based and integrated action. Too often, policies remain fragmented across sectors and levels of government, failing to reflect the realities of youth. More effective responses depend on aligning education, employment, housing and service delivery around young people's needs, supported by co-ordination mechanisms that allow institutions to act jointly rather than in silos. Particular attention is needed at key transition points, such as the move from school to work, between education cycles, or into independent living, when risks of exclusion are highest. Early and continuous intervention across these transitions can prevent disadvantages from accumulating. Proactive outreach that brings policies and services directly to where young people are, whether in schools, neighbourhoods, public spaces or online, is critical to reaching those most at risk of being left behind.

The first chapter highlights that while cities offer opportunities, from dynamic labour markets to access to tertiary education, many young people, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, still face barriers to quality education, stable employment, affordable housing and essential services. About a quarter of young people in the EU (24.1%, or 17.3 million individuals) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 21.0% of the rest of the population. Unequal access to quality education across places shapes labour market prospects. In 2023, the share of adults with at most lower secondary education was highest in towns and suburbs (23.3%), compared with 21.0% in rural areas and 18.8% in cities. Young people also face greater difficulty securing stable and well-paid employment, with an unemployment rate of 14.5%, more than double the total population rate (6.2%). Housing challenges remain significant: 9.7% of young people living in households are overburdened by housing costs and 26.5% live in overcrowded dwellings. Barriers to public infrastructure and services, including cost and lack of information, further limit opportunities. Climate change is set to disproportionately affect younger generations, who are expected to bear more than 80% of its long-term health and social burdens, especially in cities, underscoring the need for fair and inclusive climate action across generations.

The second chapter outlines policy approaches and good practices to support young people in cities through holistic, person-centred and place-based responses, recognising youth as a critical life stage that shapes future opportunities and well-being. In education, tackling segregation and discrimination can measurably improve outcomes. For example, Barcelona's (Spain) *Shock plan against segregation* led to a 26.3% decrease in the Dissimilarity Index for socially disadvantaged students between 2018-2019 and 2023-2024. Strengthening transitions between education levels and from school to work through continuous support, as well as high-quality vocational education and training (VET) and work-based learning, is another lever for improving employment prospects. Across the EU, recent VET graduates who received work-based learning were more likely to be employed (84.3% in 2024) than those who did not (69.7%). Cities can also embed entrepreneurship and innovation in education to broaden career prospects. In Lisbon (Portugal), the *Sensibilização para o Empreendedorismo e Inovação* (SEED, Raising Awareness of Entrepreneurship and Innovation) programme delivered financial literacy training to over 700 students in 2024/25. Youth centres can help cities reach those facing barriers. In Pärnu (Estonia), the youth innovation centre HUUB offers free workshops, mentoring and incubation to support youth-led initiatives

and retain local talent. Beyond jobs and skills, housing and services are decisive for youth stability. Cities are innovating with “housing plus support” models to support vulnerable young people. Lyon’s (France) *Logis Jeunes* (Youth Homes) combines sliding leases with tailored tenancy support, helping young tenants secure long-term housing. Service and mobility policies can also improve access to job opportunities. In Madrid (Spain), the *abono joven* (youth pass) is associated with a 23-percentage-point increase in the probability of finding a job within six months after layoff, with particularly strong effects for peripheral youth. Cities are also aligning youth policies with the green and digital transitions and with well-being agendas through climate literacy, sustainable urban design and youth participation.

Finally, the third chapter shows that cities’ ability to deliver inclusive growth for young people depends on a set of enabling institutional and operational conditions:

- Coherent multi-level governance: Clear allocation of responsibilities and stable institutional arrangements and structured dialogue across national, regional and local levels, support continuity and co-ordination of youth policies. For instance, France’s *Conseil d’orientation des politiques de jeunesse* (Youth Policy Advisory Council) brings national and local actors together to co-ordinate policy direction.
- Inclusive and participatory policy design: Empowering young people in policy design and delivery strengthens relevance, legitimacy and innovation, with cities such as Ljubljana (Slovenia) co-ordinating cross-departmental action and consultation through its Youth Office.
- Robust data systems: Integrated and disaggregated data systems enable cities to identify needs, target support and track progress: Barcelona’s (Spain) Vulnerable Students Registry, combining education and social data, has improved targeting of disadvantaged pupils.
- Sustainable financing: Blended financing models, including EU funds, public-private partnerships and innovative instruments such as social or sustainability-linked bonds, can scale up and stabilise youth investment. For example, the EU Youth Employment Initiative combines EU and national funding to reduce the rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- Strong local implementation capacity: Building technical capacity within local administrations, fostering cross-sectoral teams and encouraging experimentation are essential to translate strategies into outcomes, as illustrated by multidisciplinary delivery teams in the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom).
- Outcome-focused monitoring and evaluation and effective communication and leadership: Involving young people in monitoring and evaluation, and maintaining clear communication while including them in political leadership, can strengthen trust and accountability as seen in participatory budgeting initiatives in Paris (France).

# 1 Challenges, needs and opportunities for youth in cities

## Framing the issue

Definitions of youth vary across organisations, countries or cities, reflecting diverse approaches and realities. While some international organisations, such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, define youth (or “young people”, terms used interchangeably) as individuals aged 15-24, both the EU and the OECD adopt a broader age range of 15-29. This policy paper follows the latter definition unless otherwise specified.

Beyond age boundaries, youth is not a homogeneous group. It encompasses a wide spectrum of experiences shaped by social, economic, cultural, health and geographical factors that can often intensify vulnerabilities when they overlap. Young people with a migrant background, young women, young LGBTIQ+ people, youth with disabilities and those from disadvantaged families or living in deprived neighbourhoods frequently face specific challenges. These may include higher unemployment rates, discrimination on the labour market or limited access to affordable housing and quality education. For instance, ethnic minority youth, such as Roma youth in the EU, often encounter greater barriers in housing, education and employment and are statistically less likely to attain a university degree than their peers (Gerőházi, Katona and Kollár, 2023<sup>[1]</sup>; Acar, 2018<sup>[2]</sup>).

Supporting youth inclusion is particularly important in cities to ensure that urban growth and dynamism translate into opportunities for all. Although cities concentrate economic, educational and social opportunities, many young people struggle to fully access and benefit from them. Across the EU, youth are among the groups most at risk of poverty and vulnerability, especially in cities where they often face higher rates than the national average (Eurocities, 2020<sup>[3]</sup>). In cities marked by stronger inequalities and spatial segregation, disadvantage experienced early in life is more likely to intensify over time (UPLIFT, 2022<sup>[4]</sup>).

## Trends and challenges affecting youth in EU cities

### *Youth demographics in transition: challenges for cities and regions*

In 2024, there were 73 million young people aged 15-29 years in the EU (16.3% of total population), with an average age of 26.5 years within that age range. Across the EU, 46 TL3<sup>1</sup> regions out of 1 165 have a youth population representing at least one fifth of their total population. These regions, such as Byen København in Denmark (26.7% of total population), Overig Groningen in the Netherlands (25.4%) and Heidelberg Stadtkreis in Germany (25.1%), were predominantly urban. They are concentrated in a small number of Member States<sup>2</sup> and are often characterised by a higher number of education institutions and stronger labour markets, which attract young people seeking education and employment opportunities.

The share of young people in the EU has steadily declined over the past 15 years, dropping from 18.4% in 2010 to 17.2% in 2015 and 16.3% in 2024 and is projected to fall further to 15.1% by 2080, according to Eurostat's EUROPOP19 projection. This downward trend reflects persistently low and falling fertility rates combined with increasing life expectancy. Demographic shifts are expected to play out unevenly across territories. While the youth population is expanding rapidly in some EU regions, others see a shrinking youth population, deepening the spatial concentration of youth in a small number of regions and cities. Notably, all 29 TL3 regions with the largest projected increases in the share of young people between 2021 and 2050 (above 20%) are located in Germany, highlighting the country's distinctive demographic dynamics and migration patterns, such as strong external immigration, especially from Syria (Figure A A.2). By contrast, the steepest projected declines are more geographically dispersed. 15 of the 30 EU regions with the largest projected drops in their youth share are located in Poland and 5 in Italy. The sharpest decline is expected to occur in Noord-Drenthe in the Netherlands (-37%) and in Chelmsko-Zamojski in Poland (-32%). If unaddressed, these trends risk locking regions and cities into "talent development traps", where limited opportunities for young people constrain skills formation and retention, ultimately exacerbating socio-economic challenges and widening territorial disparities, illustrating the significant cost of inaction (European Commission, 2023<sup>[5]</sup>).

While youth mobility can open pathways to better educational, personal and economic opportunities, it is unevenly distributed across regions. Peripheral and rural areas, as well as former industrial regions, often experience youth outmigration, resulting in "brain drain," shrinking labour forces and demographic ageing, ultimately undermining the "right to stay", meaning the ability of individuals to voluntarily remain in their local communities to build their future, rather than feeling compelled to relocate in order to thrive (Letta, 2024<sup>[6]</sup>). The loss of skilled youth seeking better opportunities abroad or to larger or more attractive cities within the country is rooted in long-standing historical patterns, reinforced by economic instability, limited job prospects and the lingering impacts of post-communist transitions and deindustrialisation. However, youth outmigration is no longer confined to rural areas and increasingly affects small and mid-sized cities. Evidence from Spain illustrates this trend: between 2013 and 2017, Castile and León was among the most affected regions, with annual net migration losses due to long-distance mobility reaching -13.4‰ among young people in provincial capitals, -9.25‰ in other urban municipalities and -9.63‰ in rural areas. Notably, 64.8% of these young people migrating are highly educated and hold a university degree (González-Leonardo, López-Gay and Recaño, 2019<sup>[7]</sup>). This undermines local productivity, fiscal sustainability and social cohesion. Conversely, cities that attract young people face a different set of pressures, including the need to expand affordable housing, employment opportunities and services to accommodate incoming youth populations.

### ***Determinants of youth satisfaction in cities***

Younger and older adults report higher levels of life satisfaction than middle-aged individuals. A large cross-country study covering evidence from 145 countries, finds that life satisfaction tends to be relatively high among younger adults, declines progressively through mid-life, and rises again at older ages (Blanchflower, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). Youth's higher level of satisfaction is strongly influenced by local economic development. Lower GDP per capita is generally linked to lower financial satisfaction among young people, with evidence showing a negative association between income levels and the share of youth reporting low financial satisfaction. However, cities with similar levels of GDP per capita can offer very different youth financial satisfaction. For example, while in Aalborg (Denmark), 12% of youth report low financial satisfaction, in Budapest (Hungary) this rate reaches 39%, suggesting other factors are at play (Medgyesi and Csathó, 2024<sup>[9]</sup>). According to the *Youth for Reviving (Stagnating) EU Territories* project, the main drivers of youth outmigration in 2023 were limited employment opportunities (49%), personal factors (47%) and insufficient access to education (40%). Survey responses also indicate that young people prioritise policies aimed at improving affordable housing, strengthening transport connectivity, and enhancing their participation in regional decision making. These preferences are even more pronounced in regions at risk

of falling into a “talent development trap”, where housing affordability and transport access emerge as the most critical factors (European Commission, 2024<sup>[10]</sup>).

Young people’s financial satisfaction is also markedly higher where labour markets are stronger and public services of better quality. Evidence shows that favourable labour market conditions are strongly associated with higher financial satisfaction among youth. Similarly, satisfaction with local public services (such as healthcare, education, public transport) plays a decisive role. Young residents in cities with higher average satisfaction with services report greater financial satisfaction. In addition, economic literature points to the adverse consequences of a lack of affordable housing on financial satisfaction (Medgyesi and Csathó, 2024<sup>[9]</sup>). Low housing affordability has been associated with a range of social challenges, including higher risks of homelessness, poorer health outcomes and lower levels of children’s well-being (Baker et al., 2020<sup>[11]</sup>). It also contributes to residential segregation, as lower-income households get priced out of more attractive neighbourhoods or cities. However, high housing prices may partly reflect the presence of valued urban amenities, such as proximity to employment opportunities, access to green spaces or high-quality public services, which can enhance residents’ well-being (Glaeser, 2020<sup>[12]</sup>).

Beyond the economic dimensions of life satisfaction, social conditions significantly influence young people’s overall well-being, with many facing social isolation and loneliness in cities. Research shows that urban environments do not always facilitate diverse social interactions. Young people tend to encounter fewer individuals from different backgrounds than adults, with income and racial segregation particularly pronounced in larger cities and among those living in poverty (Musterd et al., 2016<sup>[13]</sup>). Several factors can contribute to this isolation. High housing costs may push young adults into smaller or more peripheral neighbourhoods, limiting their access to social and professional networks and reducing exposure to diverse economic and social environments. The limited availability of youth-friendly public spaces can reduce opportunities for interaction, while financial constraints may restrict participation in recreational activities (OECD, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>; OECD, 2025<sup>[15]</sup>).

### ***Education and training opportunities and challenges among youth***

Public investment in education in the EU has been slowly recovering after the pandemic, but key challenges remain for youth. In 2023, education accounted for around 9.6% of total public expenditure on average, compared to 10.0% in 2019 and 9.3% in 2020. Yet significant cross-country, regional and territorial disparities persist, with rates varying from 14.5% of total public expenditure in Estonia and Sweden to 7.3% in Italy. Investing in quality education is crucial to support labour productivity, innovation and demographic resilience. When education systems are aligned with skills demand, they expand job opportunities for youth and help reduce skills shortages (European Commission, 2025<sup>[16]</sup>).

Education opportunities at early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary levels are mostly concentrated in urban areas across the EU (European Commission, 2019<sup>[17]</sup>; European Commission, 2024<sup>[18]</sup>). In 2022, 44% the EU population aged 25 to 64 had attained tertiary education in cities, compared to 30% in towns and suburbs and just 25% in thinly populated areas, highlighting the spatial concentration of high-skilled labour demand in urban centres (European Commission, 2024<sup>[18]</sup>). This has important economic implications, as tertiary education is a key driver of local economic growth, productivity and competitiveness in cities. A study shows that across EU-27 countries, a one-standard-deviation increase in the share of university-educated workers is associated with a productivity increase of 24.6% at the 80th percentile of the productivity distribution (Amin, 2025<sup>[19]</sup>). This suggests that high-performing firms are especially well positioned to capitalise on concentrations of tertiary-educated workers. In 2023, the highest share of working-age adults with at most lower secondary education was recorded in towns and suburbs (23.3%), compared with 21.0% in rural areas and 18.8% in cities, while cities typically record the highest levels of tertiary educational attainment (Eurostat, 2024<sup>[20]</sup>).

Education and skills are crucial for improving youth's life chances, but important challenges remain in the EU. Early school leaving among young people (18-34) stands at 8.3% in cities (compared with 9.4% for the total population rate), with higher rates among young men (10.0%) than young women (6.6%) (Eurostat, 2026<sup>[21]</sup>). According to PISA 2022 (latest edition available at the time of writing), nearly one in three 15-year-olds in the EU did not reach basic proficiency in mathematics and around one in four fell short in reading and science. In 2024, the EU rate of young people Not in employment, education, or Training (NEET)<sup>3</sup> (Figure A A.3), was lower among those with tertiary education, suggesting that education remains one of the strongest safeguards against being outside the labour market for prolonged periods and unemployment (OECD, 2021<sup>[22]</sup>).

Across the EU, vocational education and training (VET) systems play a central role in preparing young people for the labour market but face a number of structural challenges (European Commission, 2024<sup>[18]</sup>; OECD, 2021<sup>[22]</sup>). In 2023, around half of upper-secondary students in the EU (49%) were enrolled in vocational programmes. However, participation varies widely across and within countries, territories, and levels of education, reflecting different institutional models and leading to uneven access and outcomes. For instance, the share of students enrolled in VET for that same year ranges from 17.9% in Cyprus to 73.1% in Czechia (Eurostat, 2025<sup>[23]</sup>). In contrast to tertiary education, capital city regions consistently have the lowest shares of people with VET qualifications, particularly in Romania, Germany and Czechia, where the gap exceeds 30 p.p. (European Commission, 2024<sup>[18]</sup>). Work-based learning has become an important feature of VET systems. Across the EU, in 2024, 65.2% of recent medium-level VET graduates have participated in such training, exceeding the EU-level target of at least 60% by 2025, and such learning is generally associated with stronger employability outcomes. However, its implementation remains uneven across countries. Participation rates for that same year exceeded 90% in the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, but remained much lower in Greece (15.0%), Romania (13.4%) and Czechia (7.2%) (European Commission, 2025<sup>[24]</sup>). Together, these disparities point to the need to further strengthen the attractiveness of VET systems across the EU, and to improve coherence and quality across school-based and work-based pathways.

Educational segregation remains a persistent challenge in urban areas. School zoning can exacerbate inequalities, with high housing costs limiting access to higher-performing schools for low-income families. Moreover, “first-come, first-served” allocation mechanisms may disadvantage newly arrived households or parents with limited time resources. In parallel, discrimination at school and non-inclusive learning environments can significantly undermine students’ educational outcomes and well-being, particularly for those from minority or vulnerable backgrounds. Evidence highlights how the social climate within school shapes both academic performance and students’ sense of belonging. For instance, a study of 1 445 ethnic-minority adolescents of Turkish and Moroccan background across 70 schools in Belgium found that students in schools with more ethnic minority peers, or in those actively promoting cultural diversity and equality, were less likely to report persistent or rising discrimination. Conversely, adolescents exposed to high discrimination at any stage of their school careers displayed poorer school adjustment, i.e. lower feelings of school belonging, reduced engagement and higher levels of non-compliance (Baysu et al., 2024<sup>[25]</sup>).

### ***Youth economic vulnerability and uneven labour market opportunities***

Youth in the EU face higher risks of poverty than the total population. In 2024, 24.1% of young people, representing 17.3 million individuals, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 21.0% of the rest of the population over 16. Youth poverty rates vary widely across EU countries, from 32.4% in Bulgaria to 9.9% in Slovenia (Figure A A.4) (Eurostat, 2022<sup>[26]</sup>), due to a combination of structural and policy factors. For instance, Bulgaria’s lower overall income levels and weaker labour market conditions contribute to significantly high rates of material deprivation among young people. Differences in the scope and effectiveness of social protection systems also play a role, as countries with stronger redistributive welfare policies and family support measures tend to reduce youth exposure to poverty. Educational

attainment emerges as a particularly strong predictor of poverty risk. In 2024, 61.2% of children in the EU whose parents had at most lower secondary education were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with just 11.0% of children with parents who attained tertiary education, representing a gap of over 50 p.p. based on parental education alone (Eurostat, 2025<sup>[27]</sup>). The higher risk of poverty faced by youth is also compounded by their relatively lower resilience to economic shocks than older cohorts. When they do not have sufficient family or community support, they may be forced to rely on precarious coping strategies such as accepting low-paid jobs, interrupting their studies or taking on short-term credit. Experiencing such shocks at a young age can have long-lasting consequences, turning temporary hardship into chronic poverty (OECD, 2024<sup>[28]</sup>).

Regional disparities are also evident in young people's access to education and employment opportunities. In 2024, the share of young people (aged 15-29) who were NEETs in the EU was the lowest in cities (10.1%), and higher in towns and suburbs (11.5%) and rural areas (12.3%) (Figure A A.5). The pattern of lower NEET rates in cities compared to both rural areas and towns and suburbs was observed in 18 EU countries. The largest gaps between cities and rural areas were recorded in Romania (19.3 p.p.) and Bulgaria (17.6 p.p.). This pattern reflects structural differences in economic and social opportunities between urban and rural contexts. Cities typically offer better access to education institutions, a greater diversity of job opportunities, more extensive public transport, and broader support services, all of which facilitate young people's transitions into employment or continuing education. Between 2014 and 2024, NEET rates dropped significantly in Southern and Eastern European cities, such as in Greece (-11.6 p.p.), Italy (-10.1 p.p.), Bulgaria (-7.5 p.p.) and Spain (-7.3 p.p.). This reflects the economic recovery and job creation following the severe downturns associated with the 2008 Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. EU-level frameworks, such as the employment policy Youth Guarantee and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, have emphasised early intervention to connect young people with employment, apprenticeships, traineeships and education opportunities, which also impacted the rate of NEET, especially in countries and regions where this rate was particularly high.

More specifically, in the labour market, young people form a distinct group, as their unemployment rates consistently exceed those of older age cohorts, even during periods of economic expansion. This can be attributed to their limited work experience and smaller professional networks, which make it more difficult for them to enter and remain in stable employment. Individual characteristics such as low educational attainment, an ethnic and migration background, or health and social difficulties can further constrain their access to employment. Unemployment among youth remains higher than for the overall working-age population in the EU, especially in cities, despite recent progress. The EU's youth unemployment rate declined from 24.4% in 2013 to 14.5% in 2023, but it is still more than double the overall unemployment rate of 6.2%. Youth unemployment is also higher in cities. In 2024, it stood at 15.9%, compared with 14.1% in towns and suburbs and 14.3% in rural areas, underlining the uneven geography of job opportunities for youth (European Commission, 2024<sup>[18]</sup>).

Youth pathways into the labour market also include entrepreneurship, which is strongly shaped by local conditions and plays an important role in supporting cities' economic vitality. Compared to their peers in rural areas, young people in small and medium-sized cities were 33% more likely to express entrepreneurial ambitions, compared to 6% in large cities (Vasilescu, Crivoi and Munteanu, 2025<sup>[29]</sup>). Yet, a significant share of youth entrepreneurial potential remains untapped. It is estimated that if young people aged 18-30 were as active as "core-age" men (30-49) in creating and managing businesses, the EU would count an additional 812 000 young entrepreneurs. This gap reflects a range of market and institutional failures, including limited access to finance, skills and professional networks (OECD/European Commission, 2023<sup>[30]</sup>). To strengthen youth entrepreneurship policies and programmes, the OECD Youth Entrepreneurship Policy Academy (YEPA) raises awareness of the barriers faced by young people in entrepreneurship and facilitates exchanges between policymakers, young entrepreneurs and experts on "what works" in youth entrepreneurship policy (OECD, 2025<sup>[31]</sup>).

Finally, artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping youth employment, with disproportionate effects on entry-level jobs and uneven impacts across cities. Generative AI may have a much broader labour market impact than earlier automation technologies, as it has the potential to affect a wider range of occupations, workers and regions. The share of highly exposed workers, those for whom 50% of tasks could be completed at least 50% faster, could range from 16% to over 70% across OECD regions. This exposure is expected to increase further as new software applications are developed, and Generative AI becomes more widely integrated into workplaces. Notably, regions previously considered at relatively low risk of automation appear to be among the most exposed to Generative AI. Technology-driven automation, including earlier forms of AI, has primarily affected non-metropolitan and manufacturing regions, with disproportionate impacts on low-skilled workers and men. By contrast, generative AI is expected to affect a much larger share of jobs in metropolitan regions, with greater exposure among high-skilled workers and women (OECD, 2024<sup>[32]</sup>). Evidence from recent studies shows that early-career workers, particularly those aged 22-25, in occupations highly exposed to AI automation, such as customer service and software development, have experienced notable job losses. In the United States, employment among young workers in these roles declined by around 6% between late 2022 and mid-2025 (Brynjolfsson, Chandar and Chen, 2025<sup>[33]</sup>). At the same time, the geography of AI impacts matters. Smaller cities face greater adjustments, with higher risks of displacement and substitution in routine jobs. By contrast, larger metropolitan regions benefit from greater occupational and skill diversification, with a higher concentration of managerial and technical roles that are less automatable (Frank et al., 2018<sup>[34]</sup>). This urban divide suggests that while AI may erode job opportunities for youth in more vulnerable labour markets, it could also reinforce the advantages of large cities, deepening spatial inequalities unless policy action ensures that young people in all regions can adapt and benefit from the digital transition.

### ***The youth housing affordability gap***

In many EU countries, young people experience a higher housing cost burden compared to the total population and are significantly more concerned about housing than older cohorts (OECD, 2024<sup>[35]</sup>). In 2024, 9.7% of EU youth lived in households that spent 40% or more of their disposable income on housing, compared to 8.2% for the EU's total population (Figure A A.6). However, there are considerable differences between EU countries. Croatia (2.1%), Cyprus (2.8%) and Slovenia (3.0%) registered the lowest housing cost overburden rate for young people, while Greece (30.3%) and Denmark (28.9%) had by far the highest (Eurostat, 2025<sup>[36]</sup>). Moreover, between 2013 and 2023, housing prices increased most sharply in large Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) in the OECD, where land availability is most constrained relative to demand. Prices rose by nearly 68% in FUAs with 1.5 million inhabitants or more, compared to 16% in very small FUAs (fewer than 100 000 inhabitants) (OECD, 2024<sup>[37]</sup>). Finally, in 2022, seven out of ten respondents aged 18-29 in OECD countries were somewhat or very concerned about not being able to find or maintain adequate housing beyond the next ten years. With a 16 p.p. gap compared to those aged 30-64, housing concerns show the largest disparity between young people and older age groups (OECD, 2024<sup>[35]</sup>).

Rising housing costs, coupled with limited public and affordable housing provision, disproportionately affect younger generations, who are more likely to be confined to lower-quality housing, often associated with higher energy poverty and located in peripheral multi-unit developments. Housing-related constraints can restrict access to essential services, employment, and education and training opportunities, with negative implications for social inclusion (OECD, 2021<sup>[38]</sup>). The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored how inadequate housing conditions and energy poverty can deepen vulnerabilities when people are required to spend more time at home (Kährik and Pastak, 2023<sup>[39]</sup>). For example, living in an overcrowded dwelling, which is 9 p.p. more common among young people in the EU (26.5%) than in the total population (16.9%), significantly undermines young people's ability to study at home, prepare for exams and achieve later educational success. These conditions also constrain health, social inclusion and family formation (Kährik and Pastak, 2023<sup>[39]</sup>).

Young households are relatively more sensitive than other groups to policy settings affecting homeownership, in particular mortgage market regulations (OECD, 2021<sup>[38]</sup>). As young people are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, they tend to earn less than older cohorts, face unemployment rates roughly twice the average and are more likely to hold precarious jobs. These factors limit their access to mortgage finance, as borrowing constraints disproportionately affect those with lower incomes and little collateral. Moreover, the intergenerational transmission of housing wealth is playing an increasingly important role in shaping access to homeownership, as individuals with homeowner parents are significantly more likely to become homeowners themselves. Consequently, youth are disproportionately reliant on private rentals and more frequently face housing cost overburden, nearly twice as often as older generations, undermining their ability to build stable livelihoods and exacerbating socio-spatial segregation in urban areas (Kährlik and Pastak, 2023<sup>[39]</sup>).

Youth homelessness is rising in cities across Europe, fuelled by overlapping crises including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living squeeze, worsening housing affordability and increased migration pressures (Eurocities, 2023<sup>[40]</sup>). Throughout 2024, 7% of young people (aged 15-29) were suffering from severe housing deprivation against 4% of the total population (European Commission, 2026<sup>[41]</sup>). Unlike older homeless populations, most homeless young people are not sleeping rough but experience forms of hidden homelessness, lacking stable, safe and adequate accommodation and often lacking family support. This is driven by systemic factors, such as shrinking social housing supply, barriers to accessing benefits, and service models primarily designed for adults, and individual factors, including family conflict, trauma, substance misuse and exclusion related to sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and sex characteristics (OECD, forthcoming<sup>[42]</sup>; Eurocities, 2023<sup>[40]</sup>). Risks are particularly acute at key transition points, such as the move from school to work, the shift from childhood to adulthood or ageing out of the foster care system (OECD, 2024<sup>[43]</sup>). Evidence from Eurocities' 2023 survey on youth homelessness across 29 European cities identified care leavers as the group most affected (96% of cities), followed by NEETs (88%) (Eurocities, 2023<sup>[40]</sup>). The survey also highlighted substance misuse and unaffordable housing markets as the most frequently reported immediate triggers of youth homelessness. Comparing and measuring youth homelessness remains challenging due to its often hidden and underreported nature, variations in definitions and durations of homelessness, reliance on service-based data, urban bias in counting efforts and inconsistencies in data collection, all of which complicate the assessment of trends and policy impacts (Develtere, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>). Finally, youth vulnerability in the housing market is strongly shaped by socio-economic and ethnic background, which can create additional barriers beyond income constraints alone. People who identify as migrants or as belonging to racialised or minority groups are more likely than the total population to express concern about housing costs. For instance, 74% of individuals who self-report discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or skin colour report being worried about housing expenses, compared with 51% among non-minority respondents who do not report discrimination (OECD, 2025<sup>[45]</sup>). At the same time, ethnic minority youth may encounter discrimination in rental and housing markets, as well as structural disadvantages in education and labour market integration that further constrain their housing choices.

### ***Unequal access to public infrastructures and services widens opportunity gaps for young people in cities***

Insufficient urban infrastructure, especially in vulnerable cities or disadvantaged neighbourhoods, can make it harder for young people to access quality and inclusive services including in the areas of education, employment, social, health and long-term care, culture and recreational activities. Inadequate or expensive public transport may limit their ability to travel to campuses, workplaces, or cultural and sports facilities. In 2022, 27.4% of young people in the EU used public transport every day (compared to 10.7% for 16 years old and over), and younger Europeans (18-34 years old) are more willing to give up private cars (40%) than the population as a whole (30%) (IPSOS, 2023<sup>[46]</sup>). Mobility plays a critical role in enabling young people to access employment opportunities and achieve financial independence. As a transitional phase

between dependence and autonomy, youth is a period during which access to reliable and affordable transport can significantly shape life trajectories (ITF, 2024<sup>[47]</sup>). A lack of affordable and efficient public transport modes limits access to economic opportunities for young people, especially in cities where affordable housing is located far from job opportunities. In the United Kingdom, young individuals with access to a car are 3.8 times more likely to be employed, twice as likely to access essential services, and 1.7 times more likely to participate in social activities. At the same time, the quality of local public transport also matters. In cities where local public transport is rated as good rather than poor, individuals are 2.8 times more likely to access services and 1.4 times more likely to engage in social activities (Collings et al., 2023<sup>[48]</sup>). The cost, safety, timetables and frequency of services often fail to meet young people's needs, influencing their education and employment choices.

Awareness barriers prevent many young people from accessing public services and benefits even when they are eligible. Many do not know which supports exist, how to identify relevant programmes or where to seek information, particularly in areas such as housing, food assistance or income support. This information gap is compounded by fragmented service landscapes, where providers often know only their own programmes and cannot guide youth across the wider system. Even when young people identify potential support, complex and rigid application processes present major obstacles. Eligibility rules and paperwork are often difficult to understand, poorly explained or unavailable in accessible languages, while documentation requirements can be hard to meet, especially for those experiencing housing instability, family breakdown or precarious employment. Logistical barriers such as limited internet access, lack of transport, insufficient digital equipment or long waiting times further hinder access, particularly for disadvantaged youth. Many also lack trusted adults or caseworkers to help them navigate these systems, while understaffed services struggle to provide adequate guidance. Together, these challenges suggest that beyond expanding provision, governments need to simplify procedures, improve outreach and co-ordination, and provide tailored navigation support to ensure that public services and benefits effectively reach young people most in need (Urban Institute, 2021<sup>[49]</sup>).

### ***Building climate resilience and green skills for the next generation***

Children and young people are set to face a disproportionate share of the impacts of climate change. Estimates suggest they will bear more than 80% of the related health and social burdens as the worst consequences will occur during their lifetimes (Akresh, 2016<sup>[50]</sup>; McMichael, Woodruff and Hales, 2006<sup>[51]</sup>). In urban areas, where exposure to air pollution and heat is often more intense and the effects of climate change can be particularly acute, young people tend to face higher risks, especially those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Strengthening climate resilience in cities is therefore critical not only to protect young people's health and well-being today, but also to safeguard the long-term social and economic resilience of urban communities.

Capital-city regions in the OECD are leading the shift toward greener jobs, but many regions still face significant skill shortages to meet the growing demand for green and digital roles. In OECD capital-city regions, one in four workers (25%) are employed in occupations that include green tasks, compared with less than one in five (17%) in other parts of the country (Figure A A.7). Many OECD regions, however, still lack a sufficient workforce with the skills required to meet the growing demand for green-task jobs. On average across regions, the number of vacancies per employed person in a given occupation is 44% higher for green-task jobs than for other types of employment (OECD, 2024<sup>[37]</sup>). Today's youth have come of age alongside both the green and the digital transitions. This creates complementary skill needs with new technologies (sensors, AI, etc.) that can aim at improving energy and resource efficiency and new capability requirements (digital diagnostics, predictive maintenance of buildings). Without investment in youth education, training and access to quality jobs, cities risk widening mismatches between labour demand and supply, especially as older workers tend to train less and face faster skill obsolescence (Allen and de Grip, 2012<sup>[52]</sup>). As the workforce of tomorrow, youth play a decisive role in ensuring a steady supply of qualified labour, which underpins local competitiveness.

## Why inclusion of youth matters for growth in cities

Neighbourhood environments can have a lasting negative impact on young people's educational and employment trajectories over the life course. A study following an entire cohort born in 1995 in the Netherlands and measuring their educational level in 2018 shows that sustained exposure to more affluent neighbourhoods is associated with significantly better educational trajectories, with positive effects observed across the entire childhood period (0-17) (Troost, van Ham and Manley, 2023<sup>[53]</sup>). Both the characteristics of the immediate neighbourhood and those of surrounding areas matter. While local disadvantage is associated with lower graduation rates, broader spatial contexts can compound these effects by reinforcing segregation and limiting access to positive educational environments. These findings highlight that educational outcomes are not determined solely by individual or family characteristics but are also shaped by the wider spatial inequalities young people experience throughout their formative years, underscoring the risks associated with prolonged exposure to disadvantaged neighbourhood contexts.

The impacts of childhood socio-economic disadvantage<sup>4</sup> accumulate into significant macroeconomic costs. Across EU OECD countries, adults who experienced disadvantage in childhood, estimated at age 14, are on average 3 to 6 p.p. less likely to be employed, earn around 20% less and lose the equivalent of two weeks of full health per year compared to their more advantaged peers. Such economic costs of childhood disadvantage translate into substantial losses, amounting to about 3.4% of EU OECD countries' GDP annually on average, combining labour market losses (1.6%) and health-related costs (1.9%). The fiscal and budgetary impact of childhood disadvantage is also significant. Governments forgo around 3.6% of potential income tax and social contribution revenue, while higher spending on social benefits can raise expenditures by up to 6% in countries such as Greece and Ireland (Clarke et al., 2022<sup>[54]</sup>).

Investing in young people can play a critical role in strengthening cities' capacity to attract, develop and retain talent, thereby enhancing their long-term economic dynamism and territorial attractiveness. Youth outmigration, population ageing and low fertility threaten to reduce the size of the workforce, shrink tax revenues, and increase per capita costs for infrastructure and services, creating a "scissor effect" where revenues decline as expenditures rise (OECD, 2025<sup>[55]</sup>). As places increasingly compete to attract skilled workers, entrepreneurs and students, youth attractiveness focused investments should not be treated as stand-alone policies but embedded within broader sustainable urban and territorial development strategies. This is particularly important in regions facing demographic decline or youth outmigration, where strengthening local opportunities for young people is essential to maintaining attractiveness and avoiding "talent development traps".

Investing in education and care for youth yields long-term social and economic returns. Such investments are highly cost-effective for cities as they help reduce inequalities at an early stage and generate sustained benefits across the life course, from stronger employability to greater social mobility. For instance, investing in youth work,<sup>5</sup> supporting youth's personal development through sport, creative and learning activities, generates substantial economic and social returns. For example, it has been estimated that in England, every GBP 1 of public investment in youth work, highly concentrated in cities, delivered between GBP 3.20 and GBP 6.40 in taxpayer benefits over a 10-year time period. The youth work sector generates an estimated GBP 5.7 billion annually in direct economic value, through expenditure, multiplier effects and in-kind contributions such as volunteer time. In addition, youth work yields GBP 3.2 billion in wider societal benefits, including improved health (GBP 1.7 billion), stronger education and employment outcomes (GBP 0.8 billion), and reduced crime (GBP 0.5 billion) (UK Youth, 2022<sup>[56]</sup>). Conversely, the adverse consequences of underinvestment are equally evident. In areas most affected by youth centre closures, young people aged 10 to 17 became 14% more likely to commit crimes (Villa, 2024<sup>[57]</sup>).

# 2 Policies and good practices to support youth and promote inclusive growth in cities

## Introduction

Cities concentrate both major opportunities and challenges facing young people. While offering greater access to jobs, education and public services, they also expose youth to housing unaffordability and labour market precarity. To address these barriers and harness youth as a driver of inclusive growth, national and local policies can support more equitable economic and social outcomes. This second chapter organises such policies and practices around the five core pillars of the OECD inclusive growth in cities framework: (i) education and skills, (ii) labour market access and quality jobs, (iii) housing and the built environment, (iv) public infrastructure and services, and (v) fair and equitable climate action. Drawing on concrete, locally grounded interventions, supported by the EU, national programmes or local initiatives, this chapter highlights how national and local governments can expand opportunity, reduce disparities and enable young people to thrive in cities and contribute to growth. At the EU level, these local policies align with key strategic frameworks shaping urban and youth policy. In particular, it complements the *EU Agenda for Cities*, the *EU Pillar of Social Rights*, the *EU Youth Strategy* (2019-2027), and the *EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness*, as well as EU funding opportunities, including under Cohesion Policy and Erasmus+. This chapter also connects to the forthcoming *EU Anti-Poverty Strategy* (expected in 2026), which seeks to provide essential protection to those most in need and tackle the structural drivers of poverty, including vulnerable young people.

## Education

### ***Tackling school segregation and discrimination to ensure equal opportunities for youth***

Providing equitable opportunities for all young people requires targeted policies to address the additional barriers faced by groups such as ethnic minorities (including Roma), young persons with a migrant background, young persons with disabilities, young women and those from disadvantaged families or deprived neighbourhoods. Access to high-quality and inclusive education for all learners requires rethinking not only the objectives of learning, but also how, where and when it takes place. In this context, EASNIE's (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education) Ten Pillars provide a structured, forward-looking approach to support inclusive education systems through 30 key actions, including expanding access to mental health support, nutrition and digital literacy or embedding inclusion as a core principle in curriculum (EASNIE, 2026<sup>[58]</sup>).

Moreover, reducing inequalities in educational opportunities requires tackling segregation within and across school systems. Evidence from Sweden shows that segregation in education and housing remains a significant challenge: native students often change schools as the share of immigrant students rises, reinforcing spatial and social divides (Yang Hansen and Gustafsson, 2016<sup>[59]</sup>; Neuman, 2015<sup>[60]</sup>; Cerna, 2019<sup>[61]</sup>). Evidence suggests that both highly restrictive residence-based systems and fully unregulated school choice can exacerbate segregation (OECD, 2019<sup>[62]</sup>). Effective policies combine the strategic design of catchment areas, controlled choice mechanisms and transparent allocation procedures to enable a more equitable distribution of students across schools. To fight segregation and its negative consequences on students' academic performance, the City of Barcelona (Spain) has implemented its *Pla de xoc contra la segregació* (Shock plan against segregation) since 2019. This plan implements school-specific quotas to reserve seats for socially disadvantaged students, identified through criteria such as eligibility for the city's social emergency fund, access to free school meals or other recognised socio-economic needs, in all the schools of the city (pre-primary, primary and secondary). Early results show system-wide improvements. Across Barcelona, between 2018-2019 and 2023-2024, desegregation policies led to a 26.3% decrease in the Dissimilarity Index<sup>6</sup> and a 61.4% reduction in the Adjusted Isolation Index<sup>7</sup> for socially disadvantaged students, compared with a counterfactual scenario without policy implementation (Zancajo, González Motos and Quilabert, 2026<sup>[63]</sup>). In the meantime, the gap in average standardised test scores for vulnerable and non-vulnerable 16-year-old students narrowed from 9.3 to 6.5 points between 2020-2021 and 2023-2024, with scores increasing for both vulnerable and non-vulnerable students (respectively by 5.6 points and 1.4 point).

Reducing ethnic discrimination in schools is also central to improving educational outcomes for all students. For example, the city of Rotterdam (the Netherlands), through its programme *Onderwijs010*, proactively seeks to embed anti-discrimination norms within schools. The programme explicitly addresses the themes of bullying and discrimination by providing schools and teachers with training, pedagogical tools and school interventions by experts to support open discussion and inclusive practices in classrooms. Rotterdam also supports evidence-based tools such as *Discriminatiewijzer* (Discrimination indicator) in collaboration with Erasmus University and the anti-discrimination public agency RADAR to map patterns of discrimination across neighbourhoods and sectors, thereby enabling schools, but also local stakeholders and residents, to better understand and target inequities in their practices.

### ***Strengthening school-to-work transitions through professionally oriented education programmes***

Early labour market setbacks can have persistent “scarring” effects on an individual's income and employment trajectories. To address this, evidence highlights the importance of targeted, place-based support which bring services closer to young people and build trust, to improve transitions into stable employment (Interreg, 2025<sup>[64]</sup>). By combining practical learning with opportunities for progress, vocational education and training (VET) systems can respond to diverse learner needs and aspirations while ensuring the development of skills needed in the local, regional and national context. By strengthening the quality and inclusiveness of VET systems, cities can also help ensure a sufficient supply of skilled workers for essential urban services, including health, long-term and social care, transport and mobility, and energy (European Commission, 2025<sup>[65]</sup>). Vocational qualifications continue to be associated with relatively strong labour-market outcomes for young adults, through upskilling and reskilling. When effectively integrated into school-based programmes, workplace learning can foster active learner engagement through the setting of learning goals, task negotiation and support from both teachers and workplace trainers (Rintala and Nokelainen, 2019<sup>[66]</sup>). Recent VET graduates in the EU having experienced work-based learning are more likely to be employed (84.3% in 2024) than those who have not (69.7% in 2024) (European Commission, 2025<sup>[67]</sup>). To increase the number of young people entering such vocational programmes, Berlin's (Germany) Integrated Vocational Training Preparation programme (IBA, *Integrierte Berufsausbildungsvorbereitung*), delivered through *Oberstufenzentren* (OSZ, upper secondary vocational

schools), provides a structured pathway for young people who have not yet secured an apprenticeship. The programme combines general and vocational education with compulsory workplace placements and tailored guidance, helping participants build skills and clarify career pathways. Typically delivered over one year, it aims to support direct entry into vocational training while enabling participants to obtain or improve school-leaving qualifications.

At the EU level, beyond an EU VET strategy expected to be adopted in 2026, apprenticeships are a central component of the EU Youth Guarantee, supporting young people's transition into the labour market. The European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EaFA) plays a key role in this effort by mobilising stakeholders to expand the supply, quality, attractiveness and mobility of apprenticeship opportunities. At the subnational level, EaFA also supports a Community on the Role of Cities and Regions in Fostering Apprenticeships, bringing together around 100 members and led by organisations such as the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL), Fundación Bertelsmann, and the Metropolitan City of Rome, illustrating the important role of local actors in tailoring apprenticeship systems to local labour market needs. Cities can also play a key role in supporting youth transitions to work by embedding entrepreneurship and innovation into education systems. Lisbon's (Portugal) *Sensibilização para o Empreendedorismo e Inovação* (SEED, Raising Awareness of Entrepreneurship and Innovation) project supports students in acquiring entrepreneurial and career skills. It is based on six key action areas: creating in-school entrepreneurship labs, organising visits and workshops with the entrepreneurial ecosystem, delivering financial literacy training, guiding students to develop their own projects, promoting self-knowledge and aspirations, and immersing students in real entrepreneurial settings. Between 2022/2023 and 2024/2025, SEED has expanded to 17 schools, involving over 3 400 students. The programme was awarded the EU URBACT "Good Practice" seal.

School programmes may also need to be adapted to integrate key skills from an early age, particularly in areas such as financial literacy, which strongly influence young people's knowledge, behaviour and future opportunities. School is one of the first potential sources of financial information for students, yet its role remains limited in many contexts. In Poland, for example, only 7.1% of high-school students reported receiving financial information from school, compared with 30.3% from family and 9.4% from the (Swiecka et al., 2020<sup>[68]</sup>). Evidence shows that students who follow economic or financial education programmes perform better in financial literacy assessments<sup>8</sup> than their peers, financial literacy being a key factor underpinning both individual well-being (Chhatwani and Mishra, 2021<sup>[69]</sup>). Studies highlight that early and structured financial education has a positive impact on financial knowledge, attitudes (Garg and Singh, 2018<sup>[70]</sup>).

## Labour market

Cities can play a strategic role in providing the infrastructure and support youth need to succeed in their professional career. Youth centres also offer dedicated spaces for young people to connect, develop skills and engage in decision making processes. Pärnu's (Estonia) youth innovation centre HUUB, labelled European Solidarity Corps Quality,<sup>9</sup> represents a novel model of youth infrastructure, designed explicitly to fill gaps in standard youth-centre offerings and to treat young people as co-creators rather than passive beneficiaries. Opened in 2020 in collaboration between the city, local youth, and entrepreneurs, HUUB targets those aged 15 to 26 and aims to foster community, learning, and innovation, all free of charge. HUUB offers a hybrid of formal and non-formal education, combining workshops, seminars, events and mentoring for youth-led initiatives. Young people can use the premises for meetings, creative work, networking or even presenting ideas to the local government. A distinctive element of the centre is the "youth to youth" guiding principle, under which many activities are organised by young people themselves under mentorship, thereby reinforcing their sense of agency and ownership. In the city's broader urban development strategy, Pärnu sees HUUB as a lever to slow youth outmigration.

At the EU level, youth entrepreneurship remains a key priority on the European Union policy agenda. Under Erasmus+, the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs has emerged as a flagship initiative, supporting aspiring entrepreneurs in acquiring the practical skills, knowledge and networks needed to start and successfully manage a small business. Evidence points to strong programme impacts: around 81% of participating new and host entrepreneurs report improvements in their business model or processes, while over one-third create jobs following their participation. In addition, around half report an increase in turnover, and the share of participants who are entrepreneurs rises significantly following the exchange (from 27% to 38%), highlighting the programme's role in strengthening entrepreneurial capacity and business performance across Europe.

Similarly, cities can seek to support the development of a local entrepreneurial ecosystem, fostering economic growth while encouraging young people to stay (Vasilescu, Crivoi and Munteanu, 2025<sup>[29]</sup>; OECD/European Commission, 2023<sup>[30]</sup>). Regional levels of economic development shape young people's willingness and capacity to innovate, which underscores the importance of place-based policy responses. In this context, student entrepreneurship programmes are most effective when aligned with regional innovation priorities and sustainable development objectives. Such alignment helps ensure their relevance to local economic ecosystems (Interreg, 2025<sup>[71]</sup>). The municipality of Albergaria-a-Velha (Portugal) has developed the Entrepreneurship+ Academy as a locally rooted programme to nurture youth entrepreneurship and tie young people more closely to the regional economy. Using a "learning by doing" method, the programme delivers workshops in business planning, financial literacy, marketing, product development and sustainability, paired with mentoring and collaboration with local firms and NGOs. Between 2014 and 2024, it has involved over 7 000 students, 1 000 teachers, 17 schools, 16 NGOs and 80 mentors and has led to nearly 890 youth projects.

### ***Holistic approaches to support youth economic empowerment and labour market inclusion***

To support young people's economic mobility, no single intervention is sufficient, calling for comprehensive, multi-dimensional approaches. Youth often face persistent barriers including limited access to information on employment and training opportunities or insufficient early work experience. In response to these specific challenges, four core components, established by the American Institutes for Research, are foundational to effective youth economic empowerment: access to high-quality and demand-responsive skills training, personalised career navigation and placement support, holistic wraparound services that meet basic needs and sustained, relationship-based mentoring and coaching (Amin, Goger and Yancey, 2025<sup>[72]</sup>). Such a comprehensive approach has been pursued by the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom), which provides targeted support to help young people with specific challenges, such as care leavers or those with experience of the justice system, transition back into employment. The Borough has implemented several innovative programmes to improve employment and inclusion for young people who have faced difficult life pathways. The *Honest Grind Coffee (HGC)* programme, launched in 2023, provides paid vocational training for 16-18-year-olds who have had contact with the justice system through barista work, also offering supportive training environments. Since its launch, the initiative has awarded 22 industry-recognised qualifications to trainees and recorded no cases of reoffending to date, helping vulnerable young people gain skills and confidence. Finally, the *Camden STEAM* initiative connects over 65 employers, including Google and Meta, with schools in deprived areas of the borough to deliver mentoring, work experience and T-Level placements. In 2024-2025 alone, over 11 000 student encounters were brokered, with 83% of participants reporting stronger leadership skills at the end of their placement.

Public policies can also seek to encourage young people to broaden their horizons and networks through mentoring programmes. France's national mentoring programme *1 jeune, 1 mentor* (one young, one mentor) supports young people through personalised coaching and career guidance. Launched in 2021, this government-funded initiative finances a network of around 70 NGOs that connect youth with volunteer mentors from the public sector, universities and private companies. The programme reaches around 135 000 young people each year at an average cost of EUR 700 per participant. It has achieved effective targeting, with 39% of beneficiaries coming from *Quartiers prioritaires de la ville*<sup>10</sup> (Priority urban neighbourhoods) even though residents of these areas represent only 10% of the total population. Evaluations of the programme highlight that a high share of beneficiaries are young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often have limited access to professional networks. However, a persistent operational challenge lies in reaching “invisible youth” who are not engaged in education or social services, underscoring the importance of strengthening partnerships with schools and community organisations to expand the programme's impact.

## Housing and the built environment

### ***Local housing innovations supporting youth transitions and social inclusion***

Beyond the national frameworks needed to support access to social and affordable housing, local governments can play a key role in addressing the specific housing challenges faced by young people in cities. They can deploy targeted policy instruments to expand affordable housing options, including tailored lease models and rent regulations. These measures can help provide young people with stable and secure accommodation while ensuring access to appropriate social support services. In France, Lyon's *Logis Jeunes* (Youth Homes) programme provides a bridge towards independent living for vulnerable youth (18-25-year-olds) by combining access to affordable housing with intensive social support. Operated by the Acolea association, the service provides around 46 individual dwellings, notably through *bail glissant* (sliding leases), which are initially taken by the association and then transferred to young tenants once they have reached financial stability. It also pairs tenancy with tailored work to the young tenant through *gestion locative adaptée* (tailored tenancy support) to build capabilities and prevent tenancy failure. This housing-with-support model also co-ordinates with instruments offered by the metropolitan authority such as the *revenu de solidarité jeunes* (youth solidarity income), which combines a monthly stipend with support toward employment. Out of the 15 sliding leases started, a third of them ended with permanent tenure for the young tenants.

In light of the wide array of housing access challenges, cities can deploy a mix of targeted housing policies, especially during key transition points, such as the move from school to work, the shift from childhood to adulthood or ageing out of the foster care system. For example, Brno (Czechia) has implemented different housing policies to support young people's transition to independent living. As a city home to 10 universities, 66 000 students and 33 000 residents aged 18-26, Brno has experienced strong housing demand, with apartment prices in the metropolitan area rising by 179% between 2015 and 2024. To address these affordability pressures, the municipality is maintaining its 28 000-unit public housing stock (13.5% of all apartments) and repurposing part of it for youth specifically through subsidised social housing, shared accommodation and “starter” flats (about 247 citywide). These youth-dedicated units prioritise young people just out of foster care or without any family support or at risk of homelessness, combining ready-to-move-in dwellings with tailored social support and rents averaging EUR 3.8/m<sup>2</sup> per month, i.e. around EUR 7/m<sup>2</sup> below market levels.

At the EU level, the first ever European Affordable Housing Plan (2025), calls for comprehensive actions to address housing needs of EU citizens, and more specifically young people, in line with the need for person-centred, place-based and multidisciplinary approaches (European Commission, 2025<sup>[73]</sup>; OECD, forthcoming<sup>[74]</sup>). National and local governments are encouraged to develop integrated housing strategies

for young people, combining affordable rental supply, tailored financial support and alternative living arrangements, in order to ease transitions into education, training and employment and enhance territorial attractiveness. The plan aims to scale up the supply of dedicated student accommodation by mobilising financing through instruments such as InvestEU, pan-European investment platforms and cohesion policy funds. In parallel, there is growing interest in identifying and scaling innovative housing solutions, such as co-living, intergenerational housing or modular accommodation, that can respond more flexibly to the needs of mobile and financially constrained youth. Pilot initiatives, including under Erasmus+, also seek to expand access to affordable housing for disadvantaged mobile students through partnerships with cities and local stakeholders, while the European Social Fund+ can further support targeted interventions. Forthcoming initiatives, including a Council recommendation on housing exclusion under the Anti-Poverty Strategy, aim to support prevention and reduction of homelessness, building on the work of the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.

### ***Monitoring and addressing youth homelessness at the city level***

Cities could strengthen data collection systems to enable more effective, evidence-based responses to youth homelessness as major gaps remain due to the lack of harmonised definitions and data collection methodologies, which limits comparability across, and even within, countries (OECD, 2025<sup>[75]</sup>). Youth homelessness is often hidden, intermittent and underreported, as many young people rely on couch surfing or temporarily staying with friends, moving in and out of homelessness or housing instability more frequently than other population groups, making it difficult to measure through traditional data sources that rely heavily on service use or point-in-time counts (Develtere, 2022<sup>[44]</sup>; OECD, 2025<sup>[75]</sup>). In addition, data are frequently fragmented across institutions and collected inconsistently over time, limiting their reliability and policy relevance. Improving the availability of granular, longitudinal data, disaggregated by age, gender, living situation and duration of homelessness, would help better identify the needs of different groups, tailor interventions and assess the effectiveness of policy responses (OECD, 2025<sup>[75]</sup>). The *OECD Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness* identifies nine ways to strengthen homelessness data collection, ranging from clarifying policy objectives and assessing available resources for data collection, to strengthening training and capacity-building efforts, and establishing comprehensive data infrastructure to better capture the dynamic nature of homelessness and improve public policy responses (OECD, 2025<sup>[75]</sup>).

A city response to youth homelessness could begin with secure housing, complemented by healthcare, employment and skills support. *Housing First for Youth* (HF4Y) in Waterford (Ireland), implemented by the association Focus Ireland, which provides services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, is funded by the local government and the Statutory Health Service and mentored by FEANTSA. The programme targets 18-26-year-olds living in unstable or emergency accommodation, as well as those leaving state care and at risk of homelessness. HF4Y is built around five core principles: immediate access to housing without preconditions, youth choice and self-determination, a positive youth development orientation, individualised, client-driven and open-ended support, and social and community integration. The programme combines housing provided by Focus Ireland, the local authority, certified housing bodies and the private market, offering a range of options, such as supported, transitional, step-down<sup>11</sup> or long-term housing. Two dedicated staff members support 10-15 young people each, using approaches such as Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE), Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) and restorative practices. Results have been highly encouraging: between 2015 and 2023, Focus Ireland supported 48 young people, of whom 42 received tenancies, achieving a 96% sustainment rate and zero discharge into homelessness.

## Public infrastructures and services

### ***Investing in transport and public spaces to boost youth inclusion and employment***

Improving access to public transport, local services and community infrastructure can play an important role in supporting youth inclusion and strengthening young people's participation in urban labour markets. Investments in public infrastructure, such as transport, can expand young people's economic horizons. Evidence from Madrid (Spain) demonstrates that subsidising public transport for young people can deliver significant labour market gains at relatively low cost (less than EUR 900 on average annually per young person). After October 2015, the *abono joven* (youth pass) scheme has offered all residents under 26 a flat-rate EUR 20 monthly pass valid across the entire Madrid metropolitan region, including metro, bus, tram and commuter rail, representing monthly savings of EUR 35-112 for young people. The study finds that such subsidy increased the probability of finding a job within six months of layoff by 23 p.p. and boosted cumulative employment by 30 additional days over the same period. These effects translate to 40% higher job-finding rates and 104% more days in work relative to the control group. The gains are particularly strong for youth in peripheral areas, who could afford to search for and access jobs in central Madrid where labour demand is concentrated (Inga, 2023<sup>[76]</sup>). Similarly, research in the United States shows that in car "independent" cities, where a large proportion of households do not own a car, such as in New York City (the United States), a 10% increase in public transit density is associated with a 2 p.p. lower youth unemployment rate (Brandtner, Lunn and Young, 2017<sup>[77]</sup>).

Promoting more inclusive urban design, accessible to all, including young people with disabilities and responsive to the needs and preferences of youth, can help encourage them to remain in their neighbourhoods rather than relocating to suburbs or other cities and supporting their "right to stay". Accessible and inclusive public spaces are essential to ensure that young people with disabilities can fully benefit from local opportunities, including education, employment and social participation. Such spaces should reflect the diverse and evolving nature of accessibility needs, encompassing permanent, temporary and situational forms of disability and be designed accordingly to enable full and equitable participation in urban life (URBACT, 2025<sup>[78]</sup>). On accessibility and mobility, youth tend to own fewer cars and drive less, relying instead on a combination of teleworking, public transport, ridesharing and online delivery to meet their daily needs. The share of Americans aged 20-24 without a driver's licence increased from 8% in 1983 to 20% in 2023, while the number of trips made by car by working people in large European cities has fallen markedly since the 1990s. Even before COVID-19, young workers in major European cities such as Berlin (Germany), Copenhagen (Denmark), London (the United Kingdom), Paris (France) and Vienna (Austria) showed the steepest declines in car use and the greatest shift towards non-car modes (Wittwer, Gerike and Hubrich, 2019<sup>[79]</sup>). Cities can capitalise on these changing preferences among environmentally conscious young people, not only to attract and retain young working-age residents, but also to advance broader objectives of environmental sustainability, by expanding dedicated infrastructure for micromobility (e.g. cycling) as well as improving access to green spaces (OECD, 2025<sup>[15]</sup>).

### ***Holistic and preventive youth services enhance well-being, employability and social cohesion***

Community-based integrated service provision is increasingly recognised as a key pillar of effective youth policy, reflecting a shift from fragmented, sector-based approaches towards more holistic and place-based models of support (OECD, 2024<sup>[80]</sup>). Evidence suggests that young people who engage with multiple, uncoordinated services do not necessarily achieve better outcomes, despite the higher volume of support received (Youth Work Ireland, 2022<sup>[81]</sup>). While integrated youth work is widely considered a promising approach, there is no single agreed definition; rather, it encompasses efforts to co-ordinate services across policy areas, such as education, employment, health, housing and social protection, around the needs of the individual. Delivered through local settings including schools, youth centres and community hubs,

integrated services can improve accessibility, strengthen trust, and enable earlier identification of risks. In addition to improved social outcomes, integrated service provision can also generate economic benefits, both by increasing the efficiency of service delivery and by reducing the long-term costs associated with unmet needs and adverse life trajectories. Public services, such as healthcare, can have significant effects on young people's employability and participation in training, particularly when delivered through integrated, community-based models. A study in France demonstrates that systematically offering social and preventive medicine consultations through local public services centres *Missions locales* (Local missions) to NEETs can improve both health outcomes and training access. Within 12 months, 63% of participants in the intervention group entered training, compared to only 56% in the control group (Robert et al., 2019<sup>[82]</sup>).

Creating dedicated youth spaces, such as youth work centres, co-designed with young people, is a key condition for the effective delivery of youth services in cities. When young people feel at ease and “at home” in these spaces, they are more likely to make use of the amenities on offer, engage in formal and non-formal learning opportunities and build trusting relationships with youth workers. Such places where young people can simply “be” do not only support their socio-economic development and sense of belonging but also enhance their engagement. This is the approach taken by the National Youth Council of Ireland, which strengthens youth work by developing dedicated youth centres, systematically consulting young people and youth workers as well as trusting young people with the use of facilities. Integrated, youth-centred service models can also improve access to support and help young people navigate education and employment more effectively. *Ohjaamo* centres in Finland operate as multi-agency, one-stop youth service hubs that bring together employment, social, health and education services under one roof to overcome administrative silos. Service offers vary by location, depending on local partnerships with organisations such as chambers of commerce, NGOs and occupational health providers. Operating on a “low-threshold” method,<sup>12</sup> *Ohjaamo* centres provide walk-in, face-to-face guidance tailored to young people's pace and needs, helping those who might otherwise struggle to engage with public services. Evidence points to strong results. In 2017, young people made nearly 120 000 visits, with 22% entering open labour market jobs, 32% applying for training and 7% securing housing.

Moreover, young people are spending more time online, and youth services and centres need to adapt to this trend. The Integrated Action Plans developed through the URBACT Action Planning Network NextGen Youth Work encourage cities to approach youth work as a hybrid public service, combining physical youth spaces with digital channels such as messaging apps, gaming platforms and online counselling. Five main recommendations emerge from these plans. First, placing youth voice at the centre of design is essential, as hybrid youth work is most effective when young people are engaged as co-creators rather than passive participants. Second, strengthening youth workers' digital capacities is critical, as delivery requires professionals who are confident across both digital and in-person settings. Third, cities should meet young people in their existing environments by prioritising engagement through platforms and spaces they already use, including social media, messaging apps and gaming environments. Fourth, hybrid youth work should be institutionalised within local governance to support sustainability, by embedding it in youth strategies, organisational structures and funding frameworks. Finally, fostering cross-sector collaboration is key, as effective hybrid youth work depends on partnerships across public, private and civil society actors, including youth organisations, schools, NGOs and municipalities (URBACT, 2025<sup>[83]</sup>).

Finally, reducing substance use among youth not only improves health outcomes and lowers rates of crime and antisocial behaviour but also enhances academic performance and yields strong returns on investment for local communities. The Icelandic Prevention Model has been associated with some of the largest declines in youth substance use recorded in Europe. Measures include strong parental engagement, through voluntary “parental contracts” and support for family time, expanded access to organised sports and cultural activities, and close monitoring of young people's leisure environments. In Reykjavík (Iceland), around 7% of the municipal budget is invested in structured, high-quality leisure and youth activities, framed as a long-term social and economic investment. Among 15-16 year-olds, past-month alcohol use

fell from roughly 42-45% in the late 1990s to around 5-9% by the mid-2010s, while daily smoking dropped from about 23% to below 5%. Lifetime cannabis use also declined, from around 17% to about 5-7%. Over the same period, parental monitoring increased substantially and participation in organised sports rose, illustrating how local, community-level prevention strategies can shift both behaviours and underlying risk factors over time (Kristjansson et al., 2019<sup>[84]</sup>).

### ***The night-time economy as a driver of youth inclusion and urban vitality***

A marked decline in nightlife participation among young people is raising concerns for well-being, social cohesion and local economies. In the United Kingdom, a 2025 study found that 61% of youth go out less often than a year before, citing financial pressures, safety concerns and limited late-night transport as key barriers (NTIA, 2025<sup>[85]</sup>). Nearly 70% said better night transport would encourage them to go out more, highlighting how mobility gaps restrict access to social life. At the same time, nightlife venues face mounting challenges from rising real-estate costs, post-pandemic recovery issues and touristification, which transforms local clubs into tourism-oriented spaces and accelerates venue closures. In cities like London (the United Kingdom), Berlin (Germany) and Amsterdam (the Netherlands), these pressures threaten both the economic vitality of the night-time sector and the social fabric that connects young residents to their city life.

Well-designed, inclusive and safe nightlife can be a lever for youth well-being and inclusive growth in cities by strengthening mental health, social capital and skills development. A robust evidence base links enjoyable leisure<sup>13</sup> with lower stress and more positive affect (e.g. increased vigour, well-being and calmness), including among adolescents where social leisure predicts better current and future mental health (Pressman et al., 2009<sup>[86]</sup>). Likewise, strong social ties are associated with improved physiological outcomes and lower mortality risk. Nightlife specifically can operate as space for social well-being and mutual support, venues where young people build networks, mix across groups and participate in culture, thereby reinforcing belonging and community cohesion (Nofre, 2021<sup>[87]</sup>). Frequent and longer nighttime participation is favourably connected with psychological, social and, with a weaker correlation, physical well-being, showing that nightlife provides emotional relaxation and social satisfaction (George K and Fonceca, 2025<sup>[88]</sup>). Rotterdam (the Netherlands) has begun treating the night as a legitimate area of urban policy, using an independent nightlife council (N8W8 R'dam) and a "Night Mayor" to translate the needs of young people, organisers and venues into concrete municipal reforms. In response to densification, rising costs and declining youth spending on going out, the city has built structured dialogue with the night sector: since 2019, N8W8 has convened consultations with organisers, transport providers, health services and municipal departments to identify regulatory barriers and integrate nightlife into broader city planning. This has resulted in a co-ordinated package of measures, including the return of night buses, targeted subsidies for cultural organisers, more flexible and 24-hour permits, the creation of a cross-departmental municipal nightlife team and the adoption of the city's first nightlife strategy. By institutionalising the governance of the night and supporting young organisers and creative entrepreneurs, Rotterdam is using nightlife policy to strengthen youth well-being, cultural vitality and the local economy, showing how cities can align social inclusion, safety and economic development through a more integrated approach to the night-time economy.

## **Fair climate action**

### ***Climate education to empower youth in cities***

Young people are not only among the groups most affected by climate change but also increasingly act as drivers of change, mobilising to demand stronger climate action (Nche, Achunike and Okoli, 2019<sup>[89]</sup>). Integrating climate action into education systems, while fostering partnerships with local and wider

communities, is therefore key to building the skills, awareness and civic responsibility needed for a sustainable future. Embedding climate literacy across all levels of education can equip young people with the knowledge and agency to take action. At the institutional level, this requires promoting whole-institution approaches to sustainability, integrating teaching and learning, strategic vision, planning and governance, active engagement of learners and staff, the management of buildings and resources, partnerships, and research and innovation (European Commission, 2022<sup>[90]</sup>). It can be guided by frameworks such as the European Commission's GreenComp<sup>14</sup> sustainability competence framework, and its card game tool Scaffold,<sup>15</sup> which identifies a set of sustainability competences to feed into education programmes to help learners develop knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote ways to think, plan and act with empathy, responsibility, and care for our planet and for public health. Rather than treating climate change as a standalone topic, integrating it into existing subjects such as science, geography and social studies helps enhance its relevance and effectiveness. This requires adequately trained teachers, appropriate learning resources and inclusive strategies that support all students, regardless of gender, ethnic or social background, can engage meaningfully.

The design of new schools can integrate climate objectives from the construction phase while embedding a pedagogical programme to raise pupils' awareness of biodiversity and sustainability. The *École de la biodiversité* (Biodiversity school) in Boulogne-Billancourt (France)<sup>16</sup> illustrates how architecture can actively contribute to urban biodiversity and environmental education. Built in 2014, the public primary school now hosts 354 pupils and more than 345 plant and animal species, a number comparable to an urban park. Designed as an "ecosystem building", it features a 2 000 m<sup>2</sup> roof divided into forest (with 220 trees), undergrowth and meadow zones. Its façades integrate nesting cavities, enabling birds and insects to recolonise the urban environment. Beyond its ecological value, the school also serves as a pedagogical tool: pupils use its green spaces for science, mathematics and art projects, fostering awareness and respect for living systems. Similarly, Barcelona's (Spain) Climate Shelters in Schools project demonstrates how education, climate adaptation and community engagement can be combined. Between 2019 and 2022, 11 primary schools were transformed into "climate shelters" through green-blue-grey interventions, tree planting, shaded areas, water points and improved ventilation, supported by EUR 4 million in European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding.

### ***Adapting cities to the needs of youth to promote climate action***

European cities are increasingly reclaiming school streets to promote more liveable cities, safety and sustainable mobility. In Warsaw (Poland) and Kozani (Greece), two pilot projects funded by the European Commission's Horizon Europe programme, *REALLOCATE* and *JUST STREETS*, are testing innovative, participatory approaches to redesigning streets near schools. In Warsaw, where high motorisation rates create safety hazards, the Public Roads Authority is implementing temporary road restrictions, physical barriers and visual redesigns to prioritise pedestrians. The intervention combines data-driven analysis with community co-creation and 3D visualisations to build public support. In Kozani, the city is planning buffer zones around six centrally located primary schools. The initiative involves co-creation with students, parents, teachers, residents and local businesses, and will be complemented by a cycle path linking the schools safely to surrounding neighbourhoods. Similarly, Paris' (France) 300 *rues aux écoles* (school streets) programme illustrates how cities can rapidly redesign streets around schools to improve school and road safety, reduce traffic and pollution and reclaim public space for children and residents. Through phased pedestrianisation, low-cost tactical interventions (installation of removable barriers) and more permanent greening and depaving works, the initiative improves safety and mobility while strengthening neighbourhood liveability.

Combining inclusive policies with improved transport infrastructure can promote sustainable travel among young people. Lisbon's (Portugal) Green Mobility Package illustrates how this can be done in practice. The city's offers free access to the GIRA bike-sharing system for residents aged 16-23, complementing a free public transport pass for all youth up to 23 years old. By removing cost barriers, these measures encourage

young people to adopt cycling and public transport, supporting both environmental and social inclusion goals. London's (the United Kingdom) scheme offering free bus travel for young people under 18 shows how targeted fare policies can effectively shift travel behaviour and deliver strong social benefits. Following its introduction in 2005, bus trips by young people increased by around 35%, while average daily car travel by young people fell from 3.5 km to 2.3 km. Qualitative findings showed greater social inclusion and independent mobility, reinforcing the wider social value of the measure. The policy has also proven to reduce road traffic injuries, increase bus use and decrease car dependence without diminishing levels of active travel (Green et al., 2014<sup>[91]</sup>).

# 3 Enablers of effective action for youth in cities

## Introduction

In many cities, concentrated disadvantage, higher youth unemployment and poor-quality or unaffordable public services and infrastructure constrain young people's economic opportunities and undermine social cohesion. This chapter considers seven enabling factors that help create the conditions for designing and implementing policies that foster inclusive growth for youth in cities. These seven enabling factors are consistent across all three Inclusive Growth policy papers and the final Compendium on What Works for Inclusive Growth in Cities. Building on the policy instruments presented in the previous chapter, these enabling factors focus on how cities organise, finance and sustain action for youth. They include: (i) strategic multi-level governance, (ii) inclusive policy design that is people-based, place-based and participatory, (iii) the availability and use of data to identify and monitor youth policies, (iv) sustainable and inclusive financing, (v) the technical capacity of local actors to deliver integrated support, (vi) monitoring, evaluation and adaptive learning focused on outcomes for youth and (vii) communication and political leadership to build durable support for youth-oriented action. Together, these factors define the institutional and operational foundations that allow cities to translate inclusive growth ambitions into measurable youth inclusion in cities.

## Building coherent youth policy through vertical co-ordination and cross-sectoral action

Youth policy governance varies across countries depending on their institutional and territorial structures. Regardless of the model, responsibilities need to be clearly allocated, and effective implementation requires structured and regular dialogue between the institutions involved at all levels of governance. In most unitary systems, a Ministry of Youth and Sports or a similar body such as a national agency, often combined with education, culture, or social affairs, acts as the primary authority responsible for the design, co-ordination and evaluation of youth policies at the national level (Denstad, 2009<sup>[92]</sup>). However, frequent shifts in youth policy following changes in government can weaken policy continuity and disrupt vertical co-ordination across levels of governance, particularly as local authorities, being the public authority closest to young people, are often entrusted with a central role in both the design and implementation of youth policies. In Germany, responsibilities are clearly delineated across three levels: national (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth), regional (Länder youth ministries), and local (youth offices or *Jugendämter*) responsible for planning and funding services. Similarly, Belgium allocates exclusive youth competences to its linguistic communities, reflecting its unique non-hierarchical federalism (Council of Europe and European Commission, 2018<sup>[93]</sup>). Clear allocation of competences, stable institutional arrangements and structured intergovernmental co-ordination mechanisms enhance the coherence and visibility of youth policy, improving accountability and outcomes for young people across

territories. Austria applies a centrally guided but regionally tailored model where employment services, social partners and education providers work closely together. Tools such as Youth Coaching and Vienna's (Austria) one-stop centres help young people transition smoothly from school to work (Giannoni, 2024<sup>[94]</sup>).

Political and technical leadership play a key role in aligning local, regional and national priorities, particularly where responsibilities for education, employment and social policy are shared across government levels. Successful youth missions, such as those in the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom) and Pärnu (Estonia), have demonstrated the value of political buy-in from lead councillors to secure cross-departmental collaboration and visibility. In Barcelona (Spain), the youth mission has sought to bridge regulatory constraints between local governance and national education frameworks, demonstrating the importance of co-ordinated action and clear mandates. France also provides a strong example of vertical co-ordination: *Conseil d'orientation des politiques de jeunesse* (Youth Policy Advisory Council) is a consultative administrative body placed under the authority of the Prime Minister, tasked with co-ordinating, evaluating and advising on youth, popular education and youth insertion policies. Its multistakeholder governance brings together national-level actors (State representatives, ministries) and local and territorial stakeholders (local authorities, youth organisations, associations), ensuring that national policy direction is informed by local realities and that local actors participate in shaping national youth policy.

Cross-sectoral co-ordination is central to effective youth policy governance, ensuring that actions targeting young people are coherent across departments. Youth policies span multiple thematic areas such as health, education, employment, social inclusion and leisure. To connect these different policy areas and better integrate social and physical infrastructure, the Youth Office of the city of Ljubljana (Slovenia), located within the city's Culture Department plays a co-ordinating role. It promotes youth policy across departments, supports projects by NGOs and public institutions, and operates the Youth Council, a consultative body represented at the mayoral level to bring young perspectives into decision making. Ljubljana's youth strategy (2016-2025, "*Ljubljana, City of Young for Young*") embeds youth across city policies, such as employment, housing and youth work, and strengthens dialogue and institutional mechanisms to ensure integration of youth interests into urban policy. In the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom), the Youth Mission tackles labour market exclusion by targeting young people away from work through interventions that bridge severe spatial and socioeconomic inequalities. In a borough of 220 000 residents with stark disparities, life expectancy varies by 13 years between lower and higher income households, private schooling is common while many qualify for free school meals, the Youth Mission mobilises strong cross-organisational and business partnerships to identify and support school non-attenders, care-experienced and disabled youth, and those in the youth justice system.

## Empowering young people as partners in local public policy design

Although young people tend to vote less than older cohorts, their critical views of democracy do not necessarily translate into democratic disaffection, as their political engagement is more often expressed through protest and other forms of participation. Evidence across Europe also shows that young adults are as supportive of liberal democracy as other age groups, challenging narratives of widespread apathy, even though they tend to vote less frequently (Fernández Guzmán Grassi, Portos and Felicetti, 2023<sup>[95]</sup>). Opportunities for youth engagement vary across places. Research from Croatia finds that youth in medium-sized cities perceive more social and political opportunities than those in large metropolitan regions, where information gaps can limit participation and formal political involvement tends to decline (Botrić, 2023<sup>[96]</sup>). Empowering youth to participate in local public policies strengthens the long-term resilience, attractiveness and inclusiveness of cities (Urban Minds, 2022<sup>[97]</sup>).

Some cities are moving beyond consultation towards youth co-leadership, particularly in climate action. Turku (Finland) is institutionalising youth participation within its carbon-neutral 2029 strategy by combining youth governance structures with micro-grant financing. Through its Youth Council (within UNICEF's Child-Friendly Municipality model) and university partnerships, the city earmarked around EUR 80 000 in 2025 for youth-led climate projects (ages 15-24), funding 10 initiatives in the first round. These rapid-cycle grants create feedback loops that motivate participation while translating ideas into concrete delivery. Paris (France) established a Climate Academy for youth aged 9-25, combining education with advocacy and project incubation. Athens (Greece) earmarked EUR 96 000 in 2025 for youth climate microgrants. Together, these instruments operationalise action-oriented youth participation by pairing deliberation with implementation capacity, supported by toolkits and feedback loops that mainstream youth input into urban climate plans (C40, 2021<sup>[98]</sup>).

Effective engagement strategies start by meeting young people where they are. The mobile youth centre Ljuba & Drago in Ljubljana (Slovenia) transformed a decommissioned city bus into a “mobile living-room” for young people, with a focus on cultural, artistic and social activities in under-served neighbourhoods (“grey zones”). It directly addresses a key gap identified in the city's Youth Strategy 2016-2025, which called for the establishment of youth centres in all neighbourhoods but proved difficult to implement in this area. The project employed a participatory design process, young people aged 18-29 took part in working groups on programme design, architecture, DIY workshops and communications. The project expanded access to youth services in disadvantaged areas through a low-cost, circular approach, repurposing a city bus instead of constructing a permanent facility, and through partnerships between the city, the Young Dragons (*Mladi zmaji*) and the Public Company Ljubljana Passenger Transport.

Cities increasingly rely on innovative tools to support youth engagement and help young people imagine and co-design urban futures. Playful approaches help create accessible entry points for participation and encourage young people to reflect on their neighbourhoods and propose ideas in a supportive environment. More broadly, they can strengthen the capacity of urban areas to address multiple challenges, such as climate change, migration and marginalisation, while promoting social inclusion and participation through integrated urban planning and inclusive, resilient urban environments (URBACT, 2021<sup>[99]</sup>). The Youth 4 Bauhaus NEB Enabler Toolkit supports participatory practices in the co-creation of sustainable public spaces, with a particular focus on engaging young people and addressing their priorities around space and sustainability. It helps bridge persistent participation gaps by providing accessible and interactive tools for youth engagement. As part of its implementation, a series of workshops were conducted, including in Bucharest (Romania), where a digital replica of the urban environment was developed using Minecraft Education. The model was constructed at a 1:1 scale (one block per square metre), recreating existing physical spaces as a baseline. Building on this virtual environment, young participants were able to test ideas, co-design interventions, and develop more advanced proposals for the transformation of public space. The iAdapt game, an innovative climate adaptation simulation, has been used in Dublin (Ireland) to engage disadvantaged youth in exploring climate adaptation responses to flooding. In parallel, critical mapping exercises invite young people to document and visualise their spatial perceptions through self-produced maps, helping local urban planners better understand how youth experience and envision their environments (Rodela, Nejadi and Falk, 2025<sup>[100]</sup>). In practice, within Valongo's (Portugal) initiative “4.0: The Future Built by Children and Young People”, adolescents aged 13-18 took part in a Hackathon using Minecraft to explore neighbourhood challenges and co-design solutions, strengthening planning literacy and civic engagement from an early age. However, these approaches also face challenges, as they may replicate biases, exclude certain groups or feel disconnected from real-life contexts. Scholars stress the importance of meeting youth on their own terms, combining digital tools with face-to-face activities (e.g. classroom sessions, neighbourhood walks, public meetings), and ensuring participation remains motivating and relevant (Rodela, Nejadi and Falk, 2025<sup>[100]</sup>).

To increase meaningful youth participation in local policy design, cities could adopt compensation systems that recognise young people's time, expertise and lived experience. This may include financial payments, vouchers, materials (internet data, food packages), certificates, mentoring opportunities or formal accreditation, depending on the level of engagement. Without appropriate support, participation risks becoming skewed towards more affluent and time-rich young people. Clear criteria on when and how compensation is offered can strengthen fairness, accountability and youth's role as valued partners (UNICEF, 2022<sup>[101]</sup>; OECD, 2022<sup>[102]</sup>).

## Building robust data systems to design and evaluate effective inclusive growth policies for youth in cities

Robust and accessible data are essential to identify the needs of target groups and to design, monitor and evaluate the impact of youth policies in cities. "Youth" is a definition that varies widely across cities, countries and organisations, making comparisons challenging. Using harmonised international definitions, such as the EU definition of youth aged 15 to 29, helps ensure data can be compared meaningfully. For instance, in Australia, the systematic collection and analysis of age-specific data have informed more targeted housing and social policies. In 2019-20, national data showed that 58 200 young people aged 15-24 received assistance from specialist homelessness services, with young women particularly at risk. Data also revealed that family and domestic violence and inadequate housing conditions were the leading causes of youth homelessness, and that overcrowding in low-income urban areas, especially in Sydney and Melbourne (Australia), disproportionately affected young people. In response, the city of Melbourne established the Front Yard Youth Services, delivering tailored support to young people, including early-intervention programmes that assist over 500 youth annually in maintaining connections to family, education, housing and community networks, thereby reducing the risk of homelessness. By breaking down information by age, gender and location, policymakers can better identify vulnerability patterns and direct resources to where they are most needed, improving the effectiveness of homelessness services for young people (CLGF, 2022<sup>[103]</sup>).

Youth engagement data could also be systematically integrated into planning and evaluation processes to strengthen evidence-based decision making. Planning professionals involved in youth engagement should ensure that data collected from young participants is analysed with the same level of rigour as data from adults, so that their insights can meaningfully inform planning decisions and policy outcomes. Developing consistent data collection frameworks across engagement activities, such as standardised feedback forms, digital participation platforms or longitudinal surveys,<sup>17</sup> can support comparability and reliability (Urban Minds, 2022<sup>[97]</sup>) while leveraging existing youth-led structures (youth cabinets, youth councils or other representative bodies) more systematically can strengthen youth participation in planning processes.

A well-designed data strategy across administrations and local services can greatly improve the implementation of youth programmes, particularly those requiring precise identification of target groups, such as desegregation policies. Cities could harness the potential of cross-directorate data work and local services as additional formal and informal points for data collection and direct contact with vulnerable groups as part of broader needs assessments. Such integrated, multi-source data would help cities to identify synergies across policy areas, better target interventions and monitor their impact on young people over time. In Barcelona (Spain), *Consorci d'Educació de Barcelona* (the Barcelona Education Consortium) has applied a data-driven approach to promote equity through its *Pla de Xoc Contra la Segregació* (Shock Plan Against School Segregation) since 2019. Prior to the Plan, Previously, teams of educational social workers operating across the city's ten districts were responsible for identifying vulnerable students. Once identified, these students were then reported to schools, which handled registration, resulting in inconsistent and underestimated figures, that covered only about 5% of pupils. The Plan introduced a centralised city-level team and a new information system acting as a single source of truth for identifying

vulnerable students. The system consolidated multiple administrative data sources and created *Registre d'Alumnes Vulnérables* (the Vulnerable Students Registry), which integrates education and social service data. The registry includes information on students' personal characteristics, education records and social circumstances, such as participation in municipal social or COVID funds, full school-meal grants, and socio-economic educational support. This approach, structured around clear criteria, co-ordinated detection methods, regular coverage checks and gap analysis, has significantly strengthened policy targeting. Between 2018-19 and 2023-24, the share of identified vulnerable students increased from 4.7% to 21.8% of total pupils. Furthermore, there is a need for more comprehensive data on youth poverty and social exclusion that goes beyond individual access to services and better captures underlying structural and collective factors. One approach is to explore “less visible settings”, such as schools, as entry points to identify unmet needs and data gaps. This perspective is consistent with the Council Conclusions on adequate minimum income (2023), which highlight the importance of combining accessible and well-co-ordinated income support with activation measures and strong local outreach (Council of the European Union, 2023<sup>[104]</sup>).

## Strengthening youth policy delivery through innovative financing tools

To ensure that youth policies remain sustainable and adequately resourced, particularly in constrained budget contexts, cities can rely on a mix of funding sources by pooling financing from local, regional, national and EU levels. By aggregating different sources of funding, cities can scale up financing, reduce budget fragmentation and reinforce the effectiveness of their youth policies. Specifically, across EU funds and strategies, a wide range of financial instruments is available to support cities in implementing youth policies. These include Erasmus+, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF, including Interreg), the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+, notably for social inclusion, education and skills), the Just Transition Fund, and the European Solidarity Corps. Specifically, under the ERDF, the Talent Booster Mechanism was launched in January 2023 to support EU regions facing demographic challenges, including youth outmigration. The initiative aims to strengthen regional capacities by developing, retaining and attracting the skills and competences needed to address demographic change. Supporting young people to realise their potential in high-quality learning environments, and facilitating their transition into the labour market, forms part of a broader set of measures put forward by the European Commission to help Member States manage demographic pressures and promote more balanced brain circulation across Europe. Moreover, in 2013, the EU set up the Youth Guarantee<sup>18</sup> (YG) with dedicated financing through the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), now incorporated under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). Designed to support the regions and individuals most affected by youth unemployment and high NEET rates, the YEI illustrates how combining different sources of financing can enhance the impact of youth policies. In 2021-2027 programming period, the Youth Guarantee relies primarily on EU funding through the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), complemented by national resources. Regional disparities serve as a guiding criterion for allocating resources, ensuring that funding reached the territories where it was needed most. Evidence from the evaluation of the YEI between 2014 and 2018 showed that this blended financing approach, bringing together EU and national contributions, helped deliver measurable improvements in youth outcomes. Overall, YEI-funded interventions had a significant effect in reducing the share of NEETs and unemployed youth, contributing to increasing employment rates among 25-30 year-olds and reducing early school-leaving, particularly in regions where youth unemployment exceeded 30% in 2012 (e.g. in Portugal, Spain, Southern Italy, Greece, Croatia) (Scandurra and Cefalo, 2025<sup>[105]</sup>).

Blended finance models that combine public and private contributions can expand opportunities for youth while fostering local job creation. In the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom), the Camden Community Wealth Fund is a social investment fund providing GBP 30 million in loans and equity to local organisations delivering both financial returns and social impact for local residents. Within this fund, a

GBP 2 million Youth Fund pilot was launched in 2025 to support businesses that empower young people through diversity and inclusion initiatives, confidence and skills building and mental health and well-being support. Co-designed with youth, as the applications to the fund are reviewed by a 15-member Youth Panel, it offers low-interest loans of GBP 20 000 to GBP 500 000, capped at 5%, with repayment holidays and fair lending terms.

Financing youth policies and inclusive growth in cities requires stronger alignment between urban development goals and financial frameworks. Most municipal action plans, including those targeting young people's inclusion, employment and education, are not connected to financing strategies and financial institutions are rarely part of policy design. This disconnect often leads to underfunded youth initiatives, especially in poorer countries and cities where weak credit ratings, limited institutional capacity and high perceived risk restrict access to capital. To mobilise investment for youth-focused policies, countries and cities need to translate their commitments (often defined around SDGs), such as youth empowerment and social inclusion, into Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) indicators recognised by investors, and more specifically by defining KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). By building this common language between cities and financiers, and reframing youth initiatives as ESG-aligned investments in skills, jobs and community resilience, municipalities can unlock new funding sources. This is what the city of Helsingborg (Sweden) has developed in its 2025 Sustainability-linked bond framework that directly integrates youth employment and education as a measurable performance indicator and linking it to SDG 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth). The initiative targets young people aged 16-24 who are neither in school nor working (NEET), aiming to reduce early school leaving and improve employability outcomes. Investors, including major pension funds, are attracted to these bonds because they can generate financial returns comparable to other market-rate investments, while also delivering verified social impact.

Social impact bonds can also help cities support vulnerable young people in different areas, as long as they can provide evidence-based results for the programme. The *Proyectá tu Futuro* (Project Your Future) programme in Buenos Aires (Argentina) shows how outcome-based financing can effectively support youth employment in vulnerable urban areas. Launched in 2018 as Argentina's first Social Impact Bond (SIB), it targeted 1 000 unemployed young people aged 17-24 in the city's poorest districts, where youth unemployment reached 24.7%, the highest in Latin America. The programme achieved strong outcomes: 89% completed training, 36% found formal jobs and 59% stayed employed for a year.

Participatory budgeting can serve as a mechanism to allocate public budget connecting citizen priorities, especially those of young people, to tangible investments that promote education, equity and sustainable urban development. In Cascais (Portugal), the Youth Participatory Budget (YPB) is a financial and educational initiative bringing young people's voices into local decision making, while actively involving them in public investment processes and strengthening their personal and social development. After having identified YPB classes and teachers, and formed a management council, teachers and students receive dedicated training and participate in activities such as teamwork bootcamps and participatory public sessions. Each participating school receives EUR 10 000 to implement winning projects, ensuring tangible local impact. Between 2016-2017 and 2023-2024, a total of 97 school projects were funded, representing EUR 802 500 in investments.

## Building the capacity to deliver youth-centred policies

Designing and implementing effective youth policies requires city government staff to develop an inclusive approach that recognises the diversity of young people's situations, challenges and aspirations. The delivery of services and information, as well as participation opportunities must reflect the diversity of youth experiences, particularly for vulnerable groups such as NEET youth, young migrants, homeless youth and youth with disabilities. To ensure effective implementation, decision-makers require a sound understanding

of young people's actual needs and aspirations, as well as the policy goals that guide collective action. Developing a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by different youth groups is therefore vital for designing responsive, goal-oriented policies that strengthen well-being, inclusion and meaningful participation (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020<sup>[106]</sup>).

Cities often face skills gaps that limit their ability to design and deliver effective youth policies. These include limited capacity to collect and use disaggregated data on young people's needs, difficulties reaching and engaging specific target groups and a shortage of staff with hands-on implementation and project management experience. Addressing these gaps can require cross-sectoral teams that bring together complementary skills in data analysis, outreach and engagement, behavioural insights, and programme delivery. In Barcelona (Spain) and in the Borough of Camden in London (United Kingdom), multidisciplinary teams, combining expertise in data analysis, behavioural science, IT and policy implementation, can translate strategic goals into concrete results. In Camden, for example, cross-functional teams helped address declining school attendance by integrating data insights with behavioural approaches. Barcelona's experience highlights that although many administrations have strong analytical and policy expertise, they often lack sufficient "doers", professionals focused on practical delivery. To translate youth strategies into tangible outcomes, cities need teams with strong implementation skills, room to test and adjust approaches in practice, and the confidence to take informed decisions based on evidence and feedback from young people.

Staff development can serve as a critical enabling factor to better understand the needs of youth and deliver more relevant youth policy. The City of Los Angeles (United States) offers a strong example of how municipal administrations can embed staff capacity-building within youth policy implementation. Through its Youth Development Strategic Plan, the city has institutionalised professional development as a core component of its youth strategy (City of Los Angeles, 2023<sup>[107]</sup>). In June 2024, the Youth Development Department (YDD) organised four training sessions for municipal departments, contractors and community organisations focused on Positive Youth Development (PYD) principles and Youth Programme Evaluation (YPE). These sessions reached a total of 307 city staff from 30 departments and 206 staff from 38 contractors and community organisations. Beyond in-person training, the YDD produced and disseminated concise summary reports and fact sheets that translated complex PYD and evaluation frameworks into practical guidance for daily operations, ensuring that learnings could be applied consistently across programmes. By combining large-scale training with accessible learning tools, Los Angeles has created a city-wide culture of youth-centred practice, strengthening co-ordination and evidence-based implementation across departments. This systematic approach demonstrates how staff development and institutional learning can serve as critical enabling factors for inclusive and effective youth policy delivery.

## **Harnessing youth perspectives and digital tools for inclusive policy evaluation**

Youth participation in monitoring and evaluation can significantly strengthen youth policies governance, accountability and inclusiveness when young people are empowered as genuine partners and leaders. Evidence shows that youth-led and co-designed evaluation processes enhance the relevance and effectiveness of policies and programmes by integrating first-hand insights into what works at community level. Moving beyond tokenistic consultation towards shared decision making increases ownership, transparency and innovation. Governments can institutionalise youth roles in evaluation frameworks, providing capacity-building and ensuring that young evaluators' findings inform policy cycles. The EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, for example, integrated youth input through surveys, focus groups and youth organisation consultations, ensuring policy relevance and legitimacy (European Commission, 2018<sup>[108]</sup>). Co-designing indicators with young people and involving them in defining what success means helps ensure that monitoring frameworks reflect their priorities, such as access to decent work, housing and opportunities for civic participation. Such participatory mechanisms not only improve evidence quality but also foster civic trust and long-term democratic resilience (Purdue, Peterson and Deng, 2018<sup>[109]</sup>).

Young people's direct involvement in evaluation processes can strengthen the quality, relevance and reach of evidence for policy design. Peer-to-peer evaluation helps reduce age-based power imbalances that often marginalise youth perspectives in traditional research settings, fostering more candid exchanges and ensuring that young people are active contributors rather than passive participants. By positioning young evaluators as "insiders," such approaches can unlock more nuanced insights, particularly on sensitive or culturally taboo topics. At the same time, youth bring distinctive skills to monitoring and evaluation, notably their digital fluency, strong peer networks and ability to leverage new technologies for rapid and far-reaching feedback. Initiatives like UNICEF's *U-report* in Uganda illustrate how youth-led digital platforms can collect real-time data, engage young people in policy discussions, and connect their voices directly with decision-makers. Together, these approaches highlight the importance of mobilising young people's unique capacities to make evaluation more inclusive, representative, and impactful (UNICEF, 2017<sup>[110]</sup>).

Young people can contribute effectively to traditional evaluation methods, but creative and participatory approaches are particularly well suited to capture their unique perspectives. Techniques such as photo voice, role-play, dotmocracy,<sup>19</sup> storyboard and transect walks<sup>20</sup> provide flexible and engaging ways for youth to express experiences and priorities. These methods not only make policy evaluation more accessible and meaningful but also serve as springboards for deeper dialogue, helping evaluators gather richer insights into the impacts and challenges that matter most to young people (Urban Institute, 2021<sup>[111]</sup>).

## Engaging youth and local stakeholders to foster trust and political support

Effective outreach is critical to improving young people's access to public benefits and services, particularly for those who are less likely to engage with institutions through traditional channels. Evidence suggests that outreach strategies are most successful when they use communication platforms that young people frequently access and trust, including social media, text messaging and mobile applications, and when information is delivered in places they regularly inhabit, such as schools, universities and youth centres (Urban Institute, 2024<sup>[112]</sup>). Embedding information on available support within existing communication channels, for example course materials, campus emails or orientation sessions, can help normalise access and increase uptake. Berlin's (Germany) *Jugendberufsagentur* (JBA, Youth Employment Agency) illustrates how integrated governance can also improve communication with young people about available support. By bringing together public employment services, job centres, youth welfare offices and vocational school counsellors in a one-stop-shop model, the JBA simplifies access to information and provides clear entry points for guidance. Dedicated school-based teams and counsellors act as trusted intermediaries, ensuring that young people receive timely and consistent messages about training, employment and support services.

Clear and consistent communication is key to building political support and public trust around youth policies. Dedicated communication teams can use social media, local boards, newsletters and city magazines, as in Brno (Czechia), to reach both young people and the wider community. Visual and interactive tools help make policy goals and results more tangible, fostering understanding and engagement. Strong communication also underpins transparency, which is essential for building trust between youth, policymakers and institutions. Centralising messages, improving consistency across departments and providing the right information at the right time can strengthen buy-in from both decision-makers and citizens, helping embed youth policy within broader local development agendas. Partnerships with local actor, such as government agencies, public transport providers, schools, can enhance communication and outreach.

Effective communication and coalition-building, including delivery partners, can secure political recognition for underrepresented sectors and strengthen local governance. In Rotterdam (the Netherlands), the N8W8 organisation, led by the city's Night Mayor, exemplifies how an independent civic platform can give voice to local stakeholders while building political support for cultural and economic priorities. Through more than

250 consultations with venue owners, artists, transport providers and municipal departments, N8W8 has become a trusted intermediary between citizens and city government. Its efforts helped secure 24-hour permits, introduce night bus services, establish subsidies for cultural organisers, and create a dedicated municipal nightlife team within the culture, economy and safety departments. These achievements culminated in Rotterdam's first official *Nachtplan* (Nightlife Plan), embedding nightlife into the city's broader development strategy.

# 4 Conclusions and considerations

Cities offer young people a wide range of opportunities, from dynamic labour markets to access to tertiary education, as well as to diverse social and cultural environments. Yet many young people, especially from vulnerable backgrounds, continue to face persistent barriers to quality education, stable employment, affordable housing and essential services. Enabling young people to fully participate in and benefit from their local economies is central to achieving sustainable and inclusive growth in cities across Europe. There is a need for a fundamental shift in how policies to support youth in cities are designed and delivered. While there are many examples of cities developing innovative responses, often these can be fragmented, short-term or reactive. More effective approaches require a stronger focus on prevention through greater identification and mitigation of risks, as well as interventions at critical transition moments, such as from education to work and sustaining support over time, as opposed to reactive and crisis-driven responses. Such an approach is particularly important given the extent to which early life and youth experience shape long-term trajectories.

## Policy priorities to support youth in cities and foster inclusive growth

By integrating policies across key domains and reducing administrative barriers, cities can adopt more holistic and person-centred responses. Building on these principles, the following policy pillars highlight priority areas for action to improve inclusion, accessibility and long-term outcomes for youth in urban areas.

- **Education:** Strengthen inclusive and equitable education systems by addressing segregation and discrimination in cities, and by improving transitions across the education pathway and towards the labour market. This includes reinforcing links between secondary, tertiary and vocational education training (VET), expanding access to high-quality VET and work-based learning, and embedding transversal skills such as entrepreneurship and innovation. A whole-of-system approach, mobilising schools, local authorities and wider ecosystems, can help equip all young people with the skills needed for future labour market participation.
- **Labour market:** Facilitate smoother school-to-work transitions and improve access to quality employment opportunities, particularly for vulnerable youth. This requires targeted, place-based approaches that go beyond standard employment services, including tailored guidance, mentoring and support for youth entrepreneurship. Dedicated urban youth spaces and centres, both physical and online, can play a key role in engaging disengaged young people, fostering skills development and strengthening their connection to local labour markets.
- **Housing and the built environment:** Improve access to affordable and stable housing for young people in cities, especially those in vulnerable and homelessness situations, through integrated “housing plus support” approaches. This includes combining housing provision with tailored social support and designing inclusive, accessible and youth-friendly urban environments. Housing policies should be aligned with broader spatial planning strategies to ensure proximity to education, employment opportunities and essential services.

- **Public services and infrastructure:** Enhance the accessibility, affordability and responsiveness of public services to better meet young people's needs. This includes urban transport, and health, education and social services, with a focus on fostering inclusive and accessible public services and spaces and improving co-ordination across sectors. Integrated service delivery models and targeted support, particularly at key transition moments, can improve outcomes in employment, well-being and social inclusion.
- **Fair climate action:** Align youth policies with the green transition by ensuring that young people are both beneficiaries and active contributors to sustainable urban development. This involves promoting climate literacy, supporting youth participation in urban planning and decision making, and designing inclusive policies that link environmental objectives with social outcomes. Integrating climate action with education, mobility, housing and health policies can help advance both sustainability and equity goals.

## Enabling conditions to support sustained reductions youth exclusion in cities

Delivering inclusive outcomes for young people in cities depends not only on the policies themselves, but also on the governance, financing and implementation conditions that underpin them. The following enabling factors outline key levers to strengthen policy coherence, improve delivery capacity, and ensure that youth policies are effective, inclusive and sustainable over time.

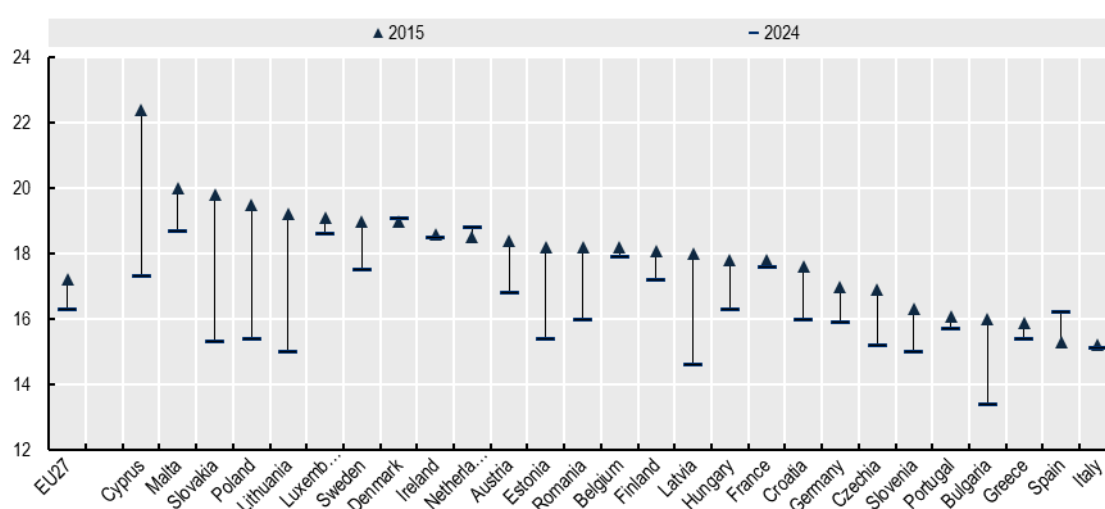
- **Build coherent youth policy through vertical co-ordination and cross-sectoral action:** Clarify roles across levels of government and ensure stable institutional arrangements, supported by regular intergovernmental dialogue. Align national priorities with local implementation through strong political and technical leadership, and foster cross-sectoral co-ordination (e.g. education, employment, social services) via dedicated structures and missions that integrate youth across policy areas.
- **Empower young people as partners in local public policy design:** Move from consultation to co-creation by equipping young people with the skills, resources and incentives to actively shape urban policies. Combine participatory methods (e.g. workshops, digital tools, peer learning) with concrete delivery mechanisms (e.g. micro-grants) and ensure inclusive participation by compensating engagement and reaching youth in under-served areas.
- **Build robust data systems to design and evaluate effective inclusive growth policies for youth in cities:** Develop harmonised, disaggregated and geo-referenced data systems that integrate multiple administrative sources (e.g. education, social services) to better identify vulnerable groups and target interventions. Strengthen data-sharing across departments and embed youth-generated data into planning and evaluation frameworks to improve policy precision and accountability.
- **Strengthen youth policy delivery through innovative financing tools:** Combine funding sources across levels of government and leverage EU and international instruments to scale and stabilise investment. Align youth policy objectives with financial frameworks (e.g. ESG indicators) and use blended and outcome-based financing tools (e.g. social impact bonds, participatory budgeting) to attract private capital and ensure measurable impact.
- **Build the capacity in city governments to deliver youth-centred policies:** Invest in multidisciplinary teams that combine policy, data, behavioural and delivery expertise to translate strategies into action. Strengthen implementation capacity through staff training, practical guidance and organisational learning, while fostering a culture of experimentation and adaptation based on feedback from youth.

- **Harness youth perspectives and digital tools for inclusive policy evaluation:** Institutionalise youth participation in monitoring and evaluation by involving them in defining indicators, collecting data and assessing outcomes. Leverage digital platforms and participatory methods to gather real-time, peer-driven insights, improving the relevance, inclusiveness and responsiveness of evaluation systems.
- **Engaging youth and local stakeholders to foster trust and political support:** Develop targeted outreach strategies using trusted channels (e.g. schools, youth centres, social media) and simplify access to services through integrated entry points. Ensure clear, consistent and transparent communication across stakeholders, and build coalitions with local actors to strengthen visibility, trust and long-term political support for youth policies.

## Annex A. Trends and challenges affecting youth in EU cities

**Figure A A.1. The share of young people declined in almost all EU countries**

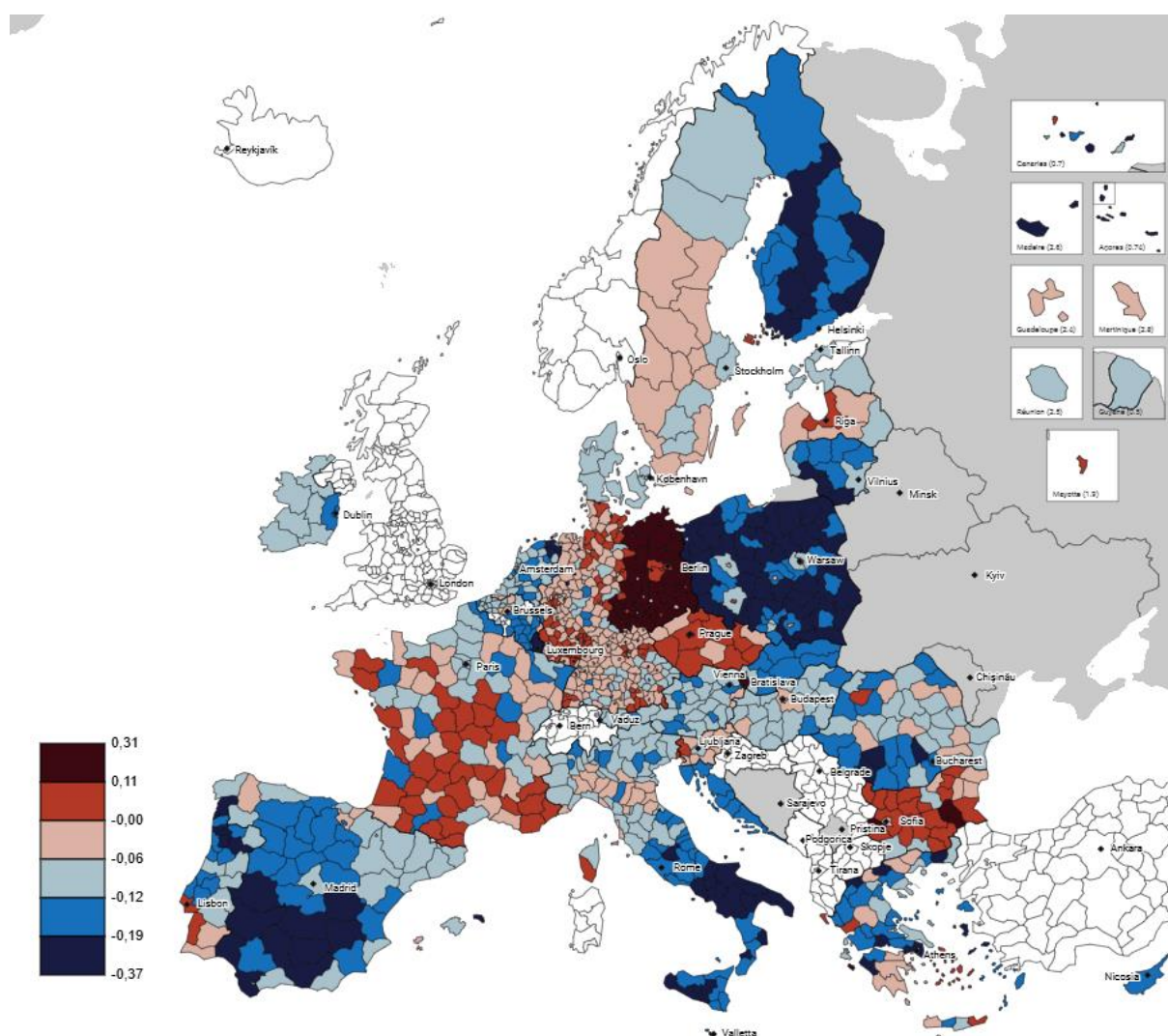
Share of young people (15-29 years) in the total population, 2015 and 2024, in %



Source: Eurostat (2025<sup>[113]</sup>), *Ratio of young people in the total population on 1 January by sex and age (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/YTH\\_DEMO\\_020](https://doi.org/10.2908/YTH_DEMO_020) (accessed on 13 January 2026).

## Figure A A.2. Demographic shifts are expected to play out unevenly across EU regions

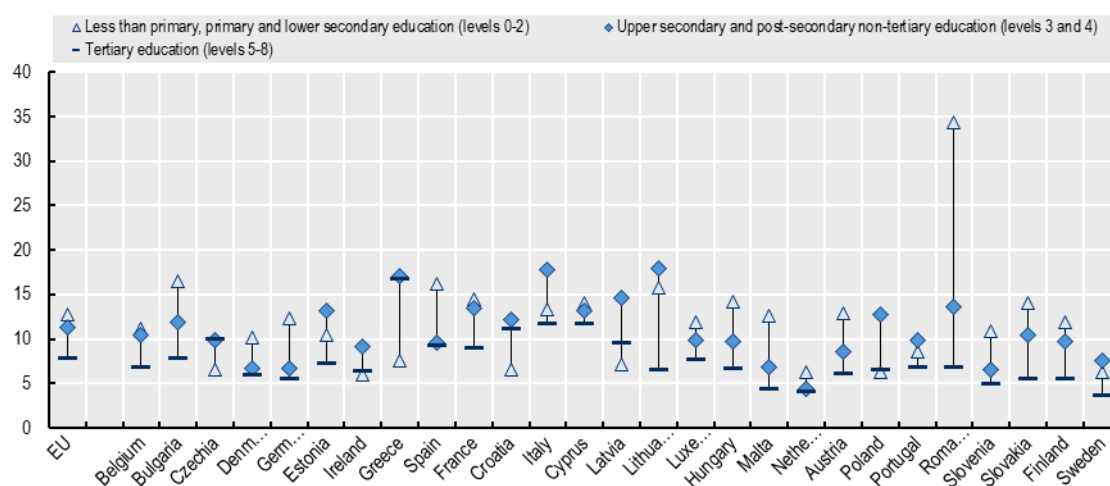
Projected change in the share of young people in the total population, in %, 2021-2050, by TL3 region



Sources: Eurostat (2025<sup>[114]</sup>), *Population on 1 January by age group, sex and NUTS 3 region (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO\\_R\\_PJANGRP3](https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO_R_PJANGRP3); Eurostat (2025<sup>[115]</sup>), *Population on 1 January by age, sex, type of projection and NUTS 3 region (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/PROJ\\_19RP3](https://doi.org/10.2908/PROJ_19RP3); Eurostat (2025<sup>[116]</sup>), *Population on 1 January by age and sex (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO\\_PJAN](https://doi.org/10.2908/DEMO_PJAN); Eurostat (2025<sup>[117]</sup>), *Population on 1 January by age, sex and type of projection (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/PROJ\\_19NP](https://doi.org/10.2908/PROJ_19NP) - EUROPOP2019 (accessed on 13 January 2026).

**Figure A A.3. Education and training offers a strong safeguard against youth long-term remaining outside the labour market long term and unemployment**

Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by educational attainment level, 2024

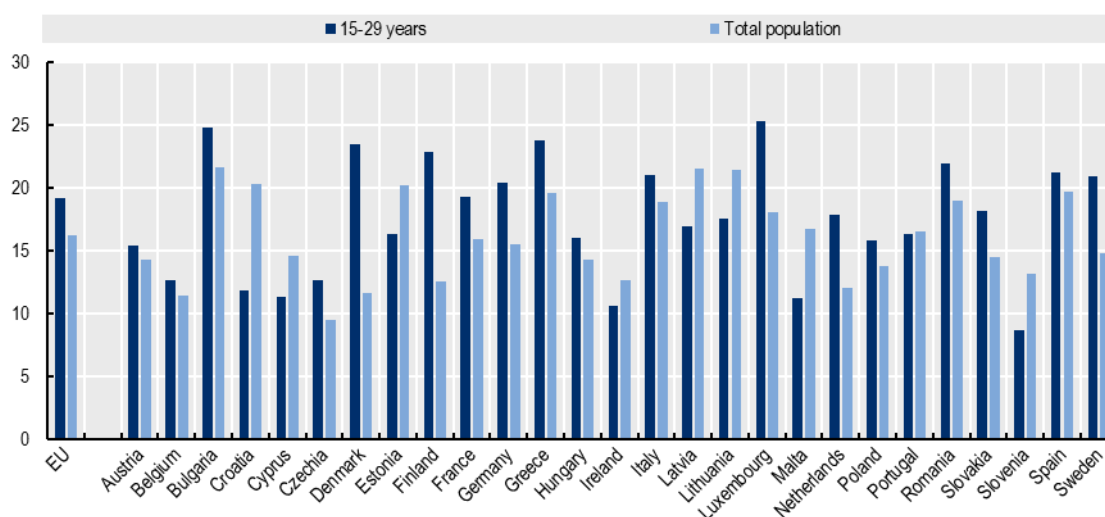


Note: Levels refer to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), the internationally recognised framework for classifying education programmes and qualifications by level and field of study.

Source: Eurostat (2025<sup>[118]</sup>), *Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training by educational attainment level (NEET rates) (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT\\_LFSE\\_21](https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_21) (accessed on 13 January 2026).

**Figure A A.4. Youth in the EU face higher risks of poverty than the total population**

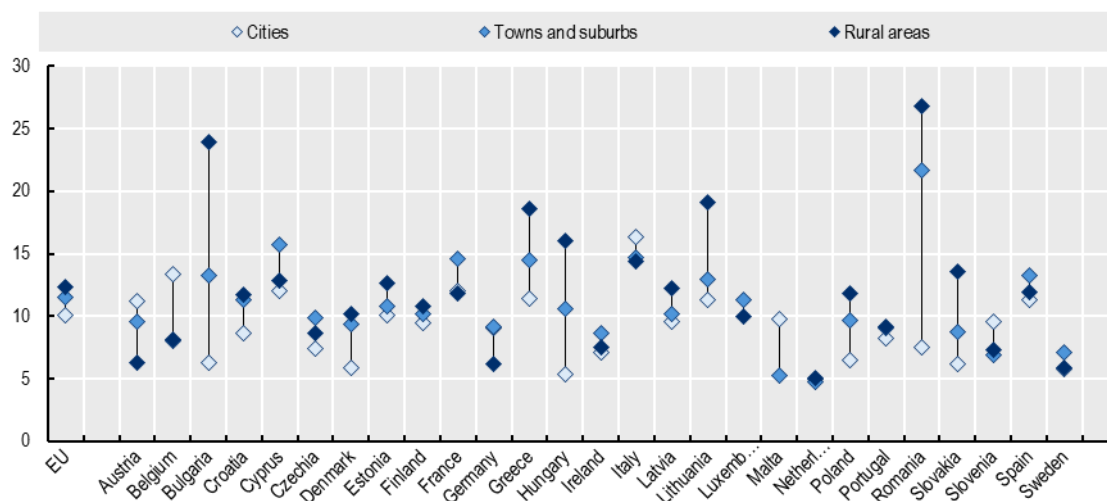
Share of young people at risk of poverty compared to the total population in 2024, in %



Source: Eurostat (2025<sup>[119]</sup>), *At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC\\_LI02](https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LI02) (accessed on 13 January 2026).

**Figure A A.5. The share of NEETs in the EU was lowest in cities and highest in rural areas**

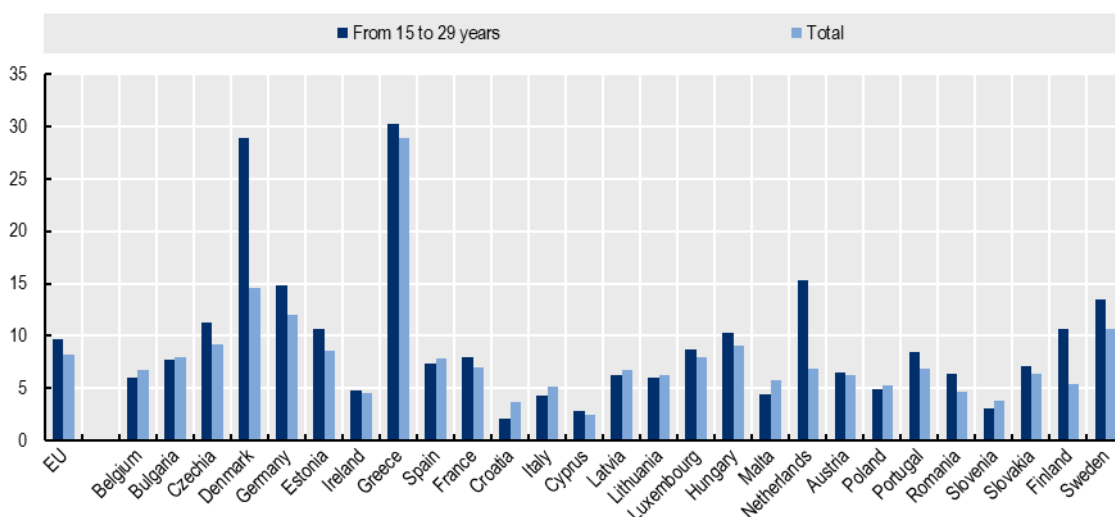
Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, by degree of urbanisation, 2024 (%)



Source: Eurostat (2025<sup>[120]</sup>), *Young persons neither in employment nor in education and training by degree of urbanisation (NEET rates) (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT\\_LFSE\\_29](https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_29) (accessed 13 January 2026).

**Figure A A.6. Young people experience a disproportionate housing cost burden compared to the total population**

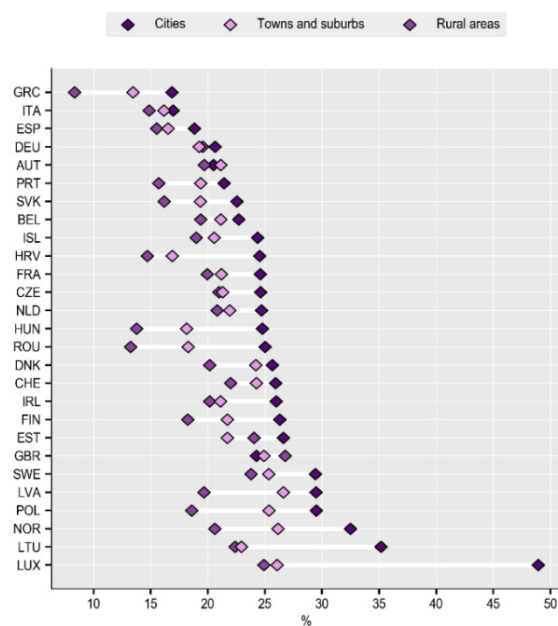
Housing cost overburden rate, youth and total population, 2024



Source: Eurostat (2025<sup>[121]</sup>), *Housing cost overburden rate by age, sex and poverty status (dataset)*, [https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC\\_LVH007A](https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_LVH007A) (accessed 13 January 2026).

### Figure A A.7. Capital-city regions in the OECD are leading the shift toward greener jobs

Share of green-task jobs by country and degree of urbanisation in 2022



Source: OECD (2024<sup>[122]</sup>), *Regions and Cities at a Glance 2024*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f42db3bf-en>.

## Annex B. EU recommendations and policies

### Box A B.1. EU recommendations and policies to strengthen foundational and civic skills through integrated education systems

Building on the EU Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success (2022), there is a growing call to adopt an integrated and preventive approach to improve outcomes for all learners. This involves combining early identification of learning risks, targeted support for vulnerable students, and compensatory measures for those who have disengaged, within a coherent framework spanning prevention, intervention and remediation. Effective implementation relies on a whole-of-system and whole-of-school approach, mobilising actors across levels of government, as well as schools, families and local communities.

In line with the EU Union of Skills, strengthening basic skills is a key priority to improve youth outcomes, employability and social inclusion. Urgent action is needed, with around 18 million underachieving pupils in the EU. This calls for moving beyond classroom-based approaches to include structured, real-world learning experiences. Building on existing frameworks, notably the Basic Skills Action Plan, effective responses require co-ordinated action to improve teaching and learning, support educators, and create more supportive learning environments. Some key actions from this Plan include early identification mechanisms and regular monitoring at national, local and school levels, while offering suitable remedial courses, particularly at key transitions in a pupil's educational career.

In parallel, reinforcing citizenship skills is increasingly recognised as essential for young people's development and for strengthening social cohesion, resilience and democratic participation. As highlighted in the European Democracy Shield (2025), integrating basic and civic skills within broader, place-based strategies can help equip young people with the competences needed to thrive and engage actively in society.

Sources: European Commission (2025<sup>[65]</sup>), *The Union of Skills*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A52025DC0090>; Council of the European Union (2022<sup>[123]</sup>), *Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success*, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC\\_2022\\_469\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=oj:JOC_2022_469_R_0001); European Commission (2025<sup>[124]</sup>), *European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025JC0791>.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The OECD Regional Database collects and publishes statistical indicators at two different geographical levels, namely large regions (Territorial Level 2, TL2) and small regions (Territorial Level 3, TL3). This classification is aligned with the EU classification known as NUTS (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics). NUTS3 correspond to small regions and account for 1 165 regions in the EU.

<sup>2</sup> Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Cyprus, the Netherlands and Sweden.

<sup>3</sup> Young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) refers to young people who are not employed (i.e. who are unemployed or outside the labour force) and who did not participate in any formal or non-formal education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey.

<sup>4</sup> Childhood socio-economic disadvantage refers to growing up in conditions of limited material and economic resources, lower household security, and often higher family stress. It also has an important social dimension, as disadvantage can affect family functioning and parenting practices, leading to fewer developmental supports such as language-rich interactions and stimulation in early life.

<sup>5</sup> The UK National Youth Work Curriculum defines youth work as a “distinct education process adapted across a variety of settings to support a young person’s personal, social and educational development”. This support for a young person’s personal development complements formal education. Youth work can involve a wide range of activities, including open access to youth clubs, outdoor learning and creative activities.

<sup>6</sup> The Dissimilarity index measures the unevenness in the distribution of socially disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.

<sup>7</sup> The Adjusted Isolation index captures the extent to which socially disadvantaged students are exposed to peers from the same group.

<sup>8</sup> The ability to apply knowledge and skills to manage financial resources effectively for lifelong security.

<sup>9</sup> The European Solidarity Corps Quality Label certifies that an organisation taking part in the Corps is able to provide the necessary conditions for young people to take part in solidarity activities.

<sup>10</sup> Priority neighbourhoods under France's urban policy are areas targeted by the State and local authorities to reduce development gaps between disadvantaged neighbourhoods and their wider urban areas. In metropolitan France, they are identified using the income per capita criterion (INSEE, 2025<sup>[125]</sup>).

<sup>11</sup> This service is for patients who are medically ready to be discharged from hospital but lack suitable accommodation or a home to return to in order to continue their recovery.

<sup>12</sup> The "low threshold" method is meant to attract young people who would otherwise not take up employment and social services due to difficulties registering or identifying services.

<sup>13</sup> Enjoyable leisure activities can be defined as the pleasurable activities that individuals engage in voluntarily when they are free from the demands of work or other responsibilities. These might include hobbies, sports, socialising, or spending time in nature.

<sup>14</sup> GreenComp: the European sustainability competence framework - European Commission (europa.eu).

<sup>15</sup> Scaffold: a card game to revolutionise teaching | ETF (europa.eu).

<sup>16</sup> Ecole de la biodiversité et gymnase | ChartierDalix / A Boulogne-Billancourt, une école abrite 345 espèces animales et végétales.

<sup>17</sup> A longitudinal survey is a type of research method that collects data from the same group of people (a "panel") repeatedly over time.

<sup>18</sup> The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that every young European is provided a quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship within the crucial four-month period. Each member state has an implementation plan, resulting in a variety of approaches across Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Dotmocracy is a participatory decision making method used in workshops, community meetings or public consultations to quickly gather feedback and prioritise ideas. Participants are given a set number of stickers or "dots" and asked to place them next to the options, proposals or issues they support on a board or poster.

<sup>20</sup> Transect walks are a participatory research and planning method in which participants walk through a neighbourhood or area along a planned route to observe, document and discuss local conditions.

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