



Social Justice Ireland

National Social Monitor

The Future Starts Now: Policies for the Next Generation



Contents

Introduction	2
Housing	4
Health.....	6
Education	8
Rural Development	10
Work.....	12
Governance and Participation	14
Income Distribution	16
Taxation.....	18
Environment and Sustainability	20
Global Issues	22
Other Publications by <i>Social Justice Ireland</i> (see www.socialjustice.ie):.....	24

Introduction

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2026 passes to Ireland and presents a strategic and timely opportunity to strengthen the voice, agency, and inclusion of young people in national and European policymaking. Ireland has an opportunity to lead by example, championing youth-centred policymaking that is evidence-based, rights-focused, and aligned with the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027.

Europe and Ireland are undergoing continuous and rapid changes; environmental, social, political, economic, and technological marked by evolving labour markets, climate adaptations, digital transformation, and increasing pressures on wellbeing and social cohesion. Ireland's Presidency of the EU will need to reflect and meet these challenges.

Young people continue to articulate the need for greater participation in democratic processes, more equitable access to education and employment, stronger mental health supports, and meaningful climate action.

In Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People and the commitment to youth participation through structures such as Comhairle na nÓg and the EU Youth Dialogue provide a strong foundation for the inclusion of young people in policymaking. However, emerging challenges—including the cost of living, housing pressures, digital literacy and safety, and the need for a just green transition—require renewed focus and stronger cross-sectoral coordination.

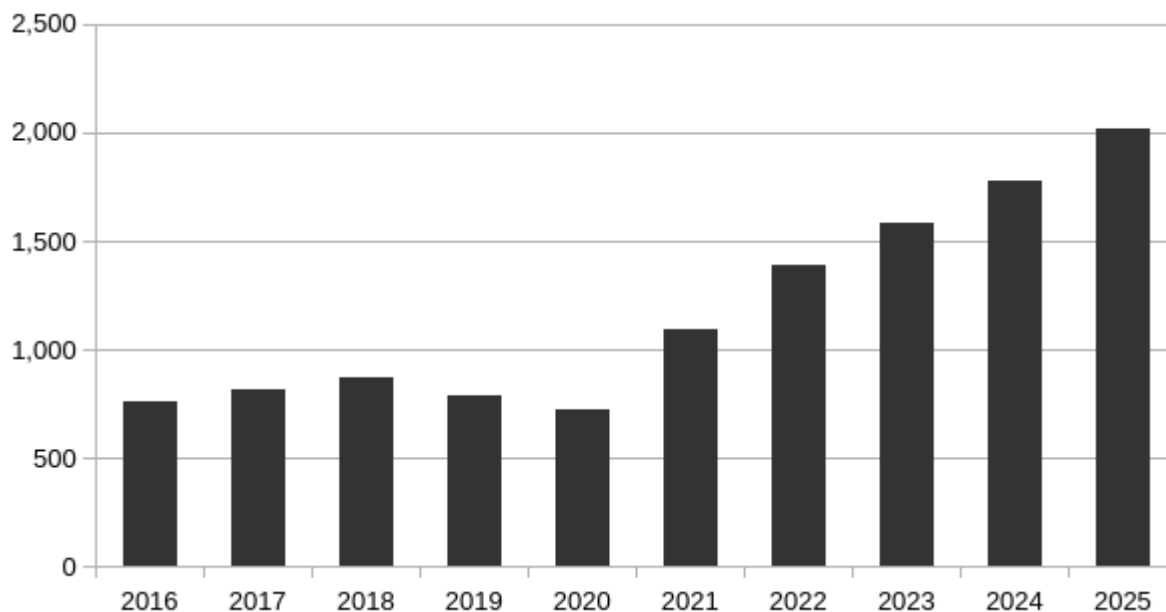
In this Spring 2026 edition of our National Social Monitor, *Social Justice Ireland* outlines the present situation on a range of policy issues that impact on young people's wellbeing and looks at whether policy is addressing the issues to ensure a fair and sustainable future for the young today. This edition of the National Social Monitor does not attempt to cover all the issues. It is offered as a contribution to the ongoing public debate, specifically on the following issues:

- Housing
- Health
- Education and Skills
- Rural Development
- Work
- Governance and Participation
- Income Distribution
- Taxation
- Environment and Sustainability
- Global Issues

All these issues have implications for Ireland's economy and how the market performs. However, they also have implications for the wellbeing of Europe's youth population and for society as a whole.

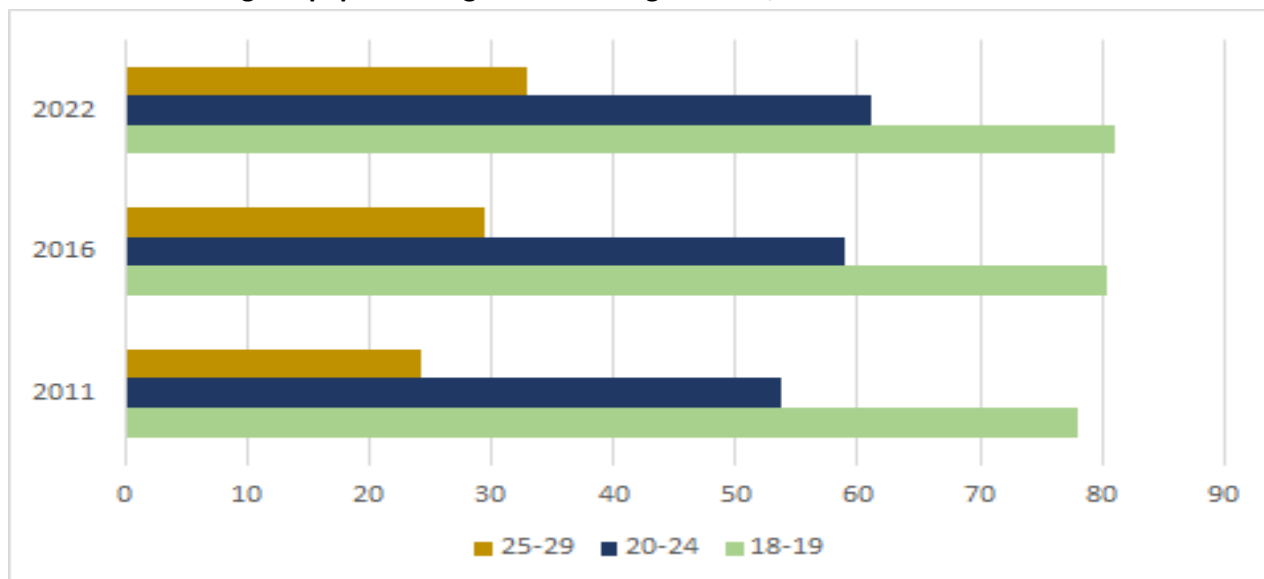
Housing

Chart 1.1: Number of young people aged 18-24 accessing emergency accommodation, December of each year, 2016 – 2025



Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Homeless Reports, Various years.

Chart 1.2: Percentage of population aged 18-29 Living at home, 2011-2022



Source: CSO Ireland, Table/F3052

Housing



Youth Homelessness

Youth Homelessness continues to be a significant issue in Ireland. Data on the numbers of people accessing emergency accommodation across the State shows an ongoing rise in homelessness for those aged between the ages of 18 and 24. Comparing the figures for a single week in the December of each year, in 2016, 765 people in this age group were recorded as homeless. Whilst dropping slightly in the Covid period, the numbers increased to 1,090 in 2021 and the most recent figures from December 2025 recorded another increase to 2,017 people (Chart 1.1) As the homelessness data captures just one week in any given month, these figures likely underestimate the true scale of youth homelessness across each year.

Youth homelessness in Ireland is driven by a combination of structural pressures such as financial instability, job precarity, rising housing costs, limited supply, and insufficient youth-specific housing. The Government has introduced several policies to address homelessness and more specifically youth homelessness. A national [Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025](#) aimed to end youth homelessness through prevention, improved emergency accommodations, and structured supports. This strategy was part of the broader Homelessness Prevention Framework which was designed to provide early intervention and support to reduce homelessness overall. These policies reflect the broader commitment in the EU to end homelessness by 2030. The EU affordable housing plan sets out steps to curb the growth of youth homelessness by supplying more student housing, cutting the need for a security deposit on private student rental properties, and increasing the number of affordable accommodations for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite these initiatives, youth homelessness continues to rise.

Without a safe, secure place to live, young people face increased risks of mental health problems as well as limited access to education and employment opportunities. This can trap them in a cycle of disadvantage. Addressing youth homelessness requires coordinated efforts to provide safe housing, support services, and pathways to independence and stability. Intervention and inclusive policies can help prevent homelessness and ensure young people have the chance to thrive and succeed.

Young People and Home Ownership

The Central Statistics Office note that property prices nationally in August 2025 increased by 171.7 per cent from a low point in 2013 ([CSO, 2025](#)). Wages, however,

have not kept pace. Between 2012 and 2022, wages increased by 27 per cent, compared to a 75 per cent increase in residential property prices, while rents increased by over 90 per cent ([Parliamentary Budget Office, 2023](#)).

Access to all forms of housing has become increasingly difficult, especially for young people. From 2016 to 2022, the number of 18–29-year-olds living in the family home grew from 344,362 to 391,156, an increase of nearly 14 per cent ([CSO, 2023](#)). Based on estimates from Census 2022 age-band data, around 730,000 people in Ireland were between the ages of 18-29 which suggests that nearly half of this age group were still living in the family home. These figures show that the number of young people living with their parents has continued to increase throughout the years. This trend is shown in Chart 1.2 and indicates the impact that lack of supply and increased cost is having on the ability of young people to afford independent living.

The increasing number of young people staying in the family home reflects the broader structural flaws within Ireland's housing system. A lack of affordable housing, coupled with a lack of support to help young people transition into independent living negatively impacts progress across multiple areas. All this leads to delayed independence, delayed household formation and the knock-on impact on fertility as well as an increased reliance on the precarious private rental sector and the wider implications for mental health and wellbeing. These pressures are made worse by an unequal distribution of wealth in Ireland which is primarily linked to home ownership, which leaves many young people with little chance of owning a home.

Policy Priorities

- Increase the supply of affordable, social and cost rental properties aimed at young people providing an alternative to the private rental sector.
- Strengthen preventative measures for young people at risk of homelessness by increasing support and youth housing services.
- Convert the Rent Tax Credit into a grant or make it refundable to benefit low-income tenants.
- Improve pathways out of homelessness for young adults, including long-term secure housing.

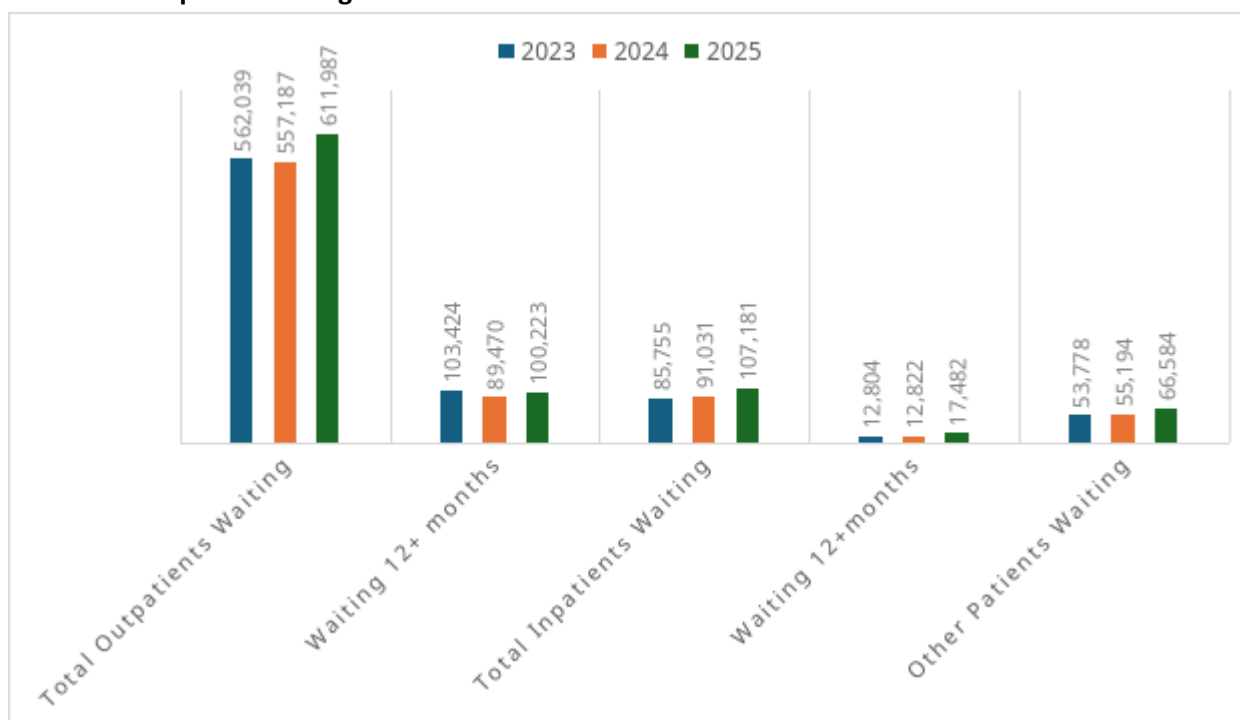
Health

Table 2.1: CAMHS waiting list data at the end of April 2025

Region	Total waiting to be seen	Waiting under 12 weeks	Over 12 weeks, under 26 weeks	Over 26 weeks, under 39 weeks	Over 39 weeks, under 52 weeks	Over 52 weeks
HSE West & North West	675	292	209	90	69	15
HSE Mid-West	167	65	39	34	19	10
HSE South West	1,103	230	182	126	163	402
Dublin & Midlands	964	462	196	95	93	118
Dublin & North East	1,040	284	216	187	139	214
Dublin & South East	605	356	153	71	21	4
National Total	4,554	1,689	995	603	504	763

Source: Dáil Question Paper, 10 June 2025, PQ 29105/25

Chart 2.1: People on waiting lists for treatment



Source: National Treatment Purchase Find, enhanced waiting list data

Health



Access to Mental Health Services

Ireland's mental health services have experienced chronic underfunding with less than 6 per cent of the health budget being allocated to mental health. This is far below the target of 10 per cent set by Sláintecare and the 12 per cent recommended by the World Health Organization. Mental health issues are more common among young people, with those aged 18-24 eight times more likely to experience a mental health disorder than people aged 55 and above ([Hyland et al, 2022](#)). Mental health issues often begin in adolescence and early adulthood, yet access to care for young people remains limited, with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) under severe pressure. As of April 2025, more than 4,500 children and adolescents were waiting for the first CAMHS appointments (Table 2.1). Moreover, the 2025 figure includes more than 760 waiting over a year. These delays in access affect young people at the very stage in life when mental health difficulties are most common as they transition into adulthood.

Wider wellbeing factors reflect the impact of these pressures. Finances, employment insecurity, education pressures and relationships are listed as key factors impacting young people's mental health. Additionally, one in three 15 year olds in Ireland record low life satisfaction which highlights the scale of young people's mental health challenges ([UNICEF, 2025](#)). The national mental health policy, [Sharing the Vision 2020-2030](#) commits to providing accessible, community based mental health services. The 2025-2027 implementation plan prioritises children, adolescents, and young adults, including improved transition supports between CAMHS and adult services. These policy objectives aim to prevent young people from losing access to mental health services during the transition into adulthood. The Government has increased funding for mental health services in recent budgets, planning to expand staffing and support. Despite these commitments long waiting lists and staff shortages limit access to timely care for young people when they need it most.

Youth mental health supports are essential for helping young people cope with challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Open conversations about mental health can reduce stigma and encourage young people to seek help when needed. Digital resources, helplines, and youth-friendly services make support more accessible. Strong support systems can improve resilience, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes.

Investing in youth mental health ensures healthier individuals, stronger communities, and a more positive future for society as a whole.

Healthcare Wait-Times

Long wait times across the entire health system has a major impact on young people. At the end of 2025 over 750,000 people were waiting for appointments or treatment, with thousands waiting for more than 18 months (Chart 2.1). 64 per cent of patients have been waiting longer than the Sláintecare targets of 10 weeks for outpatients and 12 weeks for inpatients. These delays directly affect many services relied on by young people, including mental health services, gynaecology and orthopaedics, delaying treatment at critical stages of development in life.

The Waiting List Action Plan has helped to reduce the number of patients waiting over 12 months by 58 per cent since 2021. The 2025 Waiting List Action Plan aimed to have at least 50 per cent of patients treated within the Sláintecare targets and to reduce the weighted average wait time to 5.5 months, with further reforms planned in the 2026 action plan. Although improvements have been made, long waiting lists continue to disproportionately impact on young people aged 15-29 with less ability to afford private care. Delays in accessing health care allows conditions to worsen which can disrupt advancements in education and early careers increasing the risk of a long-term health and economic disadvantage.

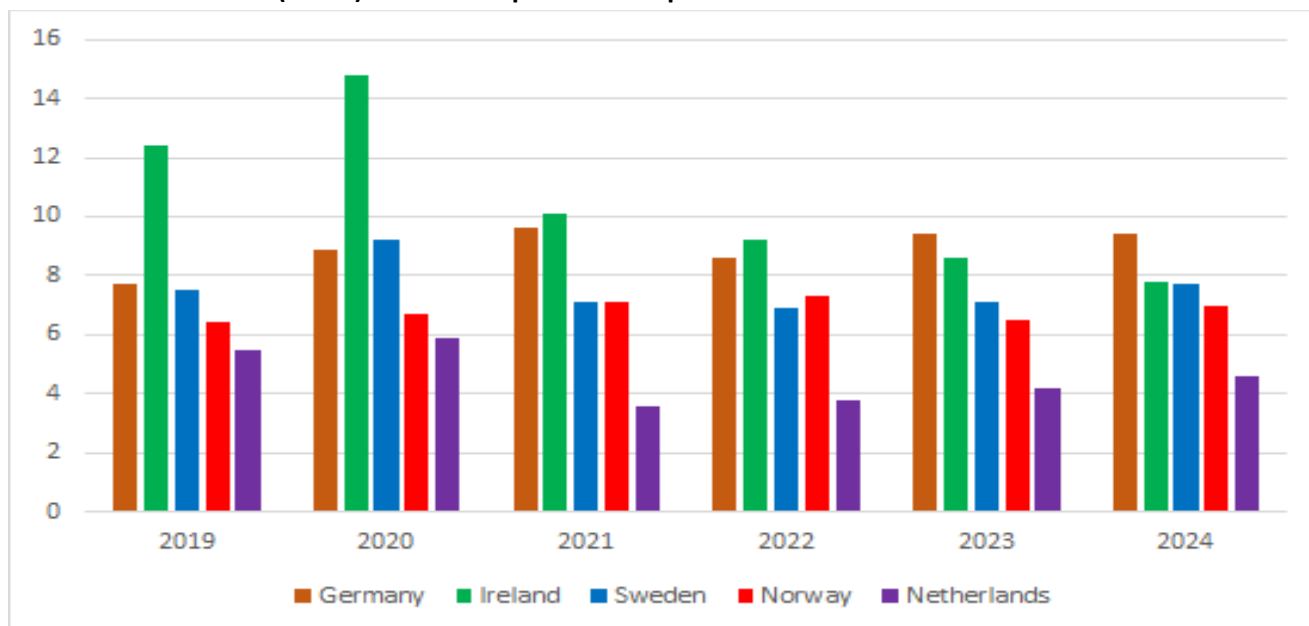
Healthcare waiting times are a major challenge affecting patient outcomes and satisfaction. Long delays can worsen conditions, increase stress, and strain healthcare systems. Addressing waiting times requires better resource allocation, increased staffing, and improved efficiency. Reducing delays ensures timely treatment, enhances patient care, and strengthens trust in healthcare services for everyone.

Policy Priorities

- Increase mental health funding to at least 10 per cent of the health budget, in line with Sláintecare.
- Introduce priority treatment pathways for young people to prevent disruptions during the transition to adulthood.

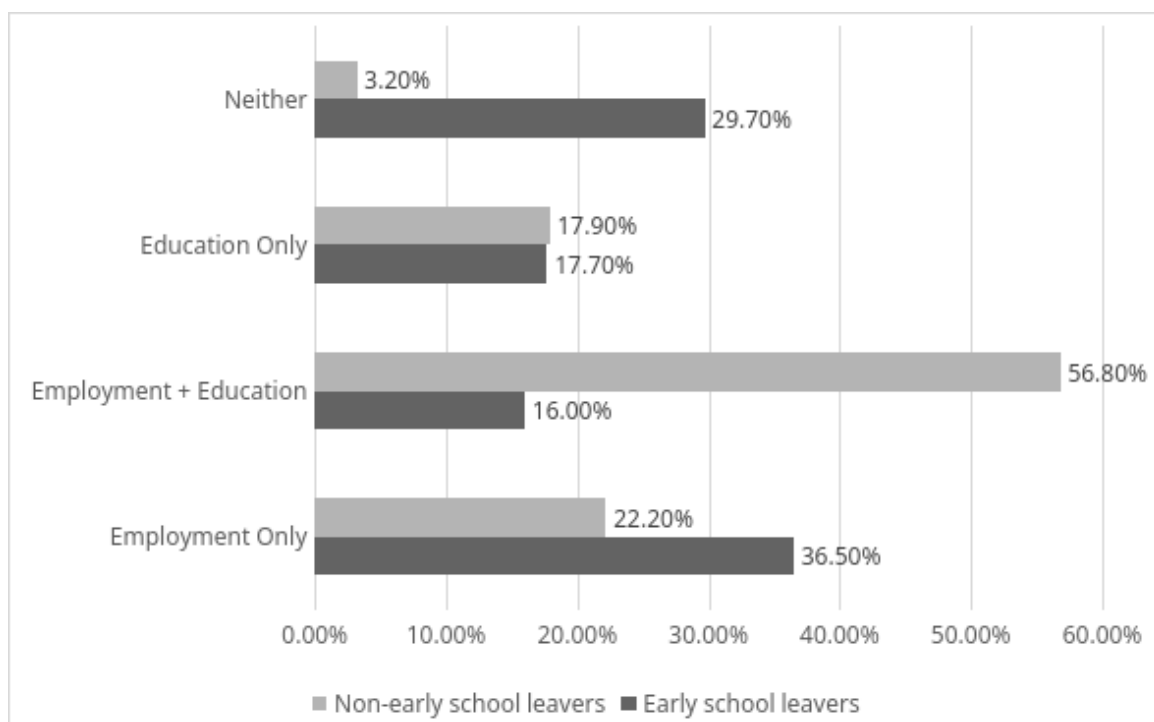
Education

Chart 3.1: NEET Rates (18-24) Across Comparable European Countries 2019-2024



Source: CSO, Table MIP03

Chart 3.2: Percentage of Employment and Education Outcomes of Early and Non-Early School Leavers (2023)



Source: CSO, Table EAACC24

Note: Percentages exclude unspecified answers

Education



Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)

Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) refers to young people who are not in work, education, or taking part in any form of training. This measure is used to assess the extent to which young people may be disconnected from both the education system and the labour market. Unlike the employment rate, the NEET indicator captures young people who are not participating in either the labour market or education systems. As such, it provides a broader understanding of youth disengagement, particularly during key transition periods.

NEETs also face significant social and economic challenges. They are at higher risk of poverty, exclusion, and poor mental health ([ESRI, 2023](#)).

Although Ireland's NEET rate is among the lowest in the European Union, 7.8 per cent of young people aged 18–24 were classified as NEET in 2024. There is still room for improvement to ensure that fewer young people remain disengaged from education or employment pathways. Chart 3.1 shows that Ireland performs strongly compared to major European peers like Germany (9.4 per cent) and is on par with Sweden. However, countries like Norway (7 per cent) and the Netherlands (4.6 per cent) demonstrate that further reductions are achievable.

While Ireland performs well overall, national averages do not show differences across socio-economic groups, as research indicates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, and early school leavers face a higher risk of NEET status ([ESRI, 2023](#)).

Although the overall rate is low, it represents a significant number of young people at risk of long-term disadvantage. Even at relatively low levels, NEET remains an issue, particularly in the period of transition from school to further education or employment. Keeping young people engaged in education, employment, and training helps build lifelong skills and reduces the risk of future labour market exclusion.

Targeted support, including skills training, education access, and career guidance, is essential to help NEETs re-engage and build sustainable futures.

Early School Leavers

Early school leavers are persons aged between 18 and 24 whose highest level of educational attainment is lower secondary or below and are currently not in

education. Ireland had the second lowest early school leaving rate in the European Union in 2024 at 2.8 per cent, compared to the EU average of 9.4 per cent. This downward trend of early school leavers is a welcome development ([European Commission, 2025](#)).

Chart 3.2 illustrates the significant difference in outcomes between early school leavers and those who completed their education. In 2023, 29.7 per cent of early school leavers were in neither employment nor education, compared to just 3.2 per cent of non-early school leavers, meaning early school leavers were nearly ten times more likely to be disengaged from both education and employment.

96.9 per cent of those who completed their education were in employment and/or continuing education, whereas this was only true for 70.2 per cent of early school leavers, a difference of 36.7 percentage points. These figures suggest that preventing early school leaving is central to reducing NEET rates.

Supporting young people to complete their secondary education is vital for their future opportunities. Providing academic support, mentoring, and inclusive learning environments can improve retention. Addressing barriers such as poverty, poor mental health, and family challenges helps students stay engaged.

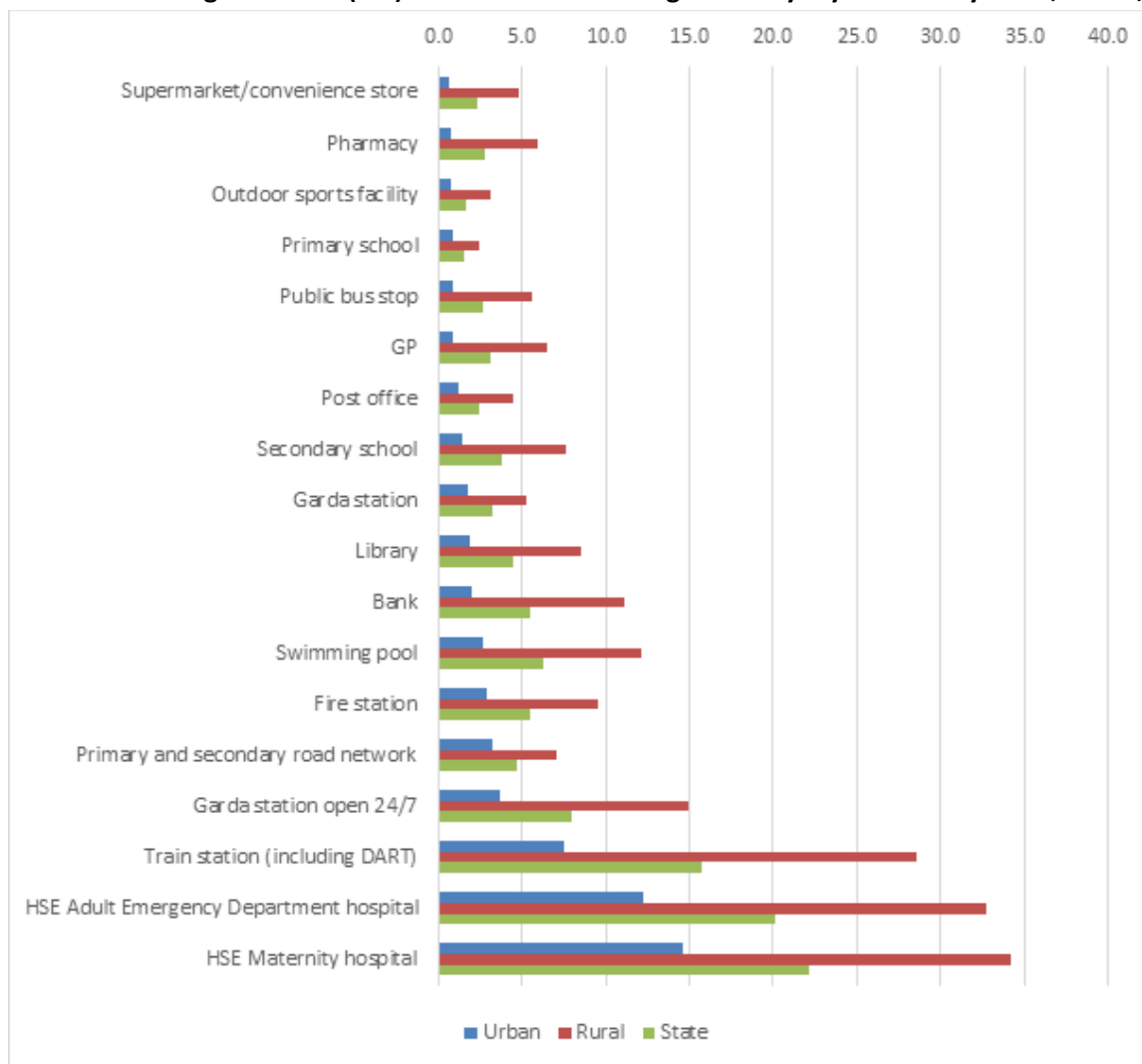
Strong school-community partnerships also play a key role in ensuring every young person has the opportunity to succeed. Also, by supporting young people to complete their education, policymakers can strengthen transition outcomes and reduce the risk of future labour market exclusion.

Policy Priorities

- Prioritise investment in policies that prevent early educational disengagement, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to reduce long-term risks of NEET status.
- Strengthen education-to-work transition pathways to ensure young people are supported during transitional periods, reducing the risk of NEET status.

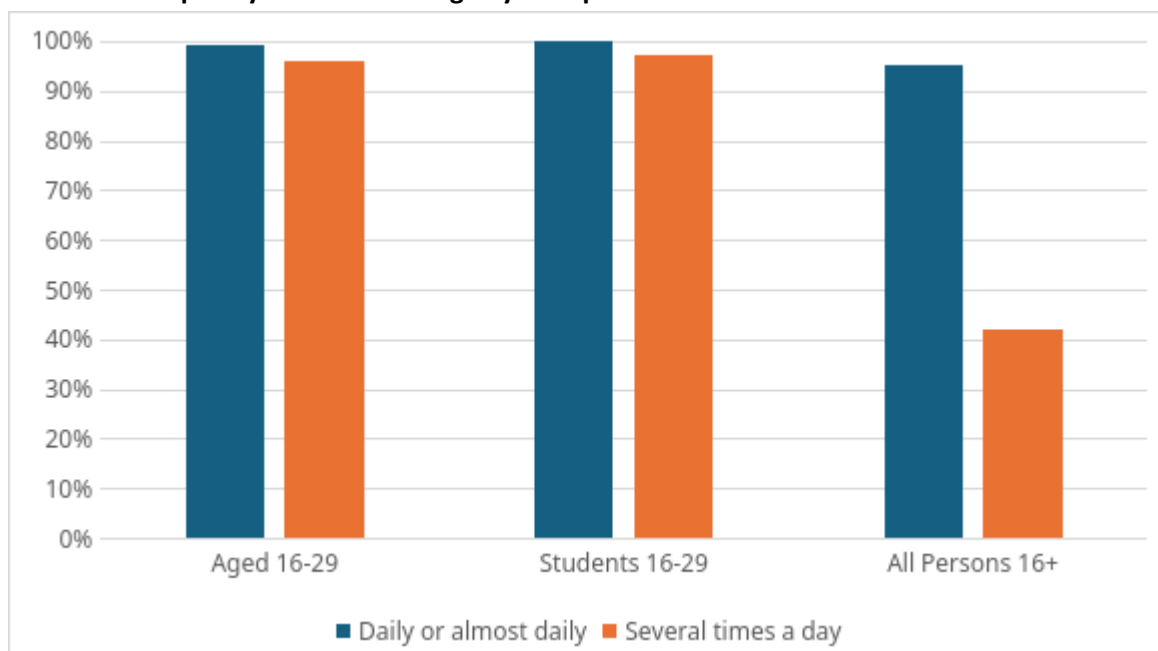
Rural Development

Chart 4.1: Average distance (km) of residential dwellings to everyday services by State, urban, and rural areas.



Source: CSO Statbank 2019

Chart 4.2: Frequency of Internet Usage by Group



Source: CSO (2025 Internet Coverage)

Rural Development



Transport

Rural areas in Ireland face the challenge of an absence of an accessible, reliable, and integrated public transport system. Long-term underinvestment in public transport infrastructure continues to disadvantage young people living in rural areas. In the absence of adequate public transport, people living in rural areas depend on car access to avail of public services, education, employment, healthcare, and recreational activities. This reliance can be particularly challenging for young people between the ages of 15-29, who are far less likely to have the financial resources to own and maintain a car.

Many young people already drive less frequently due to costs such as insurance, fuel, and other expenses ([Bank of Ireland, 2025](#)). As a result, a lack of integrated public transport options restricts young people from being able to participate fully in work, education, and community life, unless they have access to a private vehicle, further reinforcing rural inequalities.

As shown in Chart 4.1, rural households are on average several kilometres away from basic services such as bus stops, compared with just a few hundred metres in urban areas. This highlights the scale of the accessibility gap and explains the reliance on cars in rural communities.

Ireland's current rural public development frameworks targeting transport are '[Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025](#)' and '[Connecting Ireland Rural Mobility Plan](#)'. Both have committed to increase rural connectivity and connectivity between towns and villages in rural Ireland. Since 2022, 180 routes have been introduced or improved, Local Link usage has increased, and a new on-demand service is being trialled ([NTA, 2025](#)).

While these improvements have expanded rural bus services, limited frequency, poor integration, and long distances to bus stops mean that these improvements are not yet sufficient for young people to rely on for daily life. Chart 4.1 shows that bus stops are on average 5.6 km from rural households. With limited access to footpaths or safe cycling routes many young people are unable to access these new services at all.

Last mile transport options connect people from transit hubs to their final destinations. These include walking, cycling, e-scooters, ride-sharing, and local buses. Efficient last mile solutions reduce congestion, lower emissions, and improve accessibility. Investing in flexible, affordable, and sustainable options enhances

urban mobility and supports more connected, liveable communities.

Broadband

The lack of quality broadband is a considerable barrier to the sustainable development of rural Ireland. Fast reliable broadband is essential for educational, economic, and social functions.

While high speed internet is essential for all ages, young people have grown up in a digital environment and are particularly reliant on online connectivity for education, work and social participation. Almost all people aged 16-29 used the internet several times a day, compared with 42 per cent of all adults (Chart 4.2). For young people, digital connectivity has become a basic infrastructure need with the increase in remote learning, remote work, and the use of the internet for community engagement and social inclusion.

The National Broadband Plan has seen immense success in providing over 400,000 rural premises access to broadband, with plans to deliver broadband access to all premises in the intervention area by the end of 2026 ([NBI, 2025](#)). Although rural areas are being provided with broadband coverage, inequalities remain. While some urban areas in Dublin receive average broadband speeds of 200 Mbps, many rural areas still receive a maximum speed of 60 Mbps or less, which creates a persistent digital disadvantage. Rural households still experience slower speeds, higher costs, and poorer service quality.

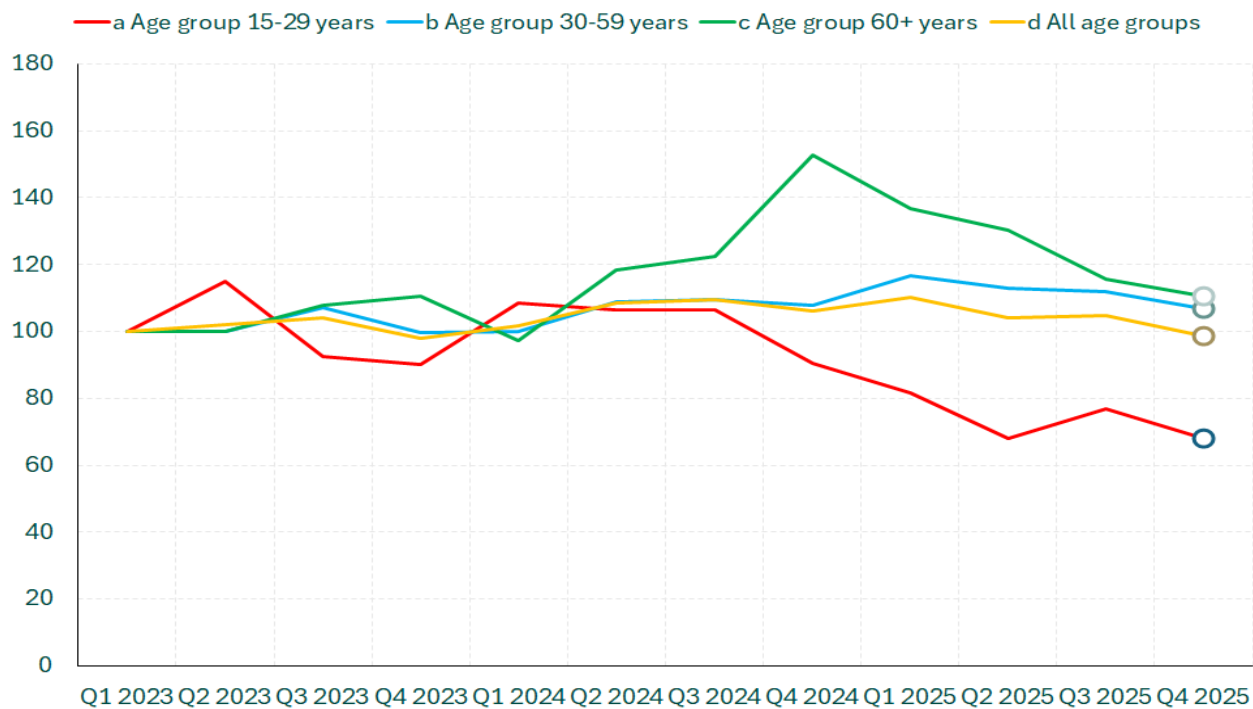
These gaps continue to limit young people's abilities to participate fully in education, remote work and online services, reinforcing inequalities and driving young people away from rural areas in favour of urban areas. Whilst the progress made recently is welcome, the Government must address the issue of universal quality broadband provision in a sustainable way which is not dependent on multinational corporations.

Policy Priorities

- Invest in safe walking and cycling infrastructure to connect rural households to transport hubs.
- Deliver broadband as a public utility to ensure equal, affordable, and reliable access for all communities.

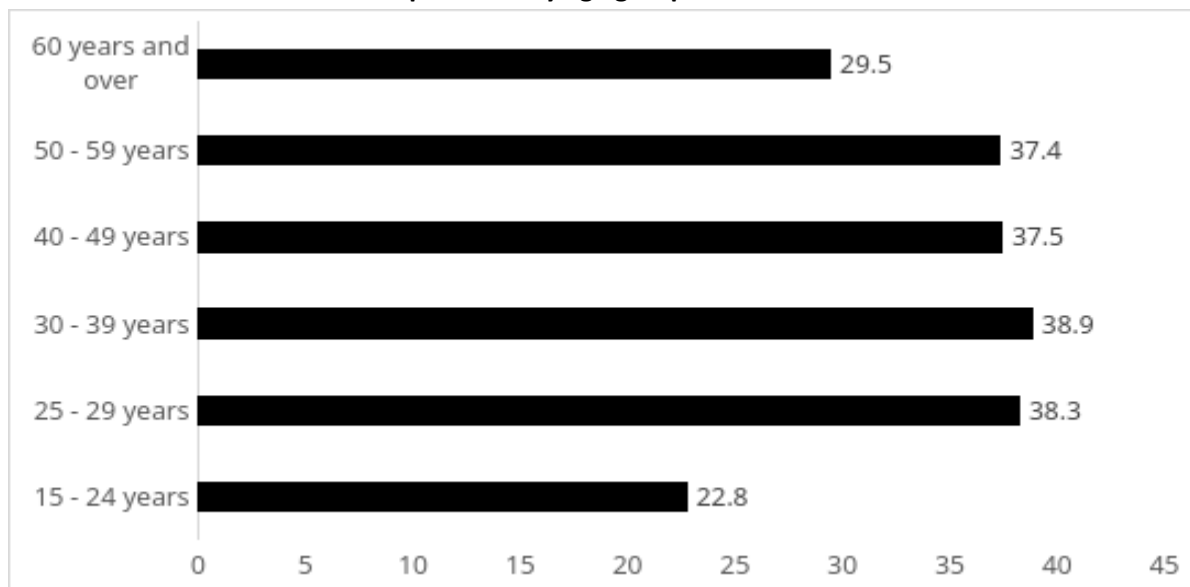
Work

Chart 5.1: Employment in ICT sector by age (Q1 2023=100)



Source: Department of Finance, Apr 2026 Chartpack. Table 10b.

Chart 5.2: Median hours worked per week by age group



Source: CSO, Table SES07.

Work



AI and Young Workers

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing the world of work and will continue to do so over the medium to long term. AI tools impact productivity, employment levels, and the types of skills in demand.

Ireland's workforce is more exposed to AI than the average advanced economy, with an estimated 63 per cent of jobs likely affected ([Department of Finance, 2024](#)). Of these, roughly half are likely to benefit from AI as a complement to work, while the other half may face substitution risks. This high level of exposure suggests that Ireland could be one of the first advanced economies to experience and detect measurable early effects of AI on its labour market.

Recent evidence indicates that younger workers in Ireland are facing more significant labour market changes in sectors with high exposure to AI. From 2023 to 2025, employment among those aged 15–29 fell in “AI exposed” sectors, even as overall employment in these sectors continued to grow. The most notable decline was in ICT, where youth employment dropped by over 30 per cent, while employment among 30 to 59 year old workers rose (Chart 5.1).

By contrast, in sectors with lower AI exposure, younger workers experienced stronger employment growth than older groups, suggesting this is not part of a broader downturn in youth employment. While these patterns cannot be attributed solely to AI adoption, they are consistent with international findings that AI is having the greatest impact on entry-level positions in highly digitalised sectors.

Temporary and Precarious work

While youth unemployment rates have declined throughout the years, young workers remain disproportionately concentrated in temporary, part-time and insecure forms of employment.

Across the labour market, around 1 in 5 workers are part-time workers, and there are over 121,000 of these who are underemployed, which is working part-time but at less hours than they would like to work ([CSO, 2026](#)). Young workers are more likely to be on temporary contracts or doing seasonal work outlining instability even when employed ([ESRI, 2021](#)).

A substantial proportion of young people are employed part-time not by choice, but due to a lack of full-time employment availability. Young people are over-represented in certain sectors such as retail and hospitality, these sectors usually have unstable

working hours, higher levels of part-time employment, are vulnerable to downturns and generally lack progression pathways. Also note that there is a higher rate of part-time employment in general across rural Ireland.

Chart 5.2 shows the median hours worked per age group in 2022. Those aged 15-24 worked nearly seven hours less than those nearing retirement and over 16 hours less than those aged between 30-39. While part-time work may reflect educational participation for some, consistently lower average hours compared to older age groups suggests structural constraints for young workers seeking full time employment ([CSO, 2022](#)).

Precarious employment limits financial stability and delays independent living for young people. Temporary contracts and unpredictable hours restrict opportunities for career progression and, as a result, being employed does not guarantee security or a substantial income for young workers particularly in the absence of a [Living Wage](#). Earnings below the living wage suggest employees are forced to do without certain essentials so they can make ends meet.

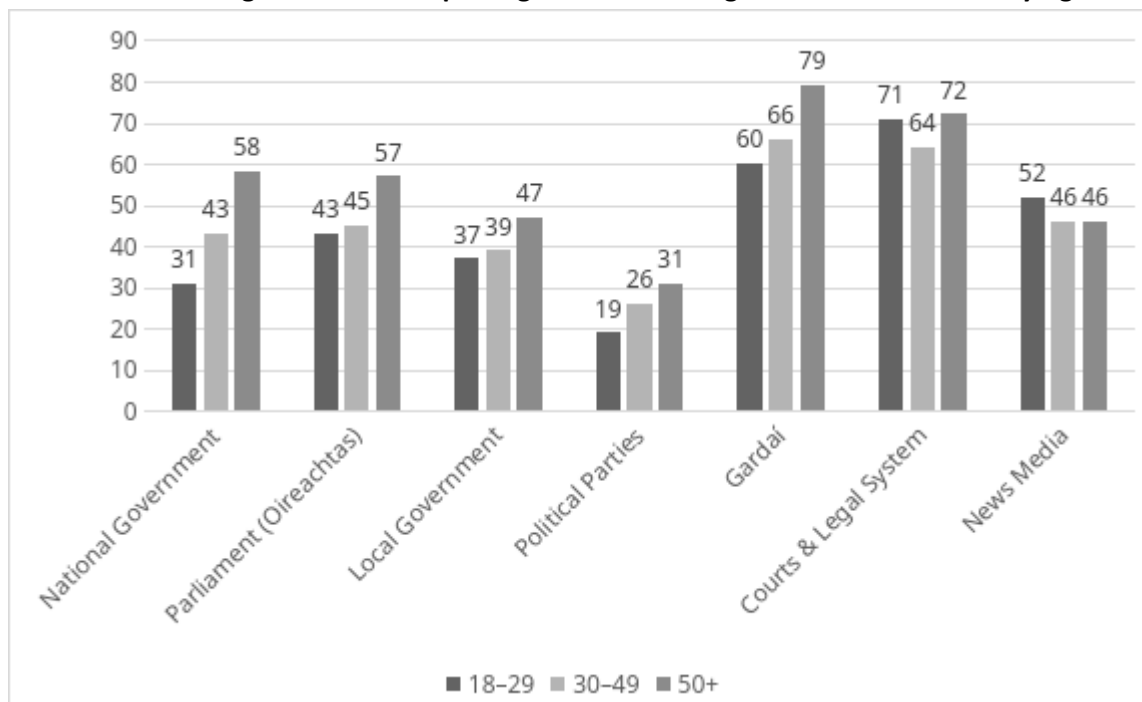
Addressing the issues surrounding precarious youth employment involves stronger regulations on temporary contracts, improved enforcement of predictable working hours and the expansion of stable career pathways and progression pathways for young workers.

Policy Priorities

- Focus on education and literacy initiatives as well as retraining schemes.
- Recognise the challenges of precarious employment for young people.
- Support the widespread adoption of the Living Wage so that low paid workers receive an adequate income and can afford a minimum, but decent, standard of living.

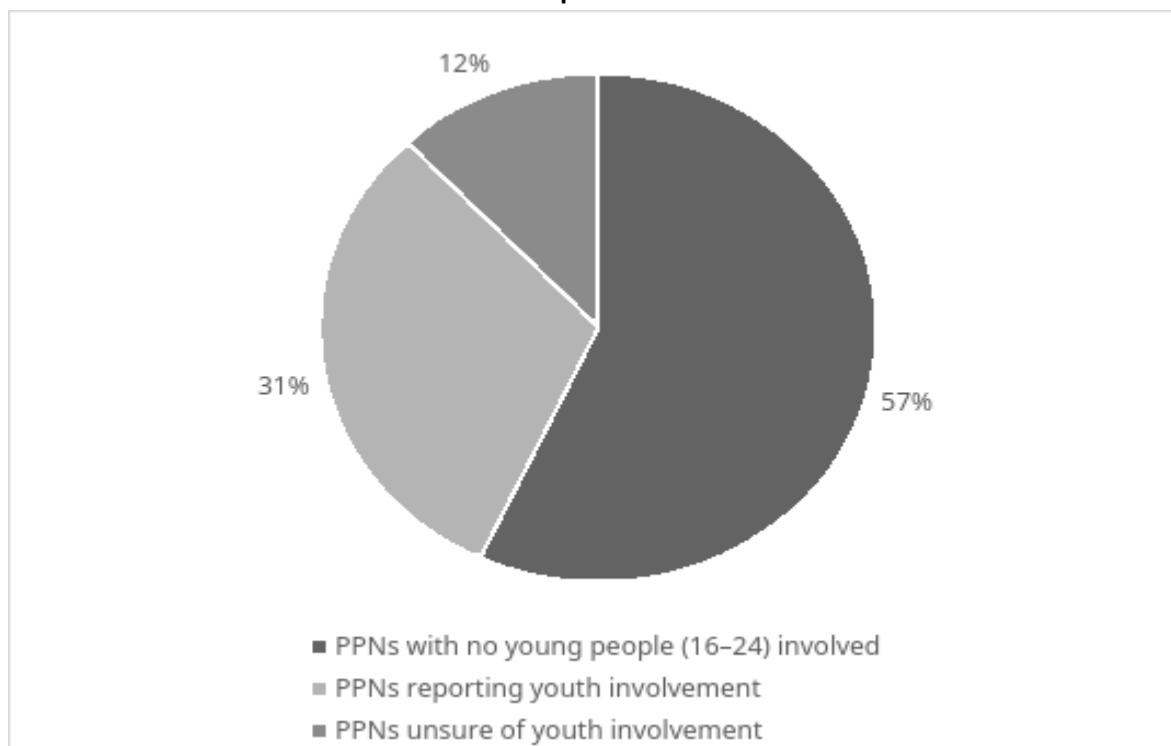
Governance and Participation

Chart 6.1: Percentage of Persons Reporting Moderate to High Trust in Institutions by Age Group, 2023



Source: CSO, CSO, Table TRA103

Chart 6.2: Youth Involvement in Public Participation Networks



Source: Research on the Barriers to Involvement in Public Participation Networks (PPN), Commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development

Governance and Participation



Trust in Institutions

Trust in public institutions is central to the functioning of a healthy democracy. It shapes civic engagement and democratic legitimacy. Data from a 2023 CSO survey shows generational differences in institutional trust.

Among young people aged 18-29, only 31 per cent reported moderate to high levels of trust (6-10 on a 0-10 scale) in the national government. Only 19 per cent expressed moderate to high levels of trust in political parties. Trust in the Oireachtas was higher at 43 per cent but still significantly lower than the 57 per cent reported by those aged 50 and above (Chart 6.1).

Trust among young people is not uniform for all institutions. Moderate to high confidence in the courts and judicial system was at 70 per cent and for the Gardai at 61 per cent which is comparatively strong. Trust in the news media stands at 52 per cent, over 20 per cent more than the trust in Government, suggesting that scepticism among young generations is directed primarily towards representative institutions rather than the broader constitutional or legal framework of the State.

Lower trust in political institutions may reflect concerns regarding responsiveness, accountability, and the political voice of young people. Younger generations have come of age during periods marked by economic crisis, housing instability, and rapid changes in digital information environments, which may shape attitudes towards governance. In times characterised by widespread misinformation and excessive social media consumption, institutional credibility can be more fragile, particularly among digitally engaged populations.

International evidence supports the importance of engagement in building institutional trust. The OECD highlights that improving government effectiveness, expanding citizen participation, and enhancing access to public services are key drivers of public trust in democratic institutions ([OECD, 2025](#)). Sustaining trust among younger generations depends not only on institutional performance, but of perceived inclusion and influence.

Youth Involvement in Public Participation Networks (PPNs)

PPNs were established to institutionalise public engagement in local government decision making. The PPNs recognises the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social, environmental capital. However, recent national research suggests young people remain disengaged from many PPNs.

A 2025 study commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development found that 57 per cent of surveyed PPN members reported no young people aged 16-24 taking part in their local PPN, while only 31 per cent confirmed the involvement of young people. This survey sample was on a proportion of overall PPN membership, but the findings indicate a lack of youth involvement and under-representation in PPNs (Chart 6.2).

This gap in participation is significant when discussed alongside low levels of trust in political institutions among the younger age group. If young people are less likely to trust political institutions and are under-represented within participation networks, a disconnect between governance and younger generations may emerge.

For young people balancing education, employment, and social commitments, sustained participation in PPNs may face everyday constraints. Strengthening youth inclusion in PPNs is important to ensure no cohort is under-represented from taking part in local government networks.

Policy Priorities

- Adequately resource PPNs to develop structured pathways for youth inclusion and participation.
- Strengthen transparency and feedback mechanisms within representative institutions so citizens can clearly see how their input influences policy decisions.
- Resource an initiative to identify how a real participative civil society debate could be developed and maintained.

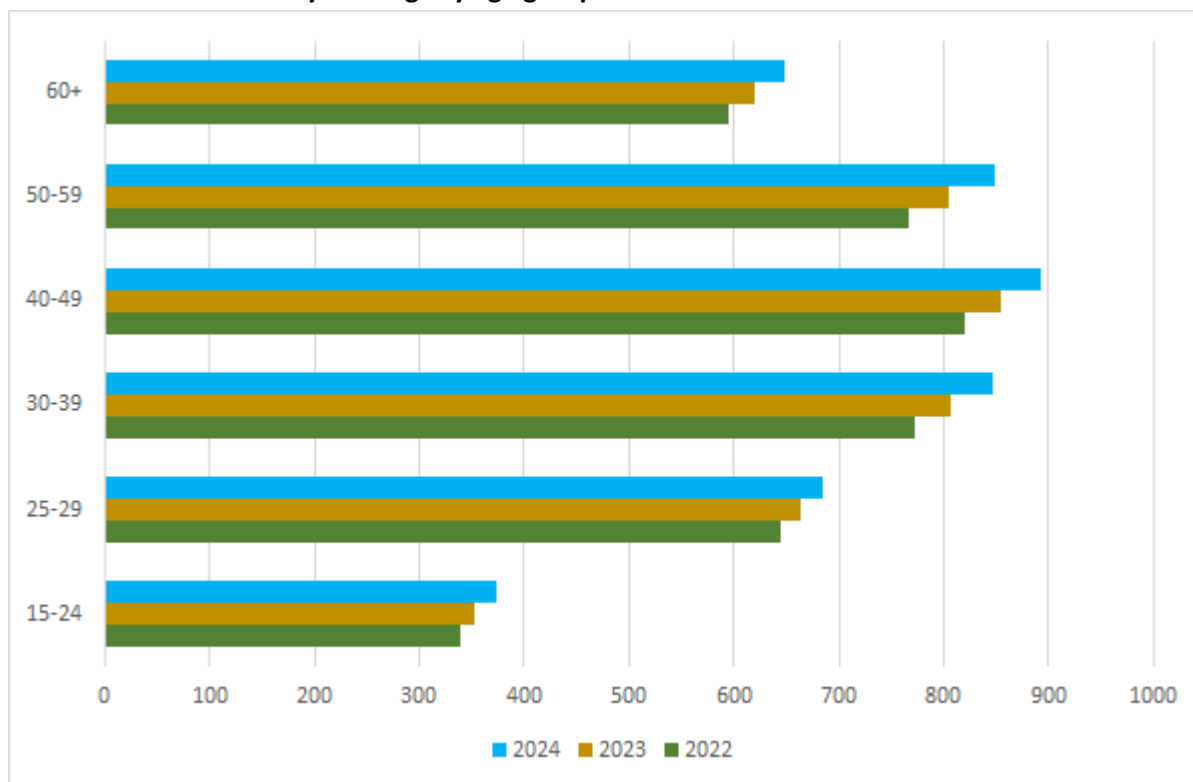
Income Distribution

Table 7.1: Jobseeker’s Allowance weekly rates by age group

Jobseeker’s Allowance	Maximum Weekly Rate, €	
	2025	2026
Aged 25 and over	244.00	254.00
Under 25	153.70	163.70
Increase for a Qualified Adult (25 and over)	162.00	168.60
Increase for a Qualified Adult (under 25)	153.70	163.70

Source: Dept. of Social Protection, SW19

Chart 7.1: Median weekly earnings by age group



Source: CSO, Earnings Analysis, 2024

Income Distribution



Social Welfare

Income inequality continues to disproportionately affect young people aged 15-29. Despite facing the same living costs as older adults, young people under 25 experience lower levels of support through Ireland's social welfare system. Reduced Jobseeker's rates mean that young people are expected to live on significantly less, even though food, transport and other costs do not vary by age. This creates a structural gap at the age where young people are attempting to transition into independent living, education or employment.

Lower social welfare payments increase financial insecurity and limit access to housing, healthcare, and professional training; reinforcing wider social or economic inequalities for young people. Table 7.1 shows that although all Jobseeker's payments increased by €10 in Budget 2026, young people under 25 continue to receive a substantially lower weekly rate than those aged 25 and above. This demonstrates that recent increases in social welfare funding fails to address the underlying inequality in age-based welfare rates. Access to the full rate is conditional for many aged under 25, it creates additional barriers for young people who are unemployed but also not in education or training. Also, although there is a difference in the jobseeker's rate for under-25s, nonetheless those aged under 25 in employment continue to pay the same rate of PRSI as their older counterparts.

Although Budget 2026 increased social welfare payments for all age groups, there are no current government commitments to equalise these rates. The reduced rate of social welfare payments for under 25s is inadequate to meet basic needs and is insufficient to support young people through a transitional period of life. The rate should be increased to the same rate as adults aged 25 and over to better reflect living costs.

Minimum Wage

Alongside inequalities in social welfare, Ireland operates an age-based minimum wage system, younger workers can be legally paid less than older colleagues for the exact same work. Workers under the age of 18 receive only 70 per cent of the adult minimum wage, rising to 80 per cent at age 18 and 90 per cent at age 19 ([DETE, 2025](#)). As a result, those aged under 18 receive over €4 less per hour than those aged

20 and above amounting to more than €160 less over a 38 hour work week.

Chart 7.1 shows that in 2024, workers aged 15-24 had the lowest median weekly earnings of all age groups followed by the 25-29 age group. The 15-24 age group's median earnings were just over half of those of the 25-29 age group. This indicates that young people make up the majority of low paid workers.

Even at the full adult rate, which was increased to €14.15 in Budget 2026, the National Minimum Wage remains below the Living Wage of €15.40, which is calculated through MESL (Minimum Essential Standard of Living) research. The Living Wage is minimum sum required to provide the minimum acceptable standard of living. Our current national minimum wage would suggest that workers are forced to do without certain essentials to make ends meet. For young people receiving sub-minimum wages the gap between earnings and living costs is even wider.

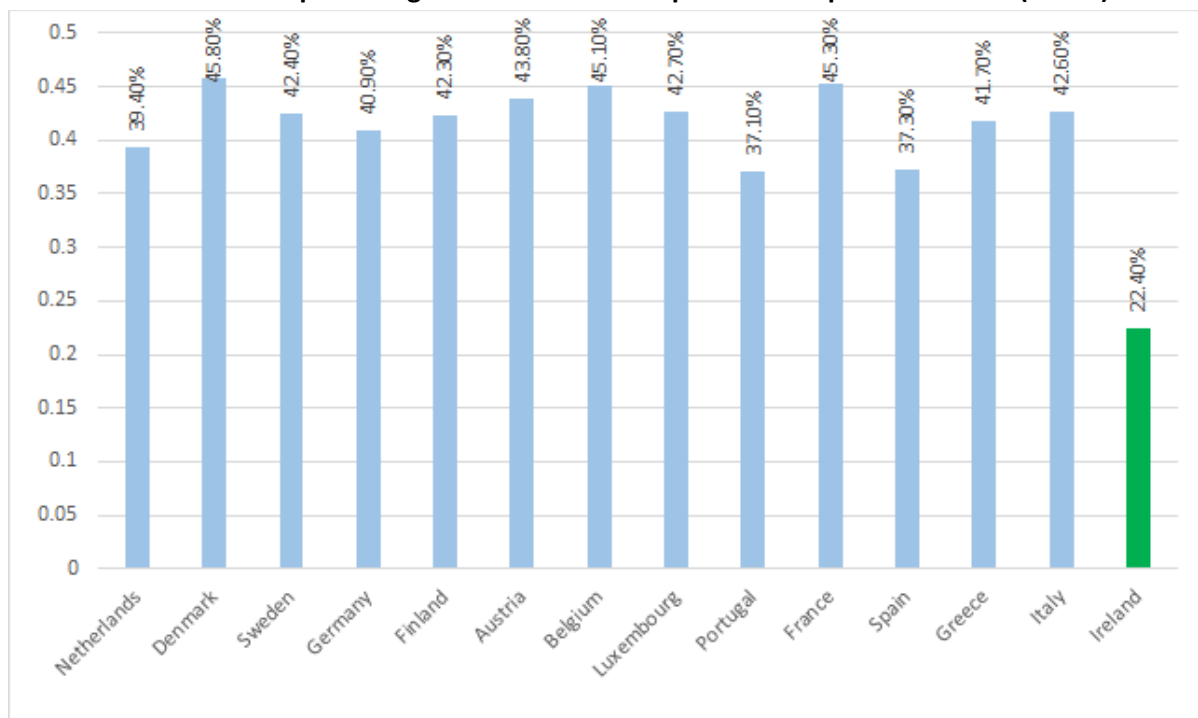
Recent ESRI research finds that increases in the minimum wage in Ireland have not led to job losses among low-paid workers, challenging a key concern in minimum wage policy debates ([Redmond, Kelly, & Creaton, 2026](#)). This evidence strengthens the case for improving pay standards. However, beyond pay, policy must also address issues of job quality, security, and worker protections in an increasingly fragmented labour market.

Policy Priorities

- Equalise Jobseeker's allowance so that those under 25 receive the same rate as those aged 25 and over.
- Phase out sub-minimum wage rates for those aged under 20 to ensure equal pay for equal work.
- Align the national minimum wage with the Living Wage to ensure full time work provides a basic standard of living.

Taxation

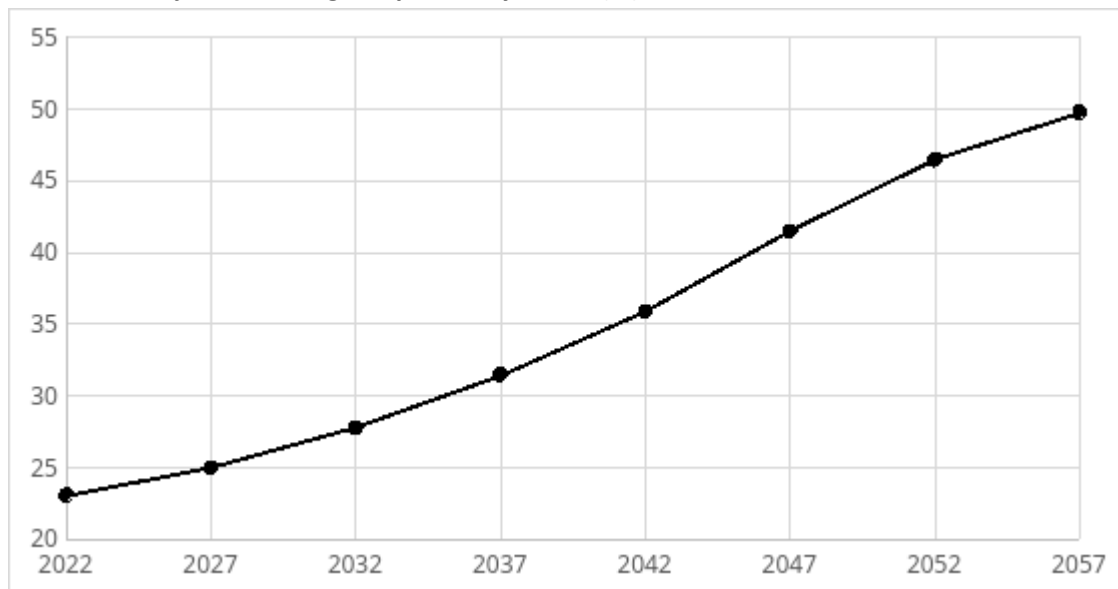
Chart 8.1: Tax-take as a percentage of GDP across Comparable European Countries (EU-14) *



Source: Eurostat, Table gov_10a_taxag & CSO Annual National Accounts 2024

Notes: *GNP and GNDI % calculated using data from Annual National Accounts and Eurostat Main national accounts tax aggregates. EU-14: We pick these countries because they are in the Eurozone and because they have adjusted to the European Union standards. We believe this comparison provides a useful benchmark that shows what similar countries have achieved.

Chart 8.2: Projected Old-Age Dependency Ratio¹ (%)



Source: CSO, Table PEC22 Central Scenario (M2)

¹The ratio is calculated by expressing the population aged 65 years and over as a percentage of the population aged 15-64 years

Taxation



Increasing the Overall Tax Take

The provision of public services, including healthcare, education and social protection, depends on the adequacy of the State's revenue base. As demographic pressures increase, ensuring a sustainable level of tax revenue is essential for maintaining and improving services. Decisions surrounding the scale and structure of taxation therefore have long-term implications for younger generations.

Younger cohorts will both contribute to and rely upon future public services. An insufficient revenue base may result in reduced service provision or increased fiscal pressure in later decades.

Chart 8.1 illustrates that Ireland's tax take as a percentage of GDP (22.4 per cent) is significantly lower than the comparable EU-14 average. Even when accounting for the distortion of Irish GDP figures due to multinational activity, the gap is substantial. When alternative income measures such as GNP (29.9 per cent) and GNDI (30.2 per cent) are used, Ireland's tax ratio increases considerably.

However, even these adjusted measures remain far below that of the other EU-14 countries. Ireland's old-age dependency ratio is set to rise significantly in the coming decades. An ageing population will place increased demands on healthcare, pensions and social protection expenditure. Ensuring the adequacy and sustainability of the State's tax revenue is essential to prepare for these demographic changes. Decisions regarding the structure and scale of our taxation system therefore carry long-term implications for future service provision.

Future pension provision

Pension provision is a central component of long-term social protection policy. Although retirement may seem distant for those aged 15-29, as previously discussed, today's young people will spend the majority of their lives contributing to a system under increasing demographic pressure. Ireland's current State Pension system operates largely on a pay-as-you-go basis. Current workers fund current retirees through taxation and social insurance contributions ([Pensions Commission, 2021](#)).

As shown in Chart 8.2, the projected old-age dependency ratio under the CSO's central (M2) scenario is expected to increase from the 23.1 per cent recorded in 2022 to 49.8 per cent in 2057. This

prediction means that the number of people aged 65 and over relative to the working-age population will more than double, leaving fewer working-age individuals supporting retirees. While those currently aged 15-29 will not yet be retired in 2057, this ageing demography will shape the fiscal environment in which they will contribute throughout their working lives. Younger workers may be subject to higher contribution requirements during their working lives whilst also facing uncertainty regarding future pension benefits.

In response to the demographic pressures, the Government introduced an automatic enrolment pension scheme at the beginning of 2026 for employees aged 23 and above who meet the eligibility criteria. This reform aims to increase pension coverage among young workers and to reduce future dependency on the State Pension system alone. However, these pension contributions will reduce disposable income in the short term.

In the context of the current cost of living crisis, it is essential to balance long-term pension sustainability with income adequacy today, and to do so in such a way that younger generations are not disproportionately impacted in the future.

Policy Priorities

- Set a new tax-take target on a per capita basis and gradually increase the total tax-take to reach this target.
- Ensure Ireland maintains a sustainable revenue base capable of funding long-term public services.
- Develop a long-term strategy to ensure sustainable pension provision for current and future generations.

Environment and Sustainability

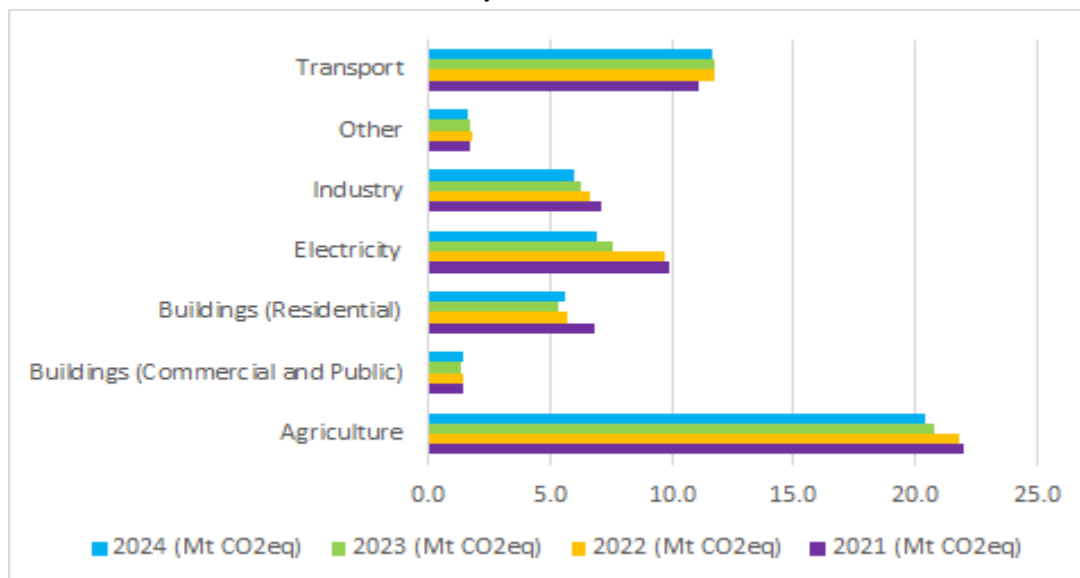
Table 9.1: The Environment SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) Index – Ranking by Country EU-14

Country	Index Score	Country Rank
Germany	0.5826	1
Austria	0.5759	2
Sweden	0.5715	3
Netherlands	0.5715	4
Denmark	0.5648	5
Greece	0.5106	6
Luxembourg	0.4990	7
Finland	0.4943	8
France	0.4900	9
Spain	0.4748	10
Belgium	0.4475	11
Italy	0.4211	12
Ireland	0.4140	13
Portugal	0.4083	14

Source: Social Justice Ireland, Sustainable Progress Index 2026

Note: EU-14: We pick these countries because they are in the Eurozone and because they have adjusted to the European Union standards.

Chart 9.1: Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sector 2021-2024



Source: EPA, Greenhouse Gas Emissions Indicator Report

Environment and Sustainability



Climate Action Goals

Ireland's progress towards environmental sustainability remains uneven. As shown in Table 9.1, Ireland's performance across the environmental dimensions ranks below nearly all comparable EU-14 countries, indicating that progress on climate action, clean energy transition, and sustainable consumption remains insufficient relative to our peers.

Under the [Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act](#), Ireland is legally committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 51 per cent by 2030 and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. However recent data from the Environmental Protection Agency indicates that Ireland is currently 'not on track' to meet its 2030 target without additional policy measures ([EPA, 2025](#)). While renewable energy generation has improved, overall emissions reductions remain insufficient to meet 2030 targets. National indicators published by the CSO also show uneven progress across energy transition and responsible consumption and production metrics ([CSO, 2026](#)).

For young people aged 15-29, this underperformance carries long-term implications. Climate change mitigation policies adopted today will shape environmental conditions, labour market structures and public expenditure priorities over the course of their lives. Delayed progress in reaching our climate goals increases the likelihood of rushed policy adjustments in the future, potentially resulting in increased economic disruption and higher fiscal costs.

Sustained, efficient and effective implementation of climate action measures is not solely an environmental objective, but a matter of long term sustainability.

A Just Transition

A Just Transition is the process of moving towards a low carbon economy in a way that is fair, inclusive and socially balanced. It recognises that decarbonisation is not solely an environmental objective, but an objective that will lead to a broad economic transformation that will affect employment, regional economies and household costs. Analysis from the OECD highlights that the transition to a climate neutral society will reshape the labour market and requires additional support and preparation to prevent increasing regional inequality ([OECD, 2025](#)).

A Just Transition therefore seeks to ensure that climate policies are implemented alongside supports for those affected by a green transition, ensuring that no cohort

of people are disproportionately burdened by the transition.

As shown in Chart 9.1, agriculture and transport accounted for the largest share of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions between 2021 and 2024. The concentration of emissions in these sectors highlights where the most significant structural changes will be required in order to reach our climate targets. Such structural transformations have economic and social implications.

Ireland is committed to a 51 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (from 2018 levels) by 2030, and to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. However, the EPA forecasts that Ireland's Climate Action Plan will deliver 29 per cent emission reductions by 2030, well-below the national target of 51 per cent ([EPA, 2024](#)). If this gap-to-target is not addressed in the coming years, it will require considerably greater effort in the 2030s and 2040s to reach net-zero. Ireland will need to accelerate the energy transition in order to achieve these targets, requiring publicly funded investments.

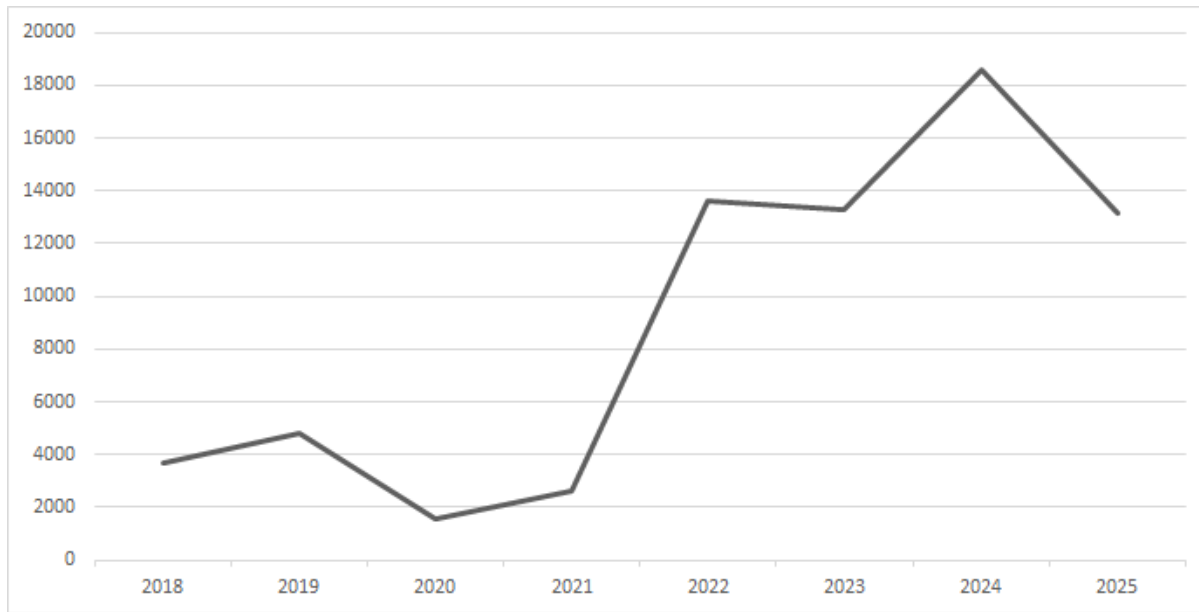
Sectors with high emissions are often regionally concentrated and employment-dependent, meaning climate action policies may affect certain communities or regions more than others. For young people, especially those concentrated in agricultural regions, this transition to climate neutrality will shape career pathways, employment opportunities and future skills requirements. To deliver a Just Transition to a green economy we must ensure we provide education and training that align with climate action objectives.

Policy Priorities

- Retraining and support for those communities who will be most impacted by the loss of employment related to the move away from fossil fuels.
- Increased investment in renewable energy schemes to ensure climate targets are met.
- Adopt targets and a reporting system for each of the Sustainable Development Goals.

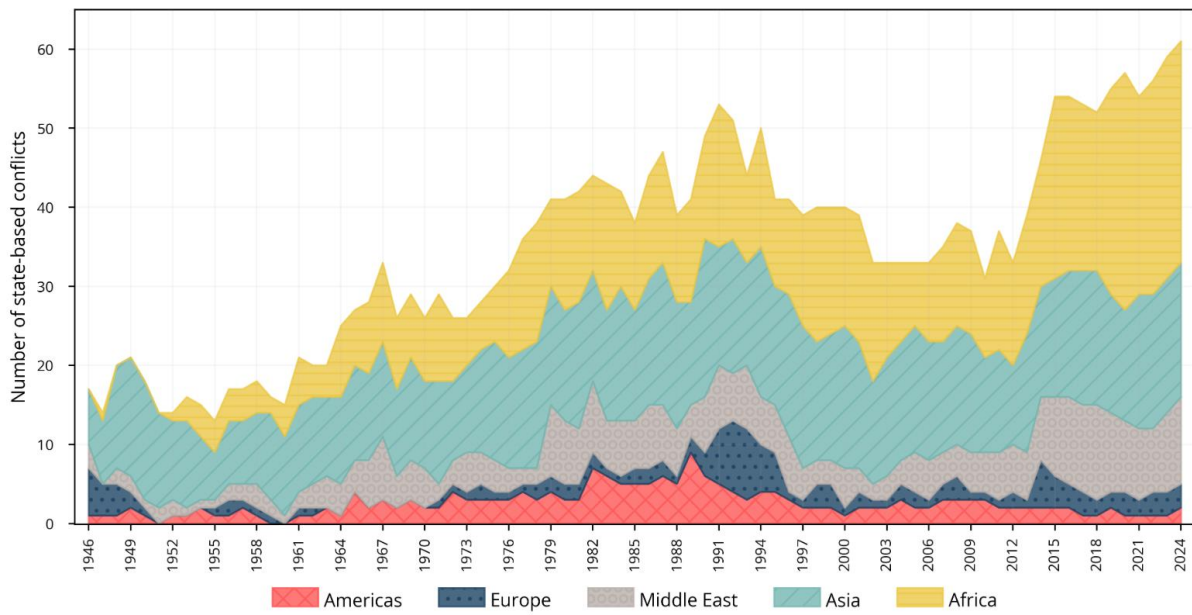
Global Issues

Chart 10.1: International Protection Applications 2018-2025



Source: International Protection Office, Various years.

Chart 10.2: State Based Conflicts by Region, 1946 – 2024



Based on UCDP 25.1 data

Source: Davies, S., Petterson, T., Sollenberg, M., & Öberg, M. (2025). Organized violence 1989–2024, and the challenges of identifying civilian victims. *Journal of Peace Research*, 62(4). UCDP is part of, and funded by, DEMSCORE, national research infrastructure grant 2021-00162 from the Swedish Research Council.

Global Issues



Displacement

Global displacement has reached unprecedented levels, mostly driven by armed conflict, environmental pressures and political instability. Prolonged conflicts alongside climate-related issues such as drought and food insecurity, have contributed to a sustained flow of migrants. Young people are particularly affected, as instability disrupts access to education, employment and basic services during stages of development.

Beyond armed conflicts, economic instability acts as a significant push factor. High youth unemployment and weakened public institutions greatly reduce long term viability for young people in affected regions. For many, the decision to migrate is not driven solely by security threats but also by long term opportunity constraints.

Climate related disruptions such as droughts, flooding and declining agricultural productivity can increase economic instability and food insecurity, particularly in regions already experiencing political challenges.

Wars, conflicts, and climate change result in the mass movement of peoples. In 2024, 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced due to violence, conflict, human rights violations, or other events seriously disturbing public order, a seven million increase from 2023. 73 per cent of people in need of international protection are hosted in low and middle-income countries. Iran hosts 3.5 million people, followed by 2.9 million in Turkey. 23 per cent are in the least developed states, with substantial increases experienced in the low-income countries neighbouring Sudan and DRC. The number of internally displaced people is 73.5 million, with significant increases in Sudan, of 3.5 million, and in DRC, of 3.1 million ([UNHCR, 2025](#))

As a member of the EU and a signatory of international protection frameworks, Ireland has seen a significant rise in international protection applications. As shown in Chart 10.1, applications rose sharply from 2,649 in 2021 to 13,651 in 2022, with these numbers remaining elevated in subsequent years. With over one third of applicants under 25 in 2024, global push factors translate directly into domestic integration and policy considerations ([CSO, 2026](#)).

Increased Armed Conflicts

The number of active state-based armed conflicts has increased to its highest levels in decades, reflecting

both the persistence of long-running wars and new intense confrontations. As shown by Chart 10.2, the UCDP recorded its highest level of global state-based armed conflicts since recording began in 1946.

The war in Ukraine, which began with Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, remains the most significant interstate conflict in Europe in recent years ([United Nations, 2026](#)). The conflict between Israel and Hamas escalated significantly following the October attacks in Israel, leading to renewed large-scale violence in Gaza ([United Nations, 2026](#)). In March of this year (2026) the United States and Israel coordinated attacks on Iran resulting in significant escalations of hostilities between the three states and further escalating regional tensions. In retaliation, Iran launched missiles and drone attacks on U.S. allied Gulf states. The conflict has been further escalated with Israel's invasion of Lebanon, highlight the regional spread of hostilities ([United Nations, 2026](#))

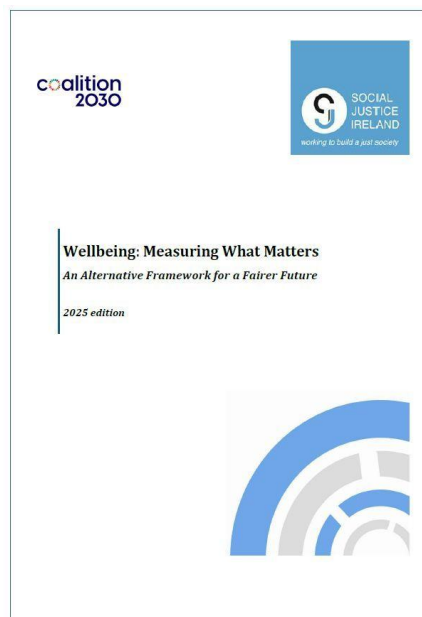
Sustained global arms transfers and the spread of small arms further reinforce instability. Weak enforcement of arms control regulations and diversion to illicit markets increase availability to non-state armed-groups, prolonging violence in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East ([United Nations, 2026](#)).

Young people are disproportionately affected by the rising number of armed conflicts. Destruction of housing, schools, healthcare systems and economic infrastructure delays state recovery, disrupts education, restricts labour market access and delays transitions into independent adulthood. Sustained instability can have lasting effects on young people, limiting skill development which increases the risk of long-term socio-economic disadvantage and displacement.

Policy Priorities

- Use Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union this year as an opportunity to foster cooperation among member states to develop coordinated human rights-based responses to armed conflict and displacement.

Other Publications by *Social Justice Ireland* (see www.socialjustice.ie):



Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for society as a whole.



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