МРНТИ: 06.77.61
JEL Classification: J01
DOI:https://doi.org/10.52821/2789-4401-2026-4-95-111

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN: TRENDS AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES (2019–2025)

E. Buitek[1*], A. Seitkazieva[1], A. Duisenbiev[1]
[1]KBTU, Almaty, Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the research – Youth employment is critical to ensuring long-term social and economic stability, especially in developing countries facing demographic and structural transitions. In the Republic of Kazakhstan, amendments to the Law on "State Youth Policy", enacted in 2023 significantly impacted the statistical indicators of the youth labor market. This study focuses on analysis of structural shifts in the youth labor market in Kazakhstan between 2019 and 2025.

Methodology – To evaluate the dynamics of the labor market both before and after the change in the law, descriptive statistics, time-series studies, calculations of relative fluctuations, and interregional comparisons were used.

Originality / value – The value of this study is that it presents the most comprehensive review of the state of Kazakhstan's youth labor market after the 2023 reform of state youth policy.

Findings – The findings of the analysis indicate that the largest changes recorded after 2023 were mainly due to a revision of the statistical definition of "youth", and not to a sharp worsening of the market situation. Despite a considerable increase in the youth labor force due to the change in age limits, the level of unemployment continued to decline, while the level of employment stayed mostly stable. At the same time, significant regional imbalances remained, especially in the levels of self-employment and the prevalent NEET groups, reflecting the continuing structural barriers to the effective inclusion of young people in the job market.

Keywords: youth employment; unemployment; NEET; self-employment; regional disparities.

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of youth in the labor market is broadly recognized as one key factor in achieving sustainable growth, promoting social inclusion and building human capital. As one of the most economically productive segments of the population, young people are a valuable source of labor renewal, innovative development and growth in labor efficiency. At the same time, it is exactly the youth who still remain one the most vulnerable categories of market participants, as they struggle with the transition from education to career, a shortage of work experience, instability in employment, and a gap between the qualifications they have obtained and the requirements of the job market. These problems are becoming increasingly urgent in both developed and developing nations undergoing economic restructuring [1-2].

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, ensuring youth employment is a priority area of the state's socio-economic policy. During the past decade, a variety of initiatives have been launched to assist young people in moving from education to careers, to support youth entrepreneurship, to enhance the vocational training system, and to improve youth participation in the labor market. Notwithstanding the measures adopted, regional variations, disparities in levels of socioeconomic development and ongoing structural distortions continue to have a substantial impact on young individuals' employment prospects.

There were significant institutional developments on 1 January 2023, when changes to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on "State Youth Policy" came into force, extending the legal age range of the "youth" group from 15–28 to 15–35 years. This change significantly impacted the statistical structure of Kazakhstan's

youth, affecting all key labor market parameters, including labor force share, employment levels, unemployment and inactive employment. Therefore, any interpretation of changes in labor market statistics from 2023 onwards must take into consideration the methodological implications of the adjustment of the age limits for the "youth" class.

While there's been a great deal of research into specific aspects of employment for young people in Kazakhstan—including unemployment, entrepreneurship, vocational training and labor mobility—there's been not much work offering a holistic view of the structural shift in the youth labor market since the 2023 legislative update. The majority of existing research examines individual indicators of the labor market in isolation and only in rare cases analyzes the dynamics of employment, self-employment, youth unemployment, the sectoral structure of the labor force, regional disparities, and the size of the NEET population within a comprehensive analytical framework.

This study fills this gap by examining the structural changes in Kazakhstan's youth labor market during 2019–2025, based on official official statistics from the National Statistics Bureau of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Special attention is given to the distinction between changes caused by a revision of the statistical definition of the "youth" segment and those which reflect actual developments in the labor market. The conducted analysis promotes a deeper insight into the current trends in the transition of the youth labor market and forms an empirical basis for the formulation of more effective government policies in the field of youth employment promotion.

Literature review. The employment of young people has emerged as one of the central issues in modern labor market research, since it is closely related to economic progress, social stability, and long-term improvements in labor productivity. In addition, international organizations, including the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), continue to recognize young people as one of the most affected groups in the labor market, exposed to unemployment, unstable employment and the negative impact of economic fluctuations [3-5].

Earlier research has shown that a skills mismatch—the discrepancy that exists between workers' abilities and the needs of the job market—is one of the main factors causing youth unemployment. The gap between what graduates are qualified to do and what companies need makes it take longer to move from education to steady work and reduces the effectiveness of the job market. Limitations in professional experience, lack of practical training and changes in technological demands further weaken the competitiveness of young candidates in the labor market [6-7].

Recent academic literature also points to the growing effect of digital changes on youth employment. Automation, digitalization and technologies are driving up requests for highly qualified specialists, while also reducing job opportunities in a number of traditional occupations. These changes mean that education systems, training and lifelong learning need to constantly adapt to the demands of the labor market.

One more significant area of scientific research is the assessment of regional variations in the youth labor market. The results of empirical research suggest that opportunities for youth employment vary widely across regions, based on the sectoral structure of the economies, the level of specialization, changing demography, and the state of investment. Therefore, the outcomes of young people's inclusion in the labor market are affected not only by their individual features, but also by the socio-economic conditions in particular regions [8].

In years past, growing attention has been given to studying the NEET group (young people not in the workforce, not in education and not participating in training programs). In contrast to traditional measures of unemployment, the NEET concept covers both young people who are out of work and those who are not economically active, which provides a more thorough assessment of the scale of their removal from the jobs market. A large proportion of NEET youth is linked to a lower potential lifetime income, fewer opportunities to build human capital, and an elevated risk of being socially isolated in the lengthy term [9].

In spite of a considerable increase in the scope of international studies in this area, studies focusing on Kazakhstan's labor market for young people continue to be relatively few in number. Moreover, insufficient emphasis is given to the impact of the 2023 legislation reform on the official labor market statistics. This research contributes to the further development of this academic field by providing a holistic assessment of the

state of youth labor market in Kazakhstan both before and after the change in the official age limits for the category of "youth".

Materials and methods

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate structural changes in Kazakhstan's youth labor market during the period 2019–2025. The analysis is based on official annual statistics published by the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which provides comprehensive information on labor force participation, employment, unemployment, sectoral employment, self-employment, regional labor market indicators, and the NEET population. The empirical analysis focuses on young people aged 15–35 years. However, it should be noted that official statistics for 2019–2022 were compiled according to the previous legal definition of youth (15–28 years), whereas from 1 January 2023 the upper age limit was extended to 35 years following amendments to the Law on State Youth Policy. Consequently, comparisons between the periods before and after 2023 should be interpreted with caution because part of the observed changes reflects statistical reclassification rather than purely economic developments.

To evaluate youth labor market performance, six groups of indicators were analyzed: labor force participation, employment and self-employment, unemployment and long-term unemployment, sectoral employment structure, regional labor market disparities, NEET population. The analysis employs descriptive statistics, trend analysis, percentage change calculations, structural analysis, and regional comparisons. Changes in labor market indicators were examined over time, while regional analysis was used to identify spatial differences in youth employment, unemployment, self-employment, and NEET rates.

Although official statistics provide nationally representative information, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the legislative revision introduced in 2023 limits the direct comparability of labor market indicators throughout the study period. Second, the aggregated nature of the available data does not permit causal evaluation of individual employment programs or longitudinal analysis of labor market trajectories. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as evidence of structural labor market trends rather than causal relationships.

RESULTS

Overall dynamics of Kazakhstan's youth labor market

Table 1 shows the basic statistics characterizing the youth labor market in Kazakhstan for the time frame of 2019–2025.

Table 1- Key indicators of Kazakhstan's youth labor market, 2019–2025

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Difference (2019-2025)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Labor force, thousand persons	2,124.9	2,099.8	2,063.4	1,885.7	3,685.7	3747,4	3742,8	76,1%
Employed population, thousand persons	2,045.9	2,019.4	1,985.8	1,813.8	3,555.8	3629.4	3628,3	77,3%
Hired workers, thousand persons	1,567.7	1,573.1	1,565.1	1,405.8	2,784.4	2810,5	2811	79%
Self-employed, thousand persons	478.1	446.3	420.7	408.0	771.4	818,9	816	70,69%

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Difference (2019-2025)
Unemployed population, thousand persons	79.0	80.4	77.6	71.9	129.9	118	114,5	44.9%
Youth unemployment rate, %	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.5	3,1	3,1	-16.2%
Long-term unemployment rate, %	2.0	2.1	1.9	2.1	0.9	0,8	0,8	-60%
Individuals not incorporated in the workforce, ths. people.	1,355.2	1,354.9	1,343.0	1,334.9	1,682.2	1659,2	1710,9	26.2%

Note - compiled based on data from the Kazakh National Statistics Bureau of the Strategic Plan and Reforms Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan

** Data for 2019-2022 are formed according to The State Youth Policy Law of the Kazakhstan Republic defines the age range of a youth aged from 15 to 28, with the option of extending it to 29 (28+). Starting from 1 January in 2023, the age cap for young adults is being raised to 35 years.*

The findings allow us to define distinct phases in the development of Kazakhstan's youth labor market. The former covers the period 2019–2022, when official data was compiled for young people aged 15–28, and the latter runs from 2023 onwards, following the legislative extension of the age range for the category of "young people" to 15–35. Therefore, the gap in the data observed after 2023 is the result of both institutional reform and broad changes taking place in the labor market [10-11].

During the period from 2019 to 2022, the number of young people in the labor force gradually reduced from 2.12 million to 1.89 million. A comparable trend was observed in terms of employment: the share of young people in employment dropped from 2.05 million to 1.81 million. These shifts were primarily driven by demographic factors and the former statistical criteria for defining the 'youth' category, instead of a worsening labor market condition [12-13].

The regulatory reform carried out in 2023 significantly transformed the statistical profile of the youth labor market. After the inclusion of people aged 29–34 in the youth category, the size of the youth labor force expanded to 3.69 million and remained relatively stable in 2024–2025, standing at around 3.74 million. Similarly, the number of young workers grew to 3.56 million in 2023 and remained stable at about 3.63 million over the following couple of years. These estimates suggest that the increase in key labor market indicators is primarily explained by the expansion of the youth population covered by the statistics, as a result of a change in the classification of the "youth" segment.

A similar tendency was noted in self-employment. After the law change, the amount of young people in self-employment almost doubled, rising from 408,000 in 2022 to 771,400 in 2023, before staying steady at around 817,000 in 2024–2025. These results are proof that working for themselves is still a key part of young people's participation in the labor market, mainly in regions where most of the economy is based on agriculture and micro-businesses.

The dynamics of youth unemployment during the period under study were distinguished by relatively small fluctuations. Before the legislative reform, the figure for unemployed young adults stood at between 72,000 and 80,000. The number of unemployed young people grew to 129,900 in 2023 following the extension of the age limits for the "youth" category, and then gradually fell to 118,000 in 2024 and 114,500 by 2025. Despite the fact that the overall number of young people out of work remained above pre-reform levels afterwards,

the later drop indicates a gradual improvement in the labor market situation following the change in statistical methodology [12-13].

It is especially worth noting that the rate of youth unemployment has stayed consistently down throughout the period covered by the study. Before the reform, it varied between 3.7 and 3.8 per cent, fell to 3.5 per cent by 2023, and then declined further to 3.1 per cent in the years 2024 and 2025. An even sharper improvement was observed in the rate of long-term unemployment, falling from around 2.0 per cent prior to the change to 0.8 per cent by 2025. These findings suggest that the expansion of the coverage of youth in the statistics was accompanied by a proportional rise in the number of young people in employment, which prevented a decline in relative levels of unemployment.

The size of the economically inactive youth population has also expanded following the legislative adjustment of the age limits for the young adult category, growing from approximately 1.34 million people in 2019–2022 to 1.68 million in 2023 and 1.71 million in 2025. Including the broadening of the statistical range of the youth population, this growth may be due to the sustained high level of participation by young people in higher education, the performance of family duties, as well as other reasons for economic inactivity [12-13].

In general, the results obtained suggest that the changes in Kazakhstan's youth labor market after 2023 should be interpreted mainly as a consequence of institutional reform, not as a sign of drastic changes in the state of the economy. However, the further decline in both the aggregate level of youth unemployment and the rate of long-term unemployment in 2024–2025 points to positive trends in the labor market, regardless of the significant statistical increase in the youth population.

Sectoral structure of youth employment

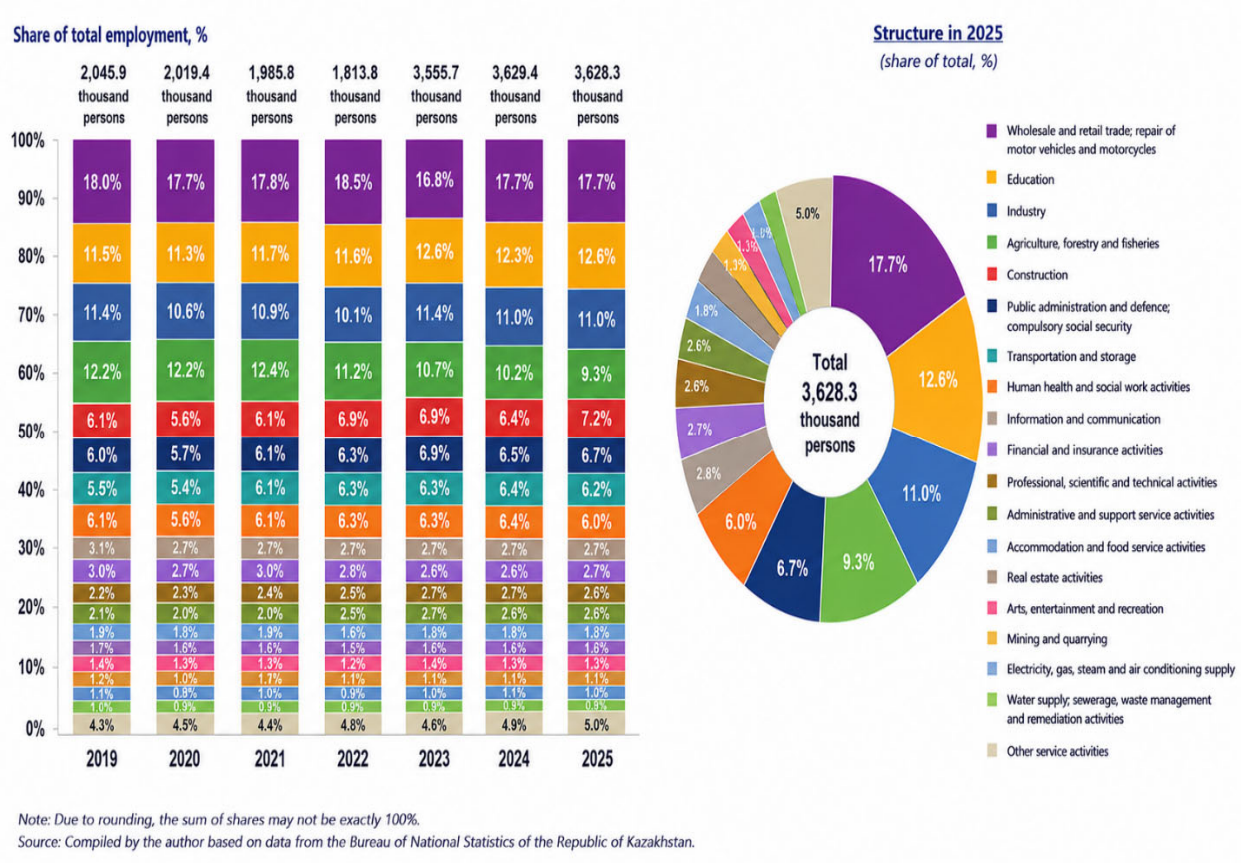
Table 2 and Figure 1 present the sectoral composition of youth employment in Kazakhstan during 2019–2025**.** Despite the substantial increase in the number of employed young people following the 2023 legislative reform, the overall structure of youth employment remained relatively stable throughout the study period. The majority of young workers continued to be employed in traditional sectors of the economy, while knowledge-intensive industries demonstrated the fastest rates of employment growth.

Table 2 - Structure of Youth Employment by Economic Activity, 2019–2025 (thousand persons)

Employment in the sector	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	Growth 2019-2025 (%)
Employed in the economy, total	3628.3	3629.4	3555,7	1,813.8	1,985.8	2019,4	2045,9	77.3
Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries	336.9	368.6	381,4	203.2	238.6	246,1	250,2	34.7
Industry	397.9	402.1	404,9	183.3	213.2	213,3	232,5	71.1
Mining and quarrying	98.5	89.5	98,9	40.5	45.3	48,4	51	93.1
Manufacturing	217.3	228.0	225,2	108.5	124.8	121,8	135,3	60.6
Providing electric power, gas, heat, steam, water, hot water and air-conditioning	53.3	51.0	50,5	22.4	29	27,6	28,8	85.1
Provision of water services; waste management; collection, recycling, and disposal of wastes; operations in the sphere of protection of the environment and control of pollution	28.9	33.7	30,2	11.9	14	15,6	17,3	67.1

Employment in the sector	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	Growth 2019-2025 (%)
Building Activities	260.3	253.8	247,4	124.7	143.9	148,5	144,8	79.8
Retail and wholesaling; servicing and maintenance of vehicles and motorbikes.	643.0	643.6	599,1	335	353.5	356,9	368,1	74.7
Transport and warehousing	226.5	233.3	225,7	113.7	120.7	113,4	125,3	80.8
Provision of accommodation and food services	96.6	102.5	94,6	50.7	54.2	54	57,3	68.6
Information and communication	102.4	94.2	90	44.8	47.2	41,8	43,6	134.9
Financial and insurance activities	96.5	98.3	96,6	48.2	58.6	59,4	62,2	55.1
Real estate transactions	87.2	66.5	58	37.7	38.3	39,2	33,1	163.4
Professional, scientific, and technical activities	114.6	117.3	115,7	59.4	59.9	74,7	63,8	79.6
Administrative and support services activities	100.7	106.0	106,4	56	64.5	73,	67,4	49.4
Government administration and protection; compulsory social security.	241.5	236.6	245,3	114.8	124.5	132,6	123,2	96
Education	458.8	447.9	448,9	209.7	232.1	227,7	235	95.2
Healthcare and social services	218.1	213.9	219,5	110.6	114.6	111,5	110,5	97.4
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	65.6	68.5	59	34	33.8	36,1	39,8	64.8
Provision of other kinds of services	181.6	176.4	163,2	87.9	88.2	90,9	89	104
Note - compiled based on data from the Kazakh National Statistics Bureau of the Strategic Plan and Reforms Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan								

During the entire period under analysis, the wholesale and retailing sector continued to be the largest employer of young people. In 2025, 643,000 young people were occupied in this sector, comprising approximately 17.7 per cent of the total number of youth employed. The industry's dominant position is due to comparatively low barriers to entry into the market, the flexibility of employment conditions, and sustained growth in consumer demand. The second largest sector in terms of the number of young people in the workforce was education – 458,800 people (12.6 per cent) – which was followed by manufacturing – 397,900 people (11.0 per cent), farming – 336,900 people (9.3 per cent), construction – 260,3 thousand people (7.2 per cent), public administration – 241,5 thousand people (6.7 per cent), warehousing and transport – 226,5 thousand people (6.2 per cent), and public healthcare – 218,1 thousand people (6.0 per cent). Overall, these sectors made up more than three-quarters of total employment among young people in 2025 [12-13].



Note: Due to rounding, the sum of shares may not be exactly 100%.
Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Figure 1- Sectoral Distribution of Youth Employment in Kazakhstan, 2019–2025
Note - compiled by the authors

Despite the fact that the overall industry structure of employment underwent only slight changes, some significant structural shifts were noted during the period studied. The number of young people engaged in agriculture gradually reduced, pointing to an ongoing transfer of young workers towards urban-based economic activities. At the same time, steady employment growth was recorded in construction, transport and warehousing, healthcare, education and public administration, reflecting continued public investment and increased demand for qualified labor.

The most rapid growth in employment was registered in knowledge-intensive areas of the national economy. Compared with 2019, the share of young people in employment increased by 163.4 per cent in estate operations, by 134.9 per cent in information and communications, by 104.0 per cent in the other services sector, by 97.4 per cent in healthcare and social services, by 96.0 per cent in public administration, and by 93.1 per cent in extractive industries and mining. While these sectors still make up a relatively small share of the structure of youth employment as a whole, their rapid growth shows how Kazakhstan's economy is continuing to get more digital and the growing demand for workers with specialized professional skills.

By comparison, jobs in sectors such as accommodation and food services, administration and support operations, manufacturing, financial and insurance activities, and arts, culture and recreation grew at a relatively slower rate. This indicates that, even though employment opportunities have been expanding in almost all sectors of the economy, the fastest growth in employment is becoming more and more concentrated in sectors which need a higher level of training and specialized vocational expertise.

As a whole, the study's findings show that Kazakhstan's labor market for young people is characterized by progressive structural diversification rather than rapid transformation. While traditional sectors retain their

leading role as the key sources of youth employment, knowledge based economic activities are steadily growing in importance. This pattern highlights the rising need to adjust education programs to the requirements of the labor market, as well as to expand possibilities for young people to develop the technical, digital and career skills required in highly productive sectors of the economy [14].

Regional disparities in youth self-employment and unemployment

The regional concentration of self-employment amongst young people indicates a strong focus in the southern regions of the country. The most significant number of self-employed youth was recorded in the Turkestan region, at 185,400 people, representing almost a quarter of all self-employed young people in Kazakhstan. High levels of youth self-employment were also recorded in the Zhambyl region (63,800 people), the city of Shymkent (60,800 people), the Kyzylorda region (57,600 people) and the Almaty region (55,900 people). These areas are distinguished by a relatively large rural population, a considerable contribution from agriculture and microbusiness to the regional economy, and limited employment opportunities in the paid labor market. Therefore, self-employment serves as a key vehicle for integrating young people into the labor market [12-13].

The lowest numbers of self-employed young people, by contrast, were recorded in the Ulytau region (2,000 people), the North Kazakhstan region (13,700 people), the Karaganda region (14,300 people) and the Pavlodar region (16,700 people). The industries in these regions are characterized by a more varied structure and a higher proportion of jobs in the formal sector, which makes young people less dependent on self-employment as their primary source of income.

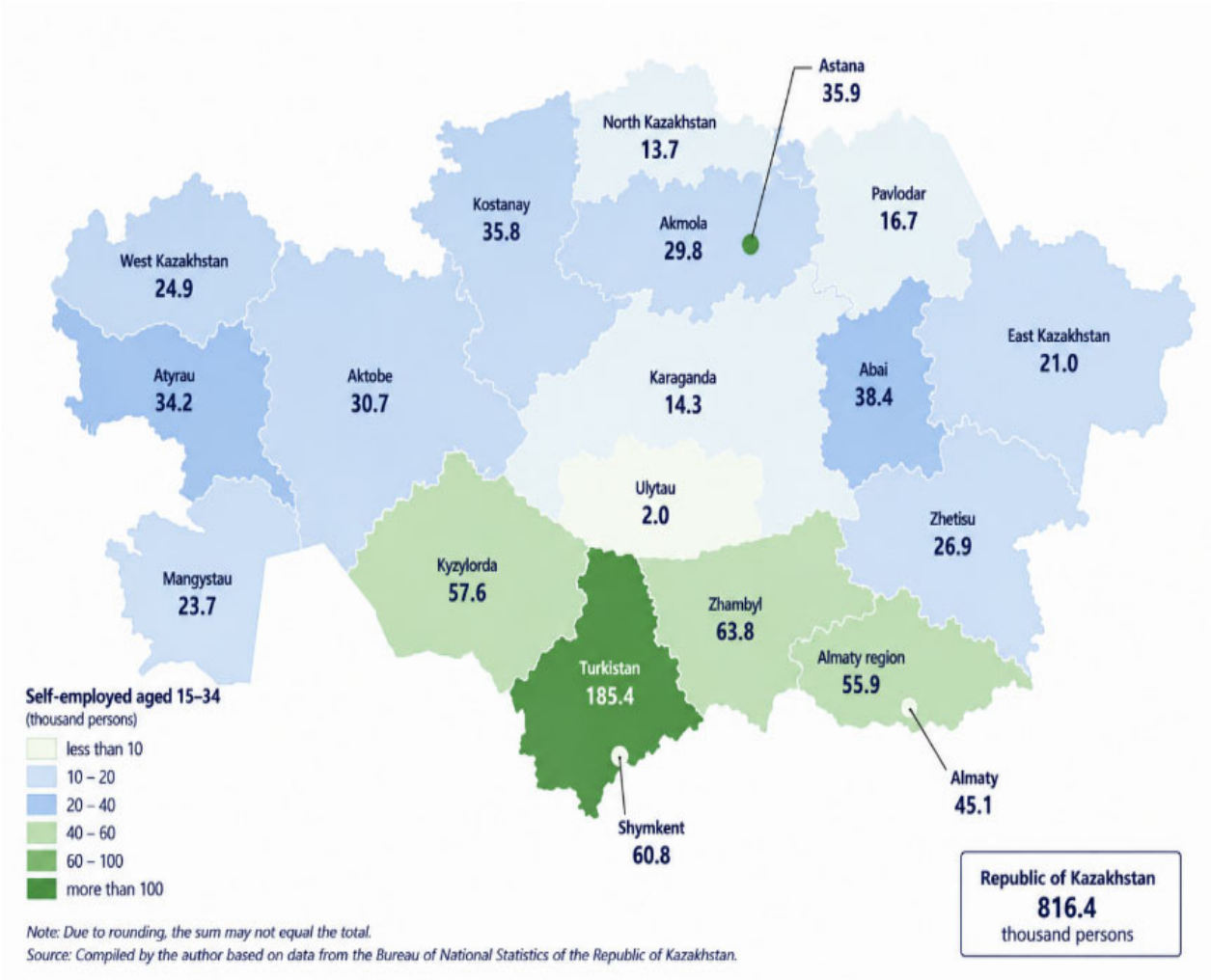


Figure 2 - Self-employed youth aged 15–35 by region, 2025 (thousand persons)
Note - compiled by the authors based on the Bureau of National Statistics.

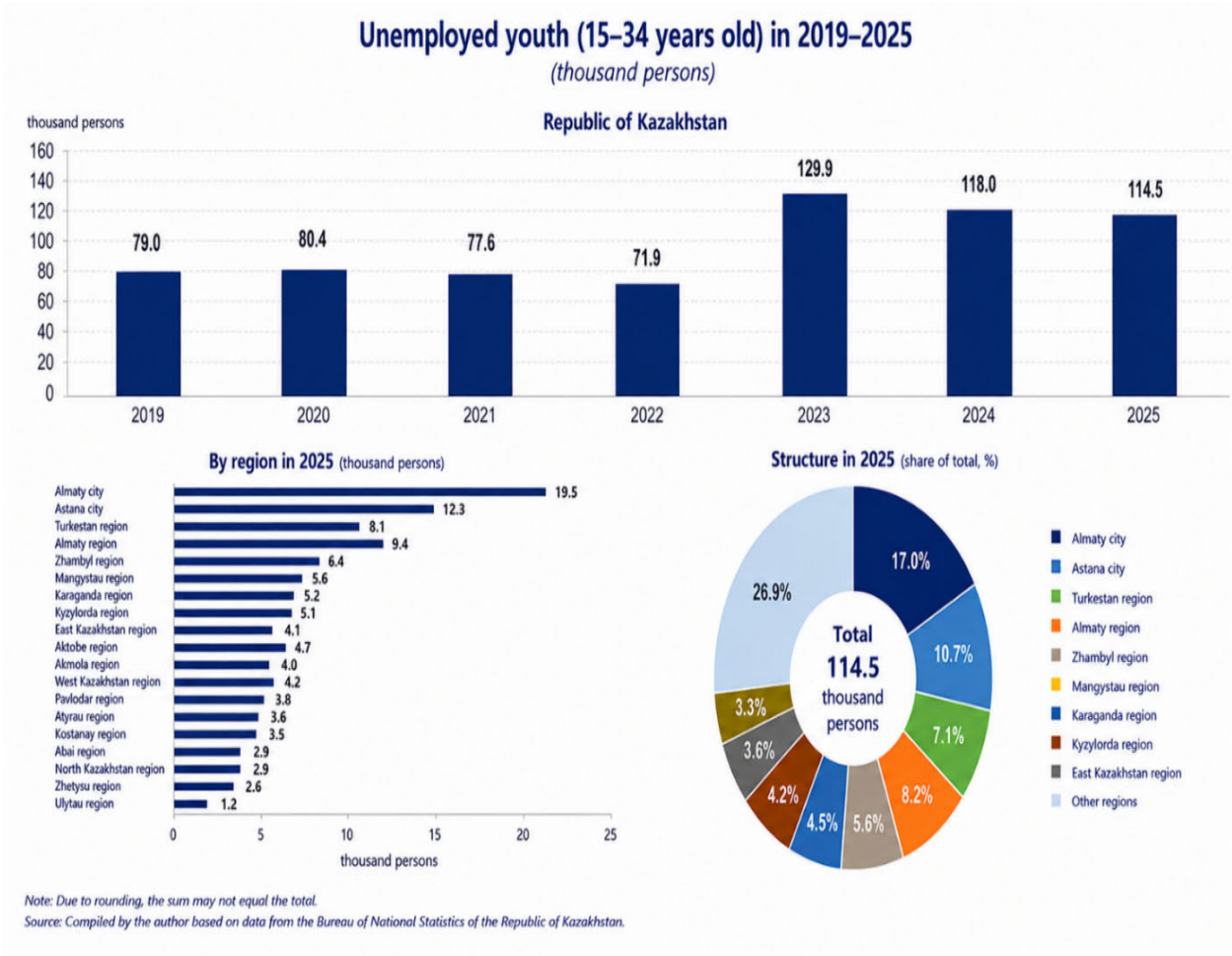


Figure 3 - Unemployed youth by region in Kazakhstan, 2019–2025 (thousand persons)
Note - compiled by the authors based on the Bureau of National Statistics.

Table 3 - Regional distribution of youth unemployment, 2019–2025

Region	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Difference
Kazakhstan	79.0	80.4	77.6	71.9	129.9	118,0	114,5	44,9%
Abay	-	-	-	2.4	3.1	3,0	2,9	-
Akmola	2.4	2.4	2.1	2.1	4.6	4,3	4,0	66,6%
Aktobe	2.9	2.4	2.1	2.0	4.4	4,1	4,7	62%
Almaty	8.3	9.7	9.1	5.3	9.3	9,2	9,4	13,2%
Atyrau	2.0	1.8	1.7	1.7	3.8	3,9	3,6	80%
W-Kazakhstan	3.1	3.5	3.1	2.8	4.5	4,4	4,2	35,4%
Zhambyl	4.2	5.0	4.5	4.1	8.0	7,4	6,4	52,3%
Zhetyssu	-	-	-	3.3	4.4	2,9	2,6	-
Karaganda	6.0	6.3	6.0	4.0	5.5	5,8	5,2	-13,3%
Kostanay	3.1	2.6	2.5	2.0	4.3	4,0	3,5	12,9%
Kyzylorda	4.1	3.6	3.4	3.1	5.2	5,1	5,1	24,3%

Region	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Difference
Mangystau	2.3	2.8	2.7	2.1	7.0	5,4	5,6	143,4%
S-Kazakhstan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pavlodar	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.8	3.5	3,5	3,8	72,7%
N-Kazakhstan	1.4	1.9	1.4	1.4	4.0	3,1	2,9	107,14%
Turkestan	5.8	6.2	5.8	6.8	10.1	7,8	8,1	39,6%
Ulytau	-	-	-	0.8	1.5	1,2	1,2	-
E-Kazakhstan	6.4	5.6	5.6	3.1	4.3	4,2	4,1	-35,9%
Astana city	5.9	5.6	6.9	7.7	12.0	11,5	12,3	108,4%
Almaty city	15.3	15.5	15.4	12.6	23.4	20,2	19,5	27,4%
Shymkent city	3.4	3.5	3.2	3.1	7.1	7,2	5,5	61,7%

Note - compiled based on data from the National Statistics Bureau of the Strategic Plan and Reforms Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan
** Data for 2019-2022 are formed according to The State Youth Policy Law of the Kazakhstan Republic defines the age range of a youth aged from 15 to 28, with the option of extending it to 29 (28+). Starting from 1 January in 2023, the age cap for young adults is being raised to 35 years*

The regional allocation of youth unemployment is defined by a different geographic pattern. In 2025, the most unemployed young people were recorded in the city of Almaty (19.5 thousand people), the city of Astana (12.3 thousand people), Almaty region (9,400 people) and Turkestan region (8,100 people). However, these indicators should not be considered solely as evidence of an adverse situation in regional labor markets. These figures largely reflect the high concentration of population, educational institutions and business activity in Kazakhstan's largest cities. Such areas attract significant flows of youth seeking education and jobs, which in turn leads to an increase in both the labor supply and the overall number of unemployed people.

The adoption of a new legislative definition of the category "young people" in 2023 led to a noticeable increase in the officially registered unemployment rate among young people in nearly all regions of the country. Meanwhile, a gradual downward trend in the unemployment rate was registered in 2024–2025, suggesting that a substantial portion of the initial rise was caused by the inclusion of people aged 29–34 in the statistics, rather than a decline in conditions on regional labor markets. Nevertheless, despite this statistical change, youth unemployment remained quite high in the Mangystau region, the Almaty region, the city of Astana and the Turkestan region, pointing to persistent structural disparities in regional labor force markets.

The comparison of Figures 2 and 3 allows us to identify significant differences in regional patterns of youth employment. The south is characterized by a mix of relatively high self-employment and low unemployment, suggesting that entrepreneurial activity, family businesses and farming partly make up for the lack of job opportunities in the formal sector. In turn, the major urban areas are characterized by a relatively low level of self-employment but a larger absolute number of young unemployed people, since they act as centers of internal labor migration and intensive competition in the labor market. Therefore, unemployment statistics should be viewed in the context of the regional demographic characteristics and the economy structure of each region, rather than in absolute terms.

In general, the study results show that Kazakhstan's youth labor market maintains significant regional disparities. The large urban centers concentrate the majority of both employed and unemployed youth due to their demographic and economic relevance, while rural and agrarian-oriented areas depend more greatly on self-employment as a source of income. These differences underscore the need to formulate diversified regional policies to promote youth employment, based on the specific features of individual labor markets, rather than implementing uniform state regulatory measures across the entire country.

NEET dynamics and youth labor market vulnerability

The share of young people not in work, study or further training (NEET) is now considered one of the most complex indicators of youth vulnerability in the labor market, as it includes both unemployed and economically inactive young adults. In contrast to the traditional measure of the unemployment rate, the NEET measure reflects a wider range of barriers that prevent young people from integrating into the labor market, such as limited access to training, vocational preparation, and sustainable employability. Therefore, analyzing trends in the NEET figure provides a more accurate assessment of the scale of young people's marginalization from active economic participation.

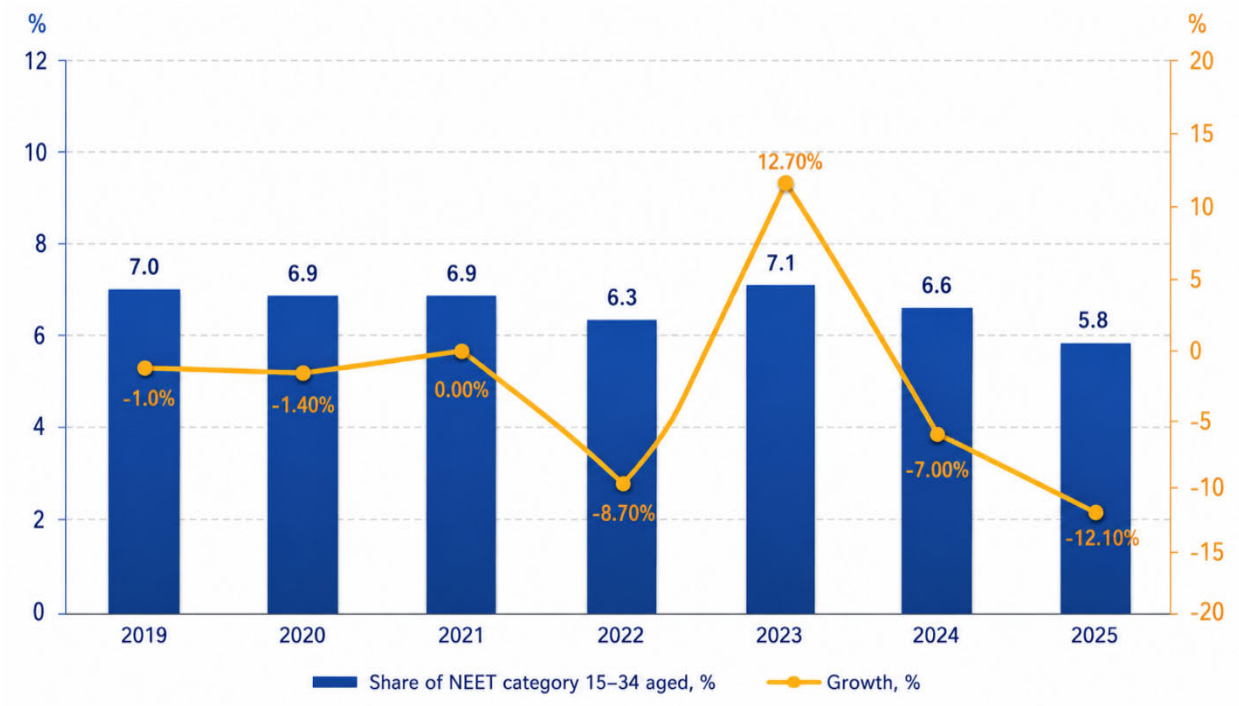


Figure 4 - Share of the NEET population aged 15–35 by region, 2025 (%)
Note - compiled by the authors based on the Bureau of National Statistics.

At country level, the percentage of young people classified as NEETs stayed pretty much the same between 2019 and 2021, floating around 7.0 per cent. In 2022, this indicator fell to 6.3 per cent, then briefly increased to 7.1 per cent after the official age range for the "youth" category was revised in 2023, and then decreased again to 6.6 per cent in 2024 and 5.8 per cent by 2025. While part of the short-term increase recorded in 2023 was driven by a revision of the statistical definition of youth, the following decline indicates a gradual increase in young people's participation in the labor market during the years following the reform.

Notwithstanding the positive nationwide trend line, considerable regional disparities continue to exist. In 2025, the most critical NEET rates were recorded in the Mangystau region (9.8 per cent), the Ulytau region (8.0 per cent) and the Zhetisu region (7.4 per cent). Comparatively high rates were also reported in the Karaganda, Kyzylorda, North Kazakhstan, Aktobe and Almaty regions. These regional areas continue to be affected by structural problems linked to low employment opportunities, weak economic diversification and lack of access to skills training and professional education [12-13].

In the opposite, the lowest NEET rates were recorded in Abay region (2.5 per cent), East Kazakhstan region (3.9 per cent), Turkestan region (5.0 per cent), Akmola region (5.1 per cent) and the city of Almaty (5.3 per cent). The favorable trend in the Turkestan region requires special attention, where the share of young people in the NEET category declined from 10.5 per cent in 2023 to 5.0 per cent in 2025. Such a considerable decrease

may indicate better participation by young people in both the labor market and education, although further studies are needed to identify the precise factors behind this trend.

The geographical distribution of NEETs shows that the vulnerability of young individuals in the labor market cannot be determined solely on the basis of indicators of unemployment. In a few regions with relatively low unemployment rates, NEET rates remain pretty high, suggesting that a significant proportion of young adults are economically inactive rather than actively looking for work. Therefore, the NEET indicator complements conventional labor market indicators by helping to identify instances of social and economic exclusion that are not apparent when analyzing unemployment levels alone.

A complex analysis of the dynamics of unemployment, self-employment and the NEET indicators illustrates the multiple dimensions of young people's inclusion in the labor market. In many cases, while unemployment reflects the failure of economically active young people to find work, self-employment is an alternative form of participation in economic activity, especially in rural regions. In turn, the NEET rate refers to young people who are not in employment, education or vocational training, and who are the most disadvantaged group in terms of the long-term risk of being excluded from the labor market.

As a whole, the results of the study indicate that, over the reporting period, Kazakhstan has made considerable progress in decreasing the proportion of NEET youth at the national scale. However, continuing regional imbalances suggest that the integration of young people into the labor market continues to be uneven across the country's different regions. The results highlight the need to develop targeted regional policies to promote youth employment, which combine the creation of new jobs, the expansion of professional education, the development of the guidance system, assistance to youth businesses, and the extension of lifelong learning possibilities to ensure young people's successful entry into stable and productive employment.

DISCUSSION

This paper provides new evidence on the structural evolution of Kazakhstan's youth labor market between 2019 and 2025, building on a complex analysis of youth labor force involvement, employment, unemployment, the employment structure by sector, regional disparities, self-employment and dynamics of the NEET indicator as part of a single analytical framework. In contrast to most prior studies, which considered individual labor market measures in separation, this work illustrates how the revision of the legal definition of the "youth" classification in 2023 impacted the understanding of official labor market information.

The obtained results testify that the most substantial changes occurring after 2023 should be viewed primarily in the context of institutional rather than solely economic processes. The widening of the official age thresholds for the "youth" group from 15–28 to 15–35 caused a large increase in the statistical number of young people in the labor force, which impacted all key labor market figures. Therefore, the observed increase in the number of employed and unemployed youth does not automatically indicate a decline in the labor market, but rather reflects, to a significant extent, a shift in the composition of the population covered by official data. This finding underscores the relevance of taking changes in methodology under consideration when undertaking a long-term analysis of the labor market.

The research also shows that the use of both absolute and relative labor market indicators can result in different conclusions about the state of the market. Although the absolute number of young people out of work rose after the legislative reform, both the youth jobless rate and the long-term unemployment rate kept going down in 2024–2025. Similarly, international labor market research has shown that institutional reforms and changes in demographics often lead to shifts in the size of the labor force without necessarily indicating a downturn in the employment situation. Thus, given changes in the coverage of the population by the statistics, it is only the relative unemployment rates that offer a more secure basis for assessing the state of the labor market.

A further key finding of the study is the determination of the distinctive features of the sectoral composition of youth employment. The analysis shows that Kazakhstan's youth labor market is still characterized by a predominance of traditional economic sectors, particularly trade, education, manufacturing, agriculture and construction. At the same time, the fastest growth in employment was observed in the fields of information and communications, healthcare, professional, scientific and technical activities, as well as in property trans-

actions. These results are consistent with the findings of international studies, which indicate the increasing impact of digitalization and technology transformation on the demand for labor, thereby broadening employment opportunities in knowledge based sectors of the economic landscape. Meanwhile, the relatively small proportion of younger workers employed in these areas shows that the process of structural change in the youth labor market continues to be quite gradual [15].

Regional analysis also suggests that the state of the youth job market is largely driven by the country's overall economic landscape. The major urban areas, such as Almaty and Astana, are the ones with the highest levels of both employed and unemployed youth, as they are the leading educational and economic centers of Kazakhstan, pulling in significant flows of internal migrants. In comparison, the south of the country shows a higher level of self-employment of young people, which is explained by the greater share of agriculture, casual jobs and family-run businesses in the local economy. The results obtained show that the situation in regional labor markets needs to be assessed not solely on the basis of official unemployment figures, but also considering the structure of employment, the scale of self-employment and the specific demographic features of the regions.

The analysis of the NEET group of young people provides a broader view of youth vulnerability in the labor market, going outside the scope of traditional measures of unemployment. Despite the fact that youth unemployment has remained at a low level in Kazakhstan during the period under review, a relatively high NEET rate has continued to be observed in a number of regions. This suggests that a large proportion of youth remain outside the spheres of employment and education, even though official unemployment figures have shown improvement. Therefore, it is appropriate to assess the degree of youth integration into the labor market on the based on a complex analysis of employment, unemployment, and NEET rates, rather than limiting oneself solely to the unemployment rate [16].

From a practical point of view, the results of the study suggest that future state policy on facilitating youth employment must focus not only on creating more workplaces, but also on raising the quality of employment and narrowing regional disparities. The persistent concentration of workers in sectors with low productivity, along with persistent regional variations in self-employment rates and the spread of the NEET category, highlights the need for closer cooperation between educational institutions, employers and public services. The expansion of practically oriented types of training, dual education programs and work practices, the improvement of digital skills, and assistance for youth entrepreneurship can help young people move from education to work and decrease the structural imbalance between the skills they learn and the requirements of the job market.

A few limitations of this study should be mentioned. The first is that the analysis is just based on officially collected aggregate statistical data, which makes it impossible to evaluate the individual career trajectories of young people or to figure out the cause-and-effect links between public policy measures and shifts in the labour market. Second, the review of the legal definition of the age limits for the youth category in 2023 makes it difficult to directly compare figures for the two periods under analysis. In further research, it will be useful to supplement official statistics with longitudinal survey data and other microdata, which will provide a more accurate assessment of the impact of specific programs to promote youth employment and help explain the causes of regional variations in the labor market for young people.

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that the youth labor market in Kazakhstan has displayed a fairly high level of resilience despite significant changes in the institutional framework. Notwithstanding the fact that legal reform has fundamentally altered the demographic profile of the youth population, the resulting decline in unemployment, the progressive diversification of the structure of employment and the positive trend in NEET figures point to favorable developments in the labor market. At the same time, continuing regional disproportion and the high degree of concentration of youth employment in traditional areas of the economy point to the need for additional improvements to government policy aimed at securing the long-term inclusion of young people in stable and effective employment.

REFERENCES

1. United Nations. Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. – 2015. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda (accessed May 20, 2026).

2. United Nations. Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. – URL: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8 (accessed May 20, 2026).

3. International Labour Organization. Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Decent Work, Brighter Futures. – Geneva : ILO, 2024. – URL: https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/global-employment-trends-youth-2024 (accessed May 20, 2026).

4. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Building Inclusive Labor Markets in Kazakhstan. – Paris : OECD, 2017.

5. World Bank. World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies. – Washington, DC : World Bank, 2023. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1941-4. – URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023 (accessed May 20, 2026).

6. Jonbekova D., Kim T., Kerimkulova S., Ruby A., Sparks J. Employment of International Education Graduates: Issues of Economy and Resistance to Change // Higher Education Quarterly. – 2021. – Vol. 75, No. 4. – P. 618–633. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12321.

7. Bekenova A. Factors Influencing Youth Unemployment in Kazakhstan // International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice. – 2022. – Vol. 10, No. 2. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.56289/ijcsrp.161.

8. Gazizova M. R., Khusainova Z. S., Vechkinzova Y. A., Sarzhanov D. K. Assessment of Structural Shifts in Youth Employment in Kazakhstan // Buketov Business Review. – 2021. – Vol. 104, No. 4. – P. 41–50. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.31489/2021ec4/41-50.

9. Khussainova Z., Gazizova M., Abauova G., Zhartay Z., Raikhanova G. Problems of Generating Productive Employment in the Youth Labour Market as a Dominant Risk Reduction Factor for the NEET Youth Segment in Kazakhstan // Economies. – 2023. – Vol. 11, No. 4. – Article 116. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/economies11040116.

10. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated February 9, 2015, No. 285-V "On State Youth Policy". – URL: https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1500000285 (accessed May 20, 2026).

11. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated April 6, 2016, No. 482-V "On Employment of the Population". – URL: https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1600000482 (accessed May 20, 2026).

12. Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Labor Market Statistics. – URL: https://stat.gov.kz/en/ (accessed May 20, 2026).

13. Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Labor Market Indicators of the Republic of Kazakhstan. – URL: https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/labor-and-income/stat-empt-unempl/ (accessed May 20, 2026).

14. Alshanskaya A. Youth in the Labour Market in Kazakhstan. – Astana: Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024.

15. Gurova E. V. Features of Youth Employment in the Context of Digitalization of the Economy // Management of the Personnel and Intellectual Resources in Russia. – 2023. – Vol. 12, No. 1. – P. 94–98. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.12737/2305-7807-2023-12-1-94-98. – URL: https://doi.org/10.12737/2305-7807-2023-12-1-94-98 (accessed May 20, 2026).

16. Rahmani H., Groot W. Risk Factors of Being a Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET): A Scoping Review // International Journal of Educational Research. – 2023. – Vol. 120. – Article 102198. – DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102198. – URL: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0883035523000629 (accessed May 20, 2026).

REFERENCES

1. United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

2. United Nations. (n.d.). Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth. https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8

3. International Labour Organization. (2024). Global employment trends for youth 2024: Decent work, brighter futures. https://doi.org/10.54394/ZUUI5430

4. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2017). Building inclusive labor markets in Kazakhstan.

5. World Bank. (2023). World development report 2023: Migrants, refugees, and societies. https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1941-4

6. Jonbekova, D., Kim, T., Kerimkulova, S., Ruby, A., & Sparks, J. (2021). Employment of international education graduates: Issues of economy and resistance to change. Higher Education Quarterly, 75(4), 618–633. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12321

7. Bekenova, A. (2022). Factors influencing youth unemployment in Kazakhstan. International Journal of Civil Service Reform and Practice, 10(2). https://doi.org/10.56289/ijcsrp.161

8. Gazizova, M. R., Khusainova, Z. S., Vechkinzova, Y. A., & Sarzhanov, D. K. (2021). Assessment of structural shifts in youth employment in Kazakhstan. Buketov Business Review, 104(4), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.31489/2021ec4/41-50

9. Khussainova, Z., Gazizova, M., Abauova, G., Zhartay, Z., & Raikhanova, G. (2023). Problems of generating productive employment in the youth labour market as a dominant risk reduction factor for the NEET youth segment in Kazakhstan. Economies, 11(4), Article 116. https://doi.org/10.3390/economies11040116

10. Republic of Kazakhstan. (2015, February 9). On state youth policy (Law No. 285-V). Adilet Legal Information System. https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1500000285

11. Republic of Kazakhstan. (2016, April 6). On employment of the population (Law No. 482-V). Adilet Legal Information System. https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z1600000482

12. Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (n.d.). Labor market statistics. https://stat.gov.kz/en/

13. Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (n.d.). Labor market indicators of the Republic of Kazakhstan. https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/labor-and-income/stat-empt-unempl/

14. Alshanskaya, A. (2024). Youth in the labour market in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

15. Gurova, E. V. (2023). Features of youth employment in the context of digitalization of the economy. Management of the Personnel and Intellectual Resources in Russia, 12(1), 94–98. https://doi.org/10.12737/2305-7807-2023-12-1-94-98

16. Rahmani, H., & Groot, W. (2023). Risk factors of being a youth not in education, employment or training (NEET): A scoping review. International Journal of Educational Research, 120, Article 102198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102198

ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ЖАСТАРДЫҢ ЖҰМЫСПЕН ҚАМТЫЛУЫ: ҮРДІСТЕРІ МЕН ӨҢІРЛІК АЙЫРМАШЫЛЫҚТАРЫ (2019–2025 ЖЫЛДАР)

Э. Қ. Бүйтек[1], А. М. Сейтқазиева[1], А. Ш. Дүйсенбиев[1],
[1]ҚБТУ, Алматы, Қазақстан

АҢДАТПА

Зерттеу мақсаты – Жастарды жұмыспен қамту ұзақ мерзімді әлеуметтік және экономикалық тұрақтылықты қамтамасыз етуде шешуші маңызға ие. Бұл мәселе, әсіресе, демографиялық және құрылымдық өзгерістерді бастан өткеріп жатқан дамушы елдер үшін өзекті. Қазақстан Республикасында 2023 жылы күшіне енген «Мемлекеттік жастар саясаты туралы» Заңға енгізілген түзетулер жастар еңбек нарығына қатысты статистикалық көрсеткіштерге айтарлықтай әсер етті. Бұл зерттеуде 2019–2025 жылдар аралығындағы Қазақстандағы жастар еңбек нарығындағы құрылымдық өзгерістер талданады. ***Әдіснамасы*** – Заңнамалық өзгерістерге дейінгі және кейінгі кезеңдердегі еңбек нарығының динамикасын бағалау үшін сипаттамалық статистика, уақыт қатарларын талдау, салыстырмалы өзгерістерді есептеу және өңіраралық салыстыру әдістері қолданылды.

Зерттеудің бірегейлігі / құндылығы – Зерттеудің құндылығы 2023 жылғы мемлекеттік жастар саясаты реформасынан кейінгі Қазақстандағы жастар еңбек нарығының жай-күйіне кешенді талдау ұсынуымен айқындалады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері – Талдау нәтижелері 2023 жылдан кейін байқалған елеулі өзгерістер негізінен еңбек нарығындағы жағдайдың күрт нашарлауынан емес, «жастар» ұғымының статистикалық анықтамасының өзгеруінен туындағанын көрсетті. Жас шегінің кеңеюіне байланысты жастардың жұмыс күші саны айтарлықтай артқанымен, жұмыссыздық деңгейі төмендеуін жалғастырды, ал жұмыспен қамтылу деңгейі негізінен тұрақты болып қалды. Сонымен қатар өңірлер арасында елеулі айырмашылықтар сақталды. Әсіресе, өзін-өзі жұмыспен қамту деңгейі мен NEET санатындағы жастардың үлесі бойынша айырмашылықтар жастардың еңбек нарығына тиімді кірігуіне кедергі келтіретін құрылымдық мәселелердің әлі де сақталып отырғанын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: жастардың жұмыспен қамтылуы; жұмыссыздық; NEET; өзін-өзі жұмыспен қамту; өңірлік айырмашылықтар.

ЗАНЯТОСТЬ МОЛОДЕЖИ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ: ТЕНДЕНЦИИ И РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ РАЗЛИЧИЯ (2019–2025 ГГ.)

Э. К. Буйтек[1*], А. М. Сейтказиева[1], А. Ш. Дуйсенбиев[1]
[1]КБТУ, Алматы, Казахстан

АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель исследования – Занятость молодежи является одним из ключевых факторов обеспечения долгосрочной социальной и экономической стабильности, особенно в развивающихся странах, переживающих демографические и структурные преобразования. В Республике Казахстан вступившие в силу в 2023 году поправки к Закону «О государственной молодежной политике» оказали существенное влияние на статистические показатели молодежного рынка труда. Настоящее исследование посвящено анализу структурных изменений на рынке труда молодежи Казахстана в период 2019–2025 годов.

Методология – Для оценки динамики рынка труда до и после внесения законодательных изменений использованы методы описательной статистики, анализа временных рядов, расчета относительных изменений показателей и межрегионального сравнительного анализа.

Оригинальность / ценность исследования – Ценность исследования заключается в представлении комплексной оценки состояния рынка труда молодежи Казахстана после реформы государственной молодежной политики 2023 года.

Результаты исследования – Результаты исследования свидетельствуют о том, что наиболее значительные изменения, наблюдавшиеся после 2023 года, были обусловлены главным образом изменением статистического определения категории «молодежь», а не резким ухудшением ситуации на рынке труда. Несмотря на существенное увеличение численности молодежной рабочей силы вследствие расширения возрастных границ, уровень безработицы продолжил снижаться, тогда как уровень занятости оставался относительно стабильным. Вместе с тем сохранялись значительные региональные различия, особенно в уровнях самозанятости и доле молодежи категории NEET, что указывает на наличие устойчивых структурных барьеров, препятствующих эффективной интеграции молодых людей в рынок труда.

Ключевые слова: занятость молодежи; безработица; NEET; самозанятость; региональные различия.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Elvira K. Buitek – PhD, assistant-professor, JSC "Kazakh-British Technical University" (KBTU), Almaty, Kazakhstan, email: e.buitek@kbtu.kz, ORCID 0000-0002-4745-2069

Aruzhan M. Seitkaziyeva – Doctor of Economics, Professor, JSC "Kazakh-British Technical University" (KBTU), Almaty, Kazakhstan, email: a.seitkaziyeva@kbtu.kz, ORCID: 0000-0002-0641-1498

Askar Sh. Duisenbiyev – Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Assistant Professor, JSC "Kazakh-British Technical University" (KBTU), Almaty, Kazakhstan, email: a.duisenbiev@kbtu.kz, ORCID: 0009-0005-9591-9400