



Navigating the Employment Landscape in Europe

Challenges and Realities of Unemployment

2026

Introduction

The European employment landscape is undergoing significant change, with unemployment remaining a key concern for many individuals and communities across the continent. Beyond headline figures, unemployment affects Europeans in complex ways, influencing income security, mental well-being, social inclusion, and long-term career prospects. Its impact is not evenly distributed, with young people, lower-skilled workers, and certain regions experiencing more persistent and severe effects.

Against this backdrop, this research set out to examine how unemployment is affecting Europeans in their daily lives. By exploring individual experiences, perceived barriers to re-employment, and the broader social consequences of joblessness, the study aims to move beyond statistics and provide a more nuanced understanding of unemployment's human and societal impact. These insights are intended to inform discussions on employment policy, social support systems, and labour market inclusion across Europe.

The findings of the study reveal a complex and multifaceted picture of unemployment across Europe. Participants' accounts highlight not only the economic strain associated with joblessness, but also its profound psychological, social, and relational effects. The results illustrate how experiences of unemployment vary according to individual circumstances, national contexts, and levels of institutional support, while also uncovering common challenges shared across countries. Together, these insights provide an empirical foundation for understanding how unemployment is lived and perceived, setting the stage for a more detailed examination of its key impacts and patterns.

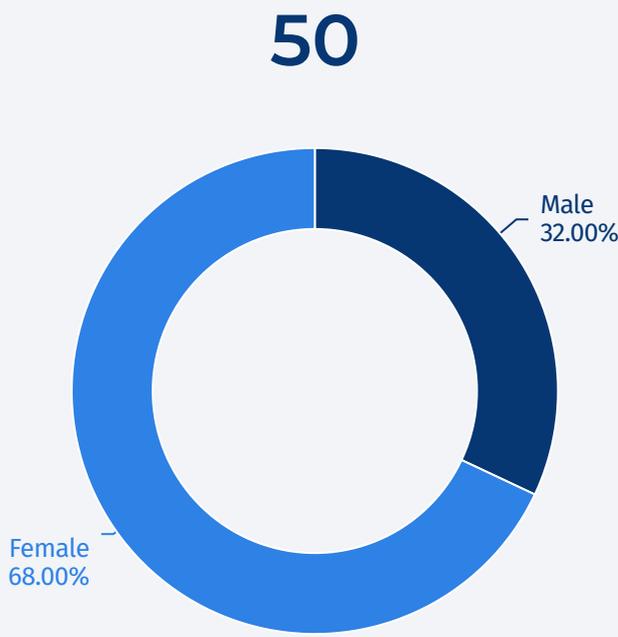
Key Findings

This section presents the key findings of the study, drawing on responses to a range of demographic, socioeconomic, and experiential questions. The results explore variations in experiences of unemployment across multiple dimensions, including gender, age, duration of unemployment, citizenship status, level of education, language skills, and individuals' responses and coping strategies during periods of unemployment. By examining these factors alongside participants' lived experiences, the findings highlight how individual backgrounds, structural conditions, and personal reactions intersect to shape distinct pathways into and through unemployment. These results underscore the varied ways in which unemployment is shaped by individual characteristics and broader structural factors across Europe.

1

Key Demographics

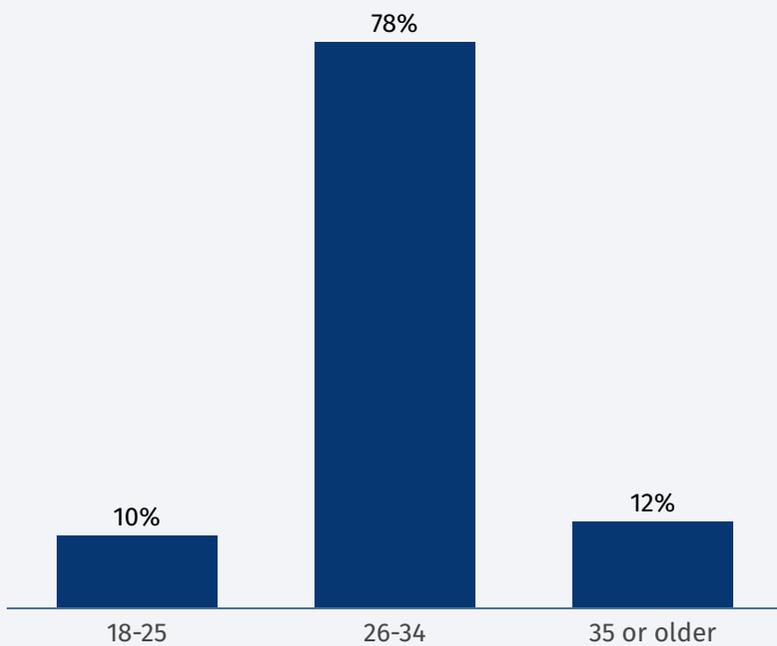
The survey received a total of 50 responses. The majority of respondents were women, accounting for 68% of the sample, while men represented 32%. This gender distribution indicates a higher level of female participation in the study.



2

Age Differences in Unemployment Experiences

Participants were grouped into three age categories for analytical purposes: 18–25, 26–34, and 35 years and older. The majority of respondents fell within the 26–34 age group, accounting for 78% of the sample, while participants aged 18–25 represented 10%, and those aged 35 and older accounted for 12%. This distribution indicates that the findings primarily reflect the experiences of individuals in early to mid-adulthood, while still incorporating perspectives from both younger and older age groups.



3

Citizenship Status

Participants were asked about their citizenship status in order to assess whether experiences of unemployment differed between EU and non-EU citizens. The results show that the vast majority of respondents were EU citizens, accounting for 90% of the sample, while 10% identified as non-EU citizens. This distribution provides contextual insight into the legal and institutional frameworks within which most participants experienced unemployment.



4

Country of Residence

Participants reported residing in a wide range of countries, reflecting diverse national contexts. The largest share of respondents were based in Belgium (45.83%), followed by France (12.5%), Germany and Spain (each 6.25%), and Ireland, Portugal, and Slovenia (each 4.16%). Smaller proportions of participants resided in Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Sweden, Switzerland (each 2.08%). This geographic distribution provides important contextual background for interpreting the findings, particularly given differences in national labour markets and social protection systems.

-  **Austria**
-  **Belgium**
-  **Cyprus**
-  **Finland**
-  **France**
-  **Germany**
-  **Ireland**
-  **Italy**
-  **Latvia**
-  **Luxembourg**
-  **Portugal**
-  **Slovenia**
-  **Spain**
-  **Sweden**
-  **Switzerland**

5

Years of Work Experience

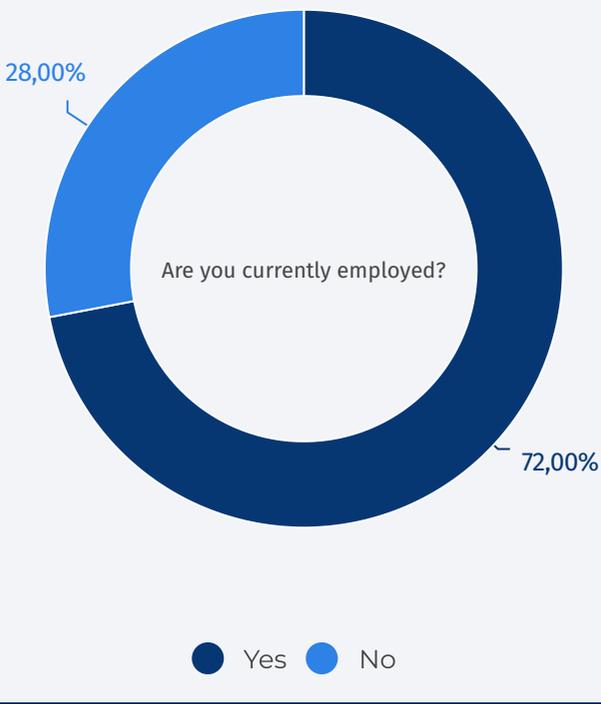
Participants were asked about their total years of work experience, including internships and traineeships. The majority of respondents reported having four or more years of experience (66%), while 18% indicated three years of experience, 12% reported two years, and 6% reported one year of work experience. This distribution suggests that most participants entered unemployment with substantial prior exposure to the labour market.



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Current Employment Status

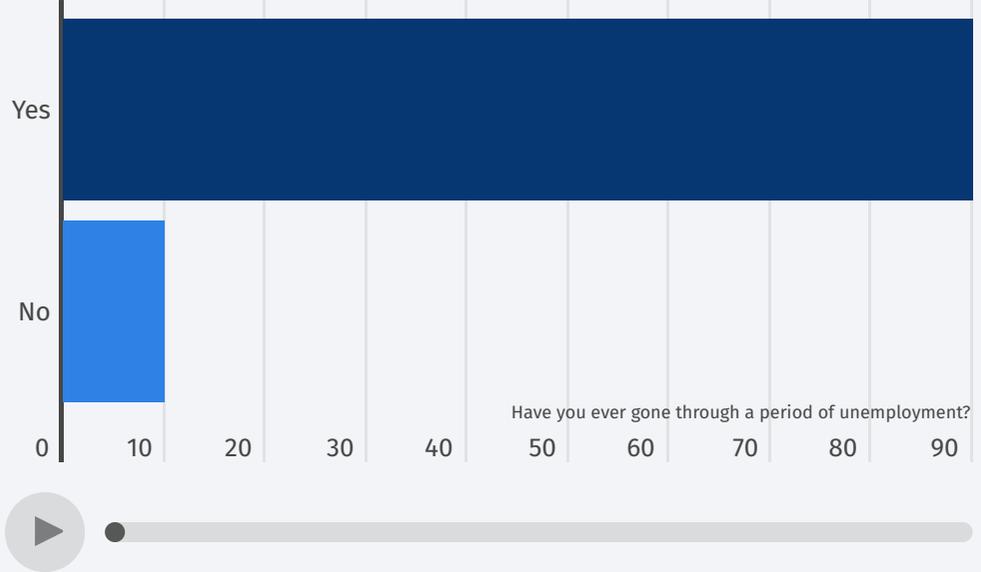
Participants were asked about their current employment status at the time of the survey. The results indicate that 72% of respondents were employed, while 28% reported that they were not employed at the moment. This information provides important context for interpreting participants' reflections on unemployment and labour market experiences.



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History of Unemployment

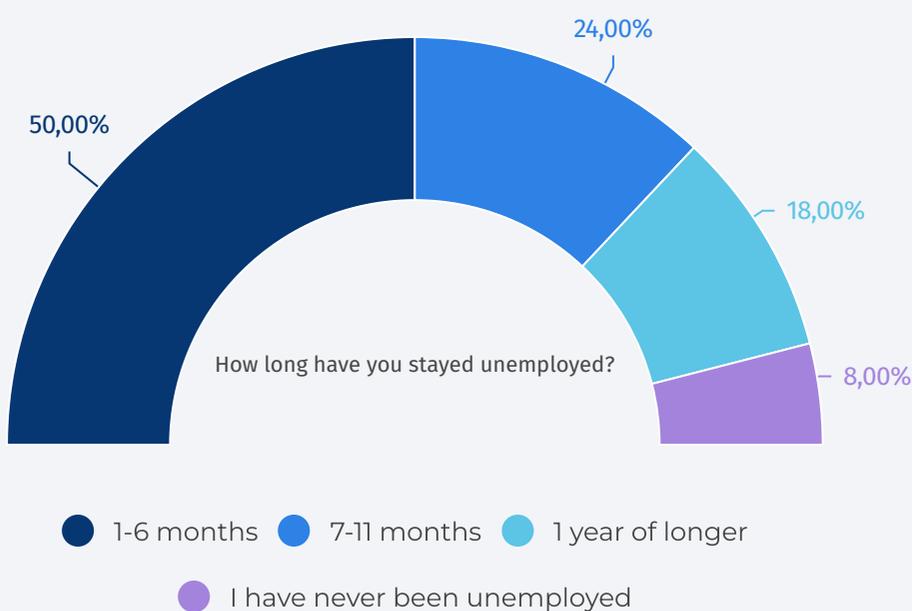
Participants were asked whether they had ever experienced a period of unemployment. The findings show that the vast majority of respondents (90%) reported having gone through at least one period of unemployment, while 10% indicated that they had not. This confirms that most participants were able to draw on direct personal experience when reflecting on unemployment in the survey.



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Duration of Unemployment

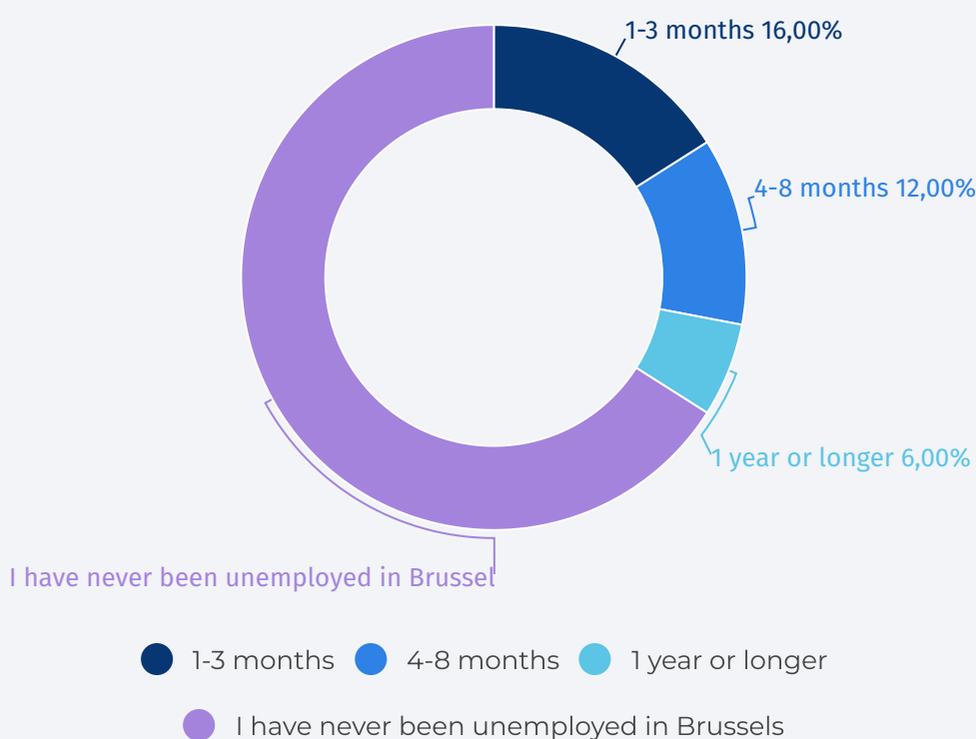
Participants were asked about the duration of their unemployment experiences. Half of the respondents (50%) reported being unemployed for a period of 1 to 6 months, while 24% indicated an unemployment duration of 7 to 11 months. A further 18% experienced unemployment lasting one year or longer, and 8% reported that they had never been unemployed. These results illustrate variation in both the length and intensity of unemployment experiences among participants.



9

Duration of Unemployment in Brussels

Participants who had experienced unemployment in Brussels were asked about the duration of that period. The results show that 16% of respondents reported being unemployed in Brussels for 1 to 3 months, 12% for 4 to 8 months, and 6% for one year or longer. The majority of participants (66%) indicated that they had never experienced unemployment in Brussels. This distribution highlights that unemployment experiences in Brussels were not shared by most respondents, but varied in duration among those who had such experiences.



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Responses to Unemployment

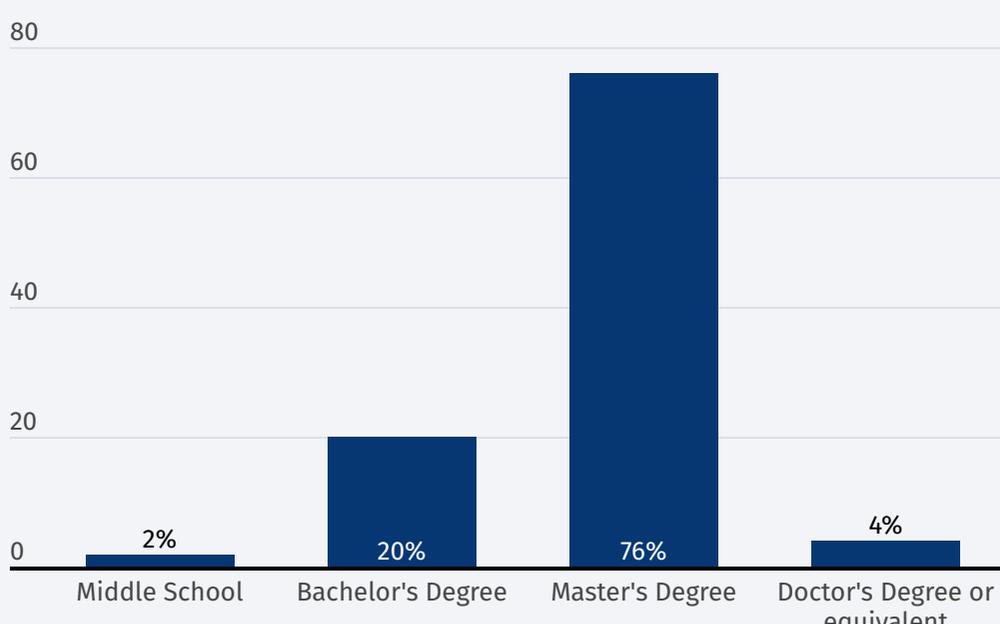
Participants were asked how they typically respond when they become unemployed. The results indicate that over half of respondents (54%) reported taking one day at a time, while 32% indicated experiencing anxiety during periods of unemployment. A smaller proportion of participants (16%) selected none of the provided options. These findings reflect differing emotional and coping responses to unemployment among participants.



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Level of Education

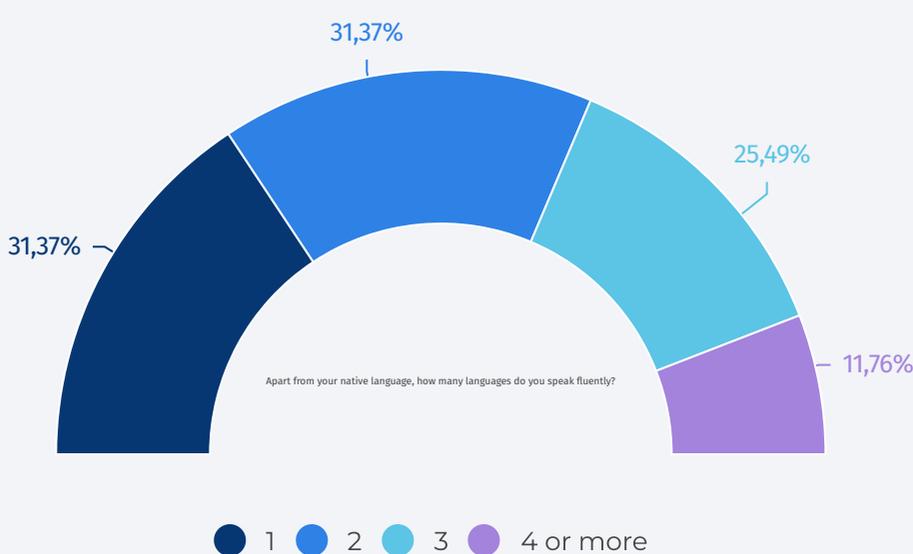
Participants were asked about their highest level of education attained. The results show that the majority of respondents held a master's degree (76%), followed by bachelor's degrees (20%). A smaller proportion reported holding a doctoral degree or equivalent (4%), while 2% indicated middle school as their highest level of education. This distribution reflects a highly educated sample.



12

Foreign Language Proficiency

Participants were asked how many languages, in addition to their native language, they speak fluently or at an advanced level. The results show that 32% of respondents reported speaking one additional language, while an equal proportion (32%) indicated speaking two additional languages. A further 26% reported proficiency in three additional languages, and 12% indicated speaking four or more languages. These findings highlight a generally high level of multilingual competence among participants.



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Participant Reflections

"The level of competition is extremely high: most positions I have applied for attracted between 200 and 500 applicants, suggesting that in certain fields there are substantially more qualified candidates than available jobs."



"This reality contrasts sharply with political narratives that emphasise an abundance of available jobs and frame unemployment primarily as an individual failure to seek work."

"The employment environment in Brussels appears to penalise non-linear career paths. As a dual citizen who has worked in several countries, my diverse professional background could be considered an asset; however, in Brussels it is often perceived as a disadvantage, as there is a strong preference for linear trajectories where education, internships, and professional experience align strictly within the same field."



"Outside of the EU institutional environment, language requirements present an additional barrier. Without fluent proficiency in both French and Dutch, applying for many positions in Brussels feels futile, particularly given current political pressures that have increased demand for Dutch-speaking candidates."

"For individuals seeking to enter the non-profit sector, budget cuts, intense competition for grants, and broader fears of financial instability have significantly reduced the availability of mid-level positions, as many professionals remain in their roles due to uncertainty."



"I frequently encounter officer or coordinator positions that offer salaries lower than the monthly unemployment benefits available in Belgium for a 38-hour workweek, raising questions about the sustainability and accessibility of such roles."

Conclusion

This study set out to move beyond aggregate unemployment statistics and to capture the lived realities of unemployment across diverse European contexts. Drawing on participants' demographic profiles, employment histories, and personal reflections, the findings reveal a labour market marked by structural rigidity, heightened competition, and growing misalignment between policy narratives and everyday experiences.

While the findings do not claim to represent the full complexity of the European employment landscape – particularly given that broader participation from individuals with more varied backgrounds would have strengthened the analysis – they nonetheless offer valuable insight into patterns and experiences that are often underrepresented in quantitative labour market data. As such, the results open important space for further reflection, discussion, and critical examination of current employment frameworks.

The results show that unemployment is not confined to those with limited qualifications or work experience. On the contrary, most respondents were highly educated, multilingual, and had accumulated several years of professional experience, including internships and traineeships. Yet many still experienced repeated or prolonged periods of unemployment, often following temporary contracts, traineeships, or organisational closures. Duration of unemployment varied, but even short periods were frequently accompanied by anxiety, uncertainty, and a sense of stagnation, particularly among younger and mid-career professionals.

Participants' accounts further highlight systemic barriers that disproportionately affect individuals with non-linear career paths, cross-border experience, or those seeking to transition between sectors. In Brussels especially, respondents pointed to rigid expectations around age, career progression, language requirements, and prior institutional experience, as well as to the paradox of job offers that provide remuneration below unemployment benefits. The combination of intense competition – often involving hundreds of applicants per position – has created an environment where stability is increasingly difficult to attain, even for well-qualified candidates.

Taken together, these findings challenge prevailing policy discourses that frame unemployment primarily as an individual responsibility or a matter of insufficient job-seeking effort. Instead, the evidence points to a labour market in which structural constraints, institutional practices, and broader political and economic pressures play a decisive role in shaping employment outcomes.

This calls for urgent action. EU institutions, national policymakers, employers, and civil society stakeholders must acknowledge the growing disconnect between labour market realities and existing employment frameworks. There is a clear need for policies that recognise non-linear career trajectories, ensure fair and adequate remuneration, expand access to stable mid-level positions, and align language and experience requirements with realistic labour market conditions. Without such reforms, there is a serious risk of normalising precariousness, eroding trust in institutions, and losing a generation of skilled, motivated individuals to disengagement or forced career compromises.

Addressing unemployment in Europe requires not only more jobs, but better, fairer, and more inclusive employment pathways. The voices captured in this study underscore that, even when limited in scope, empirical insights grounded in lived experience can serve as a catalyst for deeper reflection, informed debate, and meaningful change – and that the cost of continued inaction is one Europe can no longer afford.