

Youth Employment in Thailand: Current Landscape and Pathways to Greater Inclusion

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A. Demographics of the Labor Market and Youth Employment in Thailand

Thailand's total population stands at approximately 70 million, of whom 59.5 million are aged 15 years and above. Of this figure, 40.2 million participate in the labor force, with 39.7 million in employment and approximately 0.3 million registered as unemployed.¹ Young workers aged 15 to 24 constitute 3.3 million, representing 8.2 percent of the total workforce.² Within this youth employment cohort, 58 percent are engaged in the formal sector, while the remaining 42 percent operate in the informal economy.³

Thailand has historically maintained one of the lowest unemployment rates, consistently hovering at or below one percent. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a modest rise to 1.6 percent in 2021,⁴ before gradually declining to 0.7 percent as of December 2025.⁵ Notwithstanding the overall low unemployment rate, youth unemployment presents a more concerning picture. As of the latest available data, the youth unemployment rate stands at 5.1 percent, representing approximately 188,000 persons — accounting for roughly 63 percent of the total unemployed population.⁶

Notably, the educational profile of unemployed individuals reveals a structural mismatch in the labor market: approximately 52 percent of unemployed persons hold a college degree, while 17 percent are secondary school graduates,⁷ suggesting that unemployment in Thailand is disproportionately concentrated among more educated youth rather than being a product of low educational attainment.

A persistent structural challenge within Thailand's youth labor market is the phenomenon of young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). In the third quarter of 2022, approximately 1.2 million young people — representing 35 percent of the youth population — were classified under NEET status.⁸ Women comprised nearly two-thirds of this group.⁹ The NEET condition was found to be particularly pronounced among

¹ National Statistical Office of Thailand, *Number of Employed Persons in Formal and Informal Sectors Classified by Age Group, Sex, Region and Province, 2012–2025*, NSO, https://www.nso.go.th/nsoweb/nso/statistics_and_indicators?impt_branch=301#gsc.tab=0 (last visited Feb. 23, 2026).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ UNICEF Thailand, *In-Depth Research on Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) in Thailand 24* (2022), <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/media/10746/file/In-depth%20research%20on%20youth%20NEET%20in%20Thailand.pdf>.

⁵ National Statistical Office of Thailand, *Report of Labor Force Survey December 2025* (Jan. 2026), https://www.nso.go.th/nsoweb/storage/survey_detail/2026/20260122095359_37698.pdf.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ International Labour Organization, *Promoting Youth Employment in Songkhla and Yala, Thailand: A Situation Analysis 3* (2023), https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_922746.pdf.

⁹ *Id.*

youth with post-secondary education and among those from both low-income and high-income households, indicating a non-linear relationship between socioeconomic background and labor market engagement. Contributing factors identified in the literature include limited employment opportunities and financial constraints, absence of career aspirations, inadequate career guidance, low motivation, poor self-esteem, and labor market discouragement.¹⁰

B. Legal Framework Governing Youth Employment in Thailand

Under Thai law, the minimum age for entering into an employment contract is 15 years.¹¹ While young workers are broadly afforded the same legal status as adult employees, the Labor Protection Act B.E. 2541 (1998) (hereinafter “LPA”) establishes a number of additional protective provisions specifically applicable to workers between the ages of 15 and 18, reflecting the legislature’s recognition of this group’s particular vulnerability in the employment context.

With respect to procedural obligations, employers who engage workers in this age group are required to notify the competent labor inspector within 15 days of hiring, thereby enabling enhanced oversight of the employment conditions of young workers.¹² In terms of working conditions, the LPA prohibits young workers aged 15 to 18 from working during night hours — defined as the period between 22:00 and 06:00¹³ — as well as from performing overtime work or working on public holidays.¹⁴ Furthermore, young workers are entitled to a mandatory rest period of at least one hour after four consecutive hours of work, a more protective standard than the five-hour threshold applicable to adult workers.¹⁵

The LPA also prescribes certain categories of work and workplaces that are entirely prohibited for workers under the age of 18. These include metal smelting operations, work involving hazardous chemicals or toxic substances, and work in high-risk environments such as slaughterhouses, gambling establishments, and entertainment venues.¹⁶

With regard to maritime work, the law draws a further age-based distinction: workers under the age of 16 are entirely prohibited from engaging in such work, while workers between the ages of 16 and 18 who are employed on vessels are prohibited from performing work at night.¹⁷ For dock work¹⁸ and fishing,¹⁹ the protective threshold is set uniformly at 18 years of age, with the law prohibiting any worker under that age from engaging in either category of employment.

Beyond restrictions on working conditions, the LPA provides for enhanced access to professional development opportunities for young workers. Employees under 18 years of age are entitled to training leave of up to 30 days per year to attend meetings, training programs, or seminars²⁰ — a provision that reflects a broader policy orientation toward balancing employment with the continued education and skill development of young workers.

A further noteworthy aspect of the legal framework governing youth employment concerns the minimum wage applicable to young workers. As a general principle, all employees in Thailand are subject to a uniform daily

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Labor Protection Act B.E. 2541, § 44 (1998) (Thail.).

¹² *Id.* § 45.

¹³ *Id.* § 47.

¹⁴ *Id.* § 48.

¹⁵ *Id.* § 46.

¹⁶ *Id.* § 50.

¹⁷ Maritime Labor Act B.E. 2558, § 15 (2015) (Thail.).

¹⁸ Ministerial Regulation No. 11 (B.E. 2541) issued under the Labor Protection Act B.E. 2541, art. 4 (1998) (Thail.).

¹⁹ Ministerial Regulation on Labor Protection in Sea Fishing Work B.E. 2565, art. 4 (2022) (Thail.).

²⁰ *Id.* § 52.

minimum wage,²¹ the rate of which varies by province, with the exception of certain categories of workers possessing specialized skills. Notably, Thai labor law does not prescribe an hourly wage rate; rather, an employee is entitled to the full daily minimum wage regardless of the number of hours worked within that day. This structural feature of the wage regime effectively creates a disincentive for employers to engage workers on a part-time or hourly basis, as the cost of hiring remains fixed at the daily rate irrespective of actual hours rendered.

This arrangement, however, presents a particular challenge for young persons over the age of 15 who are legally eligible to work but remain enrolled in formal education. The absence of a flexible hourly wage mechanism effectively forecloses the possibility of meaningful part-time employment for this group, leaving student workers with limited options to supplement their income while simultaneously pursuing their studies. In recognition of this structural gap, the government introduced in 2005 a dedicated hourly minimum wage applicable specifically to students engaged in part-time work during the course of their studies.²² The current rate is prescribed at 40 THB per hour.²³

This special wage regime operates within a defined set of working conditions tailored to the circumstances of student workers. On school days, student employees are permitted to work no more than four hours per day, while the permissible limit is extended to six hours per day on weekends and public holidays.²⁴ In addition, consistent with the broader protective framework under the LPA, the nature of work must be appropriate for young workers — safe, non-hazardous, and free from occupational risk. Student workers under this scheme are also prohibited from working in certain categories of establishments, including casinos, pubs, bars, saunas, and restaurants or entertainment venues with host/hostess service.²⁵

C. Structural Challenges in Youth Employment and Support for Transitioning

A persistent structural challenge confronting Thailand's youth labor market is the pronounced mismatch between the qualifications produced by the education system and the actual demands of the labor market. Research conducted by the Bank of Thailand indicates that the positions with the highest labor demand are those requiring unskilled or low-skilled labor, such as domestic workers and general laborers, followed by technical occupations requiring practical competencies, most notably welding and mechanical work.²⁶ Critically, none of these high-demand occupations require a university degree. This stands in stark contrast to the educational profile of the unemployed population, of whom over 50 percent hold a college diploma, underscoring a deep qualification mismatch embedded within the structure of the Thai labor market.²⁷

The mismatch is further compounded by an imbalance in the composition of university graduates. Data from 2019 reveals that 32 percent of college graduates majored in business administration and law, while 13 percent graduated in engineering, industrial, and construction fields, and 10 percent in arts and humanities.²⁸ Although demand for skilled digital workers — particularly computer programmers and data scientists — remains high

²¹ As of March 2026, the minimum daily wage rate ranges from THB 337 to THB 400, depending on province.

²² Wage Committee Notification on Minimum Hourly Wage Rates B.E. 2548 (2005) (Thail.).

²³ Wage Committee Notification on Hourly Wage Rates for Students (No. 2), art. 3, B.E. 2555 (2012) (Thail.).

²⁴ *Id.* art. 3(1.1).

²⁵ *Id.* art. 3(2).

²⁶ Pimchanok How, Kawalin Sriwichayangkul & Pattareya Nualnai, *Youth Unemployment: A Look at the Labor Market for New Graduates in the COVID-19 Era* [Youth Unemployment: A Look at the Labor Market for New Graduates in the COVID-19 Era], Regional Letter (PHE & O. AOE), No. 5 (2022), https://www.bot.or.th/content/dam/bot/documents/th/research-and-publications-pdf/articles-and-publications/articles/regional/2022/2565_RL_05_Youth_Unemployment_COVID19.pdf.

²⁷ National Statistical Office of Thailand, *Report of Labor Force Survey December 2025* (Jan. 2026), https://www.nso.go.th/nsoweb/storage/survey_detail/2026/20260122095359_37698.pdf.

²⁸ Pimchanok How, Kawalin Sriwichayangkul & Pattareya Nualnai, *supra* note 26.

D. Job creation and employment support measures

A further dimension of the legal framework governing youth employment and labor market integration is the legislative regime on skill development. The Skill Development Promotion Act B.E. 2545 (2002) and its subsequent amendments establish a comprehensive system of skill standards, assessments, and quality assurance measures designed to assist individuals in enhancing their occupational competencies. The Act defines ‘skill development’ as a process through which working-age individuals acquire and strengthen agility, knowledge, ability, work ethics, and a positive career orientation through structured skill training.⁴⁰ Notably, the Act establishes non-mandatory incentive mechanisms aimed at encouraging employers to recognize and invest in the skill training and development of their employees through tax benefits.⁴¹ The Act further imposes an obligation on employers of a prescribed size to either provide skill development training directly to their employees or contribute to the Skill Development Fund, thereby enabling the government to subsidize training costs for workers who seek to develop their own occupational competencies.⁴²

To date, Thailand has not established a standing or permanent employment policy specifically targeting young people as a distinct labor market cohort. The sole instance in which the government introduced a dedicated youth employment initiative was in direct response to the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the barriers to labor market entry for new graduates became particularly acute. In 2020, the government launched the Co-Payment Program (โครงการส่งเสริมการจ้างงานใหม่สำหรับผู้จบการศึกษาใหม่), a wage subsidy scheme under which the state subsidized up to 50 percent of the monthly wages of newly graduated workers engaged under one-year fixed-term employment contracts with participating public and private sector organizations. The program was conceived as a temporary countercyclical measure aimed at incentivizing employers to hire new graduates during a period of exceptional economic contraction. However, the program concluded at the end of 2021 and has not been renewed or replaced by any comparable initiative. The absence of a successor program, or indeed any structural policy framework aimed at facilitating youth labor market entry beyond crisis conditions, reflects a broader gap in Thailand's employment policy architecture.⁴³

Moreover, the country continues to lack a coherent and integrated policy framework specifically designed to facilitate the transition of young people from education to employment or further training. A targeted policy response to the youth NEET phenomenon emerged only recently, with the introduction of a specific NEET reduction indicator under the 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP), while the Ministry of Labour (MOL) remains the sole ministry to have addressed the NEET issue within its Action Plan (2023–2027). The absence of cross-ministerial policy coherence is particularly acute given the fragmented mandates of the relevant agencies: whereas the MOL focuses on promoting employability among the working-age population aged 15 and above, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) confine their services to children and youth up to the age of 18. This institutional gap leaves a significant proportion of young people — particularly those aged 18 and above who have left school without qualifications and discouraged jobless youth — without access to meaningful support for improving their life prospects. Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs) for youth, which typically encompass employment services, labor market training, subsidized employment, and support for entrepreneurship, remain underdeveloped and insufficiently accessible in Thailand. Notably, less than one percent of Thai youth aged 15 to 24 are business owners, of whom 85 percent are men, reflecting the inadequacy of existing entrepreneurship support mechanisms in terms of both specialized training and access to startup financing. These deficiencies collectively underscore the urgent need for an integrated national NEET strategy, led by the MOL in

⁴⁰ Skill Development Promotion Act B.E. 2545, § 5 (2002) (Thail.).

⁴¹ *Id.* §§ 33–34.

⁴² *Id.* § 29.

⁴³ Thailand Development Research Institute, “*การประเมินผลของโครงการ (Co-payment) และ ประสิทธิภาพของโครงการ (Effectiveness of the Government's Co-Payment Program for New Graduates)*,” (May 14, 2021), <https://tdri.or.th/2021/05/covid-123/>.

collaboration with relevant ministries, and supported by a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure effective cross-sectoral coordination and accountability.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ UNICEF Thailand, *supra* note 4, at 73–75.