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Exploring the Influence of Crime on NEET Rates: A Regional Analysis of Italy

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Abstract: The occurrence of criminal activities has the potential to hinder socioeconomic advancement, preventing individuals from investing in human capital and pursuing employment opportunities. Our investigation focuses on the hypothesis that the NEET (not in education, employment, or training) rate is related to crime levels. Through an econometric analysis based on regional data, we examine the impact of crimes against property and against persons on NEET rates within central-northern and southern Italy, while controlling for prevalent determinants of the NEET phenomenon. Our findings reveal that, compared with prevailing discouragement factors such as youth unemployment and lack of interest in tertiary education, crime exerts a more pronounced influence on elevating NEET rates. This effect is particularly evident in the relatively less developed southern regions, where violent crimes, although relatively uncommon, may disproportionately contribute to feelings of apprehension and uncertainty regarding future prospects.

Keywords: NEET; crime; human capital; unemployment; school dropout



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1. Introduction

The economic and social costs of crime are extensively documented and scrutinized within the scholarly literature [1], with numerous criminal activities noted to yield significant adverse impacts on the economy (e.g., [2]). Specifically, crime has the potential to influence entrepreneurial and investment decisions [3], thereby undermining future prospects for societies most at risk [4]. Moreover, the media often accentuates the repercussions of crime, thereby exacerbating overall distress and diminishing quality of life for both victims and society as a whole, owing to heightened community apprehension [5,6].

In this study, we examine the macroeconomic impact of various forms of criminal activity on not in education, employment, or training (NEET) rates across Italian regions during the period of 2005–2019. Our investigation is motivated by the recognition that crime influences economic performance, thereby affecting employment levels [7]. At the same time, crime can alter the job preferences and opportunities of young individuals and notably hinder the accumulation of human capital [8]. Essentially, the presence of diverse criminal activities and the associated apprehension they instil tend to heighten the risk of unemployment while diminishing incentives for educational investment. These adverse effects of criminal activities are intricately linked to the primary determinants of the NEET phenomenon.

Italy constitutes a notable case study for two reasons. First, this nation faces significant challenges in the cultivation of human capital [9], resulting in a level of educational advancement—as somewhat mirrored in the associated NEET status—that is disheartening compared to other developed economies [10]. Second, numerous regions within Italy grapple with elevated economic and social ramifications (e.g., diminished investment, heightened unemployment) attributable to the prevalence of assorted criminal activities [11].

Our investigation adds to the substantial body of literature concerning the impact of socioeconomic context on the conditions of “fragility”, precariousness, and insecurity

among younger cohorts, often leading to their disengagement from active participation in society, culminating in their NEET status [12]. Our study contributes to exploring the influence of criminal activity on human capital or its associated indicators. Our results furnish macroeconomic insights that can inform future inquiries focusing on the significance of individual attributes among at-risk youth, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the issue [13].

Indeed, the impact of various forms of illegal activities on the NEET phenomenon remains poorly explored. Specifically, aside from the study conducted by Karyda [14], there is a lack of additional insights concerning the correlation between residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas characterized by elevated crime rates and the propensity for young individuals to transition to NEET status. Our research also builds on the well-known repercussions of crime on education and employment, such as the need for specific interventions to help individuals involved return to study, training, and work after criminal experiences or imprisonment [15,16].

Furthermore, the well-known Italian socioeconomic dualism between the “wealthy” Center-North and the relatively “poor” South (e.g., [17]) suggests segmentation into two macro-areas for comparative analysis, each of which is expected to exhibit distinct responses based on local characteristics. The hypothesized mechanism linking heightened criminal activity to the NEET phenomenon suggests a greater prevalence of evidence within the southern area. Within this geographical area, NEET rates have soared above 30% in certain regions in recent years, as indicated by data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Moreover, the entrenched presence of organized criminal activities historically rooted in the South, alongside the deliberate propagation of illicit practices, is widely acknowledged, as are their profound repercussions on local communities (e.g., [18,19]). For example, Coniglio et al. [20] observed a significant adverse impact stemming from the existence of organized crime on the acquisition of human capital in this area. However, this observation does not suggest exclusivity to the southern regions in terms of this supposed relationship. Indeed, it is recognized that the incidence of certain crimes (such as theft as opposed to homicide) correlates with the degree of economic development [21]. For example, according to ISTAT data, in 2019, 11.8 families per 1000 experienced home burglaries in the Center-North, compared to 6.9 in the South. Consequently, we utilize two proxies for criminal activity: crime against property and crime against persons.

With the aim of addressing the research question of how crime can influence the NEET rate in Italian regions, we conduct a panel analysis spanning from 2005 to 2019 that tests the role of the two types of crime (both being proxies for crime; they are tested separately) and the main causes of the NEET phenomenon recognized in regional studies. Additionally, in light of the well-known “North–South” dualism in Italy, we present the results with a focus on two distinct regional areas: the central-northern and southern regions. This analysis considers the potential for reverse causality between the NEET rate and crime proxies through the implementation of a two-stage least squares (2SLS) estimation method.

The structure of this article is as follows: Sections 1.1 and 1.2 delineate some of the causes of the NEET phenomenon and provide a brief overview of the Italian context; Section 2 details our methodology and data sources; Section 3 presents our findings concerning Central-North and South Italy; and finally, Sections 4 and 5 offer discussion and concluding remarks, respectively.

1.1. Some Causes of the NEET Phenomenon

Numerous studies have contributed to the identification of the risk factors that influence individuals’ risk of becoming NEET. Some analyses have focused on individual characteristics, such as low skill levels [22,23], low self-esteem [24], cognitive and socioemotional competencies, and aspirations and expectations [25,26]. Conversely, other studies have explored factors related to schooling and education, such as school dropout rates [27,28], learning difficulties [29], educational and training levels [22,28], and school grades [30]. In

addition to these aspects, there is a complexity of life after studies, namely, the school-to-work transition and distrust and fear in contexts with high unemployment [31].

Further research has examined the relationships between personal health factors, such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, social phobia, psychosis, and eating disorders, and the increased likelihood of unemployment and consequently increased NEET status [24,32]. Additionally, factors associated with various addictions, including smoking, alcohol, food, and drugs, have been identified as contributors to adverse outcomes, thus potentially facilitating the transition of young individuals to an NEET status [32–35].

Furthermore, evidence is found in the literature about the role of family background, whose socioeconomic status affects study and work opportunities, both within the original family and potentially within the one formed by young NEETs, with the responsibilities and constraints that this entails [36,37].

On the other hand, there is limited research examining the relationship between youth and the impact of their living environment. Indeed, a disorganized district with a high crime rate can emerge as a risk factor predisposing young individuals to become NEETs. Involvement in criminal activities can result in significant social stigmatization, affecting employment and training opportunities, thereby causing young people to disengage from such activities and become NEETs [14,38]. Similarly, the association between youth, criminal behavior, and legal charges is concerning, as it may steer young individuals towards NEET status. Legal charges and convictions may impede young people's access to the job market and discourage them from actively seeking employment, increasing their risk of becoming NEETs [38].

1.2. The NEET Phenomenon in Italy

The scientific literature on the NEET phenomenon in Italy, much like the international one, is extensive and encompasses studies from various disciplines, including sociology, economics, education, and the labor market [39]. According to data provided by Eurofound (as of [40]), in the post-pandemic era, the working conditions, living conditions, and psychological well-being of Italian youth have all deteriorated.

Some studies offer a broader perspective on the NEET situation, which is heavily influenced by the regional context [41]. In northern regions of Italy, the NEET status among young people is less frequent than that in southern regions, where job searches tend to be prolonged, depleting both social and human capital. Consequently, NEET status creates a sort of 'scar effect', justifying the prolonged absence from employment [42]. Continued NEET status tends to push young people into a downwards spiral, leading to reduced civic participation [43] and instilling a sense of disillusionment with the world around them [44]. Hence, a socioeconomic context marked by poverty and limited opportunities influences the likelihood of young people becoming NEETs [45].

Young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds can be particularly susceptible, especially in the absence of effective policy support to education and employment. Public policies, such as rehabilitation programs, social reintegration, and vocational training opportunities, have the potential to shape the trajectories of young people by decreasing their likelihood of becoming NEETs [46].

The association between engagement in criminal activity and the likelihood of entering the NEET status is intricate. Therefore, our study explores uncharted territory, specifically examining the impact of crime on proxies of human capital. We believe that participation in criminal activities may perpetuate a cycle of criminal behavior, heightening the risk of individuals becoming NEETs.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Method

To empirically analyze the determinants of the NEET phenomenon and on the basis of the background presented in Section 1, we assume that the regional NEET rate can be modeled as follows:

$$\text{NEET}_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{CRIME}_{i,t} + \sum \gamma_n X_{ni,t} + \tau_t + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \quad (1)$$

where $\text{NEET}_{i,t}$ is the dependent variable and captures the NEET rate, while $\text{CRIME}_{i,t}$ indicates the two dimensions of crime (i.e., the rate of homicides and the rate of home burglaries). We consider data for the 21 Italian regions and autonomous provinces (i) for the period 2005–2019 (t). The regression also includes a set of control variables ($X_{ni,t}$), while τ_t , μ_i , and $\varepsilon_{i,t}$ represent the time dummies, the time-invariant characteristics, and the idiosyncratic error term, respectively. We analyze both Italy as a whole (all regions) and the two macro-areas separately: the central-northern area (composed of 11 regions and 2 autonomous provinces) and the southern area (composed of 8 regions).

We are aware of a possible reverse causality problem between an education-related variable such as our dependent variable (NEET rate) and the proxies of crime. In fact, education notably contributes to influencing numerous criminal activities [47]. For instance, Groot and van den Brink [48] found that an increase in years of schooling tends to decrease many types of crime (e.g., shoplifting and threat) and increase others (tax fraud), while Lochner [49] observes that investment and time spent in education affect the opportunities and returns from criminal activities, shifting one's lifestyle toward education and work and away from crime.

Thus, we take into account this endogeneity issue by adopting an instrumental variable estimation approach based on a two-stage least squares procedure. The purpose is to obtain exogenous variation in criminality, and the economic literature provides several solutions for these exclusion restrictions. In particular, our instrumental variables represent two commonly acknowledged drivers of criminal activity. The selection of these variables is not an easy task and is strongly conditioned by the availability of macro data at the local level. Specifically, we focus on two indicators that reflect the level of satisfaction with aspects of daily life, namely, the percentage of individuals reporting complete dissatisfaction with family relationships and with the economic situation (sourced from the ISTAT dataset: aspects of daily life). Satisfaction with living conditions is an element that has been proven to have a close relationship with criminal activities [50]. In this sense, lower social controls induce subjects to expeditiously satisfy their own needs through delinquency, since low commitments and attachment increase frustration and anger [51], and for example, high life satisfaction has proven to reduce acts of violence [52].

To verify the relevance and orthogonality of the external instruments, at the bottom of each table, we report the underidentification test, which helps evaluate if the correlation between the excluded instruments and endogenous variables is high enough, and Hansen's [53] J-test is used for overidentifying restrictions when the standard errors are robust to heteroskedasticity (orthogonality). The results of both tests confirm the validity of the selected instrumental variables.

2.2. Data

Our dependent variable is the percentage of individuals aged 15–24 classified as NEETs within the respective population. This measure is commonly utilized for examining Italian NEETs (e.g., [54]) and is employed in regional (NUTS-2 level) analyses (e.g., [55]). To our knowledge, the NEET rate cannot be divided into the categories of inactive and unemployed NEETs due to the unavailability of proper data at the local level for the period considered.

In our dataset, we incorporate two proxies of criminality utilized in regional analysis [56] as regressors. These proxies refer to the rates of crimes against property and against

individuals. The first variable denotes the rate of home burglaries (referred to as *THEFTS* in Table 1), a type of crime more prevalent on average in wealthier areas, predominantly in the Center-North. The second variable represents the homicide rate (labeled *VIOLENT*), which is higher in the South (refer to Table 2). Our selection of these two proxies aligns with the metrics examined by Carboni and Detotto [57] in their estimation of the economic cost of crime in Italy, given that robbery and murder are considered the most reliable indicators within crime data.

Table 1. Variable definitions and sources.

Variable	Definition	Source
<i>NEET</i>	Incidence of young NEETs aged 15–24 (not employed and not in education) on the respective population	ISTAT
<i>VIOLENT</i>	Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants	ISTAT—BES ^a on Ministry of the Interior data
<i>THEFTS</i>	Home burglaries per 1000 families	ISTAT—BES ^a elaborations on ISTAT citizen security survey and on Ministry of the Interior data
<i>YUR</i>	Percentage of people looking for work aged 15–24, in the labor force of the corresponding age group	ISTAT—territorial indicators for development policies
<i>HC</i>	Percentage of the population aged 25–64 with tertiary education (ISCED ^b 5–8)	EUROSTAT
<i>POVERTY</i>	Risk of poverty, percentage values	ISTAT—BES ^a on Eu-Silc data ^c
<i>GDP</i>	log of gross domestic product per capita at 2015 values (euros)	ISTAT
<i>DROPOUT</i>	Population aged 18–24 years with at most a middle school certificate, who have not completed a professional training course recognized by the region and lasting more than 2 years, and who do not attend school courses or participate in training activities (percentage)	EUROSTAT
<i>SC</i>	Volunteer activities (percentage)	ISTAT—BES ^a , survey: aspects of daily life

^a Benessere E sostenibilità (wellness and sustainability) report. ^b International standard classification of education. ^c Statistics on income and living conditions.

Table 2. Summary statistics.

Variable	Regions	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>NEET</i>	All	315	17.146	6.61	6.5	34
	Center-North	195	13.081	3.134	6.5	20.5
	South	120	23.752	5.318	9.2	34
<i>VIOLENT</i>	All	315	0.779	0.584	0	3.9
	Center-North	195	0.574	0.295	0	1.6
	South	120	1.111	0.761	0	3.9
<i>THEFTS</i>	All	315	10.626	4.408	2.1	22.7
	Center-North	195	12.367	4.351	3.5	22.7
	South	120	7.797	2.717	2.1	14
<i>YUR</i>	All	315	29.745	13.429	5.3	65.1
	Center-North	195	22.504	9.574	5.3	49
	South	120	41.511	10.048	17.1	65.1
<i>HC</i>	All	315	15.795	10.333	9.4	26.1
	Center-North	195	16.792	3.303	10	26.1
	South	120	14.174	2.307	9.4	20.5
<i>POVERTY</i>	All	315	18.621	10.333	5	44.6
	Center-North	195	11.485	3.144	5	21.8
	South	120	30.217	6.825	17.3	44.6

Table 2. Cont.

Variable	Regions	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
GDP	All	315	28,241.26	7806.22	15,844.48	45,875.21
	Center-North	195	33,389.07	4975.39	23,366.85	45,875.21
	South	120	19,876.08	2539.10	15,844.48	26,003.16
DROPOUT	All	315	15.767	5.115	6.7	32.4
	Center-North	195	14.041	3.998	6.7	26.3
	South	120	18.574	5.491	7.4	32.4
SC	All	315	10.506	4.625	4.4	27.3
	Center-North	195	12.667	4.553	5.5	27.3
	South	120	6.994	1.603	4.4	11.2

Source: our elaborations on EUROSTAT and ISTAT data.

We included a set of control variables that can influence the NEET phenomenon.

We examine two primary factors contributing to discouragement among young people. One is the *DROPOUT* rate from education and training paths, as youths who do not receive adequate training or education face economic and social disadvantages compared to those who pursue studies [46]. We also consider the youth unemployment rate (*YUR*) because the discouraging impact of high unemployment rates among young people can be significant in contexts such as Italy, where there are evident challenges in providing employment opportunities for young people [58].

Another independent variable is the proxy for local social capital (*SC*), which is measured by the number of individuals engaged in volunteering activities. Both the quantity of individuals participating in volunteer work and the various motivations driving youth involvement in charitable endeavors contribute to the understanding of the social dynamics among young people, influencing their future trajectories [59]. We also incorporated the *POVERTY* rate, as it is one of the most significant risk factors for youth transitioning to NEET status [60]. Furthermore, we consider a proxy for human capital (*HC*), denoted by the average educational attainment level of the population and its impact on younger generations' educational paths, as well as the significance each region attributes to human capital resources. Similarly, per capita gross domestic product (*GDP*) can serve as a proxy for income, providing insight into the average welfare level, which is a recognized determinant of youth NEET status [61].

The descriptions and sources of the variables used in the econometric model are presented in Table 1.

In Table 2, we present the summary statistics for Italy and the two macro-areas separately, with the aim of illustrating the socioeconomic differences characterizing the Italian "North–South problem".

3. Results

The results for Italy and for the Center-North and South areas are presented in Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5, respectively.

Table 3. Robust two-stage least squares estimation results (all Italian regions).

Dependent Variable: NEET	(1)	(2)
<i>YUR</i>	0.0202 *** (0.002)	0.0107 *** (0.0021)
<i>HC</i>	0.0290 *** (0.0055)	0.0228 *** (0.0045)
<i>POVERTY</i>	0.0032 (0.0053)	0.0021 (0.0036)
<i>GDP</i>	0.0146 (0.2223)	0.0144 (0.1757)

Table 3. Cont.

Dependent Variable: NEET	(1)	(2)
<i>DROPOUT</i>	0.0158 *** (0.0034)	0.0158 *** (0.0031)
<i>SC</i>	0.0016 (0.0058)	0.0009 (0.0042)
<i>VIOLENT</i>	0.2370 *** (0.0707)	
<i>THEFTS</i>		0.0341 *** (0.0072)
Obs.	315	315
N	21	21
R ²	0.64	0.68
Underidentification test (<i>p</i> value)	5.944 (0.051)	10.866 (0.004)
Hansen's J test <i>p</i> value	0.874	0.508

Source: our elaborations on EUROSTAT and ISTAT data. Note: *** statistically significant at the 1% level. Standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity are given in parentheses.

Table 4. Robust two-stage least squares estimation results (central-northern regions).

Dependent Variable: NEET	(3)	(4)
<i>YUR</i>	0.0247 *** (0.0025)	0.0181 *** (0.0055)
<i>HC</i>	0.0208 *** (0.0061)	0.0187 *** (0.0043)
<i>POVERTY</i>	0.0055 (0.0048)	0.0029 (0.005)
<i>GDP</i>	0.3692 (0.3191)	0.147 (0.2868)
<i>DROPOUT</i>	0.0123 *** (0.0026)	0.0118 *** (0.0033)
<i>SC</i>	0.0017 (0.0063)	0.0001 (0.0045)
<i>VIOLENT</i>	0.2108 (0.1447)	
<i>THEFTS</i>		0.017 (0.013)
Obs.	195	195
N	13	13
R ²	0.74	0.77
Underidentification test (<i>p</i> value)	6.819 (0.033)	9.457 (0.009)
Hansen's J test <i>p</i> value	0.887	0.399

Source: our elaborations on EUROSTAT and ISTAT data. *** statistically significant at the 1% level. Standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity are given in parentheses.

Table 5. Robust two-stage least squares estimation results (southern regions).

Dependent Variable: NEET	(5)	(6)
<i>YUR</i>	0.0146 *** (0.0031)	0.0096 *** −0.0016
<i>HC</i>	0.0375 *** (0.01)	0.0189 *** −0.0047
<i>POVERTY</i>	−0.0004 (0.0065)	0.0002 −0.0034
<i>GDP</i>	−0.3094 ** (0.1473)	0.0635 −0.1441

Table 5. Cont.

Dependent Variable: NEET	(5)	(6)
<i>DROPOUT</i>	0.0203 *** (0.0055)	0.0180 *** −0.0038
<i>SC</i>	0.000 (0.0062)	−0.0018 (0.0034)
<i>VIOLENT</i>	0.1839 *** (0.0683)	
<i>THEFTS</i>		0.0357 *** (0.0131)
Obs.	120	120
N	8	8
R ²	0.54	0.71
Underidentification test (<i>p</i> value)	4.000 (0.135)	4.831 (0.089)
Hansen's J test <i>p</i> value	0.588	0.611

Source: our elaborations on EUROSTAT and ISTAT data. Note: ** statistically significant at the 5% level; *** statistically significant at the 1% level. Standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity are given in parentheses.

In Table 3, we observe that the two proxies of criminal activity significantly influence the NEET rate across all regions. The effect of *VIOLENT* has a coefficient approximately eight times greater than that of *THEFTS*, suggesting that the former is the primary indicator of the impact of widespread crime on society. This effect may be mediated by varying perceptions of crime against individuals and property. For instance, Cornaglia et al. ([62] on the effects of crime on mental well-being) described the impact of violent crime on both victims and nonvictims, as well as on social functioning. This would not be the case for property crime.

Both models for Italy indicate that the two phenomena influencing the study and employment prospects of young people—namely, school *DROPOUT* and *YUR*—reveal the fragility of the juvenile condition. Surprisingly, the average *HC* concentration in the adult population also directly impacts the NEET rate. While school *DROPOUT* and *YUR* are evident structural weaknesses in Italy, the role of *HC* could be observed in fostering discouragement, a typical feature of the NEET issue. This implies that young individuals might perceive lower returns from education, as evidenced by those who have invested in advanced education, or even experience widespread frustration with career expectations despite securing better job positions. This phenomenon is well documented in the Italian context [63] and may indicate that advanced education does not necessarily lead to significant wage differentiation in the country [64]. In some cases, individuals with upper secondary education may encounter greater employment opportunities than those with higher qualifications [65].

With the aim of detailing the mechanism hypothesized, we present the results for the central-northern regions in Table 4.

Neither of the crime proxy variables exerts any influence on the NEET rate in the most developed macro-area of the country. The statistically significant control variables remain consistent with those observed in the Italian context (Table 3). Notably, we observe higher coefficients for the *YUR* (compared to those observed in Italy), likely attributable to the pronounced growth of this indicator following the 2007–2008 crisis in the area, contrasting with trends in the rest of the country. This reaffirms how inadequate employment protections for young people have exacerbated their circumstances during periods of economic downturn [66].

In Table 5, we present the results for southern regions.

First, we observe tangible evidence of the North–South divide in Italy. The southern macro-area is renowned for hosting many mafia organizations that have profoundly influenced the past and present state of local development [11], rendering it particularly vulnerable to the ramifications of general crime-related fear [67]. The exacerbating effect on NEET arises from *VIOLENT*. Historically, the prevalence of homicides in southern regions

has surpassed that in the northern regions due to the proliferation of criminal syndicates and a more permissive cultural attitude towards violence [68]. Homicides are more prevalent in the South than are suicides, for instance, and are motivated differently, exhibiting an inverse correlation with civic-mindedness [69], thereby supporting our hypothesis of deeper societal connections.

Moreover, the control variables highlight the complex relationship that the South has with its human capital. Despite high unemployment being a persistent issue in the region, the true challenge for young people stems from human capital. This challenge may be attributed to the relatively low-tech economic specialization of the macro-area, which has historically lagged behind the rest of the country and faces local obstacles and conflicts [17]. This economic context fails to generate sufficient demand for skilled workers, leading to employment uncertainties for young people (e.g., [70]). The coefficients related to the percentage of young people leaving school after compulsory education provide insight into the South's significant educational challenges, showing percentages of people aged 18–24 years leaving education and training constantly above 20% in the first decade of the twenty-first century and peaking above 25%, compared to the EU average of 14–17% in the same period (in the Eurostat data). This issue aligns with the findings of other control variables, as it is connected with economic and cultural factors [71].

Furthermore, Model (5) illustrates the significance of GDP per capita: an enhancement in economic conditions would entail, for instance, a greater average household income, which is a recognized factor in reducing the risk of NEET, as it diminishes the prevalence of disadvantaged families [72].

Finally, the proxy of social capital shows no statistical significance in any of the analyses, suggesting that the expected support beyond the immediate family network is absent. A comparable finding was also noted regarding the impact of social capital on the risk of dropout in Italy by Odoardi et al. [73].

4. Discussion

Our regional analysis revealed the adverse impact of crime on young Italians, at a time when a majority of them face the risk of becoming NEET, regardless of sociodemographic background, with a significant probability of remaining in that state [74]. Our findings indicate that both violent crimes and property crimes, each with distinct social significance and consequences, contribute to exacerbating the incidence of NEET among the population aged 15–24 years. However, when examining regions based on their geographical macro-areas (Center-North and South), our results suggest that crime has a more pronounced impact in the less resilient area, the South. This highlights further disparities and new dimensions in the unequal educational opportunities for young Italians, particularly disadvantaging those in the southern regions. Moreover, the two indicators of crime exhibit an even greater effect on regional NEET rates compared to persistent issues, almost evolving into potential social habits, such as youth unemployment or the tendency to leave school immediately after completing compulsory education.

Moreover, the fact that the least affluent area of the country is also the only one where crimes against property, which are more common in wealthier regions, have statistical significance suggests a deeper underlying issue. Another concerning aspect is the substantially higher coefficient indicating the impact of homicides, despite being less frequent. Therefore, the analysis of macrolevel phenomena suggests that the fear stemming from crime awareness could affect NEETs, particularly in socioeconomic contexts that are more fragile due to limited economic support from families, inadequate investments in training infrastructure, and less efficient local labor markets.

The deterrence effect on young individuals may arise from exposure to both crime and crime-related news, heightening the fear of becoming a victim of violence [75]. This could elucidate the disparities in the results across regions, despite nine out of ten provinces with the highest crime rates (complaints per capita) being located in the Center-North. The impact of widespread fear could affect NEETs due to their tendency to hold more

pessimistic views regarding the future or significant social milestones (such as seeking their first job) compared to those engaged in studying or employment [76].

In addition to these presumed “collateral effects”, crime can directly impact the NEET rate. While the literature on the effects of criminal activities on proxies of human capital is scarce (and as far as we know, almost absent for NEETs), the evidence gathered suggests economic deterioration, particularly for those who are more exposed to high local crime rates. This could lead to premature discontinuation of studies [8]. Similarly, actively engaging in criminal activities leads to long-term consequences (e.g., after years of incarceration), such as a lower likelihood of resuming studies, as well as a higher risk of behavioral disorders [15]. Specifically, for NEETs, it appears that living in high-risk neighborhoods disengages them from mainstream societal roles [77].

Conversely, the effects of attaining higher education on reducing many types of crime (e.g., shoplifting and assault) are widely observed, although there is the possibility of an increase in education-related crimes (e.g., tax fraud) [48]. Generally, the inverse relationship between higher education and crime rates is particularly evident for young people [78], which the NEET population is part of. The mutual relationship between crime and NEET can largely derive from personal human capital, as education itself appears to be a determinant of NEET status because it affects the potential aspect of job searches (e.g., [79]).

More specifically, we must consider that not all criminal activities play the same role in the aforementioned relationships. For example, exposure to violence and antisocial behaviors are relevant for young people at risk of becoming NEETs [77].

Finally, in studies on the causes of NEET status, it is necessary to consider the various categories of NEET, although this is a limitation to our research due to data unavailability. Mostly, the effects on “inactive” and “unemployed” NEETs should be considered (additional categorizations are present depending on the definition). This depends on the various causes that could affect, for instance, the attitude towards studies and especially work by choice or discouragement. For example, women may be classified as NEET (inactive) due to temporary choices after childbirth, or a young person may choose to do so to be free to travel. In economies with high unemployment and high discouragement, we might observe unemployed NEETs who, after their studies, struggle to find work (see the literature review by Zudina [79]). These differences appear significant when considering the damage that crime could cause to the economy and thus to employment opportunities, especially in less resilient contexts.

5. Conclusions

In this article, the relationship between crime and the exclusion of young people from active participation in society was investigated. The significance of the NEET phenomenon has drawn the attention of researchers during various recent crises, spanning from the 2007 financial crisis through the Great Recession to post-COVID-19 implications (e.g., [80]). Moreover, the connection between criminal activities and the NEET phenomenon appears to manifest along at least two paths: crime exacerbates the already precarious economic conditions in the most vulnerable areas (such as southern Italy), and it instils fear in vulnerable individuals (who are already apprehensive about their uncertain future). Why is this problematic for NEETs and deserving of socioeconomic analysis? Once individuals enter the NEET status, it becomes challenging for them to exit, and the consequences, whether economic, social, or health-related, are enduring (e.g., [81,82]).

Of course, the impact of crime on the NEET rate is likely more intricate than observed in this preliminary investigation, potentially stemming from the fear induced by violent crimes, independent of the actual likelihood of victimization (numerous specific cases have been examined [83,84]).

Our findings thus underscore an additional vulnerability affecting individuals with poorer well-being and concerns about their future [85]. Given that crime often correlates more strongly with particular backgrounds (e.g., neighborhood) and social classes, there is a need for more targeted policies that consider the barriers they face in accessing education

and employment opportunities [86]. In this context, an emerging trend is the provision of individualized support in the transition to adulthood, which extends beyond traditional school-to-work transition assistance. Examples of such social interventions include the GOL program (Garanzia di occupabilità dei lavoratori—Employability guarantee for workers) established by the Italian Ministry of Labor, which offers tailored pathways into the labor market and training for vulnerable groups, including young people.

Furthermore, the issue of the Italian North–South divide in the NEET problem would remain apparent despite the existence of these support programs. It necessitates a commitment to restructuring training courses to align with labor market demands, along with assistance to reinforce family and social networks, which hold greater significance in the poorest regions. These networks serve as primary safety nets for young people at risk (e.g., [28,87]).

This article represents an initial attempt to identify how macroeconomic background variables associated with crime levels influence the discouragement of young Italians. This study does so within the context of the NEET literature, and our analysis is not without limitations, such as the omission of inactive and unemployed NEETs. Nonetheless, it offers a macroeconomic knowledge framework for future research utilizing microdata. Future research will also need to incorporate the intrinsic motivations of at-risk individuals and the actual extent of the spread of uncertainty due to fear of experiencing criminal activities.

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