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Home as an affective field: connections between housing insecurity, political empathy, and NEET youth

Abstract

This study examines housing insecurity among young people classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) in the Trnava region in Slovakia, placing their experiences in the context of post-socialist housing transformations. Drawing on the Social Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework, we interpret the Slovak housing system as an ecosystem of formal and informal, state, market, and community arrangements that simultaneously distribute material resources and affective signals of recognition, dignity, and security. Based on 108 qualitative interviews with NEETs and professionals, the analysis shows that unstable housing, uncertain income, and the absence of social support are key mechanisms that reproduce social exclusion. A typology of existential and housing deprivation identifies the most vulnerable subgroups. The study examines concepts such as affective governance and political empathy and demonstrates how current housing policy creates an affective regime that often selectively favours groups that meet expected social norms, while NEET youth are largely excluded from the focus of policy. The findings show that stable and dignified housing is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in work, education, and independent adult life, and call for the integration of political empathy and supported housing into housing policy as tools to strengthen the social affective citizenship of NEET youth. By linking

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housing sociology with the Social-Affective Citizenship framework, the study addresses an underexplored gap in NEET research: the role of housing insecurity not only as material deprivation, but also as a mechanism of affective exclusion and selective political recognition in post-socialist welfare systems.

Keywords: NEET youth, housing insecurity, social-affective citizenship, social exclusion, political empathy

1. Introduction: housing insecurity, NEET youth and social-affective citizenship

The situation of young people classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) represents a complex form of social vulnerability shaped by economic exclusion, weak institutional attachment, and limited opportunities for independent living. While existing research has primarily focused on labour-market disengagement, educational discontinuity, and psychosocial risks, significantly less attention has been paid to housing. This is an important omission, as housing constitutes a fundamental condition for social integration and the transition to adulthood. In this article, housing insecurity is understood as a spectrum of unstable, temporary, or unaffordable living arrangements that constrain life chances and reinforce social exclusion.

This study builds on insights from the sociology of housing, which has long emphasised that housing is not merely a physical space but a key domain through which social inequalities are produced and reproduced (Musil, 2005; Boelhouwer, 1993). In post-socialist contexts, however, housing systems are shaped by a distinctive historical trajectory. Under the Czechoslovak socialist regime, housing was treated as a state-organised social good, provided through centralised planning, and large-scale public construction. This legacy continues to influence both institutional arrangements and societal expectations. After 1989, the transition to a market-based system led to large-scale privatisation, reduced public housing provision, and a shift of responsibility from the state to individuals, disrupting earlier research traditions and policy frameworks (Musil, 1993). The sustained scholarly attention to the socialist period is therefore not only historical but reflects the need to understand the structural origins of current housing inequalities and institutional configurations.

Despite this context, limited research examines housing insecurity as a central mechanism shaping NEET trajectories, particularly in post-socialist countries such as Slovakia. Existing studies tend to treat housing as secondary to employment or education, overlooking how the absence of stable housing can itself prevent entry into both domains. This article addresses this gap by analysing housing insecurity as both a structural condition and an experiential process that shapes social exclusion.

To capture these dynamics, the study draws on the Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework (Szarfenberg, 2026), which conceptualises welfare systems as arenas that distribute not only material resources but also recognition, dignity, and political empathy. From this perspective, housing policy is understood not only as a technical

field of allocation but also as a mechanism that defines which social groups are recognised as deserving of support.

The article addresses the following research questions:

- How does housing insecurity influence the life trajectories and social exclusion of young NEETs in Slovakia?
- How do housing systems function as mechanisms of recognition, dignity, and political empathy within the Social-Affective Citizenship framework?

The main argument is that housing insecurity is not a secondary outcome of NEET status, but a central mechanism that reproduces marginalisation. By linking housing sociology with the Social-Affective Citizenship framework, the study shows that housing systems simultaneously allocate material resources and shape affective hierarchies of belonging, within which young NEETs remain largely excluded.

2. Housing insecurity as a mechanism of social-affective marginalisation of NEET youth

In addition to studying the spatial and cultural aspects of housing, its sociology also focuses on the socio-economic conditions that determine access to accommodation. A central concept within this framework is housing insecurity. It refers to a spectrum of unstable, temporary, or economically unsustainable forms of housing that may lead to homelessness. It represents a key mechanism of social vulnerability, as structural factors such as rising costs, declining affordability, and market pressures contribute to both chronic housing precarity and its most extreme manifestation – homelessness (Herring, 2023). When public policies focus only on visible homelessness, they overlook a broader population living in hidden housing insecurity. Central and Eastern Europe remains somewhat isolated from global discussions on international housing research and urban studies debates. Recent reviews of studies in the field of housing sociology emphasise the importance of integrating post-socialist housing research into international discourse (Kočková & Ferenčuhová, 2025). In this context, young people in NEET status constitute a particularly relevant population for examining housing insecurity. Their limited attachment to the labour market, unstable income, and often restricted access to welfare resources increase their vulnerability to precarious housing conditions. While not all young people classified as NEET experience housing insecurity, their socio-economic position places them at elevated risk of housing precarity and, in some cases, homelessness.

Across the European Union, young people classified as NEET represent a significant policy concern, although their prevalence varies considerably across countries. According to Eurostat data, approximately 11.0% of young people aged 15–29 in the EU were in NEET status in 2025 (Eurostat, 2026). Rates ranged from around 19% in Romania to 5–6% in countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden. In Slovakia, the share of NEET youth (approximately 11.1%) remains close to the EU average. However, the risk of NEET status is disproportionately concentrated among low-skilled young people and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Although overall trends have remained relatively stable in recent years, the persistence of NEET status points to enduring structural vulnerabilities linked to unequal access to education, employment, and housing. Comparative data place Slovakia in an intermediate position within Central and Eastern Europe, with higher NEET rates than Slovenia (7.6%), Czechia (8.0%), Poland (9.2%), and Hungary (10.6%) (Eurostat, 2026). A substantial proportion of Slovak youth, therefore, continues to face elevated risks of social exclusion, labour market marginalisation, and economic insecurity associated with NEET status.

This is where the sociology of housing naturally intersects with the issue of NEETs. Young people who are not in education, employment, or training are a group which often faces a disproportionately high risk of housing insecurity. The absence of stable income and incomplete or interrupted education limit their opportunities to enter the housing market. For many NEETs, this prolongs their dependence on their families, delays their independence, and creates conditions for potential conflicts, relationship tensions, and psychological stress (O'Higgins & Brockie, 2024). Where family support is lacking or disrupted, young NEETs enter informal and precarious forms of housing. They often move between short-term rentals, stay temporarily at friends' houses, or live in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions. These forms of housing precarity can develop into chronic housing insecurity and even extreme forms of homelessness, which are often insufficiently addressed by public policies.

For that reason, housing insecurity among NEETs is not merely a consequence of disadvantage, but a mechanism that reproduces marginalisation (Poulimas et al., 2024; Bobek et al., 2020). Limited income, labour market exclusion, lack of skills, and rising housing costs restrict young people's opportunities. These challenges are further reinforced by insufficient social housing provision, limited transitional housing capacity, and weak preventive measures, which hinder pathways to stable housing.

3. Social-Affective Citizenship, housing, and NEET Youth

The Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC) framework (Szarfenberg, 2026) offers a useful bridge between the sociology of housing and the analysis of NEET youth. In this perspective, the housing system is conceptualised as an ecosystem of housing provision that combines bureaucratic, market, and community logics in both formal and informal arenas. In the Slovak case, extensive privatisation and the dominance of owner-occupation have strengthened the role of market mechanisms, while fragmented municipal competences and underinvestment have weakened the universalistic ambitions of formal social housing. At the same time, families, kinship networks, non-governmental organisations, and faith-based initiatives have taken on a growing share of responsibility for housing those who are excluded from the formal system.

Within this ecosystem, young people with NEET status occupy a particularly precarious position. Their access to the formal bureaucratic sphere is often limited by low or unstable income, lack of formal documentation, or institutional invisibility. As a result, they are effectively priced out of the commodified housing market. Their housing security frequently depends on informal support networks, family support,

couch-surfing or residing informally with peers, or on time-limited project-based forms of supported housing provided by NGOs. These patterns illustrate how the lines between formal and informal, public and private, are redrawn in ways that stratify access to full social-affective citizenship.

The SAC framework further emphasises that institutional arrangements are mediated through emotional experiences of recognition or non-recognition, dignity or stigma, security or precarity. The encounters with housing offices, shelters, and social services communicate to young NEETs whether they are seen as legitimate members of the community and as subjects deserving of investment, or as marginal and undeserving. In the following sections, we therefore read the empirical material with particular attention to these mediating mechanisms. We ask how the housing trajectories of young NEET youth in the Trnava region reflect the workings of institutionally embedded affective relations, understood within the SAC framework as the emotional and moral dimensions of governance. We further examine how selective political empathy, meaning the tendency of policy actors to extend recognition and resources only to those deemed sufficiently deserving, contributes to the reproduction of their social and housing exclusion. The SAC framework is operationalised in this study through four interrelated dimensions that guide the interpretation of housing insecurity among NEET youth, connecting institutional structures, lived experience, and policy discourse to examine housing not only as material provision, but also as a domain of recognition, dignity, security, and political inclusion. The following section situates these theoretical perspectives within the Slovak housing context, with particular attention to post-socialist transformations shaping current housing inequalities.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions of SAC in this study

SAC dimension	Analytical focus	Empirical indicators in this study
Recognition	How institutions perceive and categorise NEET youth	Eligibility barriers, institutional invisibility
Dignity	Housing as moral worth and social respect	Shame, stigma, precariousness
Security	Material and emotional housing stability	Temporary accommodation, instability, supported housing
Political empathy	Inclusion/exclusion in policy priorities	Selective support, deservingness, policy neglect

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Szarfenberg's Social-Affective Citizenship framework (2026).

4. Structural barriers, marketisation, and housing vulnerability in Slovakia

Building on the framework outlined above, the Slovak housing system represents a post-socialist case where structural transformations and affective dimensions of

housing intersect in specific ways. As in other post-socialist countries, Slovakia has undergone fundamental changes in the area of housing and housing research since 1989 (Andráško, 2018; Ouředníček et al., 2015; Musil, 2005). The transformation of housing from a guaranteed social right to a commodity based on market principles means that the responsibility for securing housing has shifted primarily to individuals, with structural housing problems often interpreted as personal failures. Privatisation, changes in ownership regimes, and market prices have revived socio-economic inequalities that were largely suppressed under socialism (Tsenkova & Polanska, 2014). The Amnesty International report (2024) maps these processes in detail and shows how privatisation, underinvestment, and fragmented management of public housing create inequality and deepen housing insecurity.

Housing management is fragmented and decentralised, with municipalities setting different eligibility rules, creating local barriers, and unequal access. At the same time, privatisation and insufficient investment have drastically reduced the number of public rental apartments. Rental housing is not common in Slovakia. In 2020, 92.3% of all housing was privately owned and only 7.7% was rental housing, of which 6.1% was commercially rented and 1.6% was rent-controlled housing (Amnesty International, 2024). These changes have intensified inequality and housing insecurity, particularly for low-income households.

The lack of public housing in Slovakia creates a structural affordability crisis that deepens poverty and increases housing insecurity. Housing costs consume an exceptionally high proportion of household income, averaging 27%, and account for almost half of the income of the poorest households (OECD, 2023). This cost burden often forces low-income families to make difficult compromises between housing and basic needs, illustrating how market-oriented housing systems reproduce material deprivation. State support mechanisms do little to address these inequalities. The main tool, housing allowance, is closely linked to the income assessment system and excludes many low-income households whose incomes are just above the poverty line. Even for those who are eligible for the allowance, it is insufficient to meet the income criteria required for access to municipal housing. These gaps in social policy show how institutional design contributes to the persistence of housing insecurity and limits ways out of poverty.

Although housing policy in Slovakia is formally neutral, it often creates a mechanism that systematically excludes the most vulnerable groups and reproduces socio-economic inequality. The merit-based logic underlying transitional housing views access to housing as something that individuals must earn, rather than a social right. Administrative barriers often reinforce this effect. Complex administrative application processes and strict deadlines create significant barriers for people with limited resources or health limitations, contributing to the widespread underutilisation of eligible entitlements. Together, these institutional mechanisms reproduce inequality in housing and limit access to stable housing for the most vulnerable (Hlinčíková, 2024). In Slovakia, the housing problem of Roma households is also significant. Local government housing policies often lead to the concentration of Roma households in specific, lower-quality residential areas, contributing to their continuing social disadvantage. These patterns of housing allocation and limited tenancy security

illustrate how institutional measures can unintentionally reinforce ethnic and spatial inequalities.

In Slovakia, mainly due to the lack of public rental housing, social services providing emergency or temporary accommodation have become a long-term substitute for permanent housing, rather than serving as a short-term solution to crisis situations. From a sociological perspective, this shows that institutional mechanisms can unknowingly reproduce housing insecurity rather than eliminating it. This system of temporary housing often keeps people in a cycle of repeated use of these facilities. The most vulnerable social groups, therefore, become dependent on services, with no real possibility of moving into stable, permanent housing. At the same time, however, much of the support for vulnerable groups does not come from state institutions, but is transferred mainly to non-governmental organisations. It is often the third sector that takes over many of the activities that the state is unable to provide and comes up with innovative forms of social housing (Murray Svidroňová et al., 2017). These organisations thus play a key role in mitigating the negative consequences of inadequate public housing policy and paving the way for more inclusive and stable housing solutions. In contrast, Housing First programmes provide immediate permanent housing combined with individualised social support, viewing housing as a human right and a prerequisite for social inclusion (Škobla et al., 2016). The Housing First model rests on the principle that housing should not be earned through demonstrated compliance or sobriety, but provided unconditionally as a stable foundation which allows for addressing other issues such as employment, mental health, and social reintegration. This approach was originally developed for people experiencing long-term street homelessness, often those whom mainstream services had effectively given up on, classifying them as unlikely to change. Its application has since expanded to include younger vulnerable populations, including those leaving institutional care. Pilot projects in Slovakia's two largest cities, Bratislava and Košice, show that this approach stabilises households and reduces dependence on shelters; nevertheless, its scope is still limited and is not yet fully embedded in national policy (Pongrácz et al., 2021).

These structural features can also be understood within a broader European social policy perspective. Research suggests that post-socialist countries such as Slovakia operate within a “familiarised” model of youth support, where young people are expected to rely primarily on family rather than direct state provision (Lauri et al., 2025). In such contexts, access to housing and social security is strongly shaped by family resources, reinforcing inequalities among young people. For NEET youth, this reliance is often not voluntary but a necessity, highlighting how housing insecurity is embedded in broader welfare arrangements and contributes to uneven transitions into adulthood. Housing insecurity is closely linked to labour market exclusion. Existing research further shows that the integration of vulnerable groups such as NEET youth is shaped not only by structural barriers but also by employer attitudes and institutional practices (Bosman et al., 2025). For young people facing unstable housing, these dynamics reinforce difficulties in accessing employment, as basic survival needs take precedence over labour market participation. This highlights how housing and employment function as interdependent domains of social exclusion.

5. Methodology: capturing housing, emotion and social-affective citizenship

The analysis is based on qualitative research focused on young people in the Trnava region in Slovakia classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), including individuals not registered with employment offices. This is a relatively difficult-to-reach population, not in the sense of hidden or illicit groups, but due to weak institutional attachment, low registration with employment services, and reliance on informal support networks. The data were collected as part of a broader analysis of NEET issues conducted by a team of experts from Trnava University between May and July 2024.

The research was carried out in the Trnava region in western Slovakia, located near the capital city of Bratislava. The region combines urban centres with smaller towns and rural areas, making it a relevant setting for examining diverse housing conditions and youth trajectories. At the same time, the region reflects broader national patterns of limited public housing, reliance on family support, and the presence of vulnerable youth groups, which makes it a suitable case for analysing the relationship between housing insecurity and NEET status.

From this broader dataset, the present analysis focuses specifically on housing, as housing instability emerges as a central factor shaping social exclusion, limiting life opportunities, and contributing to risky trajectories among young inactive NEETs. Qualitative data illustrate how precarious income, dependence on social benefits, and insecure or inadequate housing intersect to reinforce cycles of disadvantage. A total of 108 respondents participated in the study: 92 young NEETs (aged 18–29) and 16 professionals with direct experience working with NEET youth in the Trnava region. The sample of 92 NEET respondents included both men and women aged 18–29 with diverse socio-economic and life situations. Reasons for NEET status varied and included long-term unemployment, early school leaving, health-related limitations, caregiving responsibilities, and transitions from institutional or foster care. Respondents also differed significantly in their housing situations, ranging from living with parents or relatives, to renting accommodation, informal shared housing and, in some cases, temporary or unstable housing, including homelessness. This diversity allowed the study to capture multiple forms of housing insecurity and their relationship to social exclusion among NEET youth. Professional respondents included social workers, NGO staff, coordinators of low-threshold centres, and community workers with first-hand experience in supporting NEET youth. Professional respondents were selected based on their direct and sustained professional involvement with NEET youth, including at least one year of practical involvement in social services, community work, or housing-related support, ensuring that the study captured both frontline perspectives and institutional insights.

Data were collected through three complementary methods: semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 NEET respondents and all 16 professional respondents, ensuring systematic coverage of key topics while allowing flexibility to explore individual

experiences. In-depth interviews were carried out with 18 NEET respondents to examine particularly complex life trajectories in greater detail. Additionally, four focus groups were conducted with NEET respondents, each involving 4–6 respondents to capture collective experiences, peer dynamics, and shared patterns of exclusion. Focus group respondents reflected similar socio-demographic characteristics, with a mix of genders, employment histories, and housing situations, allowing for the exploration of shared experiences as well as peer dynamics. This combination enabled the research to capture both individual perspectives and shared social patterns. Separate interview guides were developed for NEET respondents and for professionals. Interviews with NEET youth focused on housing trajectories, income insecurity, family support, and institutional experiences, while interviews with professionals examined structural barriers, service provision, and policy limitations.

Respondents were recruited using targeted snowball sampling, a strategy suitable for accessing hidden populations with low institutional visibility. Respondents did not receive financial compensation; however, participation was voluntary and motivated by interest in sharing personal experiences and contributing to research on youth disadvantage. The average duration of interview with NEET respondents was approximately 45–60 minutes, while interviews with professionals lasted around 60–90 minutes. Focus group discussions typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and analysed using the qualitative software ATLAS.ti. Coding was iterative, with categories refined through repeated comparison across interviews. Thematic coding proceeded in two phases. In the initial open coding phase, a broad range of recurring themes was identified across both NEET and professional interviews, including housing instability, precarious income, family dependence, institutional barriers, documentation problems, emotional insecurity, and experiences with support services. In the subsequent focused coding phase, themes were clustered into broader analytical categories relating to housing trajectories, structural exclusion, and institutional recognition. Coding also enabled systematic comparison between the experiential narratives of NEET respondents and the structural perspective of professionals, allowing the analysis to distinguish between lived precarity and institutional framing of vulnerability. Although the initial coding remained inductive, the interpretative phase was theoretically guided by the four dimensions of SAC recognition, dignity, security, and political empathy. The typology of existential and housing deprivation (Section 5.2) was constructed inductively from patterns identified across NEET and professional interviews. Types were validated using internal consistency checks applied across the dataset and further assessed through peer debriefing within the research team to ensure analytical coherence.

All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Given the vulnerability of many respondents, particular care was taken to ensure anonymity, confidentiality, and the ethical handling of sensitive narratives related to housing insecurity, family instability, and social exclusion. Interviews were anonymised during transcription, and identifying details were removed from the dataset.

6. Results: precarious income, housing insecurity and the emotional mediation of NEET life trajectories

This section presents the key findings of the qualitative analysis, focusing on the lived experiences of housing insecurity among young people in the NEET category. The analytical themes were derived through an iterative coding process combining inductive identification of recurring patterns in the data with a theoretically guided interpretation based on the Social-Affective Citizenship framework. The results are organised around core dimensions of housing precarity, including material conditions, institutional barriers, and affective experiences of insecurity, recognition, and exclusion. This structure allows for a systematic examination of how housing instability shapes the everyday trajectories and social position of NEET youth.

To ensure anonymity while providing relevant sociodemographic context, interview quotations are identified using a coding system that includes the respondent's number and gender (e.g., R13_Female for NEET respondents and P13_Male for professionals working with NEET youth). Since all NEET respondents were between 18 and 29 and age identifiers are not included to maintain anonymity. All respondents were from the Trnava Region, therefore, regional identifiers are also excluded.

6.1. Housing insecurity in NEET lived experience

The financial situation of young inactive NEETs in the Trnava region is closely related to their housing and overall social position. Some respondents state that their income consists mainly of social benefits or housing allowances, or occasional and short-term earnings in the informal economy. This pattern is consistent with international findings, which point out that low income and precarious employment significantly weaken young people's ability to maintain stable housing and increase their risk of social exclusion (Herring, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024). Financial insecurity significantly affects the daily lives of these young people, from finding housing to meeting basic needs. Many NEETs live in very low-income households, where a single pension or benefit provides the livelihood for several family members. In such circumstances, any unexpected event is a potential crisis.

We live with my mom. She has a pension and we manage to get by on that. But when the washing machine breaks down or something, we don't know how we're going to pay for it. (R27_Woman)

A poor socio-economic situation often leads to long-term economic inactivity, social isolation, and loss of motivation. Many young respondents gradually accept their situation as unchangeable, a mechanism that sociology describes as "normalisation of uncertainty". The lack of social and economic resources also weakens the ability to plan, make decisions, and consider more stable housing, thus reproducing the cycle of vulnerability. From the SAC perspective, these experiences reflect not only material deprivation, but also a profound erosion of security both as a practical and emotional

condition for agency. Housing instability limits physical shelter as well as the capacity to imagine oneself as a socially recognised future-oriented actor.

I didn't know where to go. I had to leave my apartment and I slept here and there.... It's bad, of course, but when you look at it normally, you'd say that it's... well, it's not good, but what can I do about it, how can I change it? (R13_Man)

Such narratives also reveal diminished dignity, as prolonged precarity normalises instability and weakens perceptions of social worth and entitlement to institutional support. Young people who have grown up in foster care, institutional care, or come from deeply disadvantaged families are a particularly vulnerable group. The transition from an institutional environment to independent living is a crucial and often very challenging phase in their lives. Without sufficient financial reserves, social support, and the skills needed for housing and employment, they quickly find themselves in another phase of uncertainty. They often end up in temporary accommodation or unstable informal tenancies, increasing the likelihood of remaining in the NEET status. For young people leaving institutional care, disrupted housing trajectories frequently coincide with weak recognition within both formal welfare systems and informal support networks, increasing their exposure to prolonged social invisibility.

When I was six years old, social services took me to a children's home. There were seven of us siblings, and four of us ended up in children's homes. That's where I grew up, that's where I learned my skills... you could say that the streets raised us. (R34_Man)

Many young NEETs grow up in an environment characterised by a high degree of uncertainty and repeated changes in living conditions. Such experiences often undermine the development of trust in institutions and people, which can affect their ability to establish themselves in the labour market or in the education system. The early loss of a stable family environment and contact with supportive institutions can lead to the formation of risky life trajectories and a reduction in social support, which are key factors in analysing the precarious position of young NEETs in terms of housing and economic independence.

6.2. Institutional perspectives on structural barriers

Those who work with young NEETs often point to the link between housing and social marginalisation. Insecure housing, frequent moves, and a lack of stable housing options significantly worsen the situation of these young people, especially in the case of the most disadvantaged groups, who are dependent on various forms of temporary or emergency housing. The lack of support institutions such as shelters or social housing limits their ability to plan their daily lives and seek employment or educational opportunities. In SAC terms, the absence of adequate housing infrastructure reflects not merely service scarcity, but selective recognition in which the needs of highly vulnerable NEET youth remain peripheral to institutional priorities.

There is no shelter here, only a night shelter. The night shelter is only open at night... it's open from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.... People can stay there and sleep during those hours, but after that they have to leave... A shelter is supposed to help people earn a living. It is very difficult to get up for shifts when you sleep outside... you can only be in the night shelter at night, not during the day. So, you have nowhere to sleep to be able to function somewhere, so this shelter is missing here in the city, either a shelter or something simple, some kind of emergency housing. (P6_Man)

Similarly, when it comes to long-term support for families, especially single-parent families, where there is usually a woman with several children, only limited housing options are available. These options are often subject to strict criteria that restrict access for the most vulnerable groups.

Well, a mother with children can stay with us for a year. A year is when you can provide them with certain social services, which is additional housing, usually in a different facility... Okay, there are also social municipal apartments, but they have their own conditions for acceptance... you must have been a permanent resident of that city for at least three years. (P11_Woman)

This description shows that single mothers often face a combination of economic burdens, bureaucratic barriers, and a lack of flexible solutions, which puts them in a position of increased vulnerability. The lack of affordable and stable housing forces these families to live in precarious or temporary conditions, which reproduces social and economic disadvantage and increases the risk of marginalisation not only for mothers but also for their children. This demonstrates how political empathy is unevenly distributed through policy design, often excluding those whose instability most urgently requires intervention.

Those who work with young NEETs also point to the close link between work and housing. From their perspective, housing is a fundamental condition for social stability. If housing is threatened or uncertain, the ability of young NEETs to keep a job or even enter the labour market is significantly reduced. Housing insecurity thus acts as a mechanism for reproducing social exclusion. Without a stable place to live, it is difficult to plan, organise daily life, or build work habits.

Supported housing is important. Because with their lifestyle, housing is very often a problem, just like work. But it's better to have housing than no work. And once you have housing, you can work with it, try to solve the labour situation. So, housing and work go hand in hand. (P2_Man)

This perspective confirms the view that housing is not merely one of many areas of disadvantage, but a fundamental prerequisite that influences the ability to participate in the labour market, social stability, and future planning.

6.3. Supported housing as intervention

Stable housing is a key condition for successful social integration. Housing is, therefore, not a reward for employment, it is rather a prerequisite that enables young people to gradually return to work routines, education, or building social ties. Within the SAC framework, stable housing represents a foundational form of security from which dignity, institutional recognition, and broader social participation can become possible. Professionals also point to foreign inspirations and policies that develop supported forms of housing. These are often models in which regions or states systematically invest in services that stabilise the living conditions of people in vulnerable situations.

Supported housing makes a big difference. In Finland, it works perfectly. They actually transformed their system; they have a state-owned lottery company, and put all the revenue into Housing First. And suddenly it turned out that there was money for it, that it works, and that it's totally fine. (P3_Man)

The reference to the Finnish Housing First approach is not accidental. It is a model that has proven in several countries that stable and unconditional housing is more effective than traditional “step-by-step” systems, in which individuals must first demonstrate discipline or work activity in order to gain access to housing (Juhila et al., 2022). Professionals often point out that similar approaches would also be applicable in the Slovak context, however, there is a lack of political will and long-term funding. However, some organisations are trying to create supportive forms of housing, mainly through projects financed by European funds. These programmes show that a combination of affordable housing and continuous social work can have a significant stabilising effect, especially for young NEETs, families, or young couples. The Housing First model also illustrates a policy architecture grounded in political empathy, where unconditional housing is treated as a civic foundation rather than a conditional reward.

We also have supportive housing projects, where we have about ten apartments for these people. There, under certain conditions, they can live and obtain this apartment at a very reasonable price. They can live in the apartment for as long as they want. But for the first year, they pay nothing for six months, and then they pay for utilities. It has to be shifted somehow, so we have people accommodated this way. Most of them are families or couples. (P8_Woman)

This practice shows that stable housing combined with social support can significantly improve the life chances of young NEETs. It often provides a stable point in situations that are otherwise marked by chaos, economic uncertainty, and low levels of social support. However, at the same time, it reveals the limitations of a system in which support is based primarily on temporary projects rather than a long-term housing strategy. Professionals emphasise that without sustained support from the state and a clear housing policy, such initiatives are limited in their temporary nature. From a sociological point of view, housing represents a fundamental and objective obstacle in addressing the situation of young people in the NEET status. The survival

priorities, focused on ensuring a safe place to sleep, food, and basic hygiene, naturally take precedence over the possibility of concentrating on work or education. Support services emphasise that the stabilisation of housing is a prerequisite for any further intervention. However, reliance on temporary project funding highlights the fragility of recognition when support remains contingent, fragmented, and politically non-systemic.

6.4. Typology of existential and housing deprivation

A regional analysis of young people with NEET status in the Trnava region showed that this is a very heterogeneous group with different life trajectories and risk factors. Based on qualitative data, one key typological subgroup was identified: young people experiencing existential and housing deprivation. This subgroup is defined by the following criteria:

- chronically unstable, inadequate, or completely lacking housing;
- absence of family background or weak social ties (particularly care leavers);
- and administrative invisibility due to loss of personal documents and exclusion from formal systems.

These three criteria jointly define the boundaries of this typology and distinguish it from other NEET subgroups. For young people in this typology, housing insecurity is a key factor in the reproduction of social exclusion and a major obstacle to any steps towards education or employment. It is almost impossible to plan one's life path or focus on long-term goals without stable material and spatial security. The everyday lives of these young people are often shaped by frequent moves, living in overcrowded or unsuitable conditions, or even homelessness. Many live in temporary accommodation or squats, where a chronic lack of stability exacerbates stress and existential uncertainty. In such cases, housing transforms from a spatial security infrastructure into a social barrier that limits any kind of progression.

A large part of this subgroup consists of young people who have left institutional care and are characterised by a lack of family background and very weak social ties. The inability to rely on relatives in critical situations reduces their resilience and makes it difficult for them to cope with everyday demands. Administrative invisibility further compounds their vulnerability. Personal documents are often lost, and replacing them is financially and organisationally demanding. Without documents, they cannot apply for social assistance, register as job seekers, or work legally, which keeps them in a state of social invisibility that becomes a critical failure of recognition, reinforcing exclusion not only from housing systems, but from broader citizenship infrastructures.

This condition reflects a cumulative deficit across all SAC dimensions: diminished security through unstable housing, weakened dignity through chronic precariousness, reduced recognition through institutional barriers, and limited political empathy through exclusion from long-term policy frameworks. For this subgroup, stabilising their housing situation is a basic precondition for any further progress. Without a safe and predictable place to live, all subsequent interventions in the areas of employment, education, or social counselling remain only partially effective. From a SAC perspective,

this subgroup occupies the outer margins of the housing ecosystem, where formal rights are least accessible and informal resources are weakest. Their marginal position also illustrates how deficits in political empathy can normalise exclusion by rendering structurally vulnerable youth less visible within dominant frameworks of policy concern.

Table 2. SAC dimensions as reflected in the existential and housing deprivation typology

SAC Dimension	Definition of criteria	Key empirical patterns
Recognition	Administrative invisibility	Document loss, exclusion from welfare eligibility, institutional invisibility
Dignity	Chronic housing precariousness	Normalisation of precarity, shame, weakened sense of entitlement, stigma of instability
Security	Unstable or absent housing	Frequent moves, overcrowded conditions, night shelters, temporary or no accommodation
Political empathy	Systemic exclusion	Absence of long-term housing strategy, reliance on project-based support, lack of structural policy support

Source: Author's own elaboration based on qualitative fieldwork in the Trnava region, interpreted through the SAC framework (Szarfenberg, 2026).

7. Discussion: affective governance, political empathy and social-affective citizenship in housing policy

Interpreting these findings through the four dimensions of SAC allows us to see housing policy as a specific form of affective governance. Across interviews, both NEET respondents and professionals repeatedly described how access to stable housing was conditional upon administrative eligibility, prior residence requirements, or family support, while those lacking these resources were often redirected to temporary or emergency solutions. The dominant discourse constructs homeownership and self-reliance as moral norms of good citizenship, while access to public or supported housing is framed as a conditional privilege. This pattern is particularly visible in accounts describing young people leaving institutional care, single mothers, or respondents without documentation, whose housing insecurity was not framed as structural vulnerability but as a failure to meet institutional conditions. Young NEETs, whose life trajectories are marked by unstable income, incomplete education, and periods of inactivity, are therefore positioned outside the category of “deserving” beneficiaries. This affective regime communicates that they do not fully belong to the imagined community of responsible adults and that their housing needs are the result of individual failure rather than structural constraints. In this way, the housing system simultaneously distributes material resources and regulates hierarchies of belonging. Beyond access to resources, these hierarchies also shape dignity by communicating

whose housing insecurity is understood as socially legitimate vulnerability and whose precarity is moralised as personal inadequacy.

A broader discussion of the issue of housing for young people in NEET status necessarily requires going beyond a purely empirical framework and entering the sphere of ideological and discursive mechanisms that shape political priorities and legitimise public policy interventions. Some research points to the fact that, in the case of social stereotypes of these vulnerable groups, it is necessary to work on humanising disadvantaged groups and strengthening political support (Findor et al., 2023). The sociological perspective shows that the problems of young people in the NEET status are not only material but also symbolic. They are related to how society understands merit, productivity, and the norms of good civic life. This reveals the absence of political empathy in the institutional treatment of housing insecurity among NEET youth, a dynamic through which policy actors selectively determine whose needs are made visible and whose are rendered peripheral (Zubrzycka-Czarnecka, 2025). Emotions of empathy in everyday politics can serve as tools and mechanisms that reinforce dominant narratives and shape social dynamics (Shah, 2024). Awareness of these affective dynamics can be the key to understanding how housing inequality is justified and how it is combated. Within the SAC framework, these symbolic processes are central because they mediate not only recognition, but also the preservation or erosion of dignity as a core component of social membership.

In the context of housing, an ideological framework prevails in which home ownership is viewed as a moral norm and a key marker of economic and civic responsibility. However, young people in the NEET category, by their very nature, do not meet this standard. These are people who lack a stable income, do not fall into the category of productive citizens, and whose life trajectory is marked by material insecurity. As a result, they become a group that, in political discourse, falls outside the framework of the deserving population and, therefore, does not receive the same level of public or political empathy. Young NEETs experiencing housing insecurity are often portrayed in political discourse through the lens of personal failure. Housing problems are attributed to their irresponsibility, rather than being analysed as the result of often structural factors, such as poverty or a lack of affordable housing. The individual search for blame obscures systemic causes. Such an emotional and moralising framework directly hinders the creation and implementation of effective structural measures that could improve the housing situation of NEETs.

At the same time, the empirical material suggests that the dominant response of NEET youth to these affective hierarchies is not open contestation but withdrawal. Rather than mobilising protest or collective claims, many respondents describe strategies of avoidance, adaptation, and normalization of uncertainty. Feelings of shame, fatigue, and distrust in institutions limit the ability to articulate demands as citizens and to claim housing as a right. From a SAC perspective, this pattern can be interpreted as a specific form of negative policy feedback. Experiences of non-recognition and stigma do not lead to politicisation, but instead reinforce a quietist emotional climate in which the exclusion of NEETs from housing strategies remains largely uncontested. Repeated exposure to precarious housing and institutional non-recognition can gradually undermine dignity, making withdrawal appear more realistic

than collective claim-making. In this sense, affective governance operates through selective recognition, determining which forms of vulnerability are institutionally visible and politically actionable.

The affective framework shows that emotions, especially empathy, are not only individual reactions but also instruments of political power. In the context of housing, they serve to legitimise decisions, set priorities, and create boundaries between those who deserve support and those who remain invisible. As the preceding analysis has shown, affective governance operates unevenly across social groups (Zubrzycka-Czarnecka, 2025; Hoření Samec, 2024; Findor et al., 2023; Murphy & Levy, 2012). Political narratives often invest empathy in groups that meet standards of productivity and predictability, whether they are working young families, students, or economically active young people. In contrast, young NEETs, who are perceived as an unproductive, unstable, or problematic group, are often excluded from political sympathy and attention.

The research and analysis of NEETs thus points to a broader problem. Social and political empathy in housing policy is not neutral but selective, often targeting only certain groups while systematically bypassing others, either intentionally or unintentionally. Our regional analysis, and in particular our typology of existential and housing deprivation, shows how essential it is to actively introduce this concept into NEET research itself. Empirical findings confirm that without an analytical framework that works with the affective and political dimensions of housing, some of the problems remain invisible and therefore not reflected in public policies. At the same time, this is a challenge for a broader professional discourse. If researchers, analysts, and policy makers want to gain a more accurate understanding of the housing marginalisation of young NEETs, they must consciously work with how “deserving” and “undeserving” groups are constructed in the political sphere. The stories collected in this study, which highlight, in particular, the lack of shelters, limited housing availability, and discriminatory criteria employed by local governments, suggest that institutional measures often fail to treat NEET youth as a priority group within housing policy. The absence of political empathy is not just a lack of understanding, but an active mechanism that reproduces inequality. The SAC framework clarifies how deficits across recognition, dignity, security, and political empathy reinforce one another, producing layered forms of exclusion that exceed conventional material analyses.

Young NEETs therefore remain outside the scope of housing strategies, which are implicitly oriented towards economically more stable young people. Our empirical material repeatedly demonstrates that respondents facing the greatest housing instability were often those least able to satisfy bureaucratic or moral expectations of independence, productivity, or administrative compliance. In other words, if access to housing is to be understood as a fundamental social right, both discourse and policy must move beyond moralising distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” recipients of support. Research on NEETs clearly shows that without extending social and political empathy to this area, structural inequality is reproduced and the marginalisation of the most vulnerable young people is deepened. Given that respondents consistently described housing stabilisation as a prerequisite for employment, education, and psychological security, the data strongly suggest that

housing should be treated as a foundational rather than secondary policy intervention. Recognising housing as a fundamental right is also an important first step towards creating the stable conditions necessary for more intensive, sustainable, and effective support. This support can enable young people who are not in employment, education, or training to overcome chronic instability and start building a path to independence and inclusion. The findings emphasise that housing must be understood as a prerequisite for any meaningful activation or reintegration strategy. These findings indicate that housing exclusion among NEET youth is sustained not only by material scarcity, but also by institutionalised hierarchies of recognition that shape whose needs are politically legible. The integration of the concept of political empathy into policymaking and public debate is, therefore, essential to addressing these structural inequalities. From a SAC perspective, housing policy must be understood not merely as resource allocation, but as a citizenship-forming institution that shapes recognition, dignity, security, and political belonging.

Housing exclusion among NEET youth should therefore be understood not solely as deprivation of shelter, but as a multidimensional deficit of social-affective citizenship. From this perspective, housing for NEET youth must be approached as a matter of social rights or poverty reduction, and also as a question of social-affective citizenship. The analysis also invites us to think of housing for NEET youth in terms of a matter of social rights, poverty reduction, or a question of social-affective citizenship. Current arrangements in Slovakia produce a situation in which NEETs are present in the housing ecosystem as users of temporary shelters, informal tenancies or time-limited projects, but remain largely absent from the field of political empathy and from long-term housing strategies. Expanding supported housing and integrating the principle of political empathy into policy design would improve material conditions and transform the emotional experience of young NEETs from one of marginality to one of recognition and belonging. In the terms of SAC, such reforms would strengthen their position as full social-affective citizens whose access to housing supports not only survival, but recognition, dignity, and meaningful participation.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between housing insecurity and the lived experiences of young people in the NEET category in the Trnava region of Slovakia through the combined lens of housing sociology and Social-Affective Citizenship (SAC). The findings show that housing insecurity is not merely a secondary consequence of unemployment or educational disruption, but a fundamental structural condition that shapes and reproduces social exclusion. Housing insecurity, precarious income, limited family support, and fragmented institutional responses significantly influence the life trajectories of vulnerable NEET youth, particularly those leaving institutional care or lacking stable social networks. By applying the SAC framework, the study demonstrates that housing systems operate not only through the distribution of material resources but also through regimes of recognition that shape dignity, a sense of belonging, and political visibility. Current housing arrangements often place the

most vulnerable young people in the NEET category outside dominant frameworks of merit, thereby reinforcing both material deprivation and symbolic marginalisation. Selective political empathy and conditional support thus contribute to the reproduction of inequality.

Despite these contributions, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is regionally specific, focusing on the Trnava region in Slovakia, which limits the general applicability of the findings to other contexts with different housing systems or welfare arrangements. While the regional focus provides important contextual depth, the results should be interpreted as analytically transferable rather than statistically representative. Second, the use of targeted snowball sampling was appropriate for accessing a relatively difficult-to-reach population such as NEET youth with weak institutional attachment, however, it may have introduced selection bias by overrepresenting individuals connected to existing support networks and underrepresenting more isolated cases. Third, while the qualitative design offers in-depth insights into lived experiences and structural conditions, it does not allow for broader statistical generalisation. Finally, although the application of the Social-Affective Citizenship framework provides a novel analytical perspective, its use remains exploratory and would benefit from further validation in different empirical settings.

Taken together, the findings suggest that stable and dignified housing should be understood as a fundamental condition for social integration, rather than as a reward for prior participation in the labour market or institutional conformity. Policies targeting NEET youth should, therefore, place housing stabilisation, supported housing, and inclusive institutional recognition at the centre of social intervention. To address the intertwined structural, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of youth exclusion, it is essential to move beyond moralising distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” groups of the population. This study argues that housing policy should not be viewed merely as social assistance, but rather as an institution that shapes citizenship. Recognising housing as both a social right and a key dimension of socio-affective citizenship is essential for creating more equitable pathways to autonomy, inclusion, and meaningful social participation for vulnerable young people.

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