

Who are the NEETs

**An examination of the background
and experiences of young people who
are not in education, employment or
training**



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Contents

Executive summary	4
Methodology	4
Key findings.....	6
Class and poverty	6
Educational attainment.....	8
Regional trends and variations.....	10
Health and disability.....	12
Caring responsibilities.....	15
Race and ethnicity.....	16
Recommendations	17

Executive summary

At the time of the 2021 Census, around one in eight (13.5 per cent) young people were not in employment, education or training (NEET). The NEET rate peaked in 2011 following the financial crash and the austerity agenda of the coalition government, but it has remained persistently high.

There is still the need for greater progress in creating meaningful opportunities for young people, and the NEET rate now stands at 13 per cent. There are currently just under a million young people aged 16-24 who are NEET. This is one of the clearest warning signs of a labour market and education system that is failing too many young people at the point they should be building independent adult lives.

This report finds that becoming NEET is strongly linked to structural disadvantage rather than individual choice or motivation. Young people are significantly more likely to be NEET if they grow up in poverty, live in deprived areas, experience poor health, have a disability, or have caring responsibilities.

Where a young person lives continues to shape their prospects. NEET rates are highest in northern, coastal and post-industrial communities that have experienced long-term economic decline, while rates are lower in affluent commuter areas.

The report also challenges the idea that education alone can solve youth exclusion. While qualifications remain strongly linked to better outcomes, some graduates and apprenticeship completers are still struggling to secure stable employment, pointing to weaknesses in the labour market and poor transitions between education and employment.

The rise in NEET levels should therefore be understood not as a problem of individual motivation, but as the cumulative result of wider economic and social pressures: insecure work, weak regional labour markets, reduced public services, rising childcare costs, worsening mental health and declining vocational routes.

Reducing NEET rates will require a serious strategy to rebuild opportunity, strengthen public services and ensure all young people can make a successful transition into adulthood.

Methodology

This report uses data from the 2021 Census provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), focusing on respondents aged 16 to 24 in England with valid economic activity responses. This subgroup consists of 4.8 million respondents.

At the time of the Census:

- 12.9 per cent of young women were NEET

- 14.1 per cent of young men were NEET

Additional evidence was drawn from:

- NHS Hospital Episode Statistics
- ONS birth registration data
- Labour Force Survey analysis using 2021 aggregated data
- Apprenticeship data from the Department for Education and the Department of Work and Pensions

As Census data captures a snapshot in time, not all young people recorded as NEET will have been long-term disengaged. However, the findings provide a powerful picture of who faces the greatest barriers.

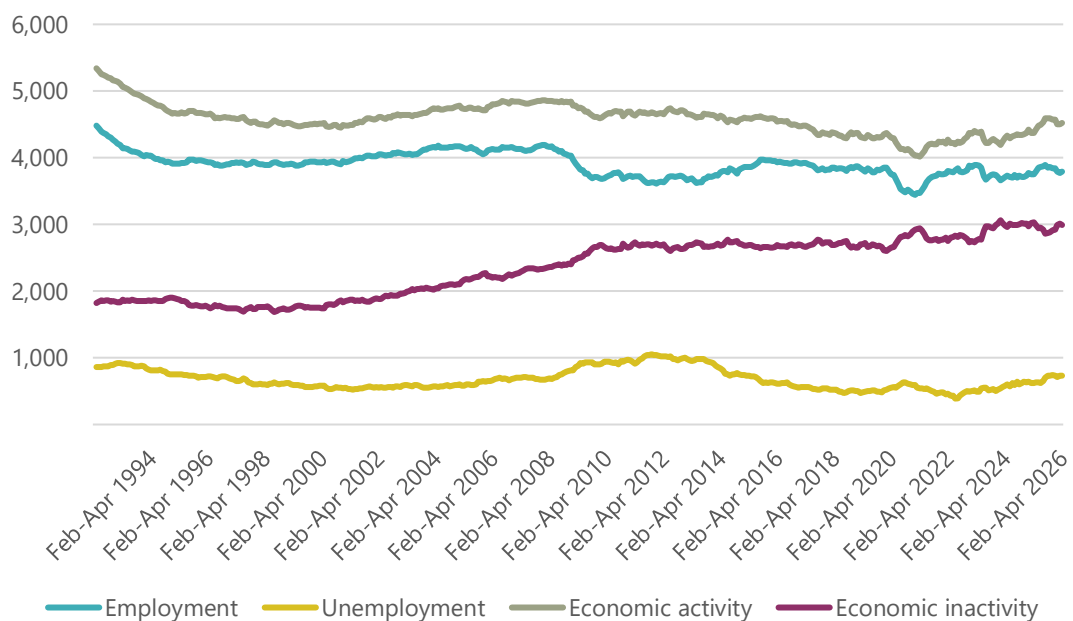
This report contains references to self-harm.

Section One

Key findings

Over the past 30 years, there have been many changes to young people's experiences within society and much of this is positive. The number of young people attending university and obtaining top A-Level and GCSE grades has risen substantially over the last few decades. The number of people starting apprenticeship is also significantly above their pre-2008 Financial Crisis levels. However, the rising number of young people who are not in education, employment and training has also increased over the same quarter of a century, while the number of young people in work has fallen since the financial crisis in 2008 and failed to meaningfully recover.

Chart 1: Employment status, 16-24, 000s

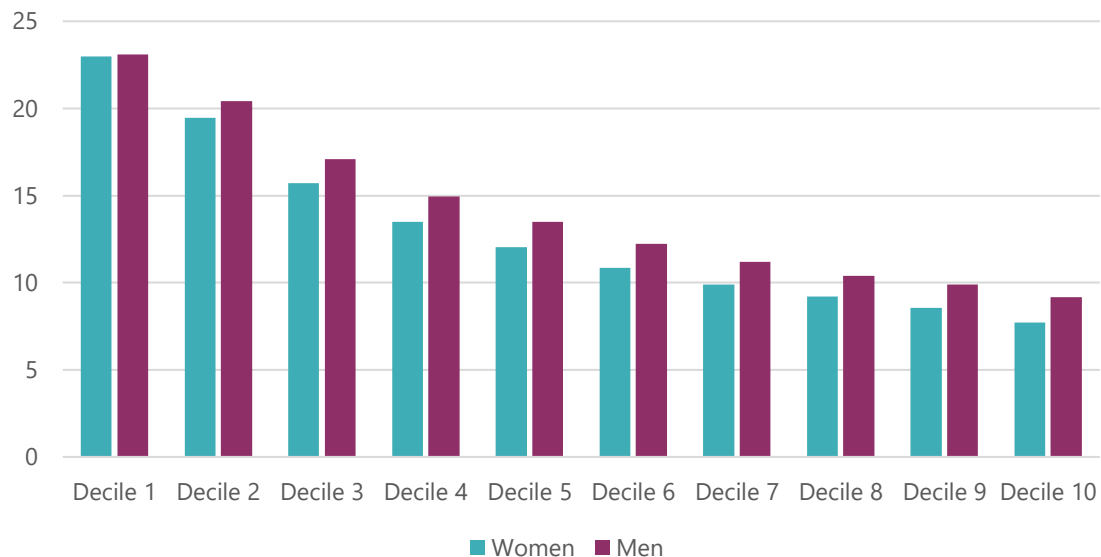


While it is expected that young people might have some period of worklessness while moving between education and employment, long-term unemployment or inactivity in this period can have a scarring impact on their long-term work prospects.

Class and poverty

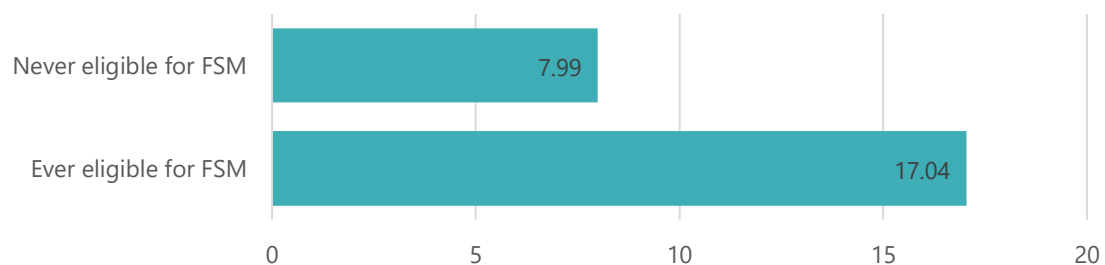
The clearest finding in this report is that poverty remains one of the strongest predictors of becoming NEET. Young people in the most deprived communities are more than twice as likely to be NEET as those in the least deprived areas. Among the most deprived decile, more than one in five young people are NEET, compared to under one in ten in the least deprived decile.

Chart 2: The NEET rate by Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) decile group and gender, %



The data reveals that the NEET gender gap is the lowest among the most deprived decile (with young men and young women having comparably high chances of being NEET), and widens as deprivation reduces. This suggests that class has a greater impact on young women's likelihood to pursue employment, education and training opportunities.

Chart 3: The NEET rate by previous eligibility for free school meals, %



This also carries on when we look at eligibility for free school meals (FSMs), which is an indicator of class as eligibility it is based upon the incomes of an individual's parents while they were growing up. Those who were eligible for FSMs at some point in their childhood are more than twice as likely to become NEETs as young adults compared with those who were never eligible. This shows a clear link between class and going on to become NEET.

This suggests that the likelihood to become NEET often begins long before adulthood. Childhood poverty can affect attainment, confidence, health, housing stability, social networks and access to opportunity, all of which influence later outcomes. Far from being a sudden labour market problem, NEET status is frequently the cumulative result of long-term disadvantage.

Educational attainment

Qualifications still matter greatly, but they are no longer a guarantee of security. Whereas previously data suggested that new graduates were significantly more likely to be employed than young people without a degree.¹ TUC analysis of the data suggests that higher education alone cannot resolve youth exclusion. Some graduates are struggling to secure appropriate entry-level work, while many young women completing apprenticeships are still becoming NEET.

This can also cause a labour market mismatch with graduates taking jobs that had typically been done by those with different qualifications who then struggle to find roles.

Furthermore, it is important that no young person falls behind regardless of their educational background. Young people with no qualifications are substantially more likely to be NEET, suggesting significant barriers to employment and further study.

Table 1: The NEET rate by the highest level of qualification received by gender, %

	Women	Men
Level 4 and above: Degree and equivalent	9.84	11.87
Level 3: 2+ A levels and equivalent	13.43	11.56
Apprenticeship	21.01	12.57
Level 2: 5+ GCSEs and equivalent	29.53	21.68
Level 1: 1-4 GCSEs and equivalent	45.61	33.87
No qualifications	55.78	46.50
Other qualification	35.69	24.20

As Table 1 demonstrates, roughly half of young people with no qualifications are NEET. This reflects the importance of ensuring that all young people achieve at least some GCSEs and that those without qualifications are offered placements in adult education courses. The data shows that 70,000 young people did not have any qualifications on the Census date and more than half of all young women without any qualifications were NEET.

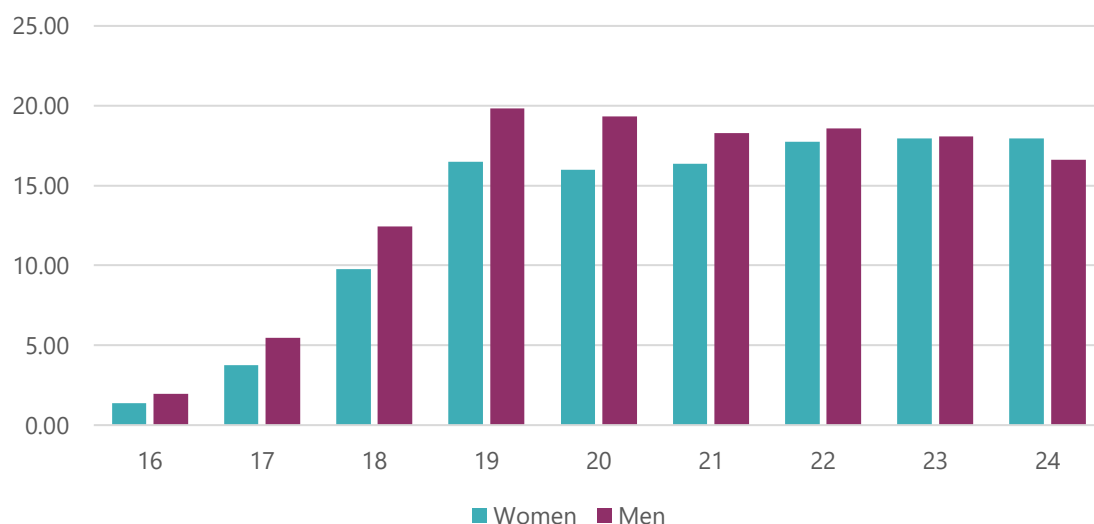
The data also reveals that more than one fifth of young women who have completed apprenticeships go on to become NEETs. This suggests that apprenticeships are failing to lead to stable careers for young women. Notably, this does not seem to be the case with young men, of which only one in eight remain NEET after finishing an apprenticeship. This is perhaps because young men and women pursue different

apprenticeship subjects. Our analysis found that over 40 per cent of men who completed apprenticeships did so in STEM fields, compared to just 6.8 per cent of women. In addition, men were more than 10 times as likely as women to achieve an apprenticeship in Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies.

Generally, there tends to be a clear pattern for young women showing an inverse relationship between educational attainment and NEET rates, however this pattern seems to have broken down somewhat for young men. Young male university graduates are more likely to be NEET than their counterparts who finished their education after achieving A levels. Young men are more likely to be unemployed (out of work and actively looking for a job), whereas young women are more likely to be economically inactive (out of work and not actively looking for it). This may partially explain the high level of NEETs among young male graduates who are struggling to find suitable jobs in the fields in which they've completed their studies. Men are more likely to pursue degrees in engineering and technology, computing, and business and management. A young man pursuing work in these relatively lucrative fields may be willing to engage in a longer job search rather than accepting a job in a different field. This may also reflect a shortage of entry-level graduate roles in specific sectors and regional mismatch.

Furthermore, the consistent pattern of young people struggling to enter and stay in employment or education regardless of their educational or vocational background suggests that there are systemic weaknesses in the labour market and poor routes into employment. This points to a wider transition problem: too many young people are doing what they were told would improve their prospects, only to find too few secure opportunities waiting at the end.

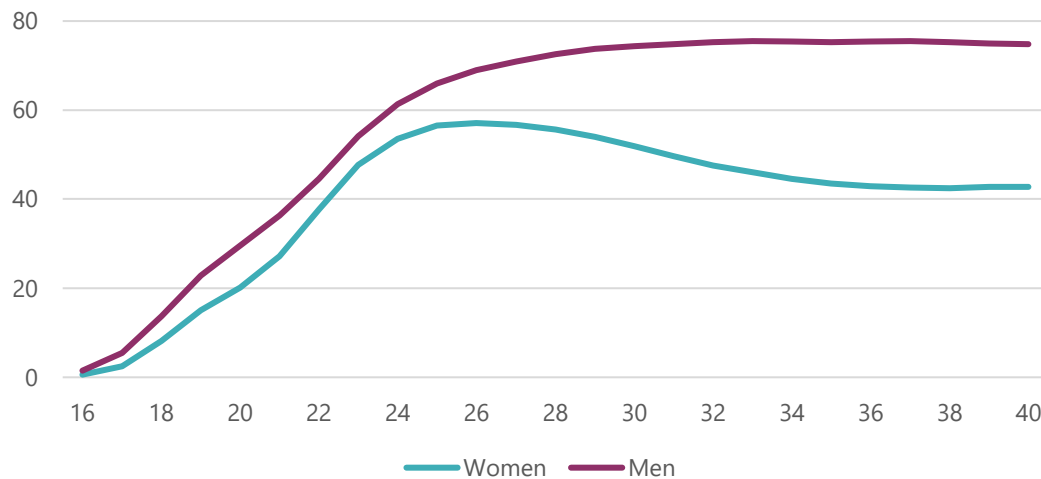
Chart 4: The NEET rate by age and gender, %



We examine this pattern more closely when looking at the age distribution of NEETs by gender. While the NEET rate for young women peaks in their early 20s and then remains stable, the NEET rate for young men peaks earlier at 19 but reduces as they

become older. By age 24, the NEET rate is higher for women than men. This may be because women are more likely to pursue higher education, so would only become NEET after completing their education. It may also be because of growing caring responsibilities, discussed below.

Chart 5: Proportion of people in full-time employment (31 or more hours per week, including paid and unpaid over-time) by age and gender, %



The barriers for women entering the workplace continue into even further into adulthood, with women at every age having a lower employment rate than their male counterparts. Separate Census data revealed that women tended to start full-time employment later than men and the level of women working full-time dropped for women aged 27 or older. This suggests that a significant cohort of NEET young women are likely to remain economically inactive throughout their entire working lives.

Regional trends and variations

Where a young person grows up still has a powerful influence on their employment and educational opportunities.

The data reveals a clear regional divide, with NEET rates generally higher in the North of England and lower in the South, excluding London. For both men and women, the highest rates are found in the North East, while the South West records the lowest. However, there are also significant variations within regions.

Across all regions, men have a higher NEET rate than women, with this difference particularly pronounced in London. This represents almost 55,000 young men in London. Within this cohort, young men are more likely to be unemployed, while young women are more likely to be economically inactive, suggesting that young men are more likely to be actively looking for jobs. It's possible to assume that high labour market competition is contributing to the high NEET rate among young men in London.

Chart 6: The NEET rate by region and gender, %



Generally, young people are more likely to be NEETs in urban areas, compared to rural locations. This disparity is slightly more pronounced in young men. However, this might partially be explained by the distribution of young people. The data also shows that 86 per cent of young people live in urban areas, so there may be more competition for suitable jobs in these areas compared to more rural locations.

TUC analysis found that young workers tend to be concentrated in certain sectors, and that two fifths of young workers work in hospitality. While there are a range of issues with the pay and conditions across the hospitality sector, this may also partially explain the regional differences in NEET rates. The wider census data found that 9.2 per cent of all jobs in the South West were in the accommodation and food services sector, compared to 7.2 per cent nationally. By contrast, only 6.6 per cent of jobs in the North East are in this sector.

When looking at the local authority data, there are clear areas with high levels of NEETs, such as Blackpool, where more than one in five young people are NEET. Blackpool is consistently named as one of the most deprived local authorities in the UK.

In addition, many of the areas with the highest levels of NEETs are in Northern and coastal areas where there has been a long-term decline in industry. These patterns reflect more than geography alone. They mirror the uneven distribution of jobs, transport links, educational opportunities and investment across England. Many of the local authorities with the highest NEET rates are places shaped by industrial decline, weak local labour markets and persistent deprivation.

Tables 2 and 3: The 10 local authorities with the highest NEET rates for men and women

Local authority	NEET rate for men, %	Local authority	NEET rate for women, %
Blackpool	21.66	Blackpool	20.83
Knowsley	20.28	Walsall	19.19
Hartlepool	19.53	Hartlepool	18.67
Redcar and Cleveland	19.31	North East Lincolnshire	18.31
Wolverhampton	18.97	Wolverhampton	17.81
Middlesbrough	18.90	Bradford	17.79
Bradford	18.41	Middlesbrough	17.74
Sandwell	18.40	Doncaster	17.51
Lewisham	18.34	Sandwell	17.50
Oldham	18.31	Redcar and Cleveland	17.48

The lowest density of NEETs occurs in areas with large student populations, such as York, Camden and Bath, suggesting that student numbers obscure some of the regional trends in the data. There also tends to be a low concentration of NEETs in typically wealthy commuter belt areas, which further support the conclusion that a young person's employment and educational outcomes and opportunities are closely linked to their socioeconomic background.

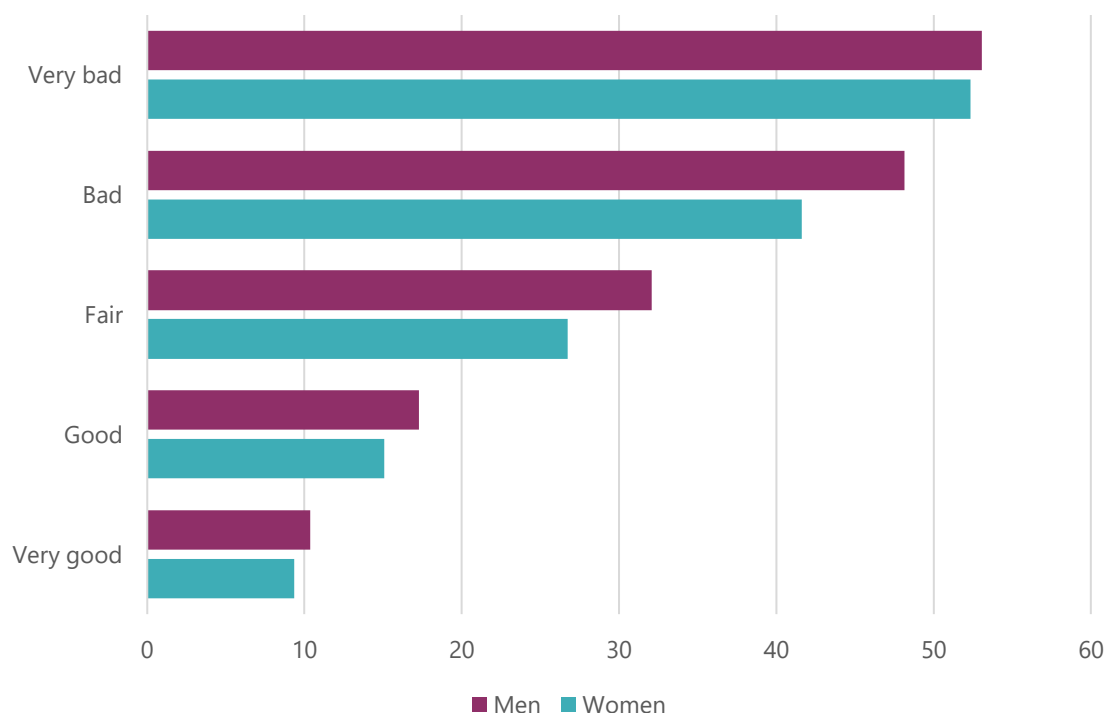
These regional differences are likely to become more entrenched over time due to housing pressures limiting the geographical mobility of young workers. Recent data reveals that a record 28.7 per cent of young people now live with their parents, and this rises to more than a third (34.9 per cent) of all young men.² While it was once common for young people to move away from home for work or educational opportunities, high rental costs have trapped many young people in their home towns.

Health and disability

Poor physical and mental health has been a growing cause of economic inactivity across all ages, with long-term cuts to the NHS and delays to treatment holding many

back. Young people face record waiting times for access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and additional difficulties when transitioning between child and adult services.

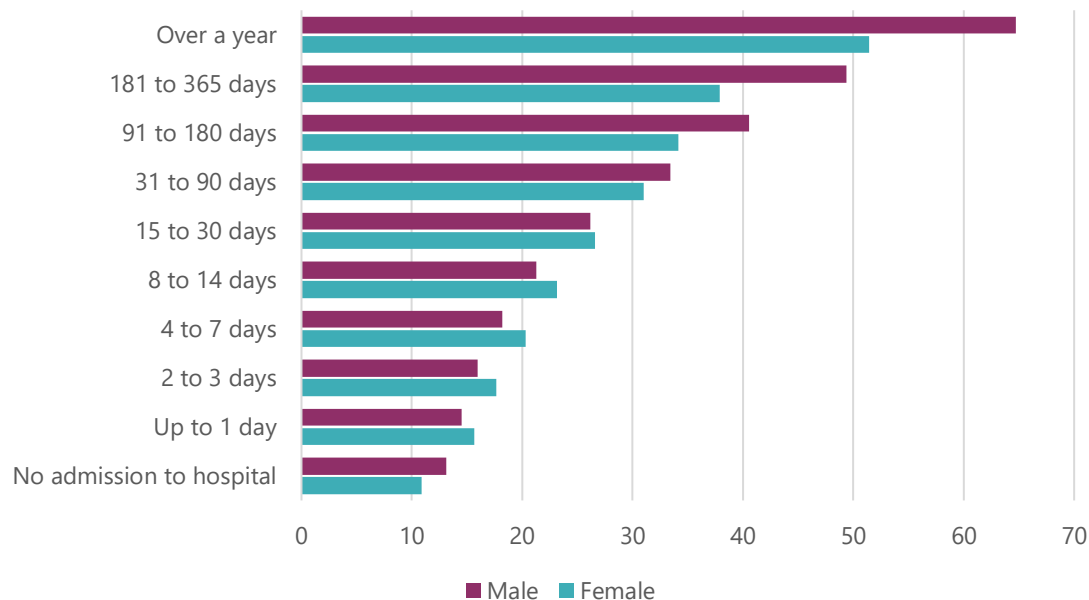
Chart 7: The NEET rate by self-reported general health and gender, %



More than half of those who were NEET reported that their health was very bad in the Census, while conversely only around one in ten NEET young people responded that their health was very good. Across the entire population of respondents in this age group, 62 per cent of young women and 67 per cent of young men described themselves as in very good health, and less than 1 per cent of respondents in both these groups stated that they were in very bad health. This shows that, in this respect, NEET young people are wildly out of step with their wider cohort. It is unclear if poor health causes young people to become NEET, or if a lack of structure and stigma caused by being in their situation leads to worse perceived health. But the data does reveal a clear link between self-reported poor health and NEET status.

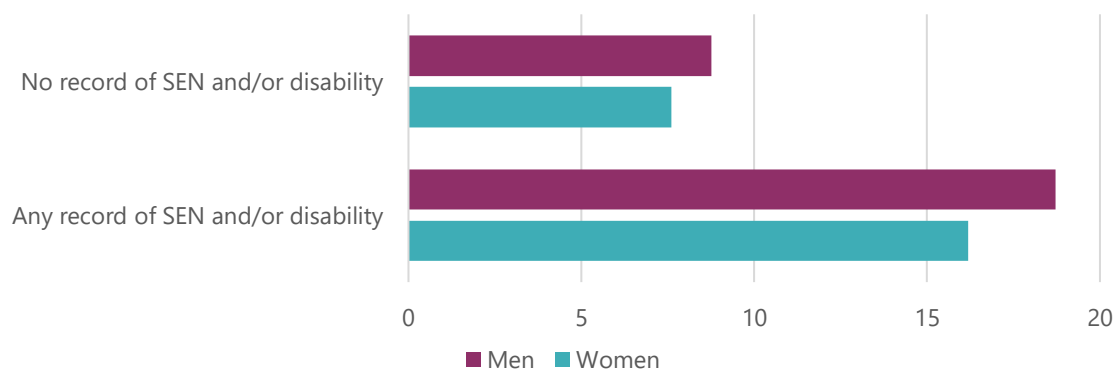
This pattern continues when we look at those who have previously had admissions to hospital. The data excludes those who were admitted to accident and emergency or outpatient care. More than half of young women and almost two thirds of young men who were previously admitted to hospital for over a year went on to become NEET.

Chart 8: The NEET rate by length of in-patient hospital admission (excluding accident and emergency) and gender, %



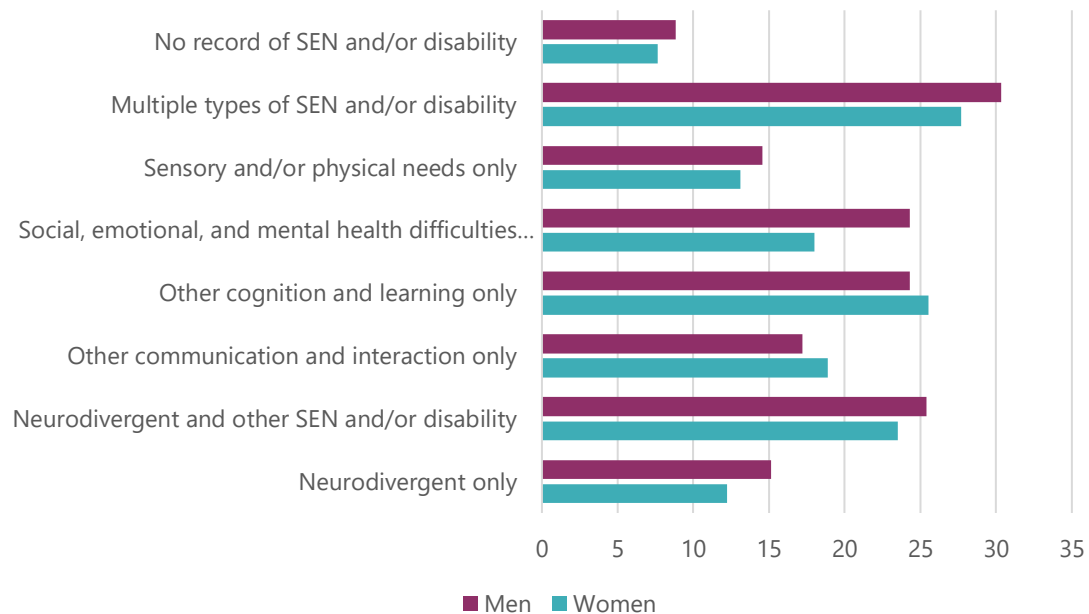
This data reveals that, for many NEETs, their health conditions are serious and should not be trivialised. In fact, there is a strong correlation between the severity of a young person's health condition and their likelihood to become NEET. This suggests that more support is needed to help young people who have experienced long-term health issues back into education, or into employment and/or training. It also highlights that any policy response needs to acknowledge the reality and severity of the health issues facing this group of individuals.

Chart 9: The NEET rate by previous record of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and/or disability and gender, %



In general, young people with Special Educational Needs and/or a disability were more than twice as likely to be NEET than young people without any recorded SEN and/or disability. Of young men in this category, almost one in five were NEET, or over 380,000 young men.

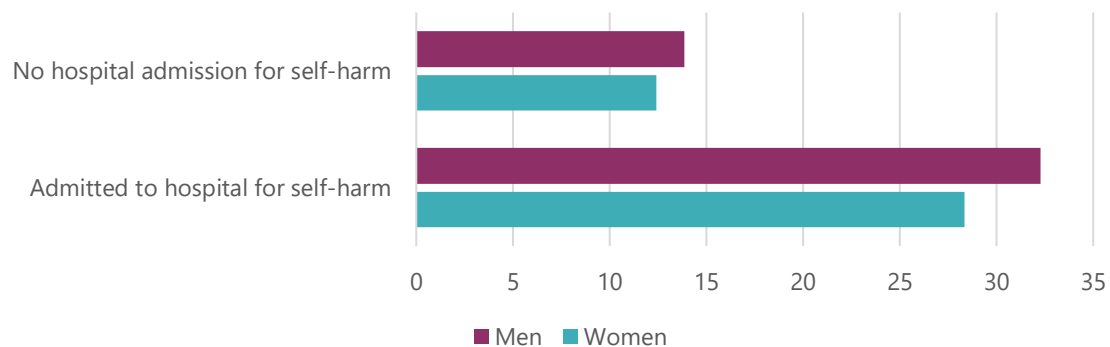
Chart 10: The NEET rate by previous record of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and/or disability type and gender, %



When drilling down into data, it emerges that more than a quarter of young people with multiple types of SEN and/or disability are NEET, and more than three in ten young men with multiple types of SEN and/or disability are NEET. Removing barriers to employment is essential to support those impairments or long-term health conditions to enter the workforce, such as ensuring employers provide reasonable adjustments, flexible working and ensure accessible workplaces. This must also be matched with functioning state support such as a well-funded Access to Work scheme.

Among those who only have social, emotional and/or mental health difficulties, young men are far more likely to be NEET than young women, suggesting that progress in addressing poor mental health among men is key for supporting these young men to gain an education and enter the workforce.

Chart 11: The NEET rate by previous history of hospital admission for self-harm and gender, %



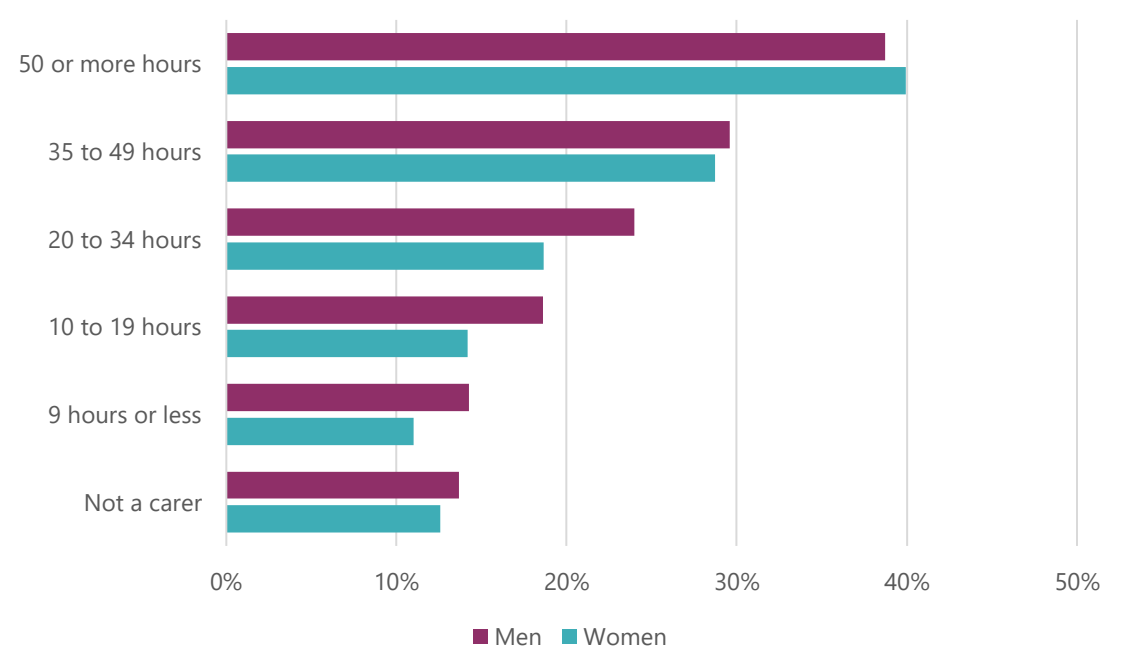
The data also shows that 100,000 young people have previously been hospitalised due to self-harm, of whom more than three quarters were young women. This cohort is more than twice as likely to go on to become NEET compared to those who have never been admitted to hospital for self-harm, again emphasising the need for support for those experiencing mental ill health. While less young men have a history of hospital admissions for self-harm, almost of a third of those who are admitted go on to become NEET later in life.

Caring responsibilities

As a result of more than a decade of austerity and the erosion of key public services, individuals within a household have taken on more care responsibilities. The price of childcare has also rocketed in recent years, putting financial strain and caring pressures on families. In addition, this data was collected in 2021 during the pandemic, when access to many support services was more limited and school closures were still taking place.

Young carers and young parents face some of the highest risks of NEET status, highlighting how unpaid care limits access to education and work. There are almost 22,000 young carers, representing 4.6 per cent of the population. Almost two fifths of young people who provided 50 or more hours of unpaid care per week are NEET, compared with one in eight young people who provide no care.

Chart 12: The NEET rate by hours spent caring and gender, %



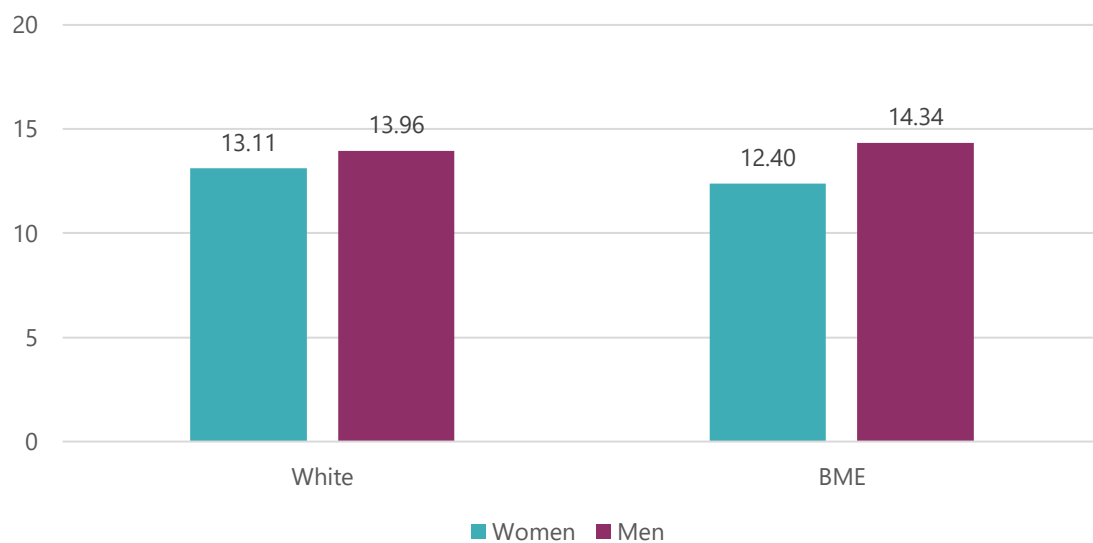
Young parents also have a higher likelihood of being NEET, especially young mothers. Of all mothers under 25 years old, almost two thirds (59.11 per cent) were NEET on the

census date. According to the data, almost one third of all NEET women are young mothers, with almost 100,000 young mothers being NEET.

There are many barriers to women returning to the workforce after having children, and this is likely to disproportionately affect younger mothers as they are likely to be lower-paid and therefore less able to justify the high cost of childcare. This suggests that young mothers are being priced out of economic participation.

Race and ethnicity

Chart 13: The NEET rate by race and gender, %



In terms of race, young white men and young white women have a very similar NEET rate, with young white men slightly more likely to be NEET than their female counterparts. However, when looking at young BME people, the gap between the two genders is larger. BME women are less likely to be NEET than white women, but BME men are more likely to be NEET than white men. Overall, BME men are the group most likely to be NEET.

Within this group, the data also reveals particularly high NEET rates among those with traveller and Caribbean backgrounds.

Conclusions

The evidence in this report shows that NEET status is rarely a matter of individual choice or motivation. It is the cumulative outcome of structural disadvantage that builds from childhood and is reinforced by gaps in education, the labour market and public services. Poverty is the clearest thread running through this report. Young people who grew up in poverty, or who live in deprived communities, are consistently more likely to become NEET, regardless of which other factors are considered. This pattern begins well before a young person leaves school: childhood poverty shapes attainment, confidence, health and access to opportunity in ways that compound over time.

Education remains important, but it is not a guarantee of security. While qualifications continue to be linked with better outcomes overall, this report has shown that some graduates and many apprenticeship-completers, particularly young women, still struggle to find stable work. This points to weaknesses in the transition between education and employment, rather than to failings on the part of young people themselves.

Geography compounds these pressures. NEET rates are highest in places shaped by long-term industrial decline, particularly the North East and coastal towns such as Blackpool, and rising housing costs are likely to entrench these inequalities further as young people become less able to move for work.

Health, disability and caring responsibilities are among the strongest predictors of NEET status. Young people with a long-term health condition, a disability, or extensive caring responsibilities face significantly higher barriers to education, employment or training, while the link to poor mental health and self-harm underlines the scale of support needed alongside any employment intervention.

Gender is a consistent dividing line throughout the report, though rarely a straightforward one. It appears that young men and women are having very different experiences entering the labour market and have markedly different outcomes. For young people with a disability, from BME backgrounds, or living in deprived areas, these disadvantages rarely act alone but compound one another.

Taken together, these findings point to the conclusion that rising NEET rates reflect the cumulative effect of insecure work, weak regional economies, underfunded public services and a fraying safety net, not a failure of ambition among young people. Addressing this will require sustained, cross-government action that treats employment, education, health, housing and childcare as interconnected parts of the same challenge.

Section Three

Recommendations

The Government has frequently said that getting young people into education, employment or training is a core priority, and the TUC welcomes this commitment.

The challenges facing young people were a key tenet of the Government's Get Britain Working white paper, published in 2024 shortly after coming into power. However there remain areas where the TUC believes that the Government should go further.

Ensure young people's opportunities are a cross-government priority

The government should use its convening and spending power to drive action, targeting regions with the highest NEET rates and embedding this agenda across departments.

Expand the jobs guarantee for young people

While the TUC welcomes plans to improve employment opportunities, the scheme must go beyond 90,000 places over three years. Priority in expanding the youth guarantee should be given to paid roles, rather than unpaid work experience. Placements must be additional (not replacing existing roles) and provide at least the National Living Wage.

These roles should be made available to young people aged 18-24 who have been not in employment, education or training (NEET) for six months or longer and young people aged 18-24 who are at high risk of becoming long-term NEET.

While a national jobs guarantee would need upfront investment, TUC modelling estimates that in the long term the cost-benefit ratio would be 2.81, with the scheme paying for itself within a decade.

The scheme should be targeted to support the areas and demographics who need it the most. The analysis reveals that there are clear pockets of deprivation across the country with poor employment prospects for young people.

We also urge tailored measures for disabled young people, including fast-track access to the Access to Work scheme and easily implemented reasonable adjustments.

Ensure quality work experiences

Poor-quality jobs can push young people out of the labour market, so the government must fully and swiftly implement the Employment Rights Act and the Make Work Pay agenda.

Improved trade union access in workplaces will create more meaningful jobs and opportunities, as well as promoting growth and development opportunities. Bringing an end to zero hour contracts will give young people more stable employment to grow their careers. And better protections for pregnant women and young mothers will help to keep young mothers in the workforce.

Reform apprenticeships

The Government should push to improve the quality of apprenticeships, expand provision, and ensure apprentices receive enough financial support to successfully complete their training.

There is a benefit to expanding access to high quality apprenticeships and promoting them to a wider cohort and ensuring that young women undertake more rewarding apprenticeship pathways. The Government could also work with employers to create apprenticeship opportunities in areas with the highest levels of young people who are NEET, such as coastal and northern towns. Furthermore, further support and reasonable adjustments should be given as standard during apprenticeships to support disabled workers or those in poor health.

The analysis also highlights that steps must be taken to ensure that apprenticeships are leading to meaningful employment opportunities and career pathways. There is evidence that too many young people are still falling between the cracks after successfully completing apprenticeships.

Reform education funding

The government should work with unions on a sustainable tertiary workforce strategy; stabilise higher education funding; and address pressures on colleges and universities delivering apprenticeships and wider learning. There is also a need to expand and promote access to adult education courses to ensure that all young people can achieve a Level 2 in English and Maths.

Access to childcare

There is clear evidence that childcare is holding young mothers back from building careers.

As a minimum, funding of the childcare sector should be brought in line with the OECD average of 0.7 per cent of GDP immediately.

In the long term, a universal, flexible, high-quality childcare and early years provision that is available to all from the point at which paid maternity or parental leave ends, with childcare free at the point of use.

A fully funded NHS and improved mental health access

The Government should act to ensure that those disabled workers who are able to work, and want to work, have the support they need to enter and stay in work. Where employers have not put in place the reasonable adjustments disabled workers need to do their job, disabled workers should not face a detriment linked to benefits or their removal/reduction.

1

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/graduatesintheuklabourmarket/2017>

2

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/latest>