

Loneliness Emerging as a Key Driver Behind the UK's Growing NEET Crisis, Experts Warn

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Loneliness and social isolation are major, under-recognised factors driving the high volume of young people out of work or education in the United Kingdom, according to a leading academic.

The warning follows the publication of the Alan Milburn report on young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), which has sparked fresh debate on how the government tackles youth exclusion.

According to Dr Liam Wrigley, Assistant Professor in Criminology and Social Policy at the University of Birmingham, the crisis has reached alarming levels. "As of May 2026, over 1 million young people are NEETs in the United Kingdom, with 1 in 6 now affected," Dr Wrigley said, commenting on the Milburn Review's findings.

The Milburn Review crystallised the severity of the issue, revealing that up to 58% of young people remain inactive in the workforce. Quarterly statistics show that the proportion of young people experiencing NEET status has remained persistently high, fluctuating between 11% and 16%.

The Hidden Impact of Social Isolation

Dr Wrigley, whose research focuses on social inclusion, poverty, and loneliness, believes that policy-makers are failing to see the human isolation at the core of the statistics. He argues that a lack of meaningful social networks directly hinders a young person's ability to find work or training.

“Importantly, loneliness remains an under-recognised dimension of the NEET issue. Social connectivity helps us better understand the inequalities faced by NEET-experienced young people, particularly in accessing the relationships that support education, employment, and broader economic participation.”

A four-year study conducted by Dr Wrigley in Greater Manchester between 2018 and 2022 tracked the social networks of young people with NEET experiences. The study concluded that strong, meaningful relationships with family, peers, and key support services are absolutely essential to help young people overcome systemic barriers.

However, despite various regional and national initiatives over the years, the situation on the ground appears to be stagnating or actively declining. “There has been little improvement in recent years, and in many respects the situation has worsened,” Dr Wrigley noted.

A Call for Sustained Relationships

The University of Birmingham academic, who has previously collaborated with the Campaign to End Loneliness, emphasised that short-term employment schemes are insufficient if they do not address a young person’s broader social fabric.

Findings from his work with the Campaign to End Loneliness reinforce the idea that sustained, supportive relationships are the true foundation required to help vulnerable young people successfully meet their educational and employment goals.

As the government faces mounting pressure to address the 1 million-strong economic inactivity crisis among the youth, experts are urging a shift in strategy, one that prioritises rebuilding local youth support services and tackling social isolation alongside traditional job training.