

One-in-Eight Young People: Misunderstood and Misused

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Abstract

This paper interrogates UK government policy-making centred on the one-in-eight 18–24-year-olds who are recorded as ‘inactive’ in the Labour Force Survey. It is argued that the actual situations of these ‘inactive’ young people are misrepresented. Furthermore, no sound case is made for using the existence of this group to tighten the eligibility of all age groups for certain out-of-work welfare benefits thereby inflicting more hardship on some of the country’s poorest households. Meanwhile, the actual difficulties faced by young entrants to the workforce in the 2020s remain unaddressed.

Keywords: disability, Labour Force Survey, mental health, NEET, welfare benefits

1. Introduction

We heard a lot about the one-in eight in the early months of 2025. The provocateur was a Green Paper from the Department for Work and Pensions (2025) which preceded a Spring Statement from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Green Paper claimed that welfare payments to persons of working age were rising unsustainably. In public discourse this was linked to rising levels of mental ill-health, especially among young people. Rising school absence rates were thrown into the charge sheet. It was hypothesised (evidence free) that the recent rise in mental disability must surely be due to over-diagnosis, and that the one-in-eight needed to be rescued from long-term welfare dependence thereby clamping down on an unsustainable welfare bill.

We shall see below that all the data are accurate, but the actual character of the one-in-eight group is misrepresented. Moreover, the different bundles of data simply do not fit together in the way that has become the basis for policy development. Older working age households, not 18–24-year-olds, will pay the price. Young people’s genuine work entry problems will remain unaddressed.

The next section unpacks the separate bundles of evidence on which the policy narrative is based. The subsequent section shows that fitting the bundles together becomes easier when the perspective is widened contemporarily and deepened historically.

2. The Bundles

2.1 One-in-Eight

Table 1 gives the source of this figure. It is from

the rolling Labour Force Survey. It shows that in Autumn 2024 almost one-in-five (not eight) were NEET as conventionally measured (not in employment, education or training). Calculations normally include the unemployed (who are actively seeking work). The one-in-eight (13 percent in Table 1) are 'inactive', neither 'in' nor actively seeking employment, education or training. Table 1 also gives the comparable pre-Covid (October-December 2019) figures. At that time, it was just one-in-ten (10 percent, not 13 percent) who were inactive. Almost 200,000 additional 18–24-year-olds had become inactive. A possible explanation is an increase in disability whether over- or properly diagnosed. However, there are other possible explanations. Between late-2019 and late-2024 there had been declines in the number and percentage of 18–24-year-olds in employment (52 to 47 percent) and a corresponding rise in unemployment, but more so in inactivity and a corresponding rise in inactivity. Between 2019 and 2024 the size of the 18-24 cohorts had grown by just over 200,000. Roughly 100,000 more were in full-time education. Approximately 100,000 fewer were in employment. Just under 100,000 more than in 2019 were unemployed. Job scarcity is an alternative possible driver of these changes. The changes in the level and rate of inactivity need to be set in the context of these other changes.

Table 1. Labour market status: 18–24-year-olds

	Oct-Dec 2019		Oct-Dec 2024	
	N 1000s	%	N 1000s	%
Employed	2873	52	2730	47
Unemployed	299	5	370	6
Full-time education	1819	33	1916	33
Inactive	546	10	730	13
N	5537		5746	

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

We know that NEETs need to be disaggregated (Furlong, 2006; Yates & Payne, 2006). Some are unemployed, defined officially as not in employment but seeking work actively. There

are further sub-groups within the one-in-eight. One sub-group is in transition, sometimes between jobs, sometimes between completing full-time education and starting their first career jobs. They may have jobs arranged with a future start-date. Others delay starting job search until they have left education and received their examination results and qualifications. It is not uncommon for higher education graduates to feel that they need a break before embarking on long-term careers. Few in this sub-group will be claiming benefits. They do not want to be pressured into applying for and accepting the jobs that are available through Jobcentres. Families will have supported these young people up to age 18, 21 or beyond and are content to continue to do so. Another sub-group are carers, typically mothers with young children. Body clocks say that their timing is right even though it is now normal for the highly educated to delay parenthood until they are established in their careers. Few in either of these sub-groups are at risk of long-term welfare dependence. A further subgroup are discouraged workers who have given-up searching and applying for jobs at the time when questioned by the Labour Force Survey (not necessarily for ever). Some return to education. Others will become inactive. Then there are those with an illness or condition that is keeping them out of the workforce. These 18–24-year-olds exist, but they are not the entire one-in-eight.

2.2 Claimants

In February 2025, the Department of Work and Pensions had roughly 24 million claimants. The largest group are the retired who can claim state pensions. Around 9 million claimants are of normal working age (16-64). Among these only 0.3 million are 18–24-year-olds.

In early 2025, 4.8 million were claiming Personal Independence Payments (PIP) or Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The latter was gradually being replaced by PIP (Table 2). In 2019 the total claiming one of these benefits was just 3.5 million. There has been an increase which needs to be explained but the mere 0.3 million 18–24-year-old claimants in 2025 cannot have been responsible for a 1.3 million rise. However, if disability had spread throughout the working age population as rapidly as inactivity had spread among 18–24-year-olds (a remarkable coincidence) this would explain the 2019-24 rise in PIP and DLA claimants.

Table 2. Claimants, all ages, Feb 2025, in millions

Personal independence payment	3.5
Disability living allowance	1.3
Job seekers allowance	0.09
Income Support	0.04
Universal credit	7.0

Source: Department for Work and Pensions, 2025.

2.3 Disability

In 2022-23, 23 percent of the working age population reported a disability or a long-standing illness or condition which caused substantial difficulty in day-to-day activities (Judge & Murphy, 2024). This percentage had risen from 16 per cent in 2012-13. Disability has been the main driver of increased spending on working age benefits. Just 10 percent reported signs of poor mental health. Most disabilities were physical. This remained the case despite benefit claims on mental health grounds having doubled (Vriend et al, 2025). In 2023 one-in-five 8–25-year-olds reported (on a strengths and limitations scale) a probable mental disorder (NHS Digital) but in most cases this was not interfering with their ability to work.

2.4 School Absences

School absences had been rising before, then leapt sharply following the Covid-19 lockdowns (Department for Education, 2025; Hunt et al, 2025). Subsequently levels have stabilised. They have not returned to pre-Covid levels. School absences could be but are not necessarily associated with mental or physical ill-health. Some pupils may simply dislike school, and the Covid lockdowns may have eroded the notion

that you ‘have’ to attend.

3. Contexts

3.1 The History of NEETs: 16–17-Year-Olds

When the acronym NEET was first used (Istance et al, 1993) the young people were 16–18-year-olds. Until 1992, which was when regular Labour Force Surveys commenced in Britain, the official measure of unemployment was a claimant count. This became blatantly unreliable for the age group in 1988 when 16- and 17-year-olds lost the right to register and claim unemployment benefit. This was supposed to push NEETs back into education or training if they were unable to find jobs. A youth unemployment problem that had festered since the early-1970s was solved on paper.

Hence, the significance of the first research that attempted to track all 16-year-olds in target neighbourhoods in South Glamorgan. This estimated that between 16 and 23 percent of young people were NEET at some time. The NEET group had high inflow and outflow rates. This was similar to the findings that followed a scare about unregistered youth unemployment at the end of the 1970s (Roberts et al, 1981). Those concerned were believed to be found in multi-ethnic inner-city districts. The research in these locations found that the registered and unregistered unemployed were mostly the same individuals at different points in time. However, as with NEETs in the early-1990s, there was a ‘hardcore’, estimated at 9 percent to 12 percent who were long term non-registrants.

By the time that the findings in South Glamorgan became available, Labour Force Surveys were reporting on nationally representative samples. Table 3 gives the findings for 16–17-year-olds in the Autumns of 1992, 2012 and 2024.

Table 3. Labour market status: 16–17-year-olds

	Oct-Dec 1992		Oct-Dec 2012		Oct-Dec 2024	
	16-17 In full-time education %	16-17 Not in full-time education %	16-17 In full-time education %	16-17 Not in full-time education %	16-17 In full-time education %	16-17 Not in full-time education %
Employed	37	64	19	42	20	34
Unemployed	5	20	21	23	28	19
Inactive	58	16	69	35	73	47

Percentages of age group	67	13	87	13	86	14
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Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

This table shows that in 1992 67 percent of the age group were still in full-time education. School and college had beaten training schemes in recruiting post-compulsory students. The statutory school-leaving age had been raised to 16 in 1972 and remained 16 until 2013. However, by 2012 almost 90 percent were already ‘staying on’, sometimes switching schools or moving to a college. Since 1992 these students had apparently encountered greater difficulty when seeking part-time jobs. Greater competition from other groups such as higher education students? Among the 16- and 17-year-olds who had left full-time education in 1992, the majority (64 percent) had jobs, but this then fell to just 34 percent in 2024. A higher proportion (47 per cent in 2024) were inactive. These appear to be the individuals at greatest risk of becoming long-term NEET, but the 47 percent is from the 14 percent who had left full-time education, not the entire age group.

When the incoming New Labour government in 1997 launched the first of its New Deals, which was for 18–25-year-olds, it found that many of the intended beneficiaries had been out-of-contact (NEET) from age 16. The response

was the creation in 2001 of an entirely new service, Connexions, with the priority target of hauling down the number of long-term NEETs, estimated from Labour Force Surveys to be between 9 and 11 percent of each cohort. The service would make contact with pupils considered at risk while in education, then coach them towards then into employment. Connexions’ core staff were from remnants of the former Careers Service, plus youth and other community workers with the necessary soft skills. Connexions retained the former Career Service’s remit to provide advice, information and guidance for all young people (McGowan et al, 2009; National Audit Office, 2004). Connexions failed to meet its priority target and was disconnected from central government funding in 2011.

3.2 Inactive at 18-24 Today

Since 2015, when 16- and 17-year-olds became required to remain in full-time learning the NEETs have usually been calculated from the population of 18–24-year-olds. Table 4 gives the findings from 2019 and 2024 which are also in Table 1 (above) but adds the findings from 2012 and 1992.

Table 4. Labour market status: 18–24-year-olds

	Oct-Dec 1992		Oct -Dec 2012		Oct-Dec 2019		Oct-Dec 2024	
	N 1000s	%	N 1000s	%	N 1000s	%	N 1000s	%
Employed	3325	59	2803	48	2873	52	2730	47
Unemployed	708	12	610	10	299	5	370	6
Full-time education	1016	18	1835	31	1819	33	1916	33
Inactive	619	11	578	10	546	10	730	13
N	5668		5826		5537		5746	

Source: Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey.

We can see that the proportion aged 18-24 in full-time education rose until 2012 and had by then stabilised at 31-33 percent. The proportion in jobs declined in the 1990s and 2000s then stabilised at 47-52 percent. The proportion unemployed declined from 12 and 11 percent in the 1990s and 2000s, to 5 and 6 percent in 2019 and 2024. Throughout most of this time series

between 10 and 11 percent were inactive. Then in 2024, the rate rose to 13 percent. This rise looks small and unremarkable, but maybe at least noteworthy when set against the previous 30 years of stability. In 2024, almost 200,000 more 18–24-year-olds were inactive than in 2019. There was no similar rise throughout the entire working age (16-64) population. Its inactivity

rate fell from 24 percent in 1992 to 22 percent in 2012 and remained at this level in 2019 (21 percent) and 2024 (22 percent).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

So, what was once one-in-ten has become one-in-eight. This is a small, barely significant change compared with the longer-term shifts in Table 4 between education and employment. The change to one-in-eight may be making an unwelcome impact on health and welfare services and spending. Even so, we have seen earlier that the numbers do not match in the way required by the claim that too-easy-to-access disability benefits are a major driver of the other bundles of evidence that are marshalled to justify the policy response.

The DWP's institutional memory must show that 'tough love' is not the best way to boost employment among groups that fall beneath employers' definitions of 'employable'. It is employers, not intended employees who need to be 'required' and 'incentivised'. State interventions in Britain to promote the employment of disabled persons began in 1944 with the intention of avoiding the post-1918 scenes of war disabled begging on the streets. There was a disabled register, reserved occupations, sheltered workplaces, and a requirement on employers to have at least three percent of their staff from the register. The register and the requirements have now been absorbed or replaced by discrimination and equality legislation. Nothing has ever worked to the full satisfaction of any of those affected. However, financial incentives for employers lay behind the limited success of Youth Training Schemes (1983-), New Labour's New Deals (1997-) and the Future Jobs Fund (2009-10). Help to Work (2014-) which relied on sanctions made no measurable impact.

The real cause of the rise in inactivity among young people is being ignored. Let us return to the crude numbers in Table 1. Between 2019 and 2024 there was a modest rise in the number of 18-24-year-olds from 5,482K to 5,754K. The number of jobs filled by this age group declined from 3,491K to 3,413 (63 per cent to 59 percent of the age group). This was accompanied by a two percent rise in unemployment and a three percent rise in inactivity. Job scarcity and job quality are the most plausible drivers of the redistribution of 18-24-year-olds between 2019 and 2024.

Those who do not pass the first hurdle of five or more good GCSEs at age 16 face a choice between low-paid, part-time, temporary, variable hours jobs (Judge & Murphy, 2024; Murphy, 2022; Navani & Florisson, 2024). Those who become university graduates face a mismatch between the jobs for which they can credibly apply and the skills that they can offer. Given that stepping down the job ladder is likely to incur a long-term penalty (Boero et al, 2025; Vobemer & Schuck 2016) is it any wonder if they delay, prolong inactivity, and continue to seek jobs offering careers commensurate with their qualifications. Is it any wonder if some shelter from the labour market. Basic unemployment 'pay' is paltry. This is an incentive to present an illness or condition that qualifies for greater welfare generosity.

A flawed analysis means that between 0.8 and 1.2 million of the country's poorest households will lose PIP entitlement worth at least £4K per year (Brewer et al, 2025). We might try job creation as an alternative to sanctions. It is surprising how low the bar will fall above which people are considered employable in conditions of job plentitude.

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