

Long-term consequences of being NEET in early adulthood

Initial findings from the 1970 British Cohort Study at Age 51

Young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) are a long-standing policy concern. While existing evidence shows short- and medium-term economic and health scarring effects¹⁻⁵, there is still limited understanding of the long-term consequences of prolonged early NEET experiences.

At the same time, recent research⁶ found stark inequalities in the financial circumstances of generation X in midlife, with the least well-off adults much more likely to not be working because of ill health, and to have financial difficulties, than the most affluent.

This briefing paper shines a light on how NEET exposure in early adulthood may affect people's employment, finances, and health in midlife. The research uses high-quality longitudinal data from the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70). BCS70 has collected rich information on participants' month-by-month histories of education, employment, and training from age 16 onwards, enabling precise identification of NEET status and cumulative NEET exposure.

BCS70 is particularly well suited to examining the long-term consequences of NEET trajectories because cohort members entered adulthood in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period of substantial change in the UK education system and labour market, with similarities to today's uncertain labour market for young people.

We examine cumulative time spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 and assess associations with outcomes measured up to age 51 in terms of employment status and financial hardship, self-rated general health and psychological distress.

ABOUT THE DATA

BCS70 Age 51 Sweep

The 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) is following the lives of around 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. The Age 51 Sweep took place between summer 2021 and January 2024. Over 8,000 study members took part in a 75-minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. Data from this and previous sweeps of BCS70 are available to download from the UK Data Service.

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Key findings

- NEET experiences in early adulthood have lasting consequences well into midlife, affecting employment, financial security, and health up to age 51.
- There is a clear 'dose-response' relationship with the longer the time spent NEET between 16 and 24, the worse outcomes are later in life.
- Outcomes are markedly worse for those who have never worked during this period than for those who have spent at least some time in the labour market, particularly for men. This is partly driven by the much greater disadvantages these individuals experience earlier in life.
- For individuals with shorter experiences of being NEET – up to two years – the consequences, while still negative, appear much less severe for later life outcomes.
- The characteristics of those experiencing periods of NEET among the BCS70 cohort are broadly in line with those among contemporaneous cohorts, highlighting the potential resonance of these findings today.

Results

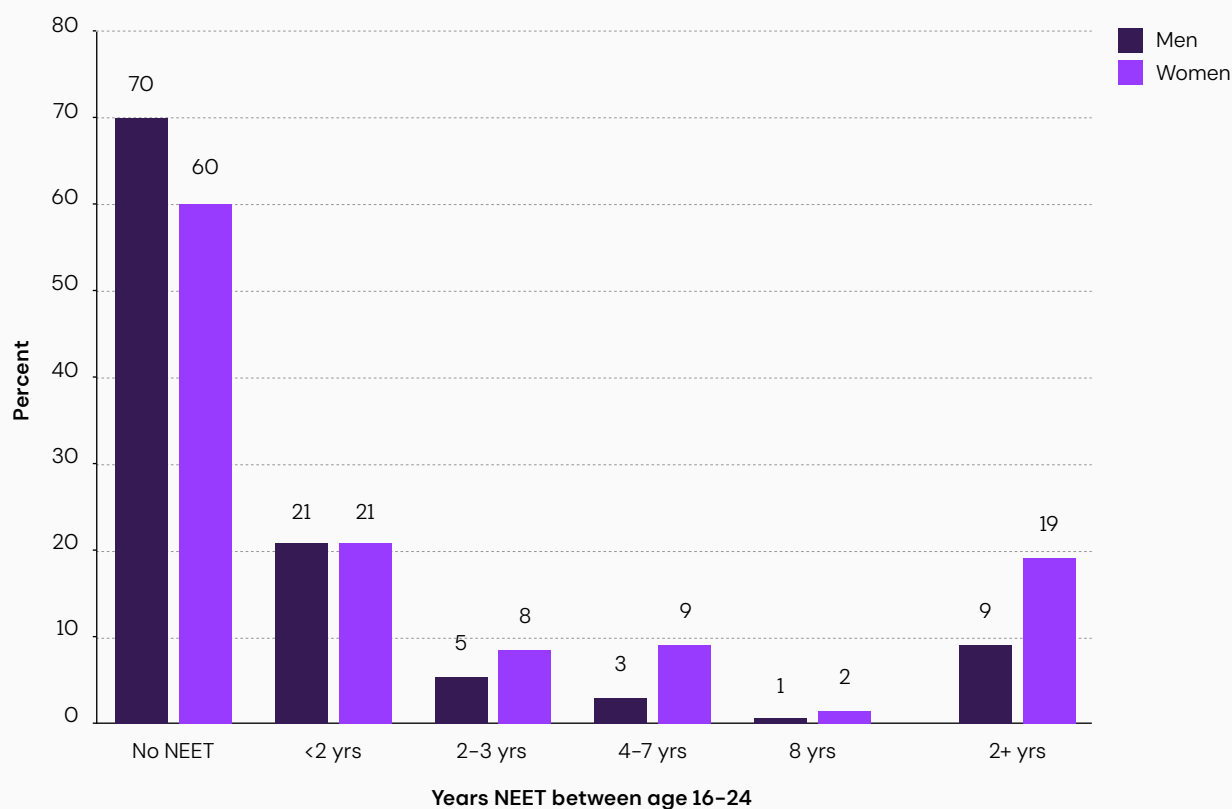
How common is early NEET exposure?

Almost a third (30%) of men and two fifths (40%) of women in the BCS70 cohort experienced at least one episode of NEET lasting one month or longer between ages 16 and 24.

One in ten (9%) of men and a fifth (19%) of women had spent two or more years NEET over this period, including 1% of men and 2% of women who were persistently NEET (i.e. had never worked).

Women were more likely than men to experience both any NEET exposure and longer cumulative durations of NEET during early adulthood, although this may partially be because of early childbearing, which is less prevalent among the same age group today.

FIGURE 1: PREVALENCE AND CUMULATIVE DURATION OF NEET EXPERIENCES BETWEEN AGES 16 AND 24 (% OF COHORT)



NEET = not in education, employment, or training. Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2-3 years, 4-7 years, 8 years, with aggregated group presented on the right - 2+ years). "No NEET" indicates individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24.

Long-term labour market effects (ages 25-46)

There is a strong and persistent link between early NEET duration and later experiences of being NEET. Individuals with longer cumulative NEET exposure between 16 and 24 are consistently more likely to be NEET in later adulthood, with differences persisting across the life course.

This pattern indicates a cumulative process of disadvantage, where early disengagement from education and work has a long-term scarring effect rather than being a temporary disruption, leading to sustained labour-market detachment.

Outcomes are substantially worse for those who are persistently NEET (i.e. have never worked) between 16 and 24. NEET experiences of even up to two years over this age range are also associated with poorer later labour market attachment, though to a much lesser extent. The association between early cumulative NEET exposure and later NEET experiences is broadly similar for men and women, though overall NEET prevalence is higher among women, especially during their 20s and 30s, which may be linked to the likelihood of spending time out of the labour market to look after children.

FIGURE 2A: PROPORTION NEET AT AGES 25–46, BY NEET STATUS AT AGES 16–24. MEN

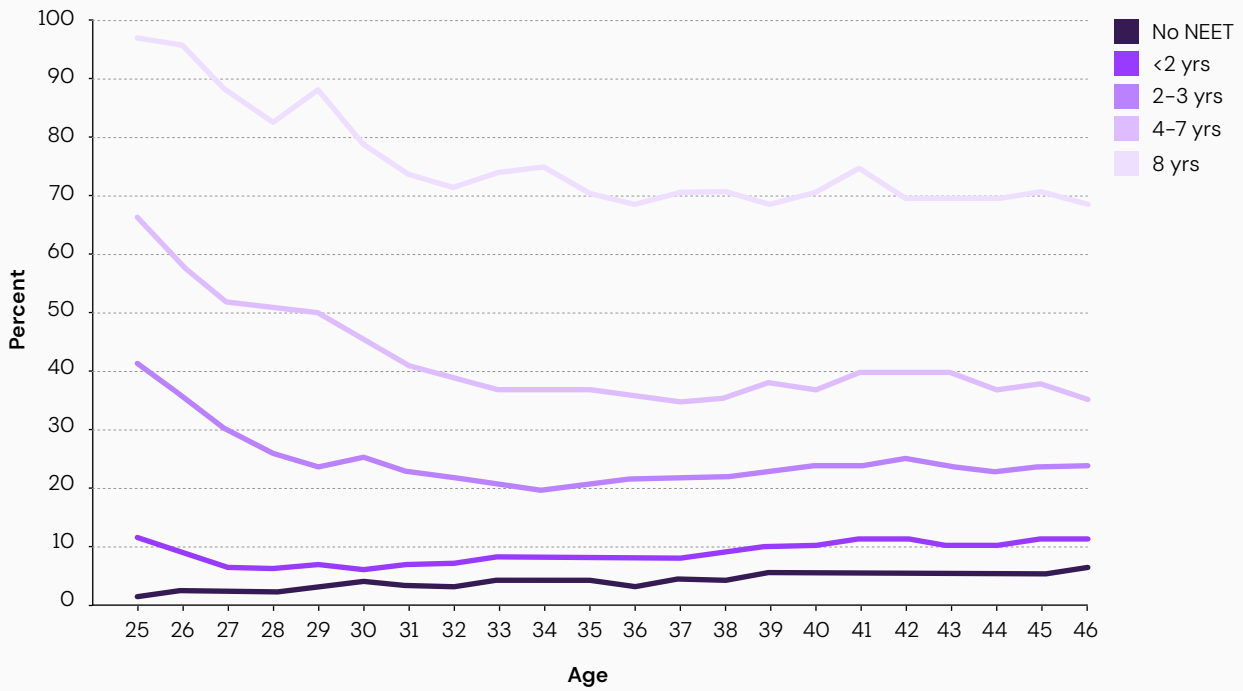
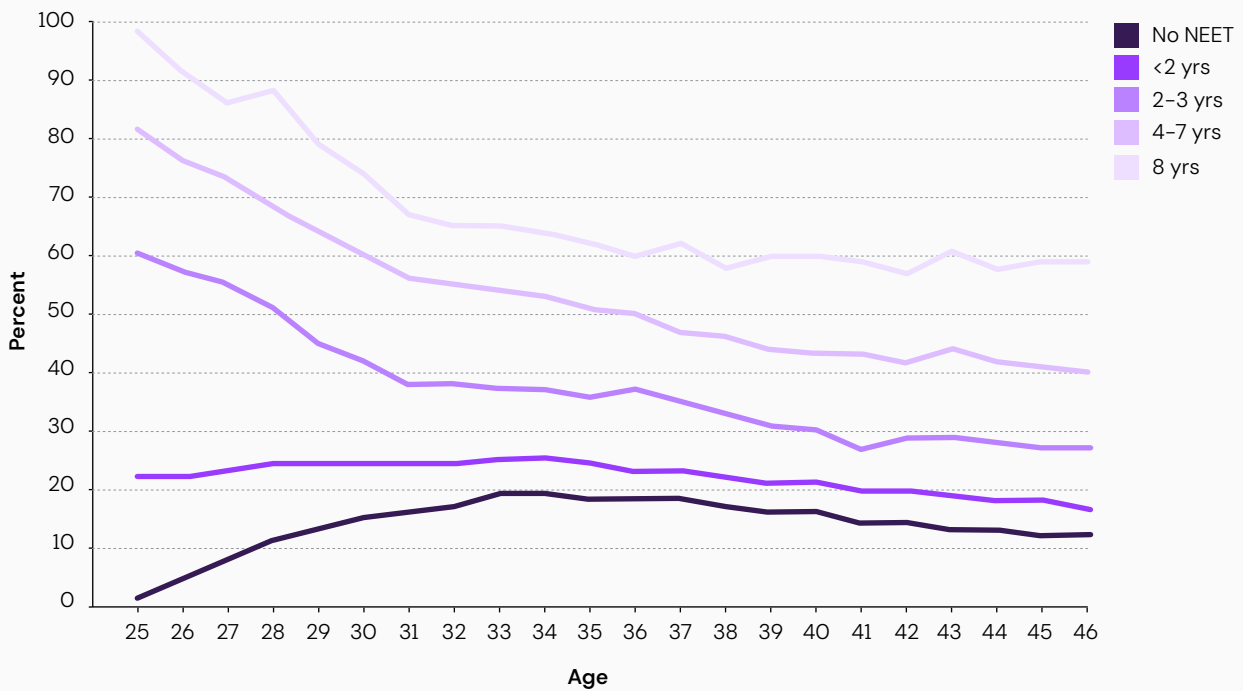


FIGURE 2B: PROPORTION NEET AT AGES 25–46, BY NEET STATUS AT AGES 16–24. WOMEN



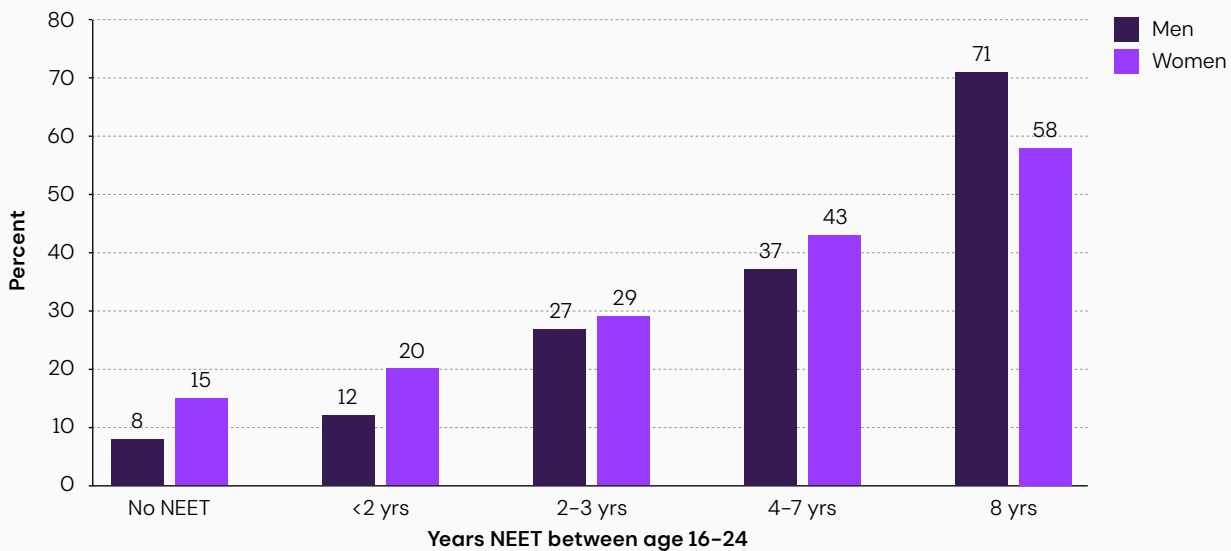
NEET = not in education, employment, or training. Adult NEET status is measured annually between ages 25 and 46 (indicating a dominant time spent being NEET in a year) and stratified by cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24. Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2–3 years, 4–7 years, 8 years). “No NEET” refer to individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24. We examined employment trajectories up to age 46, the latest age for which complete monthly histories are available.

Economic outcomes at age 51

The likelihood of being NEET at age 51 increases sharply with longer early NEET exposure. Around one in twelve (8%) men and one in six (15%) women who were never NEET between ages 16 and 24 were NEET at age 51. This compares to around one in eight (12%) men

and a fifth (20%) of women who were NEET for up to two years between 16 and 24, and more than two thirds (71%) of men and three fifths (58%) of women who were persistently NEET for all eight years between 16 and 24.

FIGURE 3: NEET STATUS AT AGE 51, BY NEET STATUS AND DURATION AT AGES 16-24 (%)



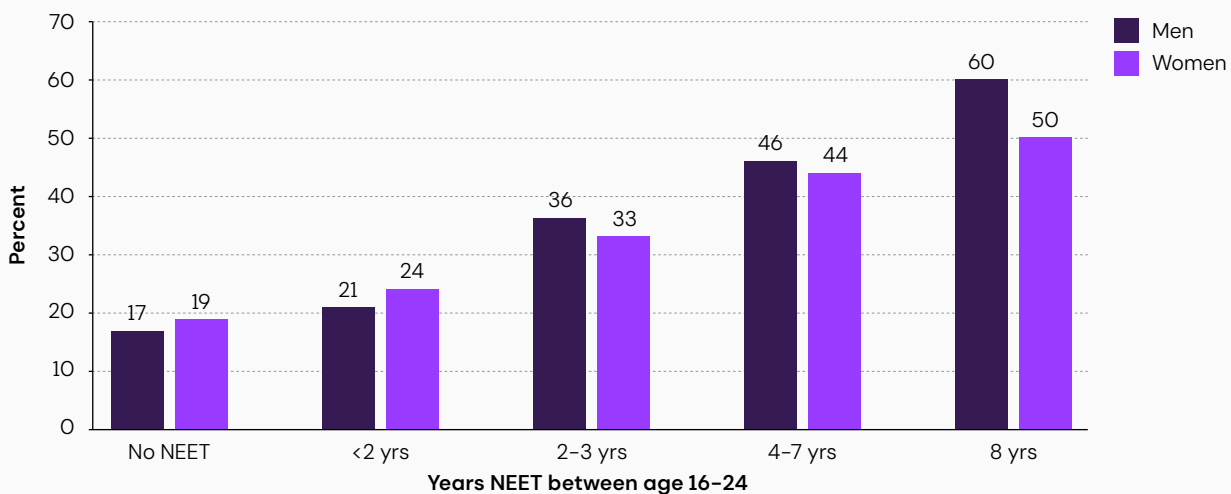
NEET = not in education, employment, or training. Individuals are defined as NEET at age 51 if NEET was their predominant economic activity status throughout the year. Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2-3 years, 4-7 years, 8 years). "No NEET" refer to individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24. Unadjusted associations.

Financial difficulties at age 51

Financial difficulties at age 51 are more common among individuals with longer cumulative NEET exposure between ages 16 and 24. Three fifths (60%) of men and half (50%) of women who were NEET for the full eight years between ages 16 and 24 report

experiencing financial difficulties at age 51. This compares to a fifth (21%) of men and a quarter (24%) of women who were NEET for less than two years, and 17% and 19% respectively of those who were never NEET between ages 16 and 24.

FIGURE 4: FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES AT AGE 51, BY NEET STATUS AND DURATION AT AGES 16-24 (%)



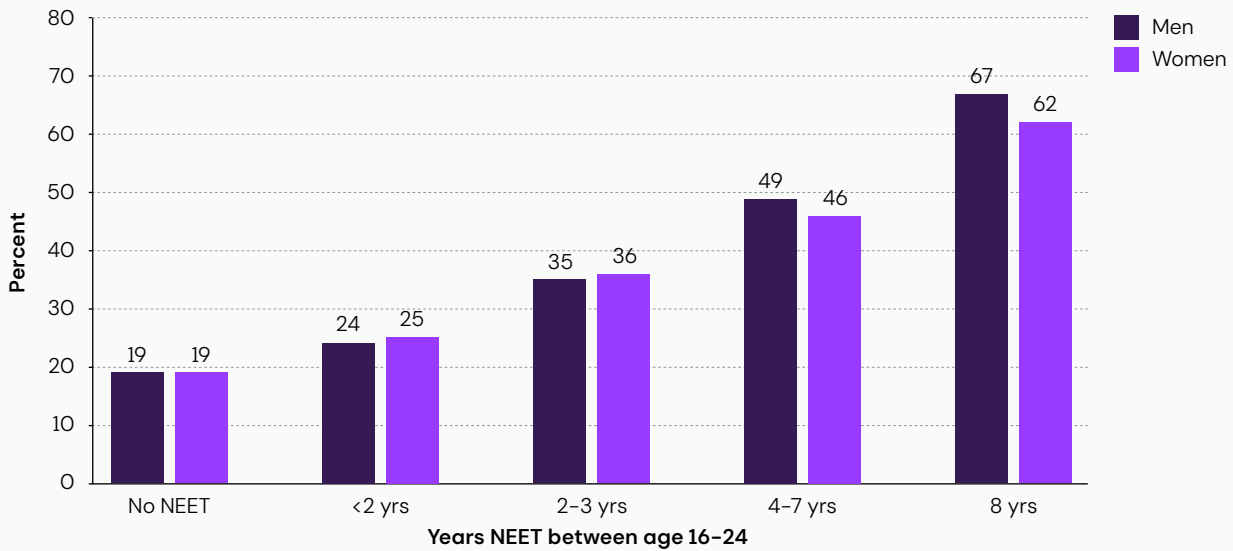
Financial difficulties are based on a self-reported question asking respondents how well they are managing financially at present. Responses of "Just about getting by", "Finding it quite difficult", and "Finding it very difficult" are combined to define financial difficulty. Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2-3 years, 4-7 years, 8 years). "No NEET" refer to individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24. Unadjusted associations.

Physical health outcomes at age 51

Prevalence of poor self-reported general health at age 51 rises with longer duration of NEET exposure between ages 16 and 24 for both men and women. Two thirds (67%) of men and three fifths (62%) of women who were persistently NEET over this age range report

being in poor health at age 51, compared to a quarter of men and women who were NEET for less than two years, and just under a fifth of men and women with no experience of being NEET between ages 16 and 24.

FIGURE 5: FAIR/POOR SELF-REPORTED GENERAL HEALTH AT AGE 51, BY NEET STATUS AND DURATION AT AGES 16-24 (%)



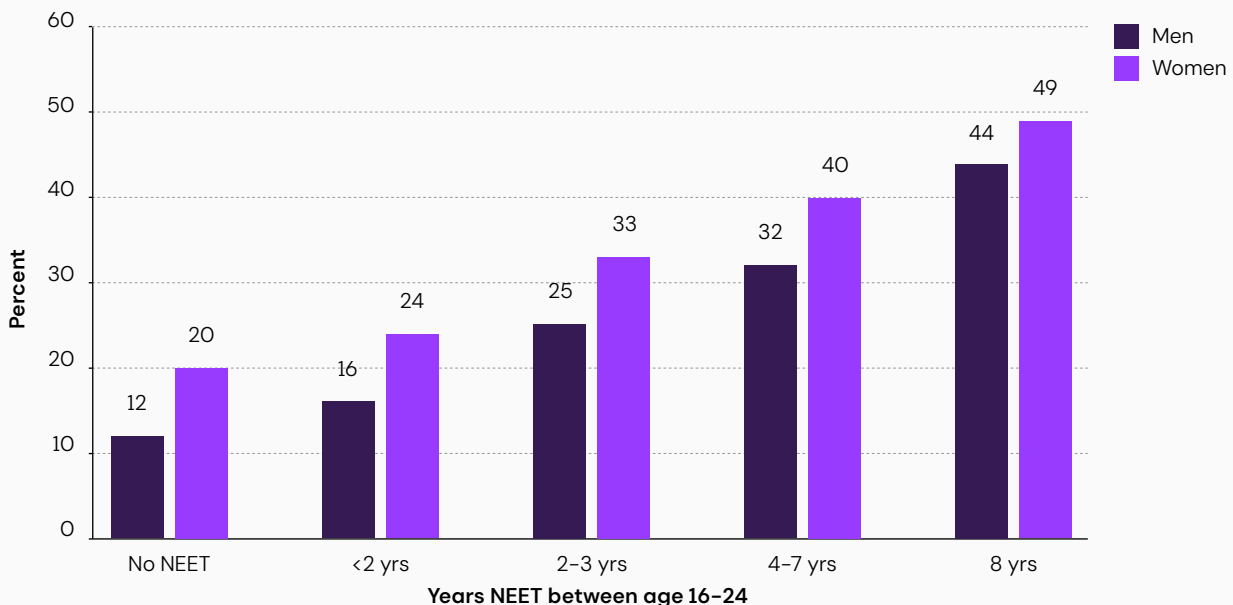
A binary measure of fair/poor self-rated health is derived from the question, "In general, would you say your health is...?" Responses are grouped as follows: "excellent", "very good", and "good" are coded as 0 (good health), while "fair" and "poor" are coded as 1 (fair/poor health). Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2-3 years, 4-7 years, 8 years). "No NEET" refer to individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24. Unadjusted associations.

Mental health outcomes at age 51

Across all NEET exposure categories, women report higher levels of psychological distress than men at age 51. Nevertheless, prevalence of psychological distress increases steadily with longer cumulative NEET exposure in early adulthood for both women and men. Around one in eight (12%) men and one in five (20%) women with no experience of being NEET between

ages 16 and 24 reported high psychological distress at age 51. This compares to one in six (16%) men and a quarter (24%) of women who were NEET for less than two years in early adulthood, and more than two fifths (44%) of men and half (49%) of women who were persistently NEET for eight years between ages 16 and 24.

FIGURE 6: PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AT AGE 51, BY NEET STATUS AND DURATION AT AGES 16-24 (%)



Psychological distress is measured using the 9-item short form of the Malaise Inventory a validated screening tool derived from the original 24-item scale developed by Rutter et al. (1970). The measure captures symptoms of depression, anxiety, and general emotional distress, rather than specific psychiatric diagnoses. Items are answered "Yes" or "No" based on how respondents have been feeling recently. Individuals with four or more affirmative responses are classified as having high malaise, indicating clinically relevant psychological distress. Duration categories refer to cumulative months spent NEET between ages 16 and 24 (<2 years, 2-3 years, 4-7 years, 8 years). "No NEET" refer to individuals who were never observed in NEET status between ages 16 and 24. Unadjusted associations.

What is the role of early disadvantage?

The figures reported above relate to unadjusted (raw) associations between NEET experiences in early adulthood and outcomes at and up to age 51. However, young people in the BCS70 cohort who went on to experience prolonged NEET exposure were already disadvantaged well before entering the labour market.

Individuals who spent longer periods NEET in early adulthood are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (grew up in overcrowded or rented housing, come from the lowest income group), have poorer educational attainment (lower cognitive test scores in childhood and poorer academic attainment in adolescence), worse health, and higher levels of psychological distress in adolescence.

Figure 7 illustrates how the findings presented above change when we adjust for a range of characteristics observed in childhood, with the lighter shaded portion at the top of each bar indicating the role of early life disadvantage in explaining the variation in outcomes across NEET exposure groups and the remaining darker shaded portion of each bar indicating the remaining unexplained variation in outcomes between groups. It shows that early-life disadvantage accounts for some—but not all—of the differences in NEET between ages 16 and 24. Importantly, a clear dose-response relationship remains: the longer individuals spend NEET during this period, the worse are their outcomes, on average, compared with those who were never NEET.

FIGURE 7: FINDING ADJUSTED FOR CHILDHOOD CHARACTERISTICS AT AGE 51, BY NEET STATUS AND DURATION AT AGES 16-24 (%)

FIGURE 7A: NEET STATUS

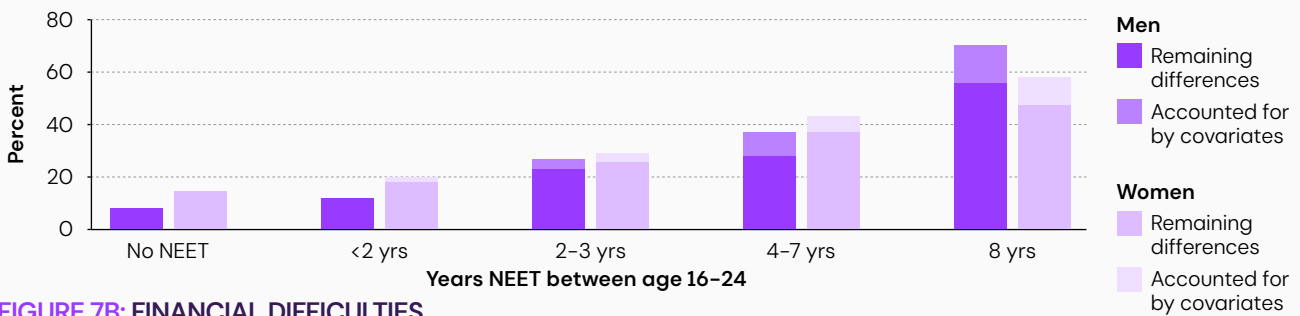


FIGURE 7B: FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

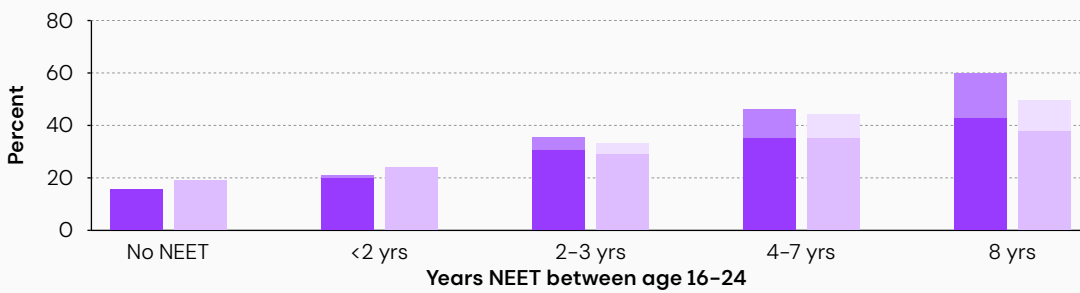


FIGURE 7C: FAIR/POOR SELF-REPORTED GENERAL HEALTH

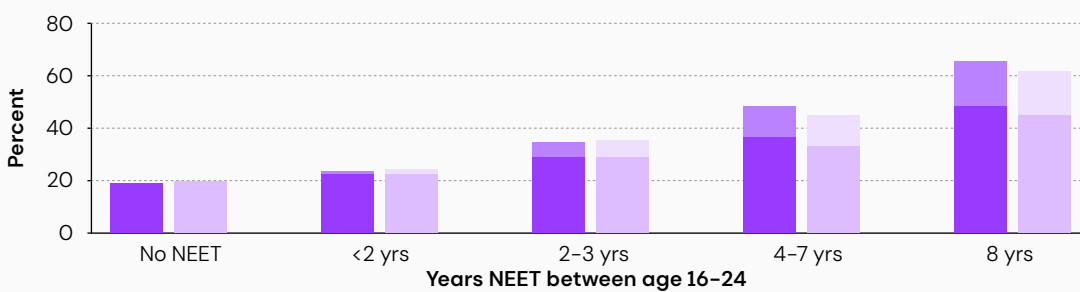
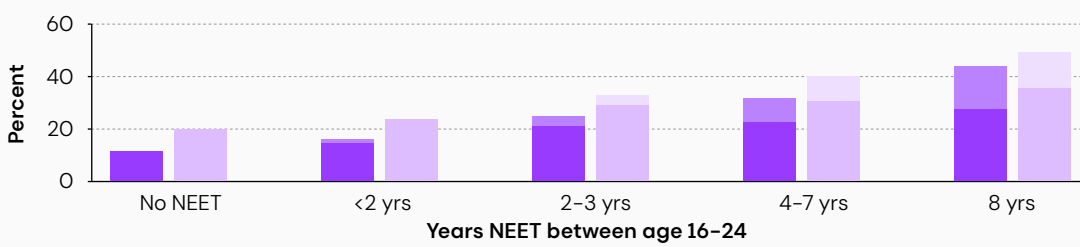


FIGURE 7D: PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS



How does this analysis relate to today's NEETs?

Although we cannot directly compare today's 16–24-year-olds with the 1970 cohort, evidence⁷⁻⁹ suggests strong continuity in risk profiles across generations, highlighting the relevance of these findings for today's young people.

While only a small minority of the BCS70 cohort had never held a job between ages 16 and 24 – 1% of men and 2% of women – the severe negative consequences for their later life outcomes are striking. This finding is particularly concerning given recent evidence⁸ that

the share of young people reaching age 25 without any work experience is increasing, suggesting that the most vulnerable group may now be larger and more disadvantaged than in earlier cohorts.

This implies that the long-term consequences for today's cohort of NEET young people may be at least as severe – and potentially more severe – than those observed in this study, reinforcing the policy relevance of these findings.

This is an **observational study**. This means that researchers did not control what the participants were exposed to, instead they observed what happened to the different groups of people without intervening. The authors were interested in the raw relationships between NEET experiences in early adulthood and economic activity and other outcomes in later life, and how these relationships changed once they accounted for other factors that may have influenced both outcomes. The study was not designed to try to elicit the *causal* effect of NEET experiences in early adulthood on later outcomes.

Policy implications

Taken together, this evidence shows that prolonged NEET experiences in early adulthood have severe long-term negative consequences, being associated with persistent labour market disengagement, increased financial hardship, worse physical health and higher psychological distress.

These negative consequences are particularly severe for those individuals who never worked between ages 16 and 24. This is partly, but by no means wholly, driven by the much greater disadvantages these individuals experienced earlier in life. For individuals with shorter experiences of being NEET – even up to as much as two years over this age range – the consequences, while still negative, appear much less severe for later life outcomes.

These findings point to several policy recommendations. Early identification and intervention should be prioritised, to prevent long-term patterns from becoming entrenched. Our findings suggest that

support should be targeted towards those with little or no work experience, who appear to be at greatest risk of long-term scarring. The Youth Guarantee scheme appears well targeted in this respect.

They also suggest that efforts should be made to move beyond short-term re-engagement initiatives towards sustained, personalised support that addresses multiple barriers, including low skills, poor mental health, and limited work experience, as it is those who experience the greatest disadvantages in childhood who are most at risk of becoming NEET at all, and for longer periods.

Finally, taking action to prevent prolonged NEET experiences – especially beyond two years – is particularly important. This will not only benefit individuals, but also has clear implications for productivity, public finances, and long-term economic participation.

Opportunities for future research

Researchers interested in the study of midlife can take advantage of a wide range of information collected at the BCS70 Age 51 Sweep as well as the extensive data collected from birth and across the lifetime of study participants.

Future research could explore a wider range of outcomes, potentially also using linked administrative data to show how NEET status in early adulthood may affect savings and preparedness for retirement.

It could also examine how certain people who are NEET in early adulthood are able to 'buck the trend' and re-engage in the labour market later in life. Comparisons with studies of later born generations, such as gen Z and millennials, may also help to build a more complete picture of the similarities and differences in terms of the challenges young people face in transitioning into the labour market at different points in time, and hence the specificity of the support needed to help them into work or training.

About the 1970 British Cohort Study

The 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) is following the lives of around 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. Over the course of participants' lives, BCS70 has collected information on health, physical, educational and social development, and economic circumstances among other factors. The study is managed by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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