

# Why Young People and Smartphones Are Not the Problem

Adam Tugwell | 23 May 2026



When *The Times* reported this week that a government-commissioned review had concluded smartphones are a major cause of the rise in young people who are NEET\*, it was hard not to feel the weight of a familiar story settling over us again.

*A new generation is struggling. A new report is published. And once again, the blame is placed squarely on the young people themselves.*

This time the villain is the smartphone. Before that it was video games. Before that it was “attitude”, “aspiration”, “work ethic”, or whatever behavioural explanation happened to be fashionable at the time.

The pattern never changes. Only the scapegoat does.

And every time, the real causes - the structural, systemic, deeply human causes - are quietly pushed out of sight.

Smartphones *are* a problem. But they are not *the* problem. They have reshaped how all of us live, think and relate to the world. They are addictive, distracting, and capable of distorting our sense of reality. But the idea that smartphones are uniquely responsible for young people becoming NEET is not just simplistic - it is a distortion of the truth.

If smartphones were the cause, then why are adults - including those in government, business and media - glued to their screens too? Why are older generations reporting rising anxiety, burnout and disconnection? Why is everyone, across every age group, wrestling with the same digital compulsions?

The answer is obvious: smartphones are not the root cause of youth disengagement. They are the symptom of a society that has stopped giving young people a meaningful place within it.

When the world outside offers no stability, no opportunity, no vocational pathway, no affordable independence and no sense of a future, the digital world becomes the only place where life feels manageable.

Young people are not disappearing into their phones because they are lazy. They are disappearing into their phones because the world we have built for them feels impossible to navigate.

We have been here before. Every decade, a new “lost generation” is discovered. Every decade, politicians and commentators blame that generation for its own circumstances. And every decade, nothing changes.

The truth is that [Britain has become a two-tier society](#) - not between young and old, but between those who benefit from the system and those who are shaped, constrained or crushed by it.

The young people now being blamed for their smartphone use are the same young people who cannot find secure work, cannot afford housing, cannot access vocational routes, cannot rely on public services and cannot see a future that resembles anything stable.

**This is not a behavioural crisis. It is a structural one.**

Worklessness is not a lifestyle choice. It is a systemic outcome. Young people are not working because there is not enough work that pays enough to live on.

We live in an extractive economic system where wages no longer match living costs, secure jobs have been replaced by precarious ones, housing is unaffordable, public services have collapsed, vocational routes have been dismantled and qualifications have become inflated and meaningless.

In such a system, young people who do not fit the narrow academic mould are not “choosing” to disengage. **They are being systematically excluded.**

And when they retreat into their phones, it is not because the phone caused the exclusion - it is because the phone is the only place where they feel any agency, connection or escape.

Another convenient narrative is that smartphones are causing a mental health crisis.

But what if the opposite is true?

*What if the mental health crisis is caused by insecurity, poverty, unstable housing, collapsing public services, academic pressure, social isolation, the disappearance of community and the loss of vocational identity - and smartphones are simply where young people go to cope with it?*

When a young person feels worthless because the system tells them they have no value unless they conform to an academic pathway that was never designed for them, the psychological damage is profound.

Smartphones didn't create that damage. They just provide a place to hide from it.

One of the most damaging shifts of the past 30 years has been the near-total collapse of vocational education as a respected, funded and valued pathway. Children are heads or hands - and both are equally valuable. But the system only rewards the “heads”. Everyone else is told they are a failure. We have created a society where practical skills are devalued, vocational learners are sidelined, experience is dismissed, qualifications are worshipped, conformity is rewarded and individuality is punished.

And then we wonder why young people disengage.

And even where something resembling a vocational route still exists, it has been hollowed out. The modern “apprenticeship” bears almost no resemblance to the traditional, deeply skilled, indentured pathway that once turned young people with no advantage into confident, capable adults.

Today's apprenticeships are shorter, thinner, and often little more than rebadged entry-level jobs. Worse still, they have become a refuge for academically strong young

people who no longer want - **or can no longer afford** - to take on explosive levels of tuition-fee debt.

It is entirely rational for them to choose a paid apprenticeship over a lifetime of repayments. But the result is that the very people apprenticeships were originally designed to lift up are now being pushed aside by those who already had other options.

*Another ladder pulled up. Another route closed. Another group of young people quietly written off by a system that insists the problem lies with them.*

Instead of rebuilding vocational routes, we blame smartphones.

Blaming young people costs nothing. It requires no reform. It avoids confronting inequality. It protects the system. It wins headlines. It shifts responsibility away from government.

It is a political strategy, not an analysis. Smartphones are the perfect scapegoat because they are visible, addictive and easy to moralise about. But they are not the cause of youth worklessness any more than television caused unemployment in the 1980s.

**The real scandal is that we are abandoning young people - and then blaming them for the consequences.**

We have created a society where young people cannot afford independence, cannot find stable work, cannot access vocational routes, cannot rely on public services and cannot see a future. Then we blame them for retreating into the only world where they feel any control.

This is not just wrong. It is cruel. And it is cowardly.

**Young people are not failing. We are failing them.**

Until we confront the structural causes - inequality, extraction, qualification tyranny, the collapse of vocational pathways and the destruction of community - we will keep producing “left behind” generations. And every time, we will find a new scapegoat to avoid admitting the truth.

Those who believe the current system benefits them will continue to resist change. But the cost of that resistance is measured in human lives - young and old - who are pushed to the margins and then blamed for the suffering that the system itself has created.

Blaming the people the system has passed by is not just a policy failure. It is an act of inhumanity.

A society that values everyone equally - whether academic or vocational, young or old - cannot be built on blame. It can only be built on systemic change.

And until we choose that change, we will continue to abandon people - and then punish them for being abandoned.

\* **NEET**: A government classification for young people aged 16–24 who are *Not in Education, Employment or Training*. It is a cold administrative label for a deeply human situation - young people who have fallen out of the system, or been pushed out of it, and are now navigating life without the structure, support or opportunity most of us take for granted.

## Further Information

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