

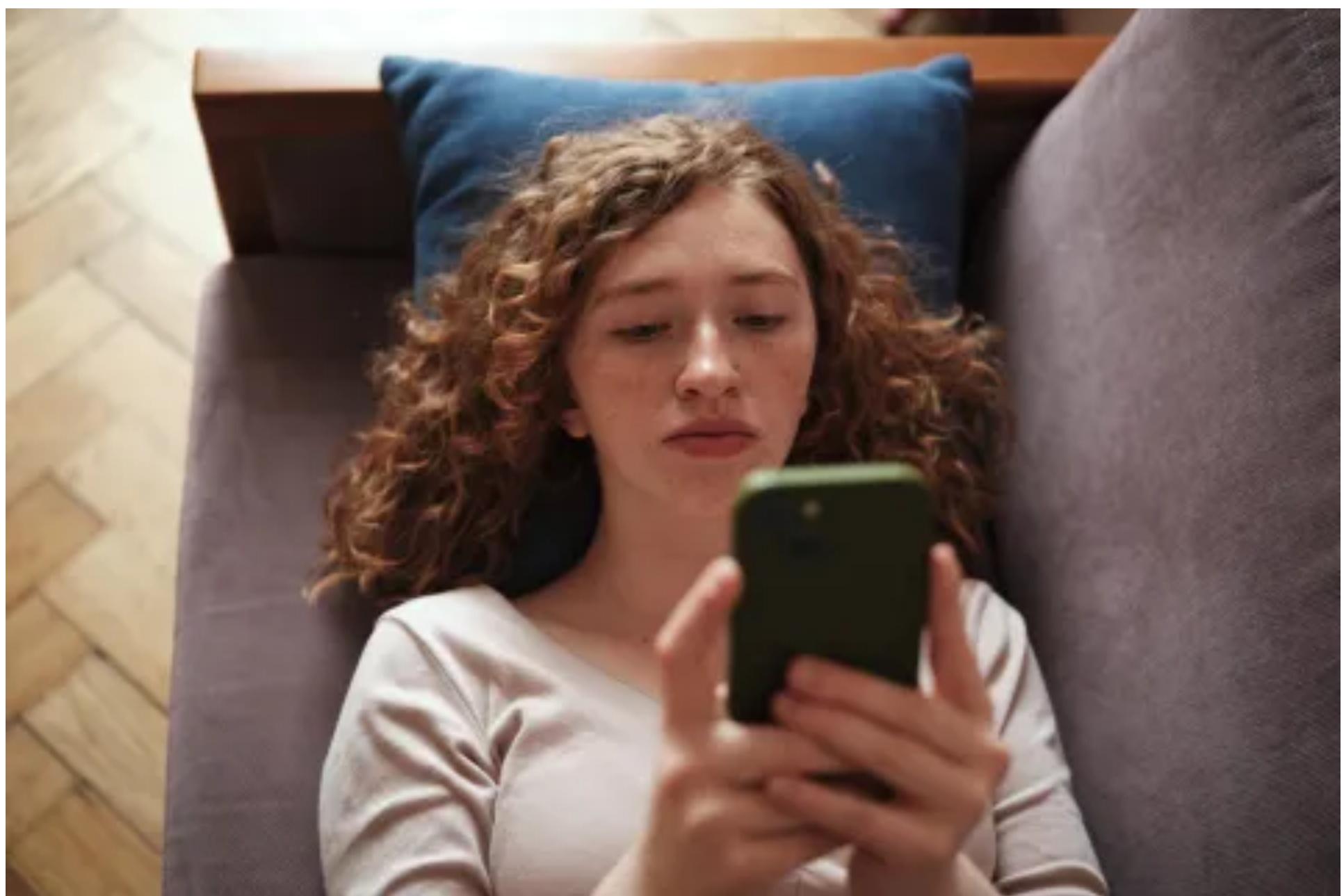
SUCCESS · GEN Z

Over 4 million Gen Zers are jobless—and experts blame colleges for ‘worthless degrees’ and a system of broken promises for the rising number of NEETs



BY PRESTON FORE
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One in 5 Gen Zers worldwide is deemed a NEET—not in education, employment, or training. The promises they received in school may be to blame.
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- Over 4 million Gen Zers are not in school or at work in the U.S., and in the U.K. 100,000 young people joined the NEET cohort. But it's not generational laziness that's to blame. Experts are taking swipes at "worthless degrees" and a system that "is failing to deliver on its implicit promise."

There's been a mass derailment when it comes to Gen Z and their careers: About a quarter of [young people are now deemed NEETs](#)—meaning "not in education, employment, or training."

While some Gen Zers may fall into this category because they are taking care of a family member, many have been [frozen out of an increasingly tough job market](#) where white-collar jobs are seemingly out of reach.

In the U.S., this translates to an estimated [4.3 million young people](#) not in school or at work. Across the pond in the U.K., the situation is also only getting worse, with the number of [NEET young people rising](#) by over 100,000 in the past year alone.

A [British podcaster](#) went so far as to call the situation a "catastrophe"—and cast a broad-stroke blame on the education system.

"In many cases, young people have been sent off to universities for worthless degrees, which have produced nothing for them at all," the political commentator, journalist, and author Peter Hitchens said of colleges last week. "And they would be much better off if they apprenticed to plumbers or electricians; they would be able to look forward to a much more abundant and satisfying life."

With millions of Gen Zers waking up each day feeling left behind, there needs to be a "wake-up call" that includes educational and workplace partners stepping up, Jeff Bulanda, vice president at Jobs for the Future, tells *Fortune*.

Higher education's role in the rising number of NEET Gen Zers

There's no question that certain fields of study provide a more direct line to a long-lasting career—take, for example, the health care industry: In the U.S. alone, over a million [net new jobs are expected to be created](#) in the next decade—home health aides, registered nurses, and nurse practitioners, among them.

On the other hand, millions of students graduate each year with degrees that offer a less clear career path, leaving young adults underemployed and struggling to make ends meet. And while the long-term future may be bright—with an average [return on investment for a college degree](#) being 681% over 40 years, plus promises of the [Great Wealth Transfer](#)—it may be coming too late for students left with [ballooning student loans](#) in an uncertain job market.

Too much time has been focused on promoting a four-year degree as the only reliable route, despite the payoff being more uneven and uncertain, says Bulanda. Other pathways, like [skilled trade professions](#), should be a larger share of the conversation.

"It's critical that young people are empowered to be informed consumers about their education, equipped with the information they need to weigh the cost, quality, and long-term value of every path available to them," says Bulanda, who leads the ASA Center for Career Navigation at Jobs for the Future.

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Lewis Maleh, CEO of Bentley Lewis, a staffing and recruitment agency, echoes that colleges should do better at communicating with students about career placement as well as nonacademic barriers to entering the workforce, like mental health support and resilience development.

“Universities aren’t deliberately setting students up to fail, but the system is failing to deliver on its implicit promise,” Maleh tells *Fortune*.

“The current data challenges the traditional assumption that higher education automatically leads to economic security,” he notes.

What's caused a NEET crisis—and what can be done?

Rising prices on everything from rent and gasoline to groceries and textbooks have put a damper on Gen Z, with some even having to [turn down their dream job offers](#) because they cannot afford the commute or work clothes.

Plus, with others struggling to land a job in a market changing by the minute thanks to artificial intelligence, it’s no wonder Gen Z finds [doomscrolling](#) at home more enjoyable than navigating an economy completely different from what their teachers promised them.

The United Nations [agency warns](#) there are still “too many young people” with skills gaps, and getting millions of young people motivated to get back into the classroom or workforce won’t be easy.

Efforts should include ramping up accessible entry points like apprenticeships and internships, especially for disengaged young people, as well as building better bridges between industries and education systems, Maleh says.

Above all, better and more personalized career guidance is key, Bulanda adds.

“When you don’t know what options exist, no one is helping you connect the dots, and the next step feels risky or out of reach—it’s no surprise that so many young people pause,” he says. “The question isn’t why they disconnect; it’s why we haven’t done a better job of recognizing that the old ways aren’t working anymore, and young people need more options and better support to meet them where they are.”

Are you a Gen Zer struggling to land a job in the current climate? Share your story with preston.fore@fortune.com.

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