

YOUNG NEETs: DROPOUT, EXCLUSION AND EVOLUTIONARY ADAPTATION. STATE OF THE ART

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Abstract

Young people who neither study nor work (NEETs) are a latent problem in Latin America, with high rates in the Colombian Caribbean. This article makes a critical and semi-systematic documentary review to analyze the causes, manifestations and responses to the phenomenon in the region, in comparative dialogue with the experiences present in the United Kingdom, Japan and the United States. Through the review in seven databases (WoS, Scopus, SciELO, Dialnet, among others) and institutional repositories, 50 documents published between 2018 and 2025 were analyzed. The findings indicate that, while in the Colombian Caribbean the NEET condition is associated with accumulated structural determinants, poverty, ethnic exclusion, informality, in other contexts subjective or racialized factors predominate. A major lack of hegemonic approaches is recognized, associated with the lack of frameworks that integrate psychosocial and structural dimensions. As an original contribution, evolutionary psychology is proposed as an interpretative framework, resignifying demotivation not as an individual fault, but as an adaptive strategy to environments considered to be of low opportunity.

Keywords: Youth, social exclusion, youth unemployment, youth policies, evolutionary psychology.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a global social phenomenon that is in some way affecting the world of work and economic and sociocultural dynamics. This is a social event without recent precedent in modern societies of a part of the population that especially affects young people, the so-called NEETs, young people who neither study nor work. A social phenomenon that has received different nominations worldwide. While in Latin America it is common to talk about NEETs, in the United Kingdom the term NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) is used and in the United States it is referred to as Opportunity Youth.

In these circumstances, this problem has emerged as one of the most pressing social challenges on a global scale. Far from being a setback for youth, it represents a deep fissure at the level of modern cultures, with implications for biological and cultural processes, since it affects not only the development of executive functions and the processes of transition to adulthood, but also has economic, social and psychological effects on the individual in the long term.

Globally, the proportion of young people who neither study nor work is estimated at 20.4% of the

world's youth population (CABEI and OEI, 2022 and ILO 2023). For these organizations, this situation is mainly due to frustration and discouragement caused by the lack of opportunities in the labor market. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2024), Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest rates of young people in this condition in the world: 19.6% and 20.2% respectively, figures that are aggravated in environments of poverty, conflict, and historical exclusion.

Colombia does not escape this global problem, because the situation in the country can be seen as a phenomenon that in addition to emerging is worrying. The data indicated by the ILO (2024) demonstrate this. According to this organization, 24.3% of young people between 14 and 28 years of age are in NEET condition. These are alarming figures if one considers the conditions of inequality that prevail in the different regions of the country. For example, on the Atlantic coast, especially in the departments of Magdalena, La Guajira and Cesar, the data show upward trends in the presence of these populations. What is worrying in this case is that this condition ends up affecting mostly young people in vulnerable rural areas, especially women and Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities (DANE, 2024).

In these regions, educational and labor dropout does not respond to a volitional action of an individual nature, but to a series of social, political, economic, and cultural factors that have converged structurally for years in these communities. The precarious and weak educational infrastructure, the lack of opportunities, multidimensional poverty, labor informality, added to historical patterns of ethnic and gender discrimination, and the legacy for more than 50 years of violence due to the armed conflict exacerbate the conditions for the presence of this type of social phenomena (Molina et al., 2022; Narváez, 2024)

Contradictorily, while in the Global South this phenomenon is related to structural failures in policies and social systems, in other countries this type of event has different causes and connotations. While in the United Kingdom this social event dates back to the 90s, and the term NEET emerges as a guide for active policies for insertion into a welfare state (Maynou et al., 2022; Cornish, 2023), in Japan, the connotation is born as a result of the extreme social isolation of a part of society, the *hikikomori*. In these individuals, this isolation is associated with academic and family pressure in a society such as Japan's, which is considered highly competitive (Figueiredo, 2023; Dong et al., 2022).

On the other hand, in the United States, the causes of school and work disconnection of Opportunity Youth have racial and territorial links. In this way, this period of emerging adulthood disproportionately affects Black and Latino youth in marginalized neighborhoods (Woods & Graves, 2023; Mendelson et al., 2018). In this sense, place of residence, income level, and racial status can affect young people's ability to explore and develop different trades or professional careers.

These social realities present in these countries converge in an essential fact, the terms NEETs, NEET and Opportunity Youth, despite representing the same construct, do not describe particularly uniform causes and factors, but multi-causal conditions and factors that can only be understood and understood under the contexts that identify them. For Cieslik et al., 2021 and Simões et al., 2021, the NEET label diverts attention from labor market inefficiencies to "barriers to participation," assuming that the young person's inability or unwillingness is the cause of the problem. For these authors, interventions focus on supply-side reform, training, and guidance, while ignoring structural inefficiencies.

However, the academic community has dealt with this phenomenon of school and work disconnection from economic and sociological perspectives focused on human capital, inequality, or public policies (Queijo et al., 2024; Bertotti et al., 2025; Kevelson et al., 2020; Alvarado et al., 2020). However, the value of these studies is that few have addressed the psychological and evolutionary factors of youth demotivation and disconnection from cognitive sciences and especially from evolutionary psychology. Here lies a substantial fact that could provide plausible explanations for this phenomenon.

According to Maner and Menzel (2012), evolutionary psychology offers through evolutionary thinking a solid conceptual framework to understand most of the psychological, behavioral, and social processes of populations. So this cognitive science could provide another perspective to understand the disconnection from school and work of these young people. Along the same lines, authors such as Manus (2018) and Montgomery (2018) indicate that, in unfavorable, uncertain environments with few opportunities, young people choose to disconnect not out of permissiveness, but as a form of conservation of psychological resources. In this way, while in an ancestral environment spending energy on goals with no apparent reward was inefficient, in today's societies, this could manifest itself as demotivation or lack of interest in abstract and time-deferred paths.

In this sense, this article aims to contribute to the state of the art by making a critical documentary review that: (1) systematizes the evidence on NEETs in the Colombian Caribbean, (2) compares these realities with those of the United Kingdom, Japan and the United States, and (3) proposes evolutionary psychology as a complementary theoretical framework to explain youth demotivation not as a deficit, but as an adaptive response to environments misaligned with human needs. And in doing so, not only is the academic debate enhanced, but doors are opened for more sensitive, contextualized and effective public policies and programs, which manage to reconnect this vulnerable population not only with work or school, but with a purpose, belonging and possible future.

METHODOLOGY

This article is a critical and semi-systematic documentary review to analyze, synthesize, and discuss the state of the art of young people who neither study nor work (NEETs) in the Colombian Caribbean and the national context of Colombia, in contrast to international experiences in the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States, and other global contexts. This choice is made to carefully and critically include empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, and public policy documents, as required by best practices in social science reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

The documentary search was carried out between January and April 2025 in seven academic and institutional databases of recognized prestige: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, ScienceDirect, EBSCOhost (Academic Search Complete), ProQuest (Dissertations & Theses Global), SciELO (Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and general) and Dialnet. In addition, repositories of international and national organizations were consulted, such as: International Labor Organization (ILO), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), National Administrative Department of Statistics of Colombia (DANE), Ministry of Labor of Colombia, Universities of the Colombian Caribbean (Universidad del Norte, Universidad del Latino University of Cartagena, University of the Atlantic).

The following selection criteria were defined: articles published between 2018 and 2025; in Spanish, English, Portuguese or French; that they address young people between 15 and 29 years of age who are not disconnected from education and/or work (NEETs, NEET, hikikomori, opportunity youth, etc.); that contain empirical, theoretical or public policy analyses of the phenomenon; From rigorous academic or institutional sources (peer-reviewed journals, reports from multilateral organizations, doctoral theses, academic books).

Regarding exclusion criteria, documents without clear authorship or explicit methodology (blogs, unsupported opinion articles), studies focused exclusively on adults over 30 years of age, and articles prior to 2018 were excluded.

The search equation combined controlled and free terms in the referred languages, using Boolean operators. The main combinations were: in Spanish: ("NINIs" OR "ni estudian ni laboran" OR "jóvenes desvinculados") AND ("Colombia" OR "Caribe colombiano" OR "Atlántico" OR "Bolívar" OR "La Guajira" OR "Córdoba" OR "Sucre") AND ("causas" OR "políticas públicas" OR "psicología evolutiva" OR "salud mental"). In English: ("NEET" OR "Not in Education, Employment or Training" OR

"disconnected youth" OR "opportunity youth") AND ("United Kingdom" OR "Japan" OR "USA" OR "Global South") AND ("evolutionary psychology" OR "life history theory" OR "youth exclusion"). In Portuguese/French: Equivalent terms ("young NEET", "jeunes ni en emploi ni en formation") were used in specific searches in SciELO and Dialnet.

The selection process consisted of three successive stages. Initially, 328 initial documents were identified from the search in databases and institutional repositories. Then, in the screening stage, 42 duplicates were eliminated and 198 records were excluded after the review of titles and abstracts because they did not conform to thematic, geographical or linguistic relevance, leaving 88 documents susceptible to full reading. Finally, after the complete reading of these, 50 documents were chosen that fully fit the inclusion criteria and that offered thematic, geographical and methodological variety to the corpus of analysis.

Inductive and deductive thematic coding were used for the analysis of the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, emergent categories of the results were coded; then, they were grouped into the pre-established analytical axes: (1) magnitude and profile, (2) structural causes, (3) psychosocial factors, (4) public policies, and (5) theoretical frameworks. This made it possible to characterize the state of the art, but also to compare contexts, recognize gaps and propose new lines of thought, such as the integration of evolutionary psychology as an explanatory framework in the global context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Magnitude and territorial inequalities: from the Colombian Caribbean to the world

NEETs are not a homogeneous phenomenon, but are the result of geographical, social and historical inequalities. For Simões et al. (2021) and Shucksmith (2004), popular and academic literature tends to present NEETs as if they all have "standardized biographies" and "look the same", without considering the diversity of factors that influence their situation. In this regard, these authors consider that place of origin has been kept outside the profiling criteria for NEETs, ignoring a whole set of specific challenges that especially affect young rural NEETs.

In Latin America, the region with the highest rate in the world (19.6%), being a NEET is related to poverty, rurality, and ethnic exclusion (ILO, 2024; CAF et al., 2023; Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2022). In this context, Colombia is a country with high levels of internal inequality: while the rate at the national level is 24.3% (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2025), the Caribbean region has one of the largest proportions in the country, with 20.5% of young people between 14 and 28 years of age NINIs.

These data show regional gaps that are not accidental. Regional analyses show that, in the departments of the Colombian Caribbean, there is a structural crisis at the level of the education system that is definitively linked to the environments of poverty, inequality and vulnerability in the region. However, these territorial inequalities are multidimensional and are not only explained by the existing economic conditions, but also by elements linked to the low quality of education, the terrible infrastructure and school endowment, chronic violence, displacement and high labor informality, which create in a certain way the context conducive to school dropout (Molina et al., 2022; Colombian Caribbean Education Observatory, 2025; Ministry of National Education, 2022). Likewise, racial, cultural, gender and even geographical factors deepen these inequalities. Young Afro-Colombian and indigenous women face historical and cumulative obstacles in this regard, which multiply their risks and exclusion factors (Bedoya, 2021; De Lima Freire, 2020, Aparicio & Traldi, 2025).

In contrast, in global contexts, the dynamics are different. In the United Kingdom, although findings suggest that proactive policies have succeeded in decreasing NEET rates (Holmes et al., 2021; Serrière & Elder, 2025), these are still closely related to social class, working-class youth are three times more likely to be NEET than middle-class youth (Kiss et al., 2021). In the United States, youth disengagement is highly racialized: Black and Hispanic youth are 2.1 times more likely to be Opportunity Youth, a result of residential segregation and historical disinvestment in marginalized

communities (Chandler & Lozada, 2021; Levin et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2024).

On the other hand, outside the West, in Japan, the social isolation of *hikikomori*, which is usually included within NEETs, obeys other cultural logics: it is not so much unemployment as the extreme pressure for school success and shame in the face of possible family failure that causes self-absorption (Figueiredo, 2023; Dong et al., 2022; Matsushita et al., 2023). Here, severity is not calculated in percentage terms, but in terms of isolation and subjective distress.

These comparisons reveal a critical conclusion: the term NEETs, NEET, or Opportunity Youth, while statistically useful, conceals profoundly different realities. While in the Colombian Caribbean the disengagement is structural and collective (lack of schools, employment, peace), in Japan it is subjective and cultural (pressure, shame), and in the U.S. it is racial and territorial (systemic racism, disinvestment). Ignoring these differences leads to universalist and deterministic policies that fail in specific contexts, as has happened with technicalist and centralist approaches in Colombia that do not consider the specificities of the Caribbean.

Structural causes vs. psychosocial factors: exclusion or demotivation?

Explanations of NEET status have historically fluctuated between two currents: on the one hand, there are those that bet on structural causes, economic inequality, job insecurity, racism and ethnic exclusion; and, on the other hand, those who focus this condition on individual or psychosocial factors, lack of motivation, or mental health problems. But a careful look shows that this dichotomy is illusory: psychosocial factors could be seen as the internalization of bad structural conditions.

In the Colombian Caribbean the explanations are structural. Multidimensional poverty, lack of opportunities, limited access to quality basic and secondary education, and the economy focused on seasonal tourism and informality generate a scenario where obtaining a decent job is a utopia for many young people (CAF et al., 2023). Added to this are the historical processes of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion of ethnic-racial, indigenous, and Afro-descendant groups, whose knowledge and ways of life are not recognized by an exclusionary educational and labor system, designed from urban and Western constructs and imaginaries (Aparicio & Traldi, 2025). For the Afro-descendant population, not recognizing oneself can be a mechanism of self-protection in contexts of racism and discrimination. The image of young NEETs can be an example of how the population is stigmatized (Aparicio & Traldi, 2025). In this context, school dropout and job disconnection can be seen not as an individual failure, but as a response to a system that does not offer results in the short term.

This is in contrast to what is found in the UK, where despite a universal education system, social class remains the best predictor of NEET status, even more so than individual cognitive abilities (Kiss et al., 2021). In the United States, youth disconnection overlaps with residential segregation and structural racism: Black youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods face not only unemployment, but also community trauma and police and institutional distrust (Smith & Lee, 2022).

In the face of these structural conditions, psychosocial factors are not seen as initial causes, but as resulting consequences. The relationship between mental health and the situation of young people who do not study or work is a crucial point to understand this phenomenon. According to Bertotti et al. (2025) and Rahmani et al. (2024), mental health is not only a consequence of being NEET, but also a key obstacle to getting out of that situation. For these authors, the NEET condition is related to serious psychological fragilities. In this way, being in this situation increases the appearance of depression, anxiety, substance use and suicidal ideation. A global meta-analysis reaffirms this association: being NEET increases the risk of mental health problems, and vice versa (Gariépy et al., 2021). However, instead of looking for a therapeutic solution to this condition, we should ask ourselves about the social, environmental or cultural factors that lead to these disorders.

This is where evolutionary psychology takes a conceptual turn. In this sense, demotivation is not a psychopathological problem, but an adaptive reaction to environments considered to have few opportunities. Human motivational systems developed in environments in which effort had to be

accompanied by a tangible reward (food, protection, status, mate). In today's world, and more so in the Colombian Caribbean, young people face uncertain, deferred and high-risk trajectories: 10 or 15 years of study for a precarious or non-existent job. As Bon and Shire (2022) indicate, an environment of high uncertainty would exacerbate the situation of NEETs. In this context, disconnecting is not passivity, but a way of conserving psychological resources in an environment that does not give reliable signs of return.

While this view does not fit into the theories of social scientists, the psychoevolutionary approach should not seem too controversial, since the things we pass down from one generation to the next, our cultural traditions and social behaviors, have adapted extraordinarily diverse forms throughout history. Ultimately, all of them are rooted in evolutionary psychology. This combination of cultural traditions and social behaviors constitutes our collective heritage as a species, which is transmitted from generation to generation.

This interpretation adheres to some research worldwide, where young people speak not of demotivation or apathy, but of passive resistance to the impossibility of accessing decent futures. In line with this, Rahmani and Groot (2023) in a study on NEET risk factors, identify how systemic failures lead young people to disengage, a behavior that can be interpreted as a form of passive demobilization in the face of inaccessible opportunities. Similarly, in Japan, *hikikomori* is not seen as a hedonistic way of life, but rather a form of escape from a system that punishes failure with shame and social finger-pointing (Figueiredo, 2023)

In short, the causes that explain the phenomenon of young people who do not study or work should not be understood from short-sighted, deterministic and reductionist visions. The solutions may lie neither in isolated structural nor psychological factors, but in a mismatch between the ancestral adaptations of the human brain and the demands of inequitable modern societies. Ignorance of this complex interaction results in failed technical policies that offer jobs for a constantly changing and evolving world of work or therapeutic clinical approaches to depression, without modifying the conditions that cause it.

Public policies: between institutional fragmentation and comprehensive approaches

Institutional responses to NEETs have been diverse, depending on the political, economic and sociocultural context. While some countries have generated comprehensive, formative and contextualized strategies, others, including Colombia, continue with approaches, often reductionist, fragmented, technical and centralized, ignoring the regional, ethnic and subjective particularities of young people.

In the country, the latest policy proposals, such as the National Youth in Peace Program or the Young State program (Ministry of Equality and Equity, 2023; Ministry of Labor, 2023) have prioritized technical training and rapid labor insertion, usually through the National Learning Service (SENA). However, despite government efforts, the results do not show structural improvements. There are still difficulties in formally linking young people to the labor market, due in large part to the continuous and permanent disarticulation with the productive fabric of the regions.

On the other hand, these policies ignore non-economic barriers: mental health, unpaid care, gender-based violence, or ethnic exclusion (Rahmani et al., 2024; Serrière & Elder S, 2025). In addition, there is a strong centralizing approach, since, in general, in the Caribbean, where a considerable percentage of the country's NEETs live, central policies are managed. For this reason, it is necessary to develop relevant programs that focus on the needs of the region. This includes the design of technical and vocational education and training programs directly aligned with the needs of the regional labor market. This social disconnect between diagnosis and design of programs with regional significance evidences a logic of Colombian public policy that homogenizes and reduces Colombian youth, making sociocultural dynamics and territorial realities invisible in a certain way.

On the other hand, in the United Kingdom since the 2000s, programmes for young people have been developed with a proactive, comprehensive and personalised approach, based on social evidence. Its NEET orientation involves the identification of young people in vulnerable situations, early vocational direction, subsidies for employers and companies that hire young people, and continuous and permanent psycho-emotional support (Dluhopolskyi & Dluhopolska, 2024; Serrière & Elder, 2025; Redmond & McFadden, 2023). The key to the programme and its success has been the principle of personalised trajectories, in which each young person is seen and analysed individually. Along these lines, the approach that not all young people need the same thing, nor do they present the same context, is satisfactory. Some need psychosocial and emotional support, others; training in basic skills and competencies, and others, only mentoring. This comprehensive perspective has managed, according to Redmond and McFadden (2023), to reduce social gaps and NEET rates by more than 30% in two decades.

In the United States, programs for Opportunity Youth have evolved and migrated towards sustainable models of human capital development, with an emphasis on socio-emotional skills and competencies, networking, and paid internships (OECD, 2024). However, although these efforts are altruistic and valuable, critics point out that they do not address the root of the structural foundations of the problem. According to Serrière and Elder (2025), systemic racism, disinvestment in marginalized neighborhoods, or the criminalization of poverty are the problems that must be tackled in the background. In this way, U.S. policies, while well-intentioned, often operate within the system without actually being able to transform it.

Beyond the West, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB, 2021) has evaluated hundreds of programs in Latin America and concludes that the most effective are those that comprehensively combine three elements: (1) technical or academic training that responds to regional dynamics, (2) psychosocial and mental health support, and (3) direct linkage with the productive sector. Programs such as *ProJoven* in Peru or *Youth with More and Better Work* in Argentina, although with limitations, show that this triad increases labor insertion by up to 40% (IDB, 2021). Along the same lines, Quinlan-Davidson et al. (2024) raise the need to create service programs for young people in NEET status that support comprehensive skills development, promote mental health and well-being, and offer long-term job opportunities.

However, a critical gap persists in all of these Latin American countries related to their contexts: the absence of permanent policies and laws that do not depend on the government of the day, that link young people to a sense of purpose, belonging, and a possible future. Most of the interventions are based on a logic that moves through the market economy: the learner is a human resource that must be reactivated and productive. But as evolutionary psychology shows, humans are not motivated only by work or salary, but by social status, felt competition, group belonging, freedom, and autonomy (Geher, 2013; Whitehouse, 2025). A program that provides precarious work, without social recognition, without a path to autonomy, is destined to fail, not because of the young person, but because of a lack of design.

Along these lines, the exhortation of CABEI and OEI (2022) is categorical in stating that youth disconnection is achieved with social justice, and this is achieved when policies focus on equity, the reduction of inequality, and the protection of vulnerable groups within the labor market. Good policies, therefore, have to go beyond training and instruction: they have to remake contexts to make them readable for the human brain again, that is, to provide achievable goals, feedback, communities of belonging, and real paths to a dignified adulthood with a future.

Towards an evolutionary approach to youth demotivation: reinterpreting disconnection as adaptation

So far, the social explanation of NEETs has been approached from economic, social or clinical perspectives, which, although they contribute and are plausible to understand this phenomenon, tend to reduce its causes to merely individual factors or even to pathologize the lack of motivation. However, a view from evolutionary psychology, little explored in the Global South, but with growing

empirical support worldwide, allows us to change the perspectives with which this phenomenon could be studied. This science has the differential tools to understand and explain the behavior of NEETs in a different way. From this perspective, the disconnection of these young people cannot be considered as a failure of the individual per se, but as an adaptive maneuver of these, when they face challenges or contexts perceived as dangerous, insecure, or devoid of opportunities (MaCurdy et al., 2024;

It should be noted that evolutionary psychology is based on a fundamental principle, the human brain was not and is not designed for today's world. In this sense, Geher (2013) explains that "the brain evolved in a context of small groups, with clear social roles, immediate rewards, and tangible threats. Modern society with its abstract institutions, deferred rewards, and impersonal relationships represents a radically novel environment from an evolutionary perspective" (p. 89). As a result, many of the psychological, educational, and social adversities arise precisely from this mismatch between the ancestral brain and the modern world (Mora, 2013). Consequently, our emotions, motivations, and ways of thinking and acting were formed and developed over the years to solve adaptive problems: evolutionary adaptation environment (EEA).

In other words, in the environment of evolutionary adaptation, young people had defined roles that were necessary for the survival of the collective, thus, the passage from adolescence to adulthood was always marked by concrete and visible social roles. This transition today can be considered different, education increasingly lengthens economic and social dependence, work is not always accessible, especially in contexts of inequality, and social ties deteriorate more and more every day due to social networks. In this context, investing energy in goals with no visible return can be considered inefficient from an evolutionary logic and lead to disconnection.

Today, young people in Colombia face difficult environments, especially in regions such as the Colombian Caribbean. Many of them face protracted and abstract educational trajectories, informal labor markets, and underpaid. Belonging, recognition and autonomy are often replaced by the search for social validation. The juvenile brain seeks to be useful and recognized, but the modern educational, labor and social system generally does not guarantee it.

In this scenario, the human motivational system, designed to respond to environmental signals of opportunity or risk, can be turned off as a mechanism for conserving psychological resources (Resource Conservation Theory, COR). According to Shelef et al. (2022), this theory can provide a robust psychological framework to understand the disconnection and inactivity of young NEETs, interpreting their situation as a result of the sustained loss of resources. Therefore, the COR postulates that humans are essentially motivated to protect their existing resources and to acquire new ones. When this motivation is repeatedly frustrated or when the loss is excessive, exhaustion mechanisms are activated that explain the disconnection observed in NEETs.

Consequently, according to Haidt (2024), when the environment transmits signals of high uncertainty, low stability, and low reward, the evolutionarily rational strategy is not to persist indefinitely, but to reduce investment in long-term goals and prioritize emotional survival in the present.

This logic explains why, in the Colombian Caribbean, many young people do not fail in the system, but withdraw from a game whose rules are biased against them. Many times it is not apathy or demotivation, but a mismatch between the motivations of their young brains and the implicit modern social structure of cost-benefit. Spending one's life studying, entering university and finishing a degree at the age of five or six does not guarantee a well-paid job, much less social status and autonomy. So why invest emotional and cognitive energy in it? This interpretation is aligned with qualitative findings that describe the NEET condition not as passivity, but as passive resistance to the impossibility of accessing legitimate futures (Shelef et al. 2022).

The international contrast reinforces this hypothesis. According to Haidt (2024), "Japanese society has long exerted intense pressure on young men to achieve academic success, get a prestigious job, and

conform to societal expectations (p. 214). In this country, *hikikomori*, a Japanese word that means "to pull inwards", is not considered a hedonistic choice, but an adaptive measure in the face of a system that sees failure as a punishment of social shame (OECD, 2023; Figueiredo, 2023; Mahoney, 2024; Matsushita and Yasumatsu, 2025). The worldview these young people have of their disconnection lies in defying the world, without needing to face their anxieties and the uncomfortable uncertainty of the real world.

In the United States, the disconnection of young people is given as a coherent adaptive response to specific environments of certain racial and ethnic groups. In this case, social maladjustment is based on structural failures in the system related to discrimination, hiring biases and residential segregation, among others. Indeed, certain ethnic groups such as African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to be *opportunity youth* than white youth. In fact, these communities experience lower incomes, poorer mental health, higher rates of criminalization, and less social mobility (Pamplin et al., 2023; Rainock, 2025).

In short, youth disengagement can be seen as an adaptive and coherent response to the social maladjustment of current education and labor systems. Although painful and stigmatizing, it plausibly explains why adaptive psychological mechanisms produce maladaptive outputs in modern environments. Understanding these mechanisms helps explain contemporary problems related to anxiety, addictions, depression, social conflict, and isolation. This comprehensive view allows us to have a holistic view of this social phenomenon, while admitting the structural problems that sustain it. It is a call for in-depth reforms that enable relevant public policies in favor of youth success.

This approach has enormous effects for public policy and programs. If it is accepted that demotivation and disconnection are the product of an adaptive response, solutions should not focus on correcting or punishing the young person, but on changing or improving the context in which they live so that it can be perceived as a place of opportunity. To this end, it is necessary to start by identifying the structural shortcomings of national and regional programmes, since current policies, not being culturally adapted or not responding to the specific context of certain racial or ethnic communities, do not adequately address the main social determinants.

Finally, these perspectives will have visible results for the future of these young people if they work on really useful programs, which include personalized and contextualized help in a continuous, permanent and comprehensive way, including proposals to improve mental health, well-being, vocational preparation, development of socio-emotional competencies and above all real possibilities of labor insertion and use of their skills and abilities.

As Shelef et al. (2022) point out, excessive loss of resources can lead to emotional exhaustion, which partly underpins the functional collapse of the psychological system that tries to cope with cumulative tension. In the context of NEETs, this burnout could translate into inactivity and a lack of job or education search. Agreeing with this does not justify exclusion, pointing fingers and social failure, but rather calls for serious public policies and the redesign of environments that for years have been deterministic so that they are once again compatible with human psychology. In the Colombian Caribbean, and in all the contexts of the Global South where structure denies the future, this perspective is not only academic: it is an ethical call to build societies where all young people can imagine, and achieve, a dignified tomorrow.

CONCLUSIONS

This article makes a critical and semi-systematic documentary review of the phenomenon of young people who neither study nor work, from the context of the Colombian Caribbean, in comparison with international experiences in the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States and the world. After reviewing 50 rigorous sources published between 2018 and 2025, four main findings were found that open the door to reconsidering this social problem.

First of all, it was confirmed that the NEET condition cannot be considered as a homogeneous category, but rather socially contextual. While in the Colombian Caribbean disengagement or disconnection underlies historical structural factors related to poverty, informality, ethnic exclusion, weak infrastructure and low educational quality, in other contexts the reasons could be considered different. In Japan, a social and cultural construct related to the dichotomy of success vs. failure; in the United States, a discriminatory phenomenon with racial and territorial structural overtones; and in the United Kingdom, a continuous and historic manifestation of class inequality. This heterogeneity requires differentiated views, policies and programs, not centralist, reductionist and deterministic directions that ignore local and regional characteristics.

Second, it was concluded that the separation between structural causes and individual factors is incorrect. Mediated demotivational processes, anxiety, apathy or mental health problems cannot be seen as causes, but rather as results of contexts perceived as adverse or lacking opportunity. In this regard, evolutionary psychology emerges as an alternative and a theoretical reference, which, far from reducing this phenomenon to a problem of vulnerability in the process of transition to adulthood, sees youth isolation and disconnection as a maneuver of psychological adjustment to preserve resources in the face of uncertain futures, job uncertainty, and abstract and meaningless trajectories.

Third, it was evident that the most effective public policies and programs are those in which young people are valued and are seen as essential resources in the social, political, and economic processes of their communities. The idea of these programs is that they are comprehensive, contextualized and focused on them as subjects of rights. In this sense, the aim is that in the process of transition to adulthood these young people acquire more self-confidence and are more competent when relating to the world of work.

Programs that advocate for youth development and participation in personal and community development, according to the IDB (2021), show higher success rates. These, according to this organization, seek to combine relevant training, psychosocial support and real linkage with the productive sector. In contrast, the technical, reductionist, centralized, and disjointed policies and programs prevalent in the country, especially in regions such as the Colombian Caribbean, fail to overlook the subjective, cultural, and territorial dimensions of exclusion.

Finally, and as a novel contribution to the problem posed here, it is outlined that evolutionary psychology should not be seen as a marginal science for the explanation of social phenomena, but as a bridge between the structural flaws posed by the system and the collective perception of a group of the population. By recognizing that young people are not broken, but responding coherently to dysfunctional environments, it opens up the possibility of designing interventions that not only offer employment or education, but reconnect young people with a sense of purpose, belonging, status, and autonomy—deep needs rooted in our social biology.

In a world where transitions to adulthood have become longer, uncertain, and fragmented, especially in the Global South, understanding youth disengagement as a symptom of evolutionary-cultural mismatch is not just an academic exercise, it is an ethical imperative. It requires transforming not only the perception of young people, but also the environments that have historically excluded them. Only in this way will it be possible to create just and equitable societies where everyone, including young people in the Colombian Caribbean, has not only access to quality education and employment, but also the right to a dignified and meaningful future.

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