

Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health



About this briefing

Youth Futures Foundation is the national What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people. We are working to drive change in policy and practice to support all young people to achieve good work. We're doing this by building the evidence base for what works, and by actively translating and embedding this knowledge into action for systemic change.

This paper provides an overview of new research commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation and carried out by a team from the University of Manchester and UCL examining the drivers of the increase in mental ill health among young people.

The youth employment policy challenge and opportunity

The latest ONS figures show that nearly 1 million young people are not in education, education employment or training (NEET), equivalent to one in eight.

Getting young people onto a successful and rewarding path to work is not just an essential step in their wellbeing, but key to our national prosperity. Youth Futures' research shows that by matching the NEET rate of the Netherlands, which is leading the way within the OECD, the UK could see 500,000 more young people in employment and a £69 billion boost to GDP.

Why we focus on mental health

Youth unemployment can be both a cause and a consequence of poor mental health, so we can't develop solutions to these inseparable challenges in isolation. Unlike after the 2008 financial crisis – when the majority of young people not in education or work were actively looking for jobs – the recent rise in NEET levels since 2021 is driven in part by growing rates of economic inactivity.

Over the past three years, long-term sickness has been the primary driver of the increase in youth economic inactivity, with mental health conditions the most common cause related to ill health. This shift is particularly concerning, as we know that being out of work or education can have a long-term negative effect on young people even decades later, impacting their wellbeing and future prospects.

This research: Examining the drivers behind the decline in youth mental health

To understand the root causes of young people's worsening mental health in England, Youth Futures commissioned the University of Manchester in July 2024 to conduct a comprehensive research project focused on 14 to 24 year olds. This is the first research of its kind to explore the population-level rise in youth mental health problems.

Unlike previous efforts, this research takes a broader approach by evaluating multiple potential drivers of worsening youth mental health through data analysis and literature review, assessing the strength of evidence supporting each one and highlighting where important gaps remain. In consultation with experts in psychology, psychiatry, education, epidemiology, and economics, ten factors were identified and grouped into three categories: increasing risk, declining resilience, and changing reporting. Analyses using Understanding Society survey data focused on assessing evidence for changes in resilience and reporting.

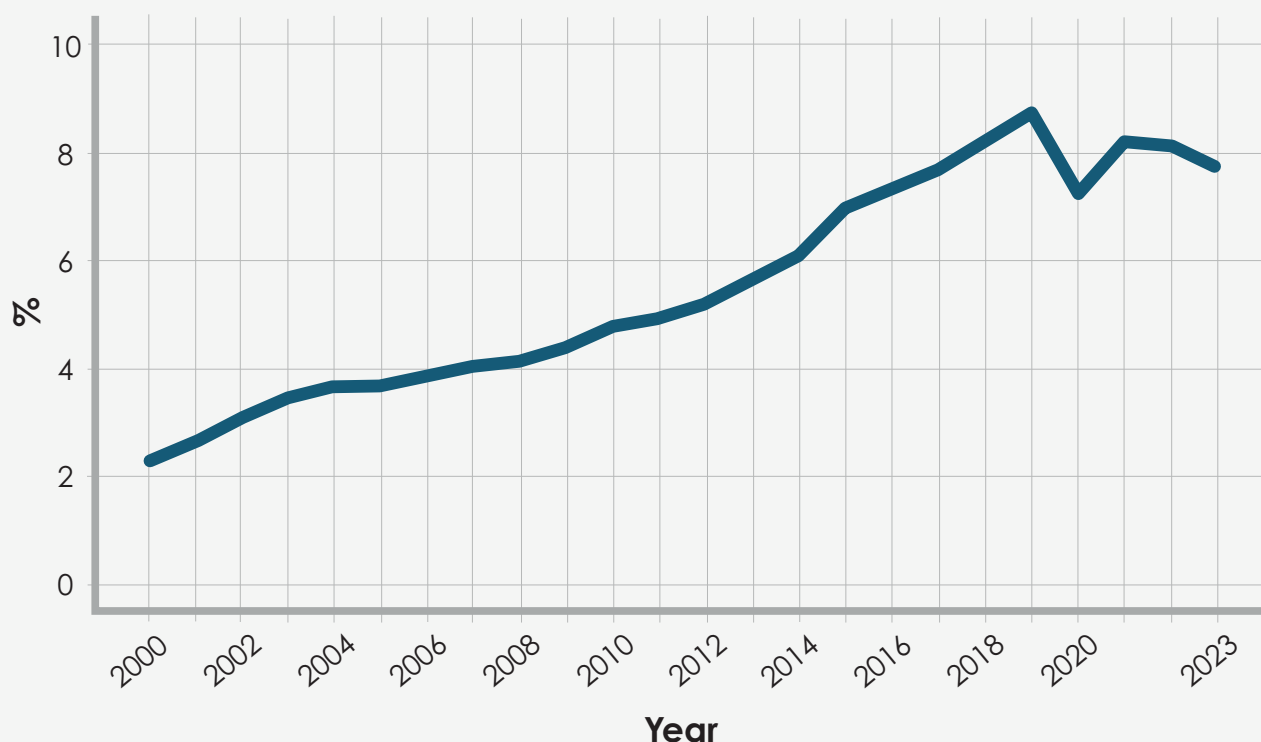
Key findings: Why are mental health problems rising among young people?

A genuine, concerning rise

Survey data show a substantial rise in mental health symptoms among young people from around 2010–2012, particularly in low mood and anxiety. Primary care data reinforce this trend: in 2019, 1 in 11 young people aged 14 to 24 were in contact with primary care for a mental health issue, up from 1 in 44 in 2000 – a three-fold increase.

Figure: Trends in young people's mental health problems

Proportion of young people with a presentation to primary care for a mental health problem, ages 14 to 24, England, 2000 to 2023



This research provides evidence that the increase of young people with a mental health problem (or decline in young people's mental health) is real – and not merely a result of increased symptom recognition, greater awareness, overdiagnosis, or reduced resilience. Our analysis points to a genuine rise in mental distress among young people.

Statistical analyses found that patterns in how young people have responded to mental health surveys are consistent over time, indicating that questions relating to specific symptoms are being interpreted similarly today as in the past, while the link between mental distress and negative outcomes like smoking, drinking, and NEET status has strengthened. This suggests that mental health problems are not being reported at lower thresholds. Additional analysis shows no general decline in young people's resilience, except for a specific decline related to financial difficulty.

A rise shaped by multiple factors

This research also shows that the decline in youth mental health is driven by a range of factors. The theories that were most strongly supported by the evidence were: worsening sleep quality, financial insecurity, reduced access to non-clinical services for children and young people, and rising social media and smartphone use. The remaining drivers either lacked strong evidence of having changed over time in ways that align with mental health trends, or were not clearly linked to worsening mental health.



Declining sleep quality

Markers of young people's sleep quality have deteriorated, and robust evidence links poor sleep to higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms.



Employment precarity and affordability pressures

Financial insecurity has increasingly impacted young people since 2010. This appears to be driven by lower access to stable jobs and careers, and affordability pressures, in particular housing.



Reduced access to children and youth services

Funding for youth services in England declined by 73% since 2010 and evidence suggests that these and early intervention services were previously having a positive effect on young people's mental health.



Social media and smartphone use¹

The most robust evidence indicates that social media and smartphone use has a small negative impact on mental health, contributing to recent trends given their wide-spread adoption since 2010.

Child poverty and discrimination affect young people's mental health, but their levels have not changed enough over time to explain the decline in mental health. Evidence on academic pressure is limited, though further research on changes to happiness at school since 2021 is warranted. COVID-19 had significant impacts, but these were short-term. Some areas, such as societal attitudes towards risk in childhood or climate change anxiety, lack robust evidence, highlighting key areas for future research.

1. Social media exposure is a very diverse category and is likely to have a wide range of different impacts on young people, including positive ones.

Youth services are more than support – they are our safety nets. They catch us before we fall, they build us before we break, they walk with us through the mess, through the healing, and into growth.

It's that trusted person who listens without judgement and who sees our potential even when we can't. For me, that person didn't always wear a suit or sit behind a desk – sometimes they were a youth worker equipped with the relevant training, who simply took the time to ask: 'How are you, like really?'

DAZO, 24, Future Voices Group Ambassador for Youth Futures Foundation



Implications for policy

A genuine rise

- This research further reinforces the need for mental health to be prioritised and for preventative solutions that bring together health services, education, employers, civil society and other stakeholders.
- Investment in young people's mental health should continue to focus on prevention and early intervention.

Changing economic conditions and unstable employment

Young people consistently tell us that good work with secure hours and income is among their top priorities. That's why, in partnership with Workwhile, we are working with marginalised young people to co-create a definition and better understanding of 'good work' that is rooted in their lived expertise and designed to be clear, actionable and accessible to both employers and policymakers.

This report demonstrates employers' role in young people's ability to thrive at work and be retained, and we know we need to understand better what works. That's why we are developing a series of landmark research trials to understand what works in the recruitment and retention of young people by testing interventions with employers.

This research highlights the importance of employment conditions to young people's mental health. In light of this finding:

- The Government's employment rights agenda (Make Work Pay) should incorporate an explicit impetus to improve mental health through improving worker's rights.
- As the Youth Guarantee develops, central and local government should be conscious of the quality of work being offered to young people through the Guarantee, including in contracted hours, quality of work and wages.

The Government should consider the implications of this research on housing policy and its potential role in the decline of young people's mental health.

Reduction in children and youth services

The research highlights that cuts to children and youth services are contributing to the decline in young people's mental health. In light of this:

- We welcome the Government's commitment to Family Hubs in every local authority, offering integrated support for children and families. As it rolls out Young Futures Hubs, equal weight should be given to ensuring all young people have access to trusted adult relationships and support services.
- As the Government develops its National Youth Strategy, this research underscores the need for a coordinated, comprehensive youth offer. With poor mental health acting as a barrier to employment, investing in youth services is both a wellbeing imperative and an economic strategy – connecting young people to support, trusted adults, and positive futures.

Sleep

Given the strength of evidence on sleep coming out of this research, the Government and civil society should consider the role of sleep quality in young people's mental health and promote public awareness.

Social media

This research adds to a wealth of growing investigation of the impacts of social media on youth mental health and we welcome ongoing investment into better understanding this important issue.

With young people's mental health deteriorating at such a significant level, the case for action has never been clearer.

Some claim the rise in youth mental health problems is purely the result of increased awareness and reporting and a culture of declaring mild, everyday symptoms as mental illness. This study stands as an unequivocal rebuttal to that charge that we must take seriously. In particular, we must have a national conversation about declining sleep quality and how important it is for young people's mental health.

Baroness Luciana Berger, Independent Chair of Youth Futures Foundation's Mental Health Advisory Group



About the authors

- **Matthias Pierce** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Women's Mental Health, University of Manchester.
- **Yushi Bai** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Women's Mental Health, University of Manchester.
- **Vicky Taxiarchi** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Women's Mental Health, University of Manchester.
- **Samuel Hugh-Jones** is a PhD candidate in health economics at the University of Manchester.
- **Kathryn M. Abel** is Professor of Psychological Medicine and Director of the Centre for Women's Mental Health at the University of Manchester.
- **Praveetha Patalay** is Professor of Population Health and Wellbeing at University College London.
- **Ola Demkowicz** is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology of Education at the Manchester Institute of Education.

Youth Futures Foundation's Mental Health Advisory Group

An independent advisory group was established to steer the project, bringing together clinicians, leading academics and policy stakeholders.

- **Baroness Luciana Berger**, Former Shadow Cabinet Minister for Mental Health (Chair)
- **Kadra Abdinasir**, Associate Director of Policy, Centre for Mental Health, Trustee for Race on the Agenda & Member of the NHS Race and Health Observatory Mental Health Working Group
- **Dr Rachel Bradley**, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Children and Families Lead for Psychological Services at Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust & Chair of the Faculty for Children, Young People and their Families, Division of Clinical Psychology, British Psychological Society
- **Professor Jessica Deighton**, Director of the Evidence Based Practice Unit, UCL and Anna Freud
- **Professor Bernadka Dubicka**, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Hull York Medical School, University of York
- **Dr Lucy Foulkes**, Research Fellow in Psychology, University of Oxford
- **Olly Parker**, Head of External Affairs and Research, YoungMinds
- **Charlotte Rainer**, Coalition Manager, Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

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If you would like more information about this report:

Abigail Coxon

Senior Economist

Kat Thompson

Strategic External Affairs Lead

Youth Futures Foundation, Fivefields, 8-10 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH

comms@youthfuturesfoundation.org



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