



Nearly five million more people experiencing poor mental health since 2009

## Description

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Stock image of girl looking through window, illustrating mental health outcomes

The Mental Health Foundation has released *The Foundation Reports: The state of mental health inequality in the UK*, based on data following 40,000 individuals over 15 years.

The report found higher levels of [poor mental health](#) than recently reported in other datasets. One in four adults in the UK (25%) now experiences mental distress. That's 14 million people. This has risen from 17% since the period immediately following the 2008 financial crisis. And that means an additional 4.8 million people now experience poor mental health just 16 years later.

The evaluation of the Understanding Society dataset involved examining data gathered from 2009 to 2024 to discover what is driving unequal levels of mental health across the country. The size and depth of the dataset allowed researchers to evaluate how these factors impacted different social groups. Across the fifteen years, people in financial distress experienced the greatest rise in poor mental health.

## Mental health inequality

In the most recent data, more than half of people who were financially struggling (54%) experienced poor mental health, more than three times the rate of those who are financially comfortable (17%).

The gap between the poorest and richest people has increased by 50% the last 15 years. There was a 28.9 percentage point gap in 2009. But that's risen to a 43.4 percentage point gap in the most recent data.

Women and young people were also found to have been disproportionately affected. Nearly one in three young people (31%) are now experiencing poor mental health. This compares with less than one in four (23%) people aged 25 and above. More than one in four women (28%) experienced poor mental

health, compared to one in five (21%) men.

Mental health inequalities between these groups have also risen steeply since 2009. This is particularly notable for younger people, for whom there was no inequality in 2009, but who now experience a 7.5% higher rate of mental distress than older groups.

[The Foundation Reports](#) follows a Delphi process, conducted by the Mental Health Foundation, in which more than 40 experts in the field identified which factors drive unequal outcomes the most.

By combining the results of the Delphi process with the evaluation of Understanding Society data, [The Foundation Reports](#)'s authors found that previous governments' austerity policies, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis have been the main factors driving the widening of mental health inequality.

Mark Rowland, chief executive at the [Mental Health Foundation](#) said:

The Foundation Reports exposes how financial inequality has become intertwined with poor mental health in the UK. A million more people are experiencing poor mental health than in 2009. It is people who are less well-off, younger, or women who are hardest hit and paying the greatest price.

Clearly, decisions of successive UK governments have made mental health outcomes worse. Examples include austerity, the response to Covid-19, and failing to address the cost-of-living. These have contributed to record levels of poor mental health, particularly among vulnerable groups.

This is a UK-wide issue. We've found that financial inequality in the UK is the biggest driver of unequal mental health outcomes in all four nations. The UK and devolved governments' failure to support those on lower incomes is one of the largest public health mistakes in decades. Policies have also disproportionately damaged women and younger people's mental health.

The announcement of a mental health plan for England provides a vital opportunity for government to turn the tide. To reduce mental health problems, all UK governments must prioritise tackling poverty and access to debt advice.

We need better support for people returning to work, and greater security for those who will never be able to do so. Governments must also support women and younger people through policies that address the specific challenges these groups face, like access to housing.

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By [The Canary](#)

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