

# One in four older teens now has a probable mental health disorder, new research shows

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One in four 17- to 19-year-olds now has a probable mental health disorder—up from one in six last year.

The findings are according to the NHS digital report [The Mental Health](#)

[of Children and young People in 2022](#). The report was produced in collaboration with experts from the University of Exeter and Cambridge University. It explores the mental health of children and [young people](#) in 2022, compared with 2017, 2020 and 2021, thereby providing a comparison to pre pandemic times.

The report examines views and experiences on family life, education, household circumstances, services and employment.

One of the report's authors is Dr. Tamsin Newlove Delgado from the University of Exeter Medical School. Speaking as a specialist in the field, she said: "Our young people have been living through uncertain and challenging times, and this report shows the urgent need to support them. We've seen a significant increase in mental health problems in children and young people, which rose sharply over the pandemic and haven't dropped back to pre-COVID levels.

"Particularly worrying is that one in four older teenagers are likely to be experiencing [mental health problems](#), up from one in six last year. We need to understand more about which young people are struggling the most and why, and what changes we can make to help them. This will not be a 'quick fix', but as a society, we need to prioritize supporting young people to get the best start to their lives."

In 2017, 10.1% of 17- to 19-year-olds had a probable mental disorder—the rate increased to 17.7% in 2020 but remained stable between 2020 and 2021, when it was 17.4%.

Among 7- to 16-year-olds, the proportion with a probable mental disorder was 18.0% in 2022—up from 12.1% in 2017 but a similar rate to 2020 when it was 16.7% and 2021 when it was 17.8%.

In 2022, among those aged 7 to 10, prevalence of a probable mental

disorder was nearly twice as high in boys (19.7%) as in girls (10.5%).

The findings draw on a sample of 2,866 children and young people who are now aged between 7 and 24 years old, while information was also provided by parents for children aged 7 to 16. This publication is part of a series of follow up reports to the 2017 Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey.

The survey, commissioned by NHS Digital, was carried out earlier this year by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the National Center for Social Research (NatCen), University of Cambridge and University of Exeter.

Other topics covered in the report include:

## **Household circumstances**

Children with a probable mental disorder were more likely than those without to live in a home experiencing financial strain:

- Among 17- to 22-year-olds with a probable mental disorder, 14.8% reported living in a household that had experienced not being able to buy enough food or using a [food bank](#) in the past year, compared with 2.1% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.
- One in five (19.9%) 7- to 16-year-olds lived in households that experienced a reduction in [household income](#) in the past year. This was more than one in four (28.6%) among children with a probable mental disorder.
- 17.8% of children aged 7 to 16 with a probable mental disorder lived in a household that had fallen behind with bills, rent or mortgage, compared with 7.6% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.

- 13.6% of children with a probable mental disorder lived in a household where they could not afford to keep the house warm enough, compared with 6.0% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.

## School

Children with a probable mental disorder were more likely than those without to report negative views and experiences at school:

- 11- to 16-year-olds with a probable mental disorder were less likely to feel safe at school (61.2%) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (89.2%). They were also less likely to report enjoyment of learning or have a friend they could turn to for support.
- School absence rates were higher in children with a probable mental disorder; 12.6% missed more than 15 days of school compared with 3.9% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.
- Looking at all 11- to 16-year-olds surveyed, regardless of whether they had a likely mental disorder, 38.6% were worried about the impact COVID-19 has had on their schoolwork and 43.5% were worried about the effect on their future exam results.

## Social media

Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely than those without to experience bullying online:

- One in eight (12.6%) 11- to 16-year-old users of social media reported that they had been bullied online. This was more than one in four (29.4%) among those with a probable mental

disorder.

- 11- to 16-year-old social media users with a probable mental disorder were less likely to report feeling safe online (48.4%) than those unlikely to have a disorder (66.5%).
- Among all 17- to 24-year-old social media users surveyed, regardless of whether they had a likely mental disorder, [young women](#) were almost twice as likely to report having been bullied online (19.5%) compared with 11.3% of young men.

## Eating problems

The report includes data on possible problems with eating, which indicates an increased likelihood of problems or broader difficulties with eating. It does not mean that the child or young person had an eating disorder.

- 12.9% of 11- to 16-year-olds; 60.3% of 17- to 19-year-olds and 62.2% of 20- to 23-year-olds had a possible eating problem in 2022.
- Across all [age groups](#), the rate of possible eating problems was higher in girls than boys: for children aged 11 to 16, the rate was 17.8% in girls compared with 8.1% in boys. For young people aged 17 to 19, the rate was 75.9% in young women, compared with 45.5% in young men.
- In children aged 11 to 16, the rate of possible eating problems rose between 2017 (6.7%) and 2021 (13.0%), and then remained stable between 2021 and 2022 (12.9%).
- In young people aged 17 to 19, the prevalence of possible eating problems rose from 44.6% in 2017 to 58.2% in 2021. Rates remained stable between 2021 (58.2%) and 2022 (60.3%).

## Sleep problems

Sleep problems were more common in children and young people with a probable mental disorder than in those unlikely to have a disorder:

- 34.0% of 7- to 16-year-olds and 64.0% of 17- to 23-year-olds were affected by problems with sleep three or more times over the previous seven nights. Of those with a probable mental disorder, this rose to 72.3% in 7- to 16-year-olds and 89.5% in 17- to 23-year-olds.

## Loneliness

Loneliness was more common among [children](#) and young people with a probable mental disorder:

- 5.2% of 11- to 16-year-olds and 12.6% of 17- to 22-year-olds said they often or always felt lonely.
- Loneliness was higher among those with a probable mental disorder, with 18.0% of 11- to 16-year-olds and 28.9% of 17- to 22-year-olds reporting often or always feeling lonely.

## Self-harm

Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely to [report](#) self-harm<sup>7</sup>:

- 28.3% of 7- to 16-year-olds and 68.6% of 17- to 24-year-olds with a probable mental disorder had ever tried to harm themselves. Of those unlikely to have a [mental disorder](#), 2.5% of those aged 7 to 16 and 17.8% of 17- to 24-year-olds had tried to harm themselves.

Provided by University of Exeter

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