

Cost of unpaid care in England and Wales now exceeds that of NHS budget

May 4 2023, by George Dean



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The value of unpaid care in England and Wales is now estimated to be

£162 billion, exceeding that of the entire NHS budget in England for health service spending, which by comparison was £156 billion for 2020–21.

Following analysis of the latest 2021 Census data, new research from the University of Sheffield and caregivers' charity, Carers UK, found that the value of unpaid care has increased by nearly a third since 2011.

Millions of people provide unpaid care for a family member, friend or neighbor affected by long-term illness, disability, or those needing more help and assistance in older age. Most people will experience needing care, or become an unpaid caregiver during their lifetime.

Often caring around their own commitments such as employment and [family life](#), unpaid caregivers receive little support or recognition for the massive savings they contribute to the U.K.'s health and social care system every year.

Professor Matt Bennett, deputy director for the Center for Care at the University of Sheffield, said, "Without unpaid caregivers, our health and social care systems would collapse, that is the stark reality of the situation. Despite NHS funding increasing annually, increases to social care funding have not kept pace, so the system is now relying more heavily than ever before on unpaid caregivers and would collapse without them.

"Our research shows that people are providing more hours of care than ever before, and their contribution to the U.K. economy now exceeds that of the entire NHS budget in England. There are estimated to be around 5 million unpaid caregivers in the U.K., and it is obvious that they need to be recognized, not just for their contribution to society, but in their need for specific rights and support for the work that they do."

For the new report, researchers from the Center for Care analyzed Census data to measure the number of hours people in local authority areas in England and Wales reported caring for a loved one, friend, or neighbor each week. Using information about the current wage rates of caregivers and nursing assistants, they were able to estimate the monetary value of unpaid care, and how this has changed between 2011 and 2021.

The research found that even though the number of people in England and Wales who identify as an unpaid caregiver has decreased slightly, an increase in the number of hours of unpaid care is believed to contribute to a staggering increase in the cost of unpaid care in England and Wales.

The report, published by Caregivers UK today (Wednesday 3 May 2023), sets out 14 recommendations, in a call for government to understand the value of unpaid care and help it make changes to improve the lives of caregivers in such areas as:

- Better rights, recognition and support from the NHS and social care
- Support and rights in employment
- Freedom from [financial hardship](#), and a recognition of the in poverty and the additional impact and costs of caring
- Freedom from discrimination and promotion of equality

Dr. Maria Petrillo, a Research Associate with the Center for Care, said, "The data shows how heavily the health and social care system relies on unpaid caregivers. [About 12,000 people a day become an unpaid caregiver](#), and these people are often a lifeline for the most vulnerable in our society.

"Even so, our estimates cannot put a true value on the costs of unpaid care; as it is often done out of love, and immense respect for the person

needing support; and can be at cost to caregivers' health, careers, social and family lives and even their financial health.

"Our data underpins recommendations that can help the government and [local authorities](#) better support unpaid caregivers, and ensure those who often sacrifice so much for their loved ones, are valued and supported by the health and social care system."

Professor Matt Bennett, added: "As social care budgets are decentralized, and local authorities decide how to spend their budgets on services, this new localized analysis illustrates how unpaid care varies and can aid decision making across England and Wales.

"We hope the new report encourages the government to act urgently. It makes clear recommendations that [policy makers](#) and local authorities can use to review [health](#) and social care service provision across England and Wales and provides an opportunity to improve urgently needed support for unpaid caregivers."

Provided by University of Sheffield

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