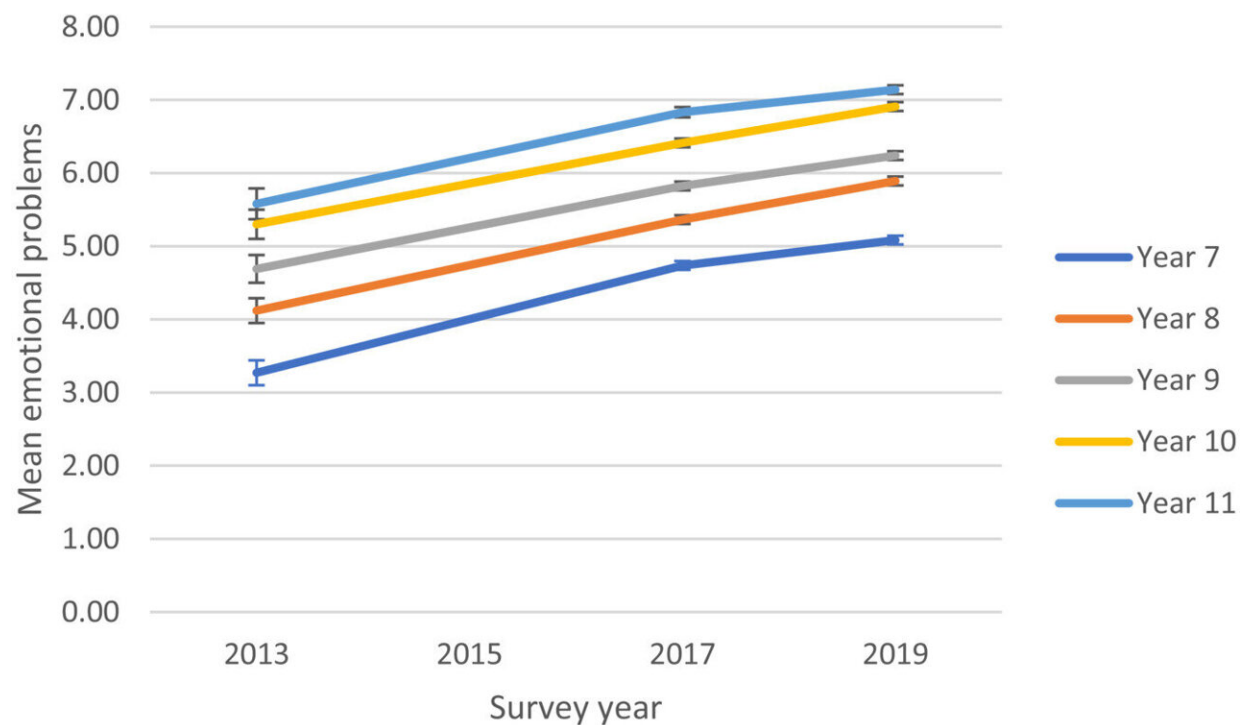


Emotional problems in young people were rising rapidly even before the pandemic

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Mean emotional problems score by age, 2013–2019. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The 2015 survey represents a predicted midpoint figure. Credit: *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2023). DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13924

There was a substantial increase in emotional problems among young people in Wales in the years immediately before the pandemic, research

from Cardiff University shows.

In the article, "Trends in adolescent [emotional problems](#) in Wales between 2013 and 2019: the contribution of peer relationships," [published](#) in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, academics studied [data](#) collected from more than 200,000 young people aged 11–16 in Wales.

The results, which compare responses taken between 2013 and 2019, show the number experiencing emotional symptoms associated with anxiety or depression increased over time, with the proportion of young people with high numbers of emotional problems rising from 23% to 38% over a six-year period. Emotional symptoms reported in the survey include feeling low, irritable, nervous and having sleep difficulties.

Girls and young people from less affluent backgrounds had more emotional problems, according to the analysis, with pre-existing inequalities in emotional symptoms widening during this time.

Friendship quality and experiencing any form of bullying were strongly associated with higher emotional problems in all three surveys, but these trends did not account for the sharp increase in emotional problems over time.

Lead author Dr. Rebecca Anthony, based at Cardiff University's Center for the Development, Evaluation, Complexity and Implementation in Public Health Improvement (DECIPHer) and Wolfson Center for young People's Mental Health said, "This study provides evidence of a substantial increase in emotional problems among young people in Wales, particularly for young people from less affluent backgrounds.

"These results are concerning, particularly as this paper only explores the emotional symptoms of young people prior to COVID-19. Evidence

indicates that the pandemic and associated restrictions took a large toll on young people's mental health. Our data demonstrate what a vulnerable position young people's mental health and well-being was already in before the pandemic struck.

"Our findings highlight a growing need for prevention efforts across society, and mental health support for [young people](#), particularly among those from less affluent families. Further research to address these rising problems is going to be vital as we move on from the pandemic."

The study used data from the 2013 Welsh Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) and the 2017 and 2019 School Health Research Network (SHRN) Student Health and Well-being surveys.

More information: Rebecca Anthony et al, Trends in adolescent emotional problems in Wales between 2013 and 2019: the contribution of peer relationships, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13924](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13924)

Provided by Cardiff University

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