

Youth mental health in decline: Generations differ on causes of apparent crisis, survey finds

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There is widespread agreement across generations in the UK—from Gen Z to Baby Boomers—that young people's mental health is worse than it was in the past, but they often differ on what this really means and what might be driving it, according to [a new survey](#).

The research, by the Policy Institute at King's College London and the Orygen Institute in Australia, finds:

- Baby Boomers are much more likely than younger generations to put a potential rise in youth mental health problems down to increased use of drugs and alcohol, and less likely to attribute it to the increased cost of living or worse economic prospects.
- Around half of Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers believe mental health problems were just as common among young people in the past, but they just weren't identified as having mental health problems back then—higher than the four in 10 Gen Z who feel this way.
- Baby Boomers and Gen X are around twice as likely as Millennials and Gen Z to say youth mental health problems have increased because young people today are less resilient.

The survey of 2,516 UK adults aged 18+ also looks at perceptions of the impact of [social media](#)—which is often seen as a possible cause of youth mental health problems—and reveals generational differences in the perceived effects on young people's health.

In the report of the findings, UK attitudes on all these issues are compared with attitudes in Australia, with both countries largely aligned in their views, aside from some differences.

The public feels mental health and other aspects of life are worse for today's youth

Majorities of the UK public feel various aspects of life are worse for young people today compared with when they were young or when their parents were their age—including mental health (70%), level of worry (67%), future prospects (53%) and ability to find a full-time job (56%).

In some cases, young people themselves are much more likely to feel they have it tougher. For example, 78% of those aged 29 and under say the ability to afford things is worse for young people today relative to their parents' generation—notably higher than the 62% of those aged 30 and above who think this is worse than when they were young. In Australia, there is much less of an age divide on this issue.

But across UK generations—Baby Boomers (65%), Gen X (70%), Millennials (73%), and Gen Z (74%)—are largely in agreement on mental health, with two-thirds or more saying it is worse for today's youth.

Around half put rising youth mental health problems down to better identification, while tougher circumstances or young people being less resilient are seen as causes by the rest...

When asked to estimate mental health trends, nearly half (45%) of the public believe the share of people aged 17 to 19 with a probable mental disorder increased from 10% to 26% between 2017 and 2022—the most common answer given, which is in line with official NHS data. A further third (34%) believe this figure increased to a lesser extent, from 10% to 18%.

Yet the public arise relatively split on what's driving this change:

- 47% think mental health problems were just as common among young people in the past; they just weren't identified as mental health problems back then, while 40% believe there has been a real increase in the proportion of young people with mental health problems today.

Among those who do believe there has been a real increase:

- 57% (or 23% of the public overall) say it's because the circumstances facing young people are more difficult than they were in the past, compared with 36% (15% overall) who say it's because young people are less resilient than young people were in the past.

...with notable generational differences in views too

- 38% of Gen Z say youth mental health problems were just as common in the past, compared with around half (49%) of older generations.
- Gen X (18%) and Baby Boomers (17%) are twice as likely as Gen Z (9%) to say today's youth are less resilient.
- Baby Boomers (19%) and Gen X (19%) are less likely than Gen Z (30%) and Millennials (27%) to think tougher circumstances are a cause of greater youth mental health issues.

Social media is seen as the key driver of worsening youth mental health...

Increased use of social media is the only potential cause of rising youth [mental health problems](#) selected by a majority of the UK public, with two-thirds (65%) believing this is a key driver—higher than the share of Australians (58%) who think the same.

Other factors—such as the impact of COVID (40%), the emergence of new tech (38%) and the increased cost of living (38%)—are seen as the next most important in the UK, while worse economic or employment prospects (29%) rank even lower.

...though Gen Z are least likely to hold this view, while Baby Boomers are most likely to blame alcohol and drugs over the cost of living or worse economic prospects

There are key generational differences in views on the most important reasons behind the apparent rise in mental health issues among young people:

- 51% of Gen Z say it's due to increased use of social media—far lower than the two-thirds or more of older generations hold this view. And 27% blame of Gen Z blame the emergence of new tech, compared with around four in 10 who belong to other generations.
- Baby Boomers (50%) stand out as around twice as likely or more than Gen X (27%), Millennials (21%) and Gen Z (20%) to attribute this change to increased use of drugs and alcohol among young people.
- Baby Boomers (25%) are half as likely as Gen Z (49%) and Millennials (50%) to say it's down to the increased cost of living. And while a quarter of Baby Boomers (24%) and Gen X (25%) blame worse economic or employment prospects, this rises to a third of Gen Z (36%) and Millennials (36%).

Social media and smartphones are mostly seen as having a negative impact on young people's general health, but younger people themselves tend to have a more positive view

Around seven in 10 people believe social media and smartphone use make sleep (71%), anxiety and depression (71%), bullying (76%) and body image (78%) worse for young people today, and over half say the same for loneliness (57%) and real-world relationships (55%).

But around half feel social media and smartphones are better for access to expert health information you know you can trust (48%) and self-expression (46%), while a third believe emotional support (32%) and community building (32%) are improved.

And younger generations are notably more likely than older generations to say social media and smartphone use make certain health-related factors better for young people today:

- 60% of Gen Z and 57% of Millennials feel self-expression is better, compared with 43% of Gen Z and 31% of Baby Boomers.
- Baby Boomers (21%) are roughly half as likely as Gen Z (46%) and Millennials (40%) to cite community building as a benefit.
- 42% of Gen X say emotional support is improved, compared with 30% of Gen X and 26% of Baby Boomers.

But overall, the UK public are nearly seven times as likely to say social media and smartphones have a negative (67%) rather than positive (10%) impact on young people's mental health.

Though, again, the young themselves have a more favorable view, with half (51%) of Gen Z feeling they have a negative impact—far below the seven in 10 of other generations who say the same.

The public prefer policies that more immediately seek to tackle youth mental health issues, rather than those focused on longer-term structural drivers

More mental health services (34%) are considered the top most important thing government should do to support young people's mental health, closely followed by zero tolerance policies on bullying in schools

(31%) and holding social media companies legally accountable for their impact on children's mental health (29%).

But policies focused on potential structural drivers of mental health, such as sexism, racism, and discrimination (13%) and youth employment (13%), are seen as a priority by far fewer.

Professor Bobby Duffy, Director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said, "We see a lot of clichés and stereotypes when we talk about the attitudes of different generations, often pitting one generation against the other—but this new study shows there is a lot of consistency in attitudes across most issues and acceptance that we face a serious issue with young people's mental health."

"However, there are some differences in perceptions of what's driving this—for example, older generations are more likely to blame social media. While young people themselves do see these platforms as a potential cause, they cite a much wider range of factors, particularly economic ones like the cost of living and difficulties in getting jobs or housing.

"One aspect where [older generations](#) do have a more clichéd view is their much greater tendency to blame increased drug and alcohol use among young people for worse mental health outcomes. However, we know that alcohol consumption has declined substantially among younger generations, and while drug use does move around over time, there is no trend of significant increases over the long term. This reflects a general tendency to generalize from eye-catching but relatively rare instances of risky behavior among young people, and to forget the risks we ourselves took when we were young."

"Whenever there is a big shift in challenges facing society, it is tempting to look for and blame one thing, like social media, but it is often more

complex than that, and we should listen to young people themselves when we decide on what actions to take."

Vivienne Browne, Director of Policy and Engagement at Orygen, said, "We often hear that the different generations are in opposition to each other, but this research shows while there may be differences in perceptions about what is driving the crisis, it's clear youth mental health is a key concern across all age groups, and there is a need for action. The results should provide politicians and other policymakers with reassurance that addressing the rising tide in youth mental health issues would be met with broad public support."

"We know that youth mental health is not just a problem for young people; it impacts the families, supporters, and community around young people and has significant implications for our health system, economy, and society. At Orygen we know that supporting young people to improve their mental health is vital to this generation, as well as generations to come."

More information: Survey results: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ... health-in-crisis.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...health-in-crisis.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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