

# Unpaid care disproportionately affects low-income households across Europe

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Unpaid care has a huge impact on mental health and is more likely to be provided by people from low-income households, finds a landmark Europe-wide [study](#) by researchers at UCL and St George's, University of London. The Eurocare research examined unpaid care provided by people of all ages across Europe.

The researchers found that around 1 in 10 people aged 15 to 29 across Europe are caregivers. More than a quarter (27%) of these young adult caregivers come from households ranked in the bottom fifth for income.

The [mental health](#) of participants was also found to deteriorate after becoming a caregiver and the impact of this increased the more hours they spent caring, showing the urgent need for early identification and intervention to support them.

For example, those who are providing more than 20 hours of unpaid care per week are more than 96% more likely to report poor mental health compared to their peers.

Young adult caregivers' education and future employment are also affected and, in the U.K., there are stark inequalities in educational attainment. Young adult caregivers are 38% less likely than their peers to hold a university degree as their highest qualification. This rises to a staggering 86% for those who provide more than 35 hours of care per week.

Co-ordinator of the Eurocare project, Professor Anne McMunn (UCL Epidemiology & Public Health), said, "Our partnership with Caregivers Trust has been crucial to the research for this project, informing the entire process from formulating research questions to interpreting and sharing results. Caregivers play a vital role in our society and need our

support to stay well. We hope these reports will provide some impetus for improving that support."

For people aged 30–49 in the U.K., unpaid care is also linked to worsening mental health and the effects persist for years after care starts. The impact is more pronounced for women compared to men, the research showed.

Caregivers in this age bracket are also more likely to come from disadvantaged households. Of those ranked in the lowest two-fifths of the population for household income, 17% were caregivers. This compared to just 12% of those in the richest fifth of the population. The researchers concluded that support must be ramped up with financial assistance programs, caregiver tax credits and social safety nets for low-income caregivers.

The research also showed that older caregivers are more likely to report loneliness. It recommended increased support for their mental health and well-being, including access to counseling services, [community engagement](#), social support networks and mental health screening programs.

Dr. Rebecca Lacey from St George's, University of London, said, "Our research shows the significant impact that being a young adult caregiver can have on a young person's life. Many caregiver organizations and charities will know the inequality that young adult caregivers face but through this research we have helped to evidence and quantify that difference.

"It is a gap that is sadly substantial, particularly for young adult caregivers who provide significant hours of care. We really hope that this will help to pave the way for better support for young adult caregivers."

Rohati Chapman, Caregivers Trust's executive director for programs, policy and impact, said, "This vital research shows the significant impact that failing to support unpaid caregivers has across Europe. From [young people](#) seeing their future prospects blighted to ever worsening mental health and finances across all ages, the price paid for unpaid care is high.

"People shouldn't be forced to sacrifice their own health and well-being just for trying to do the right thing by looking after family and friends, but that's the situation faced by millions of caregivers.

"Caregivers Trust will use this valuable evidence to inform our work to support caregivers via our network of local organizations. But what the U.K.'s 7 million caregivers urgently need is a cross-Government national caregivers strategy which focuses on identifying and properly supporting them throughout their lives."

**More information:** Alejandra Letelier et al, Understanding Young Caring in the UK Pre- and Post-COVID-19: Prevalence, Correlates, and Insights from Three UK Longitudinal Surveys (2024). [DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/65k2m](#)

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