

Surveying mental health in young people

Explore the four waves of data from the NHS survey series

The MHCYP survey

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, children and young people in England have experienced major changes in their lives. Family situations have been affected, as well as access to education, leisure and other services. The first and second follow-ups to the 2017 *Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP)* survey by the NHS in England took place in 2020 (wave 1) and in 2021 (wave 2). They provided insight on the initial impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of children and young people.

By February 2022, measures to control the spread of Covid-19 were largely removed. The subsequent surveys therefore focused on broader issues affecting the daily lives of children, young people and families. The third follow-up to the survey (wave 3) took place during April and May 2022, and the fourth (wave 4) took place in February to April 2023. We now have access to some vital longitudinal data on the recent lives of young people and children. Why is this so important for sociologists?

After considering the data on these pages, reflect on the usefulness – and some of the problems – of collecting data on young people and mental health issues over time. Also, think sociologically about how the lives of the young might have been changed by the Covid-19 experience. Discuss it with your friends. You might also give some thought to how we might best try to measure changing experiences of mental health problems among children and young people. Such research is complex, but it is vital if we are to try to manage social problems and make decisions on the health and care services we will require in the future.

Prevalence of mental disorder

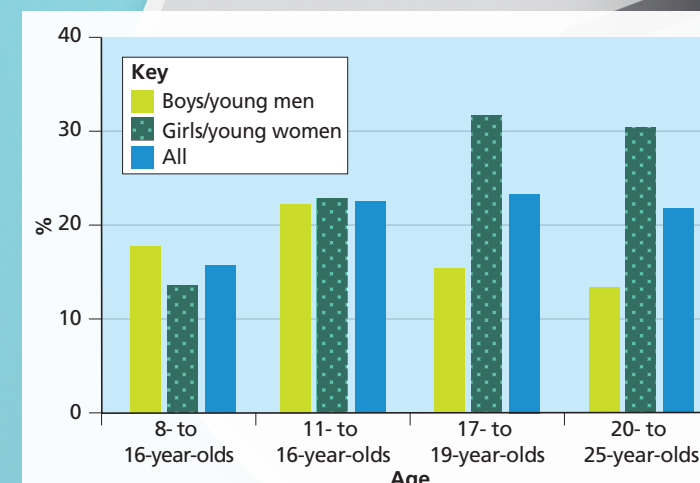
The *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England Report (2023)* draws on data from the 2,370 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years who took part in the 2017 survey and who made it to the 2023 follow-up – including information provided by parents for children aged 8 to 16 years. Look up the term ‘prevalence’. How might we measure it in relation to mental disorder?

This NHS report found that 20.3% of all 8-to-16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder in 2023. Among 17-to-19-year-olds and 20-to-25-year-olds the proportions were only slightly higher. But patterns changed by sex as people got older (see Figure 1). The prevalence of a probable mental disorder was twice as high in young women (31.6%) as in young men (15.4%). Reflect now on why you think this might be the case.

In terms of changes *over time* – between 2017 and 2023 – the prevalence of probably having mental health problems increased for all ages, but most markedly for those in the 17–19 age group, despite a fall in 2023 (see Figure 2).

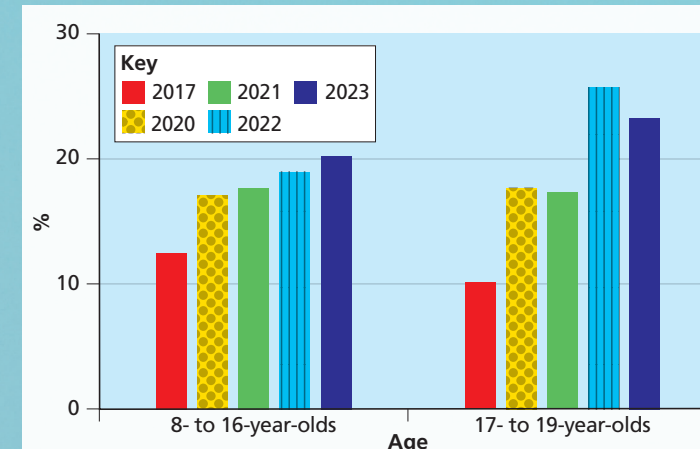
Eating issues

Looking specifically at the prevalence of possible eating problems in those aged 11 to 16 (children) and 17 to 19 years (young people), the overall figure rose, from 44.6% in 2017 to 58.2% in 2021. Rates remained stable over subsequent waves (2022 and 2023). But concern about eating issues was especially pronounced for young women aged 17 to 19 years (see Figure 3). Thinking sociologically, why might this be the case?



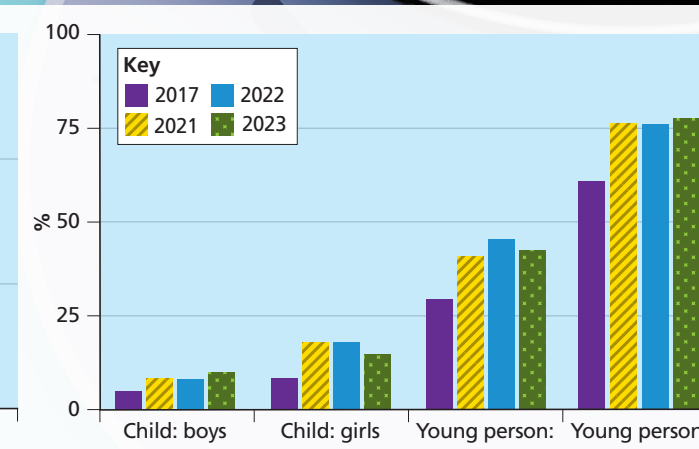
Source: NHS

Figure 1 Percentage of children and young people with a probable mental disorder, by age and sex (2023)



Source: NHS

Figure 2 Percentage of children and young people with a probable mental disorder, by age (2017, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023)



Source: NHS

Figure 3 Percentage of children and young people who screened positive for possible eating problems, by age and sex (2017, 2021, 2022 and 2023)

REFERENCE

NHS (2023) *Mental Health and Young People in England Report*. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/2ahy63e

John Williams is a managing editor of SOCIOLOGY REVIEW.

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