

Mental Health in England

Deepening the National Conversation

Authors

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Introduction

The publication of the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2023/4 comes at a time of growing public and political attention in mental health. In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the need for early intervention, better access to services, and more inclusive approaches to support people with mental health conditions and neurodevelopmental differences. Earlier this year, the government and NHS published the 10 Year Health Plan for England, outlining plans to place mental health on a more equal footing with physical health, while public discourse has increasingly highlighted the importance of tackling stigma, addressing inequalities, and improving outcomes for groups with unmet mental health needs.

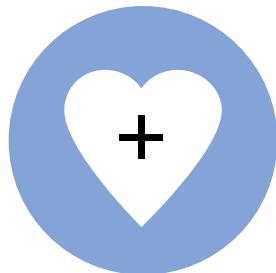
Despite these developments, challenges remain. Some people with mental health conditions or signs of substance dependence continue to go without diagnosis or treatment. Socioeconomic inequalities persist, and the system faces pressure to meet rising demand with limited resources. This survey provides a vital evidence base to inform policy, shape services, and support a more equitable and effective mental health system for all.

About the survey

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the University of Leicester and City St George's, University of London, on behalf of NHS England, is the longest running mental health survey series in the world. It began in 1993 and has collected 5 waves of data since.

The findings from this series are our best barometer of trends in the nation's mental health because of the quality of the survey samples (around 7,000 people took part in the most recent survey) and the rigour of the mental health assessments. For each survey a random sample of addresses are invited to take part. By surveying the whole population, and not just those in contact with health services, we can examine population change over time.

Find out more about the survey here: [**natcen.ac.uk/publications/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey-20234**](https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey-20234)



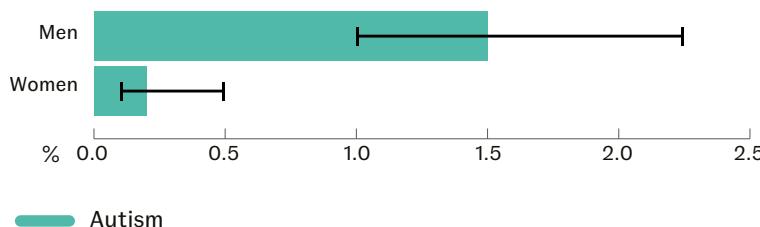
Autism in the adult population

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey remains one of the most robust sources of data on autism prevalence in England. Across the 2007, 2014, and 2023/4 surveys, the prevalence of autism remained stable at around 0.8% - approximately one in every hundred adults (measured using the Schedules for Clinical Assessment in Neuropsychiatry).

There were no significant changes in prevalence over time, suggesting that autism rates in the adult population have remained consistent. Men were more likely than women to be assessed as autistic in the survey.

Autistic adults were less likely than non-autistic adults to be using mental health services. Overall, the survey identified few adults living in England had an autism diagnosis (1.2%).

Autism, by sex



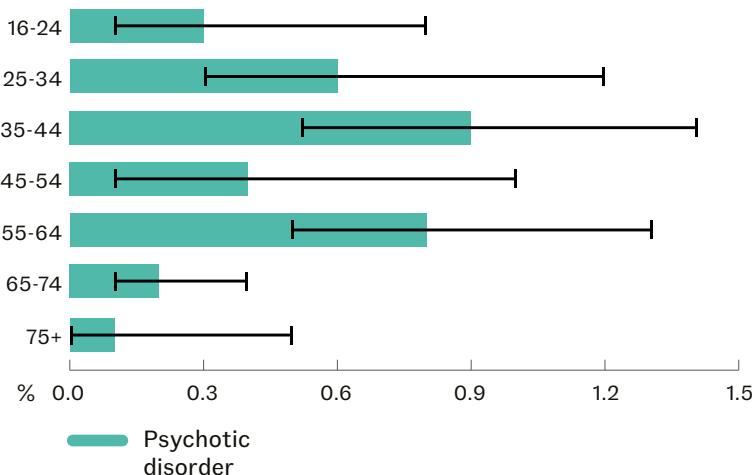
The black bars show 95% confidence intervals - we expect that the true value of the statistic in the population would be within the range given by the 95% confidence interval in 95 cases out of 100.

Severe mental illness:

Psychosis and bipolar disorder

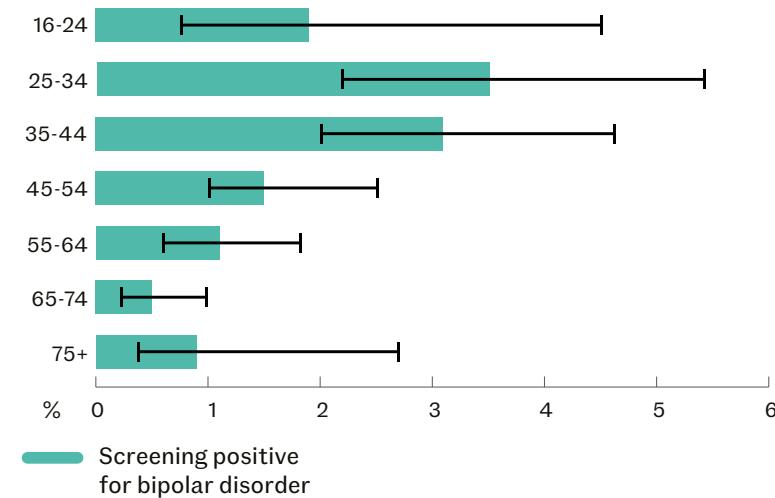
Psychosis and bipolar disorder are both considered severe mental illnesses and are tracked over time due to their complexity and impact on people's lives. Psychotic disorders remain relatively rare, affecting fewer than 1 in 100 adults (measured using the Schedules for Clinical Assessment in Neuropsychiatry). Prevalence was 0.4% in 2007, 0.7% in 2014, and 0.4% in 2023/4.

Psychotic disorder, by age



Screening positive for bipolar disorder also remained stable: 2.0% in 2014 and 1.9% in 2023/4 (using the 15-item Mood Disorder Questionnaire). Screening positive for bipolar disorder was most common in 25-44-year-olds and least common in those aged 65 and over.

Bipolar disorder, by age



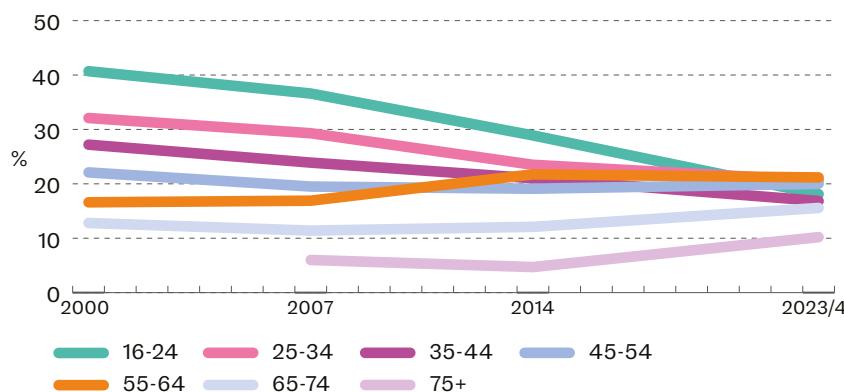
Alcohol use and dependence



Hazardous alcohol use (an AUDIT score of 8+) has declined over time, from 26.1% of 16-64-year-olds in 2000 to 18.9% in 2023/4. Men were twice as likely as women to drink at hazardous levels or above.

Despite this decline, many adults with signs of alcohol dependence have not received specialist treatment or a formal diagnosis. This highlights a gap between need and access to support services.

Drinking at hazardous levels in the past year (AUDIT 8 or more), by age: 2000, 2007, 2014, 2023/4

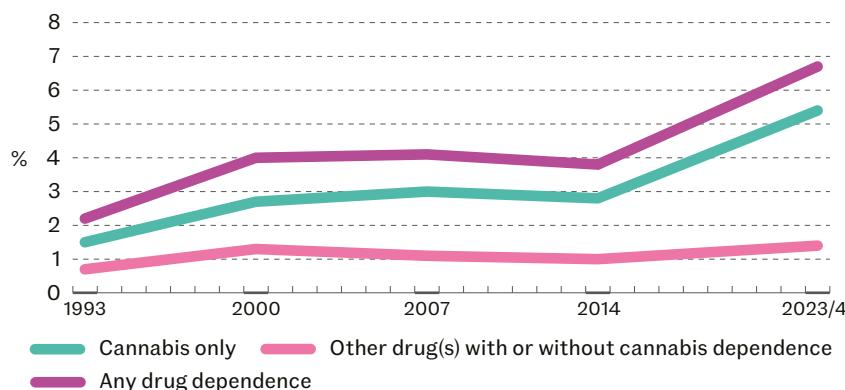


Drug dependence and non-medical use of prescription opioids

Signs of drug dependence increased from 3.8% in 2014 to 6.7% in 2023/4. This rise is largely driven by cannabis dependence, which nearly doubled from 2.8% to 5.4%. We found that around 18.1% of 16-24-year-olds reported using an illicit drug in the past year.

Non-prescribed use of opioid medications is a growing concern: 3.1% of men and 3.2% of women reported having ever used opioids such as fentanyl or tramadol without a prescription.

Signs of drug dependence over time



Eating disorders in the general population

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2023/4 was the first survey to use a detailed clinical assessment to estimate eating disorder prevalence in the general population (using the Schedule for Clinical Assessment in Neuropsychiatry).

An estimated 1.3% of adults were identified with an eating disorder. This figure may be conservative for a number of reasons and will be explored further in future validation work led by the University of Leicester, NatCen and City St George's, University of London.

Conclusion

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2023/4 offers a timely and comprehensive picture of mental health in England, deepening our understanding of both enduring challenges and emerging concerns. While some indicators - such as hazardous alcohol use - have shown improvement, others, including service use in those with signs of drug dependence and alcohol dependence, highlight possible gaps in support and access to care.

The stability in prevalence of severe mental illness and autism contrasts with rising signs of drug dependence and the newly reported estimates of eating disorders, underscoring the importance of continued monitoring and nuanced interpretation of the nation's mental health over time. These findings reinforce the need for a mental health system that is responsive, inclusive, and grounded in high-quality evidence.

As England moves forward with its 10 Year Health Plan, this survey provides a vital foundation for shaping policies and services that reflect the realities of people's lives. By listening to the data - and the voices behind it - we can foster a national conversation that leads to meaningful change.

