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**MENTAL  
HEALTH**  
FOUNDATION

# **The state of mental health inequality in the UK**

*Scotland report*



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# Acknowledgements

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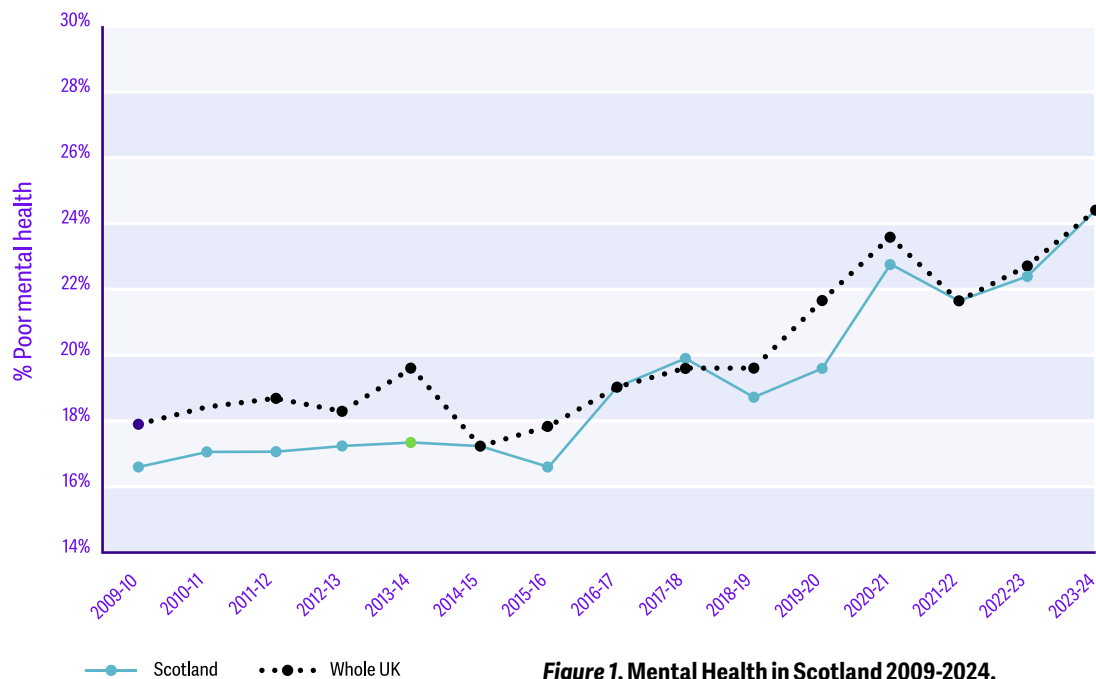
# Chapter 1: Mental health in Scotland



# What is the state of mental health in Scotland?

Mental health in Scotland has worsened at a similar rate to the UK average, climbing significantly over the past decade to reach the highest levels recorded. In the most recent data, 24.6% of adults in Scotland – around 1.1 million people – had poor mental health.

## Mental health in Scotland



**Figure 1. Mental Health in Scotland 2009-2024.**

Levels of poor mental health among adults in Scotland compared to the whole UK population average. Percentage estimates calculated from the *Understanding Society* dataset based on the GHQ-12 cutoff score of four or more. Green dots identify years when levels of poor mental health were statistically significantly lower in Scotland than the UK population average.

Mental health in Scotland has generally been comparable to, or slightly better than, the UK average (Figure 1). Trends in rising levels of poor mental health have also mirrored those seen across the UK. Like the rest of the UK, Scotland has experienced a substantial increase in poor mental health over the past 15 years.

Between 2009/10 and 2015/16, levels of poor mental health in Scotland remained relatively low and stable, fluctuating between 16.6% and 17.4%. In 2013/14, Scotland recorded a significantly lower rate of poor mental health (17.4%) compared with the UK overall

(19.6%). After this period, rates began to climb sharply. A notable spike occurred in 2020/21 during the pandemic, when 22.8% of adults in Scotland were identified as experiencing poor mental health. Although levels dipped slightly in 2021/22, they have since risen to an all-time high of 24.6% in 2023/24.

Based on the most recent *Understanding Society* data available, one in four adults (24.6%) – around 1.1 million people – are experiencing poor mental health in Scotland. **That's an additional 425,000 people with poor mental health compared to 2009/10.**<sup>1</sup>

Further detail on mental health in Scotland can be found through [Public Health Scotland](#) and the [Scottish Health Survey](#).

The numbers in these government sources may not be identical to those from our analysis of *Understanding Society* data. This is normal: each dataset measures the population differently, but all provide useful insights into national trends.



1. Population calculations can be found in *Appendix: Research Methodology* of the full research report, *The Foundation Reports – The state of mental health inequality in the UK* (Mental Health Foundation, 2026).

# What are the key factors impacting mental health in Scotland?

**Progress on reducing poverty will benefit population mental health. However, high levels of worklessness, persistent geographic inequalities, long-term austerity constraints on prevention and the compounding impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have widened existing disparities and increased financial stress, particularly for low-income households.**

## Poverty in Scotland

Over the past two decades, Scotland has consistently recorded a lower relative poverty rate than the UK average.<sup>2</sup> Notably, Scotland has made clear progress in reducing child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) forecasts that Scotland will be the only UK nation to reduce child poverty over the next three years, while levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are expected to rise.<sup>3</sup> Poverty is a key social determinant of poor mental health. Therefore, these diverging trajectories may, in time, contribute to widening differences in mental health outcomes between the nations, with Scotland faring comparatively better.

## Worklessness and low-income households

Despite action taken to address poverty in Scotland, socio-economic inequalities persist and contribute to mental health disparities.<sup>4</sup> For many years, Scotland has reported a higher proportion of workless households than the UK average, and both income and employment growth have slowed relative to the rest of the UK.<sup>5</sup> These economic challenges interact with Scotland's pronounced geographic inequalities, as income and employment opportunities vary substantially by region.<sup>6</sup> According to the 2024 *Scottish Health Survey*, 31% of adults living in Scotland's most deprived areas experience poor mental health, compared with 17% in the least deprived areas, underscoring the depth of socio-economic disparities.<sup>7</sup> Housing conditions further exacerbate these inequalities. The Scottish Government has declared a national 'housing emergency,' with poor-quality, insecure and unaffordable housing placing additional strain on population mental health.<sup>8</sup>



## Austerity in Scotland

Scotland's ability to respond to these challenges is shaped by broader fiscal constraints. The Scottish Health Equity Research Unit notes that years of austerity have restricted Scotland's ability to invest in upstream, preventative measures capable of reducing health inequalities<sup>9</sup> – despite strong policy ambitions in areas including housing, financial security and mental health stigma.<sup>10</sup> This creates a structural tension: Scotland has clear policy commitment and public support for early prevention in mental health, but is, for a variety of reasons, struggling to deliver transformative change at scale.

## Impact of COVID-19

Compounding the structural risks mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic widened pre-existing inequalities<sup>11</sup> and the cost-of-living crisis has had a profound impact on wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> Cost-of-living is the top economic concern for 59% of people in Scotland, and half of adults report cutting back on day-to-day spending.<sup>13</sup> Public sentiment has deteriorated sharply: 70% of

people say economic conditions are worse than a year ago, and half report their personal financial situation has declined.<sup>14</sup> These pressures are felt most acutely across low-income households and disproportionately impact women, racialised communities and families with children<sup>15</sup>, contributing to increasing financial stress and deteriorating wellbeing.



2. Birt C, Cebula C, Evans J, McKenzie A. Poverty in Scotland 2025. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. October 6, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2025>
3. Ibid
4. Catalano A, Congreve E, Jack D, McHardy F, Smith K. 2025 Inequality Landscape: Health and Socio-economic Inequality in Scotland in 2025. Scottish Health Equity Research Unit. September 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://scothealthequity.org/2025-inequality-landscape/>
5. Phillips D, Waters T, Wernham T. Employment, earnings and incomes in Scotland. The Institute for Fiscal Studies. August 2023. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/Employment-earnings-and-incomes-in-Scotland-IFS-Report.pdf>
6. Ibid
7. Terris J, Deakin E, Wilson V, McLelland R, Biggs H, Wilson H. The Scottish Health Survey: 2024 Main Report. Scottish Centre for Social Research. August 22, 2025. Accessed April 21, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-health-survey/>
8. Catalano A, Congreve E, Jack D, McHardy F, Smith K. 2025 Inequality Landscape: Health and Socio-economic Inequality in Scotland in 2025. Scottish Health Equity Research Unit. September 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://scothealthequity.org/2025-inequality-landscape/>
9. Tackling Scotland's Housing Emergency. Scottish Government. September 2, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-scotlands-housing-emergency/>
10. Catalano A, Congreve E, Jack D, McHardy F, Smith K. 2025 Inequality Landscape: Health and Socio-economic Inequality in Scotland in 2025. Scottish Health Equity Research Unit. September 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://scothealthequity.org/2025-inequality-landscape/>
11. Dewison N, Smith KE, Brown A. The Wider Social Determinants of Mental Health in Scotland: Review of Key Policy Documents and Qualitative Literature. SIPHER Consortium. September 2024. Accessed April 23, 2026. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_1107935\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_1107935_smxx.pdf)
12. The early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Scotland's mental health – not just one story. Public Health Scotland. July 22, 2022. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/the-early-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-scotland-s-mental-health-not-just-one-story/the-early-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-scotland-s-mental-health-1/overview/>
13. Understanding Scotland Economy Tracker – May 2025. Understanding Scotland. May 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://understanding-scotland.co.uk/report/understanding-scotland-economy-tracker-may-2025/>
14. Ibid
15. Ibid

# How have policy decisions impacted mental health in Scotland?

Despite recent increases in investment and shifts towards prevention through a social model of mental health, under-delivery on commitments, limited transparency and the compounding impacts of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis mean these policies have not yet reversed worsening population mental health outcomes.

Scotland remains in the grip of a public mental health emergency. Between 2011 and 2022, a mental health condition was second only to long-term illness (any disease, impairment or condition expected to last at least 12 months) as the most reported condition in Scotland's census.<sup>16</sup> The *Scottish Health Survey* of 2024 (the latest available data from the Scottish Government) illustrates the scale of that emergency in more stark detail. It shows that the mental health of the Scottish population has worsened over time, and rates of mental ill health and suicide are highest in the most socio-economically deprived communities.<sup>17</sup>

## The impact of austerity on Scotland

The population mental health impacts of austerity-driven policy decisions at the UK level from 2010 onwards, following the financial crisis of 2008, have been discussed previously in this report. These decisions included an overall 6% real terms cut in resource spending within the *Block Grant* allocated by the UK Government to the Scottish Government to fund public services in Scotland between 2010-11 and 2017-18.

This reduction has left Scotland's public services, including mental health services, in a fragile state.<sup>18</sup> That fragility has arguably been exacerbated by Westminster government cuts to welfare spending during the same period, given that some welfare policy remains reserved to the UK Government.

As the Scottish Health Equity Research Unit has noted, a large body of evidence exists which links austerity to 'a slowdown or reversal in life expectancy improvements, particularly among disadvantaged populations'<sup>19</sup> in the UK. Key identified pathways include **financial stress and mental health**, especially in already vulnerable groups; **stigma and psychological strain**, with poverty and reliance on welfare services having damaging consequences for individuals' mental health; and **housing insecurity**, with austerity-related housing policies contributing to declining mental health.<sup>20</sup>

16. Scotland's Census 2022 - Health, disability and unpaid care. Scotland's Census. October 3, 2024. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/2022-reports/scotland-s-census-2022-health-disability-and-unpaid-care/#:~:text=category%20for%202022.,Mental%20health,up%20from%202.5%25%20in%202011.>

17. Terris J, Deakin E, Wilson V, McLelland R, Biggs H, Wilson H. The Scottish Health Survey: 2024 Main Report. Scottish Centre for Social Research. August 22, 2025. Accessed April 21, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-health-survey/>

18. Finch D, Wilson H, Bibby J. Leave no one behind: The state of health and health inequalities in Scotland. The Health Foundation. January 2023. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/leave-no-one-behind>

19. McHardy F. Exploring the Health Impacts of Austerity. Scottish Health Equity Research Unit. June 11, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://scohealthequity.org/exploring-the-health-impacts-of-austerity/>

20. Ibid

Austerity's damaging impact on the mental health of the most socio-economically disadvantaged people in Scotland is undoubtedly a major contributory factor to the public mental health emergency that the nation is now experiencing. This has been compounded by the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, as discussed in the previous section. These and other multiple complex factors have shaped how policy has impacted mental health in Scotland, which makes identification of specific causes challenging, beyond this top-level evaluation.

### Mental health funding in Scotland

Policy developments by the Scottish Government, in particular, the way in which mental health has been funded, illustrate the direction of public mental health policy in Scotland, both in terms of positive developments and the improvements needed for progress.

The Scottish Government's Mental Health Directorate annual budget increased in real terms from £63.6M in 2017-18 to a peak of £296.8M in 2021-22.<sup>21</sup> The Directorate's budget for 2026-27 is £149.8M because

of funds having been baselined to NHS Boards for mental health services instead of appearing as direct budget lines.

The general trend of increasing the Scottish Mental Health Budget between 2017-18 and 2021-22 indicates the Government's welcome recognition that substantial resources are needed to address Scotland's long-standing public mental health emergency.

Despite this, however, the Scottish Government has failed to honour its commitment to ensure that 10% of the front-line NHS budget is spent on mental health (including 1% of the budget on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) by the end of the 2021-26 Parliament, as laid out in the 2021 *Programme for Government*. Moreover, baselining a substantial proportion of the mental health budget to NHS Boards, whilst allowing for action and innovation on prevention at the local level, undermines transparency related to that spend in the absence of both ring-fencing and appropriate budget tools to demonstrate that expenditure locally.



21. Johnston L, Thomas-Tudo E, Tennyson C, Carter J, MacPherson M. Adult mental health. Audit Scotland. September 2023. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://audit.scot/publications/adult-mental-health>

## Scottish mental health strategies

Over the last decade, successive mental health strategies have been implemented by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), which demonstrate the growing recognition of prevention.

The *Mental Health Strategy 2017-27*<sup>22</sup> focused on four specific themes: prevention and early intervention; access to treatment and joined-up accessible services; the physical wellbeing of people with mental health problems; rights, information use and planning. The 2017-27 strategy has been characterised as centring on the ‘medical’ model of health<sup>23</sup>, which attributes physiological, biochemical or genetic causes to psychological distress, leading to medical diagnoses and treatments.<sup>24</sup> Evaluation of the strategy in 2019 indicated progress on workforce development (268 Whole Time Equivalent mental health workers employed); funding to improve access to CAMHS and psychological therapy; a service focused on stigma reduction, school counselling and improving physical health for people with mental health issues.<sup>25</sup>

In 2023 a new *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*<sup>26</sup> was published by the Scottish Government and COSLA. The strategy differs from its predecessor by not being time-bound and by having a distinctive and welcome focus on the wider social determinants of mental health. The inclusion of ‘wellbeing’ in its title also indicates a shift away from the ‘medical’ model underpinning the previous strategy and towards a ‘social’ model of mental health.

Other important changes in the new Strategy include a ‘3Ps’ approach, as championed by the Scottish Mental Health Partnership, intended to **promote** positive mental health and wellbeing for all; **prevent** mental health issues occurring or escalating and address underlying causes; and **provide** mental health and wellbeing support and care.

Equally importantly, the current strategy explicitly emphasises a ‘whole system’ approach to improving mental health and wellbeing with a distinctive focus on cross-government working across a wide range of policy portfolios. This includes (but is not limited to) health and social care, human rights, equality and inclusion, economy, housing, justice, children and young people.

More recently, Scotland’s *Population Health Framework 2025-35*<sup>27</sup> focuses on developing a ‘prevention-focussed system’ with a commitment to a ‘health in all policies’ approach underpinned by the development and implementation of a ‘health lens’ approach to impact assessment. Similarly, Scotland’s *Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland*, published in June 2025, identifies ‘prevention’, ‘joined up services’ and ‘efficient services’ as the three foundational pillars for change to ensure the future delivery of sustainable public services in Scotland.<sup>28</sup>



22. Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027. Scottish Government. March 2017. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/>

23. Dewison N, Smith KE, Brown A. The Wider Social Determinants of Mental Health in Scotland: Review of Key Policy Documents and Qualitative Literature. SIPHER Consortium. September 2024. Accessed April 23, 2026. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_1107935\\_smx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_1107935_smx.pdf)

24. Chakravarty T. Medicalisation of Mental Disorder: Shifting Epistemologies and Beyond. *Sociol Bull.* 2011;60(2):266-286. doi:10.1177/0038022920110204

25. Mental health strategy 2017-2027: second progress report. Scottish Government. November 26, 2019. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-second-annual-progress-report/>

26. Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027. Scottish Government. March 2017. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/>

27. Scotland’s Population Health Framework. Scottish Government. June 17, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-population-health-framework/>

28. Scotland’s Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland. Scottish Government. June 19, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-public-service-reform-strategy-delivering-scotland/>

# What policy action is needed to improve mental health in Scotland?

**Ambition must be turned into action through protected and ring-fenced funding for prevention, and a whole-government implementation plan with robust monitoring and sustained collaboration – including investment in community and voluntary organisations – to address the root causes of poor mental health.**

There is long-standing recognition in Scotland of the need to decisively shift the delivery focus of public services to prevention.<sup>29</sup> Scotland's *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* and *Population Health Framework 2025-35* both illustrate the ambition to engineer a whole-system policy turn towards prevention as a cornerstone of public health in Scotland. This is a positive and welcome direction towards addressing the root causes of poor mental health.

However, there is much more still to be done. The framework lacks detail on what a 'whole government' approach will entail, and crucial information regarding the resources and actions required to implement such an approach in practice is lacking.<sup>30</sup>

A sufficiently expansive implementation plan, coupled with a robust monitoring and evaluation strategy is required to ensure that the framework avoids becoming ensnared in the silos that characterise much of public policymaking and implementation in Scotland. The Mental Health Foundation contends that mental health must be an explicit focus of the framework's implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

## A move to protected preventative funding

Developing the policy infrastructure to enable the Scottish Government and other public bodies to systemically invest in preventative mental health measures was a core theme of the Mental Health Foundation's manifesto for the recent Scottish Parliament Election.<sup>31</sup> We strongly advocate for the introduction of a 'preventative investment expenditure' category for mental health as part of a *Mental Health Across All Polices* approach, both for Scottish Government portfolios and for delivery organisations including health boards, integrated joint boards and local authorities. Such an approach would represent a step-change in transparency and accountability. It would also be beneficial to consider how such a category of expenditure could mesh with the *Population Health Framework's* commitment to improve whole system accountability for primary prevention by:

**'...strengthening primary prevention in NHS Board Planning and wider system planning and prioritisation; balancing performance metrics across systems to include more upstream data; and reforming the *National Performance Framework* to support the development of a stronger more impactful framework for Scotland.'<sup>32</sup>**

The Scottish Government needs to look beyond the mental health budget to take a genuinely preventative approach to addressing Scotland's public mental health emergency, and to turn commitment into action. This would require sustained policy and systems coordination and impact assessment across the Scottish Government's policy portfolios, as many of the preventative policy interventions required to address the emergency fall outside the health portfolio.

### Voluntary and charity sector organisations

Community-based third sector organisations play a vital role in addressing the social determinants of mental health. They understand the needs of their communities and the challenges faced by them, and have the expertise to develop and implement evidence-based and innovative programmes to support population mental health.

Fair, multi-year funding of such organisations should be a priority in budget considerations, both nationally and within regional and local delivery organisations, including local authorities and integrated joint boards. Doing so would help to ease pressure on waiting times by enabling an expansive preventative approach driven by local organisations grounded in communities.

### Ring-fencing mental health funding

The Scottish Government must consider ways to ring-fence elements of mental health funding, as highlighted in the *Health, Social Care and Sport Committee Pre-Budget Scrutiny* report of the 2026-27 Scottish Budget during the last Scottish Parliament.<sup>33</sup> We contend that such ring-fencing should specifically prioritise preventative mental health funding.

There is an urgent need to test and scale innovative approaches that can help to decisively shift Scotland's public mental health policy onto a preventative footing. The *Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund for Adults*, introduced during the last Scottish Parliament session, has been a positive development in this regard. Since 2021, it has allocated £81M of project funding, mainly through small grants of £10,000 or less. That investment has helped build a grassroots preventative focus at the local level.

However, the Scottish Government needs to do more to build on that success at the strategic level. The Mental Health Foundation is calling for the establishment of a new *Improving Scotland's Mental Health Fund* of at least £20M in each year of the new Parliament. This new fund would complement the existing *Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund for Adults* by providing a strategic focus across the public and third sectors on innovative preventative approaches capable of operating at scale and with scope to leverage additional external funding.



29. Christie Commission on the future delivery of public services. Scottish Government. June 29, 2011. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/commission-future-delivery-public-services/>

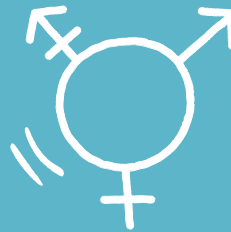
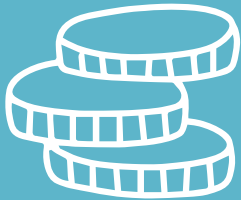
30. Scotland's Population Health Framework. Scottish Government. June 17, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-population-health-framework/>

31. Pathways to Prevention: Ending Scotland's public mental health emergency. Mental Health Foundation. 2026. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/policy-and-advocacy/ending-scotlands-public-mental-health-emergency>

32. Scotland's Population Health Framework 2025-2035. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2025/06/scotlands-population-health-framework/documents/scotlands-population-health-framework-2025-2035/scotlands-population-health-framework-2025-2035/govscot%3Adocument/scotlands-population-health-framework-2025-2035.pdf>

33. Health, Social Care and Sport Committee: Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2026-27. The Scottish Parliament. October 31, 2025. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://bprcdn.parliament.scot/published/HSCS/2025/10/31/5cecf09a-7e1e-40da-944f-5d4a5a4dbdbc/HSCSS062025R10.pdf>

# Chapter 2: Demographic mental health inequalities



# Financial hardship

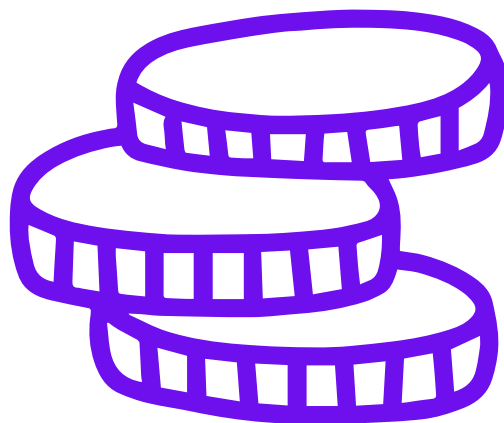
Set against the background of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, various elements of financial insecurity have had a detrimental impact on peoples' mental health in Scotland in recent years.

Polling for Citizens Advice Scotland in 2024 found that the mental health and wellbeing of around 665,148 people had been affected by debt.<sup>34</sup> In 2025, the Scottish Government published a report analysing the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland, which showed that 43% of respondents to polling in December 2024 said that the cost of living had negatively affected their mental health.<sup>35</sup> The report also emphasised the intersectional nature of the cost-of-living crisis in relation to its impacts on women, disabled people, ethnic minorities, larger households, rural households, young people, students, young carers, lone parents and single-person households, as well as households in receipt of income-related benefits, people narrowly ineligible for benefits and people with no recourse to public funds. Much of that intersectional impact is rooted in widening inequality and high levels of poverty, with the Scottish Government's report highlighting that people on low incomes experience a 'poverty premium' whereby they pay more for essential goods and services.

## Addressing economic insecurity

The significance of structural inequalities is further reinforced by a research briefing published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) in March 2026 on the building blocks of economic security in Scotland.<sup>36</sup> Its findings show that nearly half (47%) of adults in Scotland feel economically insecure. That insecurity is determined by a combination of factors including income, housing, work, savings and debt. JRF's research also indicates that respondents across all income quintiles consistently identified lower cost of essentials, higher pay and improved pension savings as the top three things that would improve their economic security.

However, the findings also showed that addressing issues with the social security system and providing support with debt were higher priorities for lower-income households compared to respondents in higher income quintiles. As the JRF report notes, the labour market is failing too many people in Scotland, leading to their inability to pay for essentials and, for those who cannot work, the social security system fails to provide sufficient income for a good quality of life. Moreover, unaffordable and insecure housing, coupled with the ongoing cost-of living crisis, 'is fuelling financial precarity for families.'<sup>37</sup>



## The Scottish Child Payment

Given the impacts of financial insecurity on the mental health of people in Scotland, we agree with JRF's call for 'investment, at scale, to tackle poverty and inequality and improve economic security.'<sup>38</sup> That call to action requires a programme of co-ordinated cross-portfolio interventions. We contend that such a programme should include implementing the Scottish Government-appointed Minimum Income Guarantee

Expert Group's recommendation to increase the *Scottish Child Payment* (SCP) from £27.15 per child, per week to £55 per week by the end of 2030 at the latest. The SCP has been found to improve the mental health of recipients<sup>39</sup> and may help to prevent poor mental health<sup>40</sup>, and the Group calculates that its recommended £55 a week increase would result in a reduction of six percentage points in relative child poverty by 2031, at a combined cost of £626 million.<sup>41</sup>



34. Over 660,000 people say debt has impacted their mental health. Citizens Advice Scotland. February 17, 2024. Accessed April 28, 2026. <https://www.cas.org.uk/news-and-events/over-660000-people-say-debt-has-impacted-their-mental-health#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20YouGov%20poll%2C%2085%25%20of,in%20debt%20had%20impacted%20their%20mental%20health>
35. Understanding the Cost of Living Crisis in Scotland. Scottish Government. February 2025. Accessed April 28, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/understanding-cost-living-crisis-scotland/>
36. McKenzie A, Cebula C. The building blocks of economic security in Scotland. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. March 11, 2026. Accessed April 28, 2026. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/public-attitudes/the-building-blocks-of-economic-security-in-scotland>
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38. Ibid
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40. Top-up Universal Credit payments for parents could prevent poor mental health. Mental Health Foundation. October 23, 2024. Accessed April 28, 2026. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/top-universal-credit-payments-parents-could-prevent-poor-mental-health>
41. The Minimum Income Guarantee: a roadmap to dignity for all. Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group. June 2025. Accessed April 28, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2025/06/minimum-income-guarantee-roadmap-dignity/documents/minimum-income-guarantee-roadmap-dignity/minimum-income-guarantee-roadmap-dignity/govscot%3Adocument/minimum-income-guarantee-roadmap-dignity.pdf>

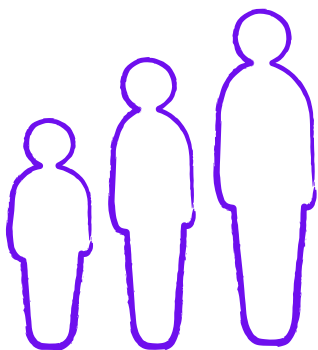
# Age

Approximately one in four young people in Scotland face mental health challenges, with 10% of 5-16-year-olds having a clinically diagnosable mental health condition.<sup>42</sup> Poverty remains a key driver of poor mental health in children, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many existing inequalities faced by young people in education and work. 50% of mental health problems are established by age 14, and 75% by age 24, making early intervention in childhood the most effective life period to prevent poor mental health.<sup>43</sup>

The *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* has made commitments to addressing children and young people's mental health, including recognising the need for support in schools, committing to rolling out parenting programmes and developing multi-agency support pathways.<sup>44</sup> These are welcome, but there is much more action needed to address the deep mental health inequalities faced by children and young people in Scotland.

## Family Nurse Partnership model

Preventing poor mental health – and protecting good mental health – begins at the very start of life, and consistent parental support is key to protecting good mental health throughout the life course. However, new parents often struggle to access the continuous support they need, frequently undergoing a change in professional care between anti-natal and postnatal support. Adopting the *Family Nurse Partnership* (FNP) model, which evaluation has shown supports both



parental and babies' outcomes over the first 1001 days, would enable more consistent support for newborns and parents, and promote better early years mental health.

## Addressing school bullying

Childhood bullying is among the most common negative experiences that can impact life-long mental health. Recent data shows that nearly one in three children in Scotland experience bullying, and 80% of these children experienced bullying in a school setting.<sup>45</sup> The Scottish Government's approach to tackling bullying, *Respect for All*, acknowledges the impact of bullying on young people's mental health, the lifelong trauma it causes and the overlapping inequalities that it reinforces. However, the continuing prevalence of bullying in Scottish schools shows the need for more action to address the causes of bullying behaviour and to equip schools, families and pupils to prevent harm to mental health caused by bullying.

## Neurodevelopmental conditions

Addressing the support needs of those groups of children and young people who are most at risk of poor mental health, such as children with neurodevelopmental conditions (NDCs), is also essential to preventing long-term mental health inequalities. The substantial increase in referrals for NDCs for children in recent years is placing unsustainable pressure on mental health services and resulting in neurodivergent children's support needs not being met. *Together to Thrive* is a pioneering multi-agency collaboration in Dundee, independently evaluated as equipping parents to better meet their children's support needs and enabling children to recognise and better manage their emotions and behaviours.<sup>46</sup> We recommend that the *Together to Thrive* task-sharing model be rolled out as part of a *National Pathway for Neurodevelopmental Support Needs* in Scotland.



42. Our Positions - Mental Health. Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/positions/mental-health-2/#:~:text=Our%20Publications,Mental%20Health%20in%20Scotland,have%20positive%20mental%20well%2Dbeing>.
43. Children and young people: statistics. Mental Health Foundation. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/statistics/children-young-people-statistics>
44. Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027. Scottish Government. March 2017. Accessed April 23, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/>
45. Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-Bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People. 2024. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/respect-national-approach-anti-bullying/documents/>
46. Together to Thrive - Evaluation. Mental Health Foundation. August 2025. Accessed May 1, 2026. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/MHF-Together-to-Thrive-Impact%20Report.pdf>

# Gender

In Scotland, as across the UK, gender shapes and influences people's mental health experiences.<sup>36</sup> Scotland's current *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy* acknowledges this, both by recognising the importance of an intersectional and gender-sensitive approach and by identifying social determinants that explain – at least in part – gendered mental health inequalities in Scotland.<sup>47</sup> These include gendered experiences of poverty, violence against women and girls, gendered experiences of caring, participating in the workforce and parenthood.

## Scotland's approach to women's health

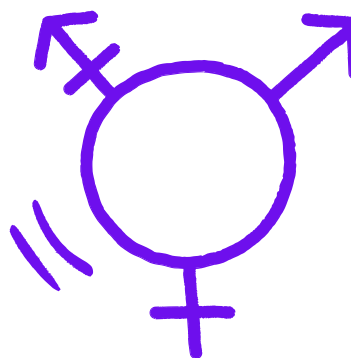
The Scottish Government published its first *Scottish Women's Health Plan* in 2021. The second phase of the plan, published in January 2026, identified mental health as a pillar of supporting women's health throughout life and reaffirmed acknowledgement of the social determinants of gender inequality in mental health. However, it did not commit to any new actions to address mental health beyond those in the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the Scottish Government clarified in 2025 that it had no plans to develop a dedicated health plan for men and boys, as has been developed for England.<sup>49</sup>

The Scottish Government's approach to gender in policymaking is outlined in its first *Gender Coherence Statement*, published in 2025. The statement lays out a 'whole government' approach to advancing gender

equality in Scotland.<sup>50</sup> As noted earlier in this report, we have called for a *Mental Health in All Policies* approach. Such an approach must recognise the gendered nature of social determinants of mental health and include a cohesive and cross-cutting programme of action to address them.

## Taking a cross-government approach

Future strategies to tackle poor mental health in Scotland must take a cross-government lens, so that relevant strategies are properly integrated and address not just the effects of gender inequality in mental health but also its driving social causes, including gendered experiences of poverty and workplace discrimination, gender inequalities in suicide and self-harm, violence against women and girls and gender roles and expectations in broader society. This approach should also account for the specific experiences of LGBTQI+ and gender non-conforming people.



47. Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Scottish Government. June 2023. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2023/06/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/documents/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/govscot%3Adocument/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy.pdf>

48. The Health of Women and Girls: Health and Social Care Policy Beyond the Women's Health Plan. Scottish Government. January 2026. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2026/01/health-women-girls-health-social-care-policy-beyond-womens-health-plan/documents/health-women-girls-health-social-care-policy-beyond-womens-health-plan/health-women-girls-health-social-care-policy-beyond-womens-health-plan/govscot%3Adocument/health-women-girls-health-social-care-policy-beyond-womens-health-plan.pdf>

49. Minto J. Question reference: S6W-42788. The Scottish Parliament. January 9, 2026. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/questions-and-answers/question?ref=S6W-42788>

50. Gender policy coherence: annual statement 2025. Scottish Government. June 19, 2025. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/annual-statement-gender-policy-coherence-2025/pages/5/>



# Urban/rural residency

Scotland's diverse human geography has a profound impact on the mental health needs of its communities, including how social factors impact mental health in distinct ways. Across Scotland, the impacts of poor mental health are most keenly felt by those living in areas of the highest economic deprivation – but this is not evenly experienced by rural and urban communities, producing inequalities that can be complex to understand and resolve.

## Urban mental health

Whilst rural and urban areas in Scotland experience similar levels of loneliness, some evidence suggests the effects of isolation can be deeper in urban areas of Scotland compared to rural ones. This may be because of how stronger social connections and community cohesion acts as a protective factor for good mental health in some rural communities.<sup>51</sup>

The intersection between urbanity and poverty is particularly key to understanding urban mental health, with some evidence suggesting that poor-quality housing, a feeling of being unsafe in their community, a lack of access to green space and ongoing concerns around alcohol and substance use to all be major factors that impact the mental wellbeing of Scotland's most socio-economically disadvantaged urban communities.<sup>52</sup>

## Rural mental health in Scotland

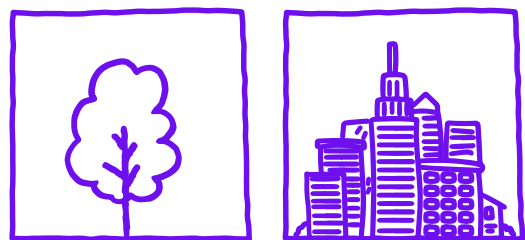
Rural areas – especially remote and island communities – face their own distinct mental health challenges, such as digital exclusion, precarious and often low-wage economies and entrenched stigma relating to discussing mental health and wellbeing. Due to the

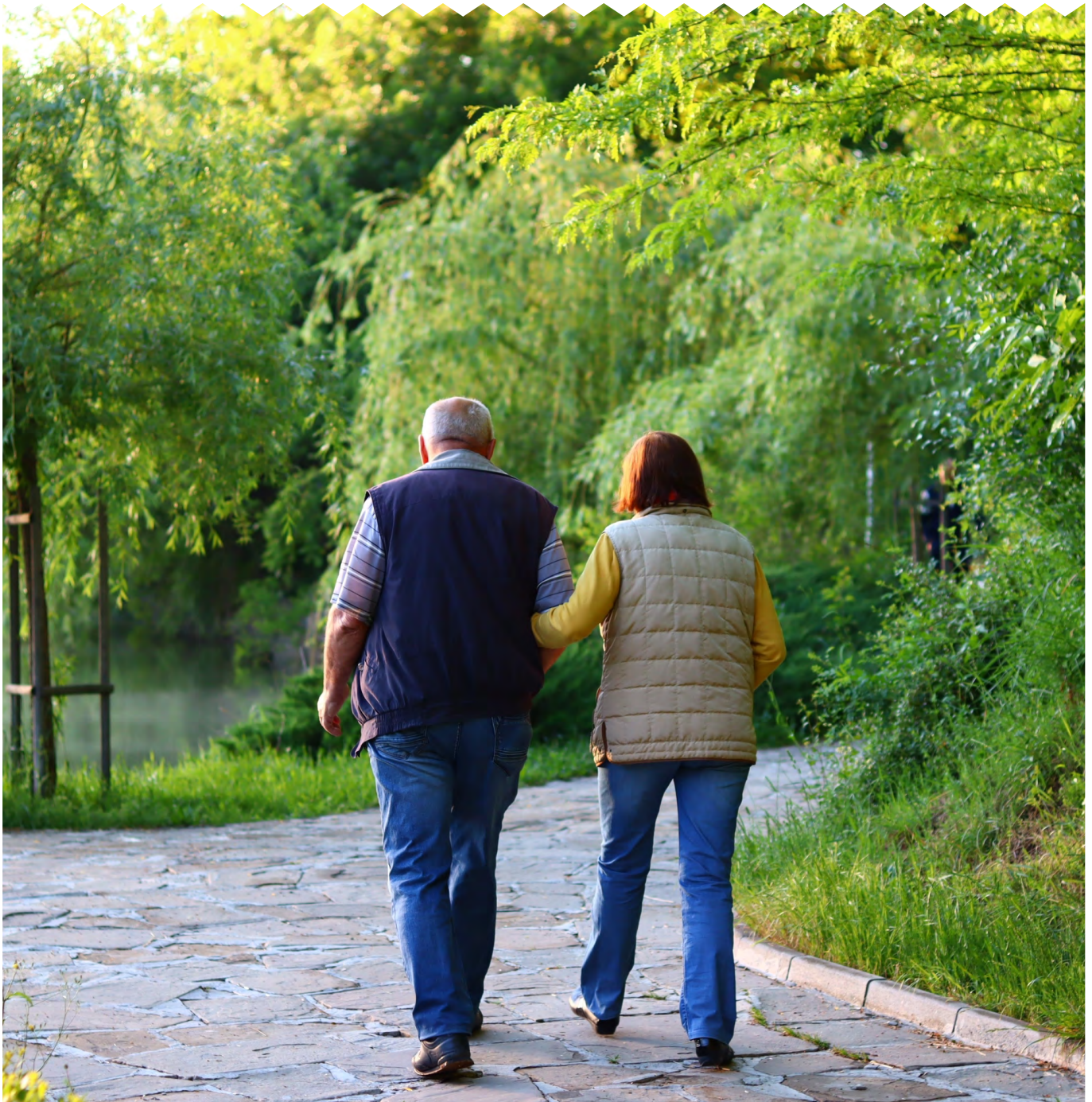
particularly geographically remote nature of many of Scotland's rural communities, rural areas are regularly underrepresented in participation and lived experience, especially the most marginalised communities within rural Scotland.<sup>53</sup>

Whilst there are many examples of good practice of initiatives and interventions that prevent poor mental health in rural and island communities in Scotland (for example, the use of task-sharing models to facilitate support that makes best use of community assets), the remoteness of these communities can make it difficult to share good practice systemically.<sup>54</sup>

## Addressing geographic inequalities

Evidence from early intervention and prevention pilots such as these has highlighted how taking a geography-sensitive approach to addressing mental health inequalities is essential. The Scottish Government recognises the need for geographically tailored support in the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan*, via its support of the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum, Scotland's cross-sector network to address the mental health challenges faced by remote, rural and island communities.<sup>55</sup> This is a welcome commitment, but a cross-government approach to mental health in Scotland's diverse rural and urban communities – for example, acknowledging and addressing the separate risk factors for poor mental health in Scotland's urban and rural workforces – must be the next step in holistically addressing the geographic aspects of Scotland's mental health inequalities.





51. Long E, Thomson M, Milicev J, et al. Loneliness, social support, and social networks: urban–rural variation and links to wellbeing in Scotland. *J Public Health (Bangkok)*. 2025;33(12):2651-2661. doi:10.1007/s10389-024-02236-9
52. Dewison N, Smith KE, Brown A. The Wider Social Determinants of Mental Health in Scotland: Review of Key Policy Documents and Qualitative Literature. SIPHER Consortium. September 2024. Accessed April 23, 2026. [https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_1107935\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_1107935_smxx.pdf)
53. Inclusive participation in rural Scotland: research report. Scottish Government. February 26, 2021. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/inclusive-participation-rural-scotland-preliminary-exploration/pages/6/>
54. Roots of Resilience: Cultivating mental wellbeing in Scotland’s communities. Change Mental Health. March 2026. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://changemh.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/CMH-Roots-of-Resilience-EIP.pdf>
55. Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. Scottish Government. June 2023. Accessed May 6, 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2023/06/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/documents/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy/govscot%3Adocument/mental-health-wellbeing-strategy.pdf>

# Chapter 3: **Policy calls to action**



## POLICY CALL TO ACTION



### The Scottish Government should:

- **Take action on prevention** by introducing a preventative expenditure budget category, an implementation and evaluation plan for the *Population Health Framework* and a £20m *Improving Scotland's Mental Health Fund* in each year of the new parliament.
- **Address financial insecurity in Scotland** by increasing the *Scottish Child Payment* to £55 per week by the end of 2030, to ensure support is sufficient to meaningfully address child poverty.
- **Improve children and young people's mental health** by implementing the *Family Nurse Partnership* model across Scotland, implementing anti-bullying programmes in schools and rolling out the *Together to Thrive* task-sharing model for young people with neurodevelopmental support needs.
- **Implement a holistic, cross-government mental health approach** that recognises and addresses the overlapping impacts of gender and geography, alongside other inequalities.





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