

# The mental health of children and young people

Over recent years, the number of children and young people experiencing mental health problems has increased. Data from NHS Digital shows:

- **2004:** One in ten children (10.0%) aged 5-16 had a mental health problem
- **2017:** One in nine children (10.8%) aged 5 to 16 had a mental health problem
- **2020:** One in six children (16.0%) aged 5 to 16 had a mental health problem
- **2023:** About one in five children (20.3%) aged 8 to 16 years had a mental health problem

**Source:** <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england>

# Referrals to children and young people's mental health services

The rise in mental health needs has resulted in increased referrals to NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services:

- Analysis of NHS data by YoungMinds shows the number of open referrals to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) reached the highest on record in November 2023, with **496,897** referred to services, an increase from **493,434** in October 2023.
- The number of urgent referrals among under 18s also reached a record high of **4,032** in November 2023, compared to **3,355** in the previous month.

**Source:** YoungMinds: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/monthly-referrals-to-camhs-reach-record-high/>

# Access to support

However, not all children referred access the support they need. Data from the Children's Commissioner for England shows the following in relation to access to NHS CYPMHS:

- There were **949,200** children and young people who had active referrals to CYPMHS at any point in the year 2022-23 financial year. Of these:
  - 305,000 (32%) entered treatment
  - 270,300 (28%) were still waiting for treatment at the end of the year
  - 372,800 (39%) had their referrals closed before accessing CYPMHS
- Of the 1.4 million children estimated to have a diagnosable mental health problem, **less than half (49%)** received at least 1 contact with CYPMHS during the year.

# Waiting times for support

Once a young person's referral is accepted, they can face long waits for support which can further impact their mental health.

- For the 305,000 children who entered treatment in 2022-23, they waited on average **35 days (median)** or **108 days (mean)**.
- Children with suspected autism wait the longest time for support on average (median wait of 216 days) followed by children with other neurodevelopmental conditions (median wait of 111 days).
- Long waits for support can impact on children's mental health further. A survey of almost 14,000 young people aged under 25 by YoungMinds conducted in 2022 found that of those who responded:
  - More than one in four (26%) said they had tried to take their own life because of having to wait for mental health support.
  - More than half (58%) said their mental health had got worse while they were waiting for support.

**Source:** <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2022-23/>

**Source:** <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/mental-health-waiting-times-harming-young-people/>

# Inpatient care

The CQC has reported that high demand for support and a lack of specialist beds means that children and young people with mental needs are cared for in inappropriate environments, such as acute adult wards. Data from the CQC Monitoring the Mental Health Act report in 2024 shows:

- Children continue to be admitted to adult wards:
  - In 2021/22, there was a **32%** rise in the number of people under 18 being admitted to adult wards (260 admissions in 2021/22 compared to 197 in 2020/21). Figures show that the number of notifications has dropped by **25%** and are now similar to 2020/21 figures at **196 notifications**.
- The report highlighted that the main reason provided for admitting the child to an adult ward was because there was 'no alternative mental health inpatients or outreach service available for young people.'
- The CQC also found that in 2022/23 across England, children and young people spent on average **313 bed days per month** on adult wards, reflecting the high demand for specialist mental health beds for under 18s.
- The CQC has also expressed concern about the high number of children with mental health needs being treated on pediatric wards.
- Insights gathered by the Children's Commissioner for England show how children and young people can find inpatient settings frightening places to be, separated from their friends and families, and often seeing and experiencing high levels of restraint.

**Source:** [https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/20240321\\_mhareport2223\\_print.pdf](https://www.cqc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/20240321_mhareport2223_print.pdf)

**Source:** <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2019/05/cco-who-are-they-where-are-they-may-2019.pdf>

# Inequalities in access to care

- Evidence suggests that young people from racialised communities are less likely to access support from community services but are more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act.
  - An article by The Independent in 2022 highlighted that Black and mixed-race children accounted for **36% of young people** detained in acute mental health services despite making up 11% of the population (based on unpublished data from NHS Benchmarking). Conversely, young Black people make up just 5% of those accessing community-based child and adolescent mental health services.
- At the end of May 2024, there were **215 under 18s in inpatient units** who are autistic or had a learning disability. Of these, **98%** are autistic according to the National Autistic Society.

**Source:** <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/leak-black-children-failed-by-mental-health-b1997924.html>

**Source:** <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/number-of-autistic-people-in-mental-health-ho-20>