

Coastal Disadvantage and Youth Mental Health: Emerging Evidence from England

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Policy Context

As of 2023, one in five children and young people in England had a probable mental health disorder¹—double the rate in 2010. Referrals to mental health services for this group rose by 50% between 2020 and 2023. While urban centres face significant pressures, coastal communities are disproportionately affected. Many of the highest suicide rates among young people are found in deprived coastal areas, where poor mental health is deeply entrenched. With over two-thirds of mental illness starting before the age of 25, it is essential to identify the key drivers—especially those affecting coastal areas—before young adulthood.

Key research findings

Our research shows that young adults residing in the most deprived coastal areas of England face a double whammy of poor mental health. They are both more likely to rate their mental health lower, and live with an undiagnosed mental health condition, than if they had lived in an equally deprived area inland.

We analysed data from Understanding Society, a nationally study that has interviewed households across the United Kingdom. The study was launched in 2009-2010 with an initial sample of approximately 40,000 households.

- The first study looked at whether adolescents (10-15 years) had lived by the coasts of England or not. We then followed them up to 11 years later (2010-21) to see what they said about their health.
- In the top fifth of most deprived areas of England, young people who grew up in coastal areas reported average mental functioning scores 3.7 points lower than their peers inland.
- The second study used the same data set with the same young adult mental health measures but used more recent data (2018-23) and looked at whether they had a history of mental health diagnosis.
- If the young person self-reported high mental distress, but had never had a mental health diagnosis, they had 'undiagnosed mental distress.'
- Young adults residing in the most deprived coastal areas had three times the risk of experiencing undiagnosed mental distress compared to young adults from equally deprived inland areas.
- Both of these studies took account of study members age, sex, ethnicity and household income.



Policy recommendations

National government:

- NHS 10-year plan. Prioritise reducing waiting times for treatment of mental health conditions and support in deprived coastal communities.
- Incentivise recruitment of mental health staff to deprived coastal communities, especially those with specialised training in youth mental health.
- Increase spending on preventative mental health programmes for young people in deprived coastal areas.
- Prioritise the location of Young Future Hubs in deprived coastal communities with highest mental health burden.
- Create national granular level data that tracks health and well-being of young people in the UK.

1. Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T, Mandalia D, Dennes M, McManus S, Savic M, Treloar W, Croft K, Ford T. (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. NHS England, Leeds.

Local government:

- Develop a long-term strategy to increase diagnosis of mental health conditions and reduce the development of poor mental in children and adolescence.
- Create local targets to improve mental health for young people in line with the national average, as part of their annual planning exercise.
- Invest in delivery of interventions to support the mental health of coastal young adults in the most deprived areas of the England. This should include facilitating access to services with a focus on the most at-risk groups (e.g. how can services be brought closer to coastal young adults).
- Fund longer-term investments in deprived coastal communities to tackle the drivers of poor mental health. This includes improving opportunities for education, employment, housing and social connection with improved public transport essential for all of these.

Work with us

Dr Murray is Director of the Centre for Coastal Communities (CCC), and Dr Claire Wicks is a Senior Research Officer, at the University of Essex. The CCC aims to deliver research, innovation and impact to address the challenges coastal communities face and take advantage of the opportunities they offer.

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Contact Dr Murray or Dr Wicks at coastal@essex.ac.uk. If you would like to learn more about their research, invite them to speak at your event, or collaborate with them to develop or evaluate your coastal youth initiative.

