

The Mental Health of Young People in Northern Ireland

Amit Anand

Background and Context

This feature explores mental health amongst young people in Northern Ireland (NI) using a range of data including ARK's public attitudes surveys. Experiencing the best possible mental health and wellbeing is important for all young people. However, NI faces significant mental health challenges exacerbated by the legacy of the conflict and high rates of deprivation (Waller, 2021). Despite the launch of The Mental Health Strategy in 2021 (Department of Health, 2021), aimed at transforming mental health services, its full implementation has been limited by political instability and the ongoing public finance crisis. The Northern Ireland Executive's Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 identifies mental health as a key priority and aims to improve emotional wellbeing by promoting awareness of positive mental health and building resilience (The Executive Office, 2020).

The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) is a screening instrument for common mental health disorders and wellbeing. In 2022/23, findings from the Northern Ireland Health Survey (Department of Health, 2023) indicated that 20 per cent of all respondents had a high GHQ-12 score, which could indicate a mental health problem. Looking at younger people, the proportion of those aged between 16 and 34 scoring highly on the GHQ scale decreased significantly between 2019/2020 (23%) and 2021/22 (29%) and 2022/23 (18%), reflecting a return to pre-pandemic levels.

The Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Survey¹ measured the mental health of children and young people including rates of common mood and anxiety disorders and their association with personal, familial, and social risk factors (Bunting et al, 2020). Findings showed that the majority of children and young people in Northern Ireland do not meet the criteria for a mental health disorder, but rates of anxiety and depression were about 25 per cent higher than the figure for the UK in general (Bunting et al, 2020). This could be linked to transgenerational legacy and psychological trauma as research shows that the legacy of the conflict continues to affect the lives of children and young people growing up in NI (Austin, 2019; McAlister et al, 2021).

The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitude Survey (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2023) reported that 21 per cent of young people had experienced depression or anxiety in the past 12 months. When asked if they had any concerns or worries about their mental health, 19 per cent acknowledged such concerns, while an additional 32 per cent indicated they had concerns to some extent. Girls were more likely than boys to report feeling left out and to say they had no-one to talk to. Most (around two thirds) of those with mental health concerns did not seek help, with the majority feeling they could handle things on their own. It is essential that young people can access help when they need it. Seeking help was

¹The Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Survey is a representative household survey of young people aged 2-19 years and their parents

also identified as an issue in the Children and Young People's Strategy (The Executive Office, 2020: 37) that states it will 'ensure intervention and effective help and support is provided in a timely way'. With this in mind, it is important to understand where young people are likely to seek support from. The Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Survey 2020 (Health and Social Care Board, 2021) found the most common source of support was a family member or close friend (16%) and this was closely followed by seeking support from a teacher (15%). In terms of gender, males were more likely to report seeking help from someone in primary care (9 % compared to almost 7% for females) while females were more likely to turn to family members or friends. Overall, females engaged in more help-seeking behaviours.

Public Attitudes and Mental Health

In 2023, the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey explored attitudes of individuals regarding mental health (ARK, 2024). Findings from the survey show that most people feel good about their mental health with 76 per cent of men saying this was the case, slightly higher than the 74 per cent of women. Fifty per cent of those aged 18 – 24 also reported positively about their mental health and wellbeing.

We also have an insight into how 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland perceive their mental health through the Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey. The 2023 YLT survey found gender differences in the self-assessment of mental health with young men assessing their mental health more positively than young women (ARK, 2023a; ARK, 2023b). Almost half of the male respondents (49%) reported that their mental health was excellent or very good, compared to fewer than one in three female respondents (31%). Both males and females identified "Being under pressure at school" as the main reason for feeling worried or stressed (71% and 87% respectively). Male respondents were more likely to say, "I never feel stressed or worried" (13%) compared to two per cent of female respondents who agreed with this statement.

Focusing on younger age groups, the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) (2023c) Survey is an annual survey of P7 children in Northern Ireland and in 2023, the survey asked them a number of questions about their mental health. A quarter (25%) assessed their mental health and wellbeing as "excellent" and only five per cent thought it was "poor". Slightly more boys (29%) than girls (21%) felt their mental health and wellbeing was "excellent" and, while 24 per cent of boys said they never felt worried or stressed, this applied to only 13 per cent of girls. Factors that caused girls the most stress were related to "problems or arguments with friends" (53%), while the greatest source of stress for boys was being "being under pressure to do well at school" (36%).

Self-harm

In 2013, 13 per cent of respondents to the Young Life and Times Survey had said that they had self-harmed with eight per cent saying they had done so more than once (ARK 2023a; ARK, 2023b). The Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Survey (Health and Social Care board, 2021) reported that 10 per cent of 11–19-year-olds had answered yes to a question about whether they had ever injured themselves on purpose. Females were more likely than males to answer yes to this question (13% compared to 6%) Just over 12 per cent of young people in the same age group said they had thought about or attempted to kill themselves. Reporting on figures for 2019/20, the Northern Ireland Registry for Self-Harm (Public Health Agency, 2020) notes that 11 per cent (n=984) of all self-harm presentations to emergency departments were by those under 18. Seventy-five per cent of under 18s presenting were female.

Key points

Overall, young people in Northern Ireland report good levels of mental health but the data highlighted here suggests there is no room for complacency. They reinforce the importance of destigmatising mental health problems. Only a small number of young people had sought professional help when experiencing serious emotional health problems, yet early intervention is important and support services need to be available and accessible. The research shows that young people tend to seek help primarily from

family and friends, but girls and young women are more likely to seek support than boys and young men.

Additionally, a range of socio-economic factors are associated with increased levels of poor mental health in the general population. There remains a clear need for policies to address the social determinants of health, ensuring that the structural causes are also tackled.

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About the authors:

Amit Anand is an undergraduate Social Policy student at Ulster University.



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
6 College Park, Belfast, BT7 1LP

Tel: 028 9097 3034 E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk