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Employment and mental health inequality

England



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Acknowledgements

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Highlights

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Workplace mental health in England has deteriorated to the worst level recorded in this data series.
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More than one in five workers are now experiencing poor mental health.
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6.1 million workers are experiencing poor mental health, an increase of 55% since 2014.
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The share of workers facing financial hardship has nearly doubled since 2021.
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Cost-of-living pressures leave four in ten workers dissatisfied with their income and one in ten facing financial hardship.



Poor mental health is climbing in the England workforce

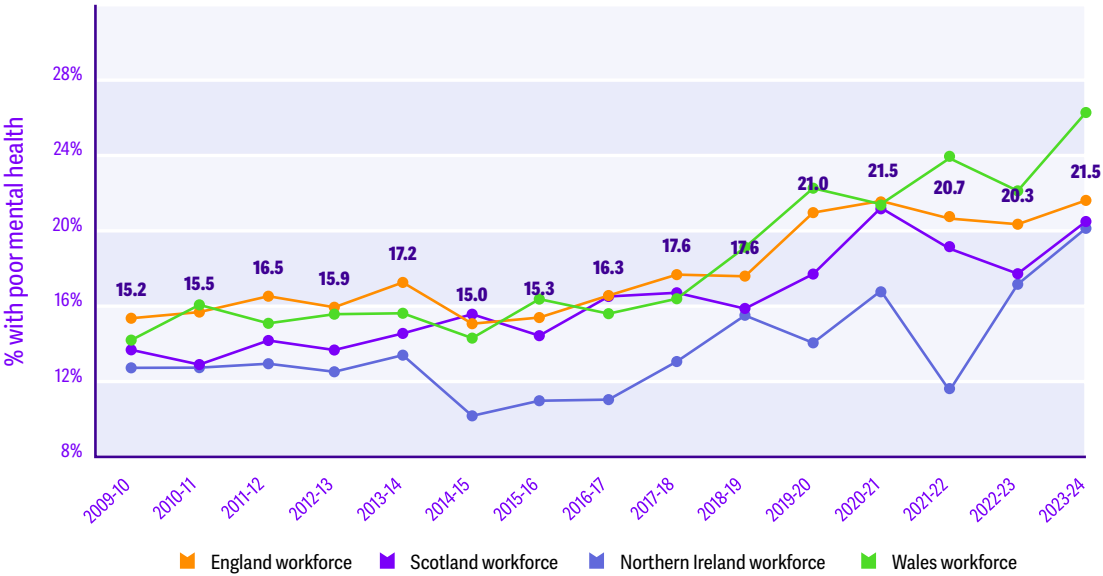


Figure 1. England workforce mental health 2009-2024. Levels of poor mental health in the England workforce (all employed adults) compared to workforces in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Percentage estimates calculated from the *Understanding Society* dataset based on the GHQ-12 cutoff score of four or more.

England’s workforce is facing unprecedented mental health challenges

Workforce mental health in England has undergone a troubling decline over the past two decades (Figure 1). In the most recent *Understanding Society* data, **more than one in five workers (21.5%) – 6.1 million people¹ – were identified as experiencing poor mental health.** This marks a sharp increase from the lowest point recorded in 2014/15, when 15.0% of workers recorded poor mental health.

Since 2014, the number of workers with poor mental health in England has grown by 2.2 million people (55%).²

The pressures created by this deepening mental health crisis will be felt across families, communities, workplaces and the wider economy.

Increasingly, work itself is contributing to poor mental health, as the number of people who say they are struggling because of their job has grown. In the latest data, **17.1% of workers – 4.8 million people³ – felt stressed or unhappy most of the time because of their job,** a notable rise from the low of 14.8% recorded in 2018/19.

This increase suggests a growing intensity of pressure within workplaces themselves; for many workers, the protective factors that once buffered job-related stress

are weakening. This erosion of job-related wellbeing is particularly concerning because it functions as both a driver and an early warning signal of poor mental health.

Financial security is one of the most powerful determinants of mental health, and low income is a key driver of mental health inequality.⁴

For many workers, financial stress is no longer occasional or peripheral; it is now a central part of their daily lives.

Financial wellbeing has also worsened significantly. **In 2023/24, two in five workers (43.2%) said they were not satisfied with their income,** a substantial jump from 34.0% in 2020/21. **The proportion of workers facing financial hardship nearly doubled** from 5.6% to 10.5% over the same three year period. These changes point to a rapidly tightening cost-of-living landscape in England, where rising housing costs, inflation and wage stagnation have placed increasing strain on household finances.

England risks entering a negative cycle in which rising financial hardship damages

mental health, poor mental health pushes more people out of work and rising economic inactivity further undermines prosperity and social equality.

Because 85% of the UK population lives in England, England’s trends heavily shape the UK-wide picture. In this analysis, it is therefore more meaningful to compare England with the devolved nations rather than with the UK average, which is largely reflective of England’s own outcomes.

When viewed through this lens, England’s workforce is faring worse than Northern Ireland and Scotland across multiple dimensions: overall mental health, job-related wellbeing, income dissatisfaction and the share of workers experiencing financial struggle. In contrast, England performs better than Wales, which currently records the highest levels of mental ill-health and financial strain of all four nations (Table 1).

Despite these differences, the direction of travel across the UK shows a consistent pattern. Mental health is worsening, financial security is eroding and work is becoming a source of stress for a growing share of people. England’s position within this landscape is particularly consequential due to its demographic weight.



1. Region/nation profile - England. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/por/contents.aspx> Based on 28,387,000 employed people in England in December 2023 – February 2024, corresponding to the midpoint of *Understanding Society* Wave 15 data collection.

2. Region/nation profile - England. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/por/contents.aspx> Based on 26,278,000 employed people in England in December 2014 – February 2015, corresponding to the midpoint of *Understanding Society* Wave 6 data collection.

3. Region/nation profile - England. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/por/contents.aspx> Based on 28,299,000 employed people in England in December 2022 – February 2023, corresponding to the midpoint of *Understanding Society* Wave 14 data collection.

4. Jowett S, Lutz N, Crepez-Keay D. The Foundation Reports: Tackling mental health inequalities in the UK: expert consensus on priority areas. Mental Health Foundation. November 2025. Accessed August 17, 2026. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/research/foundation-reports-tackling-mental-health-inequalities-uk>

	% Poor mental health	% Poor job-related wellbeing	% Income dissatisfaction	% Financially struggling
England workforce	21.5	17.1	43.2	10.5
Northern Ireland workforce	19.9	14.4	37.2	8.1
Scotland workforce	20.3	13.8	35.9	8.0
Wales workforce	26.2	19.1	48.9	10.6
Whole UK workforce	21.6	16.9	42.7	10.2

Table 1. National workforce wellbeing stats.
Comparison of wellbeing measures across employed adults in each UK nation. Percentage estimates calculated from the most recent *Understanding Society* data available: 2023/24 for general mental health, income dissatisfaction and financial situation, and 2022/23 for job-related wellbeing.

The data show a workforce under accumulating strain.

While the drivers vary across regions and sectors, the overarching trend is clear:

Workforce wellbeing is deteriorating, and without targeted intervention, the pressures facing England’s workforce will continue to deepen in the years ahead.



Labour market

The employment rate in England (75.4%) is similar to that of Scotland (74.3%) and higher than in Wales (73.0%) and Northern Ireland (72.1%).⁵

This headline figure obscures the significant geographical variation in employment within England, with the East and South East of England having the highest employment rate in the UK (78.2%), but the

North East having the lowest (71.1%). Overall, London has the highest unemployment rate, at 6.6%.⁶

The complex relationship between finding and staying in work and good mental health will therefore need to be navigated by policymakers in such a way that takes account of these geographical differences, and indeed the substantial local variations associated with deprivation and other factors within these large regions.

For up-to-date stats on the England labour market and economy, visit the [Office for National Statistics](#)



5. Labour Market Profile – Wales. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/2013265930/report.aspx>

6. Labour market in the regions of the UK: June 2026. Office for National Statistics. 2026. Accessed July 16, 2026. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/regionallabourmarket/june2026>

POLICY CALLS TO ACTION – WHAT CAN WE DO?



Westminster has an opportunity to reduce the negative impact of work on mental health through targeted action in key policy areas:

- **Establish a cross-government plan for mental health.** The new mental health strategy for England announced by the UK Government must be truly cross-governmental. This plan should set out a road map for how mental health will be supported via the non-health government departments. It must also reflect the fact that employment and mental health is a policy topic where there is great local variation that needs to be addressed across the overlapping footprints of employers, local authorities and health structures.
- **Increase access to affordable, flexible childcare.** Policy should target additional childcare support towards the lowest-income households.
- **Extend the 30 hours of funded childcare per week.** While this is currently available to all working parents of children aged nine months up to school age, it should also be available to parents receiving social security payments.
- **Reform fit notes to support work, not trigger absence.** The Statement of Fitness for Work (fit note) system should be redesigned and reoriented with a greater connection to employment, including increasing use of 'may be fit' advice. The Get Britain Working recommendation to ensure employers develop stay at work plans and return to work plans should be adopted, with these plans agreed collaboratively between workers and employers.
- **Incentivise employers to focus on prevention and early intervention.** The UK Government should introduce incentives for prevention, for example, by increasing the length of statutory sick pay (SSP) from 28 weeks to 40 weeks, building on other reforms to SSP in the Employment Rights Act 2025. There should be regular comprehensive reviews of the policy, with at least one review during this parliamentary term. This should be in addition to the annual uprating of the SSP weekly rate undertaken each tax year by the government.
- **Place employers and line managers at the centre of response.** Line managers are critical. In non-office roles, there is particular value in more regular check-ins. Therefore, evidence-based, low-cost and scalable training for line managers should be a priority.
- **Treat flexibility, autonomy and job control as core mental health infrastructure.** Work design is a crucial preventative tool. Employers should

support flexible and hybrid working, workload adjustments and job control as the norm, building on the reforms of the Employment Rights Act 2025. This could include restricting night shifts and adjusting working hours on site, or temporary adjustment of any customer-facing duties in non-office roles.

- **Reduce stigma and take a non-adversarial approach to support.** Employers should ensure workplaces become trauma-informed, with stigma treated as a structural problem, not an individual failing. Workplaces could focus on and build on the definition set out by the United States SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration).
- **Avoid additional employer burdens.** The UK Government should stress-test any additional reforms for unintended impacts on employer capacity.
- **Strengthen data and evidence on workplace mental health.** The UK government should address the evidence gap by investing in better, integrated data to inform policy and practice. One option is the Workplace Health Intelligence Unit recommended by Get Britain Working.
- **Regularly update the Minimum Wage.** The UK Government should update the Statutory Minimum Wage at least every six months to genuinely reflect the cost of living. Any publicly funded organisation should pay the Living Wage.
- **Strengthen coordination between the UK Government and devolved governments.** Coordination needs to be strengthened where devolved and reserved responsibilities interact with devolved health, skills and employability services.
- **Enforce measures in the Employment Act 2025.** The UK Government should ensure the restrictions legislated for in the Employment Act on zero-hours contracts and guaranteed income are enforced. The remit of the Fair Work Agency should also be regularly assessed, with the option of providing additional powers where required.



Research methods

The figures here come from new analysis of the *Understanding Society* dataset⁷ carried out by the Mental Health Foundation research team. The *Understanding Society* study collects longitudinal data from 40,000 households across the UK, surveying the same people each year to track changes over time. Here, we have analysed data from 2009/10 through to 2023/24, the most recent data available

at the time of The Foundation Reports publication. The 2023/24 wave of data collection included 14,333 employed people in England.

Further details on the analysis strategy can be found in the appendix of the full-length research report, *The Foundation Reports: Employment and mental health inequality (2026)*. Data tables are available on *The Foundation Reports* website.



7. University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2025). *Understanding Society: Waves 1-15, 2009-2024 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009*. [data collection]. 20th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-21>



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