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Employment and mental health inequality

Northern Ireland



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Acknowledgements

Report authors:

Dr Nina Lutz, Catherine Negus, Ben Lejac, Michael Hough, Catherine Razzell, Vivienne Fitzroy, Natalie Sadler

Data source:

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The Foundation Reports steering group:

Dr David Crepaz-Keay, Emily Fu, Karen Hall, Prof Gavin Davidson, Claire Fleming, Lee Batchelor, Oliver Chantler

Quantitative analysis collaborators:

Dr Thomas Steare (University College London), Wenzhen Cao (University of Cambridge), Wen Wang (University of Essex)

Qualitative research:

Telltale Research

Data visualisation:

Studio Lift

Copyediting and proofreading:

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If you have questions about this research, please contact The Foundation Reports study team at research@mentalhealth.org.uk

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Highlights

- Historically strong workforce mental health in Northern Ireland has rapidly worsened during the cost-of-living crisis.
- One in five workers (179,000 people) are now experiencing poor mental health.
- The number of workers experiencing poor mental health has nearly doubled since 2021.
- The share of the workforce living in financial hardship has tripled since 2021.
- Cost-of-living pressures leave more than one in three workers dissatisfied with their income and one in 12 facing financial hardship.



Workforce mental health has worsened dramatically in Northern Ireland

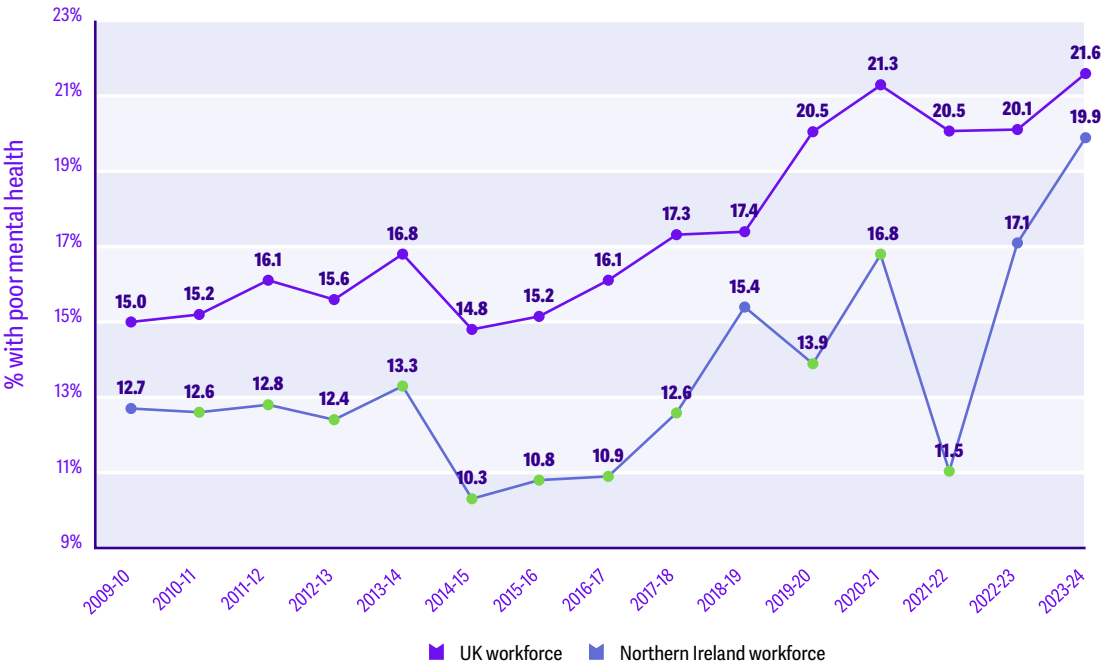


Figure 1. Northern Ireland workforce mental health 2009-2024.
Levels of poor mental health in the Northern Ireland workforce (all employed adults) compared to the whole UK workforce. Percentage estimates calculated from the *Understanding Society* dataset based on the GHQ-12 cutoff score of four or more. Green dots indicate years when workforce mental health was statistically significantly better in Northern Ireland than in the whole UK.

In *The Foundation Reports: The state of mental health inequality in the UK (2026)*¹, our research found that Northern Ireland has long recorded stronger population-level mental health than the UK average. This relative advantage is mirrored in the workforce. As shown in Figure 1, **workers in Northern Ireland have consistently recorded better mental health outcomes than workers across the rest of the UK**. In most years, this difference has been statistically significant, underscoring that it is not a marginal variation but a meaningful and sustained population-level pattern.

However, this historically positive picture has shifted massively in recent years. In the most recent data, **one in five workers in Northern Ireland (19.9%) – 179,000 people – were identified as experiencing poor mental health**, a stark departure from the nation’s previously stronger performance relative to the UK as a whole. This is the highest level recorded to date, and nearly double the rate recorded in 2021/22 (11.5%).

Since 2021, the number of workers in Northern Ireland experiencing poor mental health has grown by over 80,000 people.

1. Lutz N, Berrington W, Lejac B, MacLeod C, Fitzroy V, Razzell C, Hough M, Barnswell I. The Foundation Reports: The state of mental health inequality in the UK. Mental Health Foundation. 2026. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://reports.mentalhealth.org.uk/foundation-reports/report/>

2. Region/nation profile - Northern Ireland. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/contents.aspx>
Based on 899,000 employed people in Northern Ireland in December 2023 – February 2024, corresponding to the midpoint of Understanding Society Wave 15 data collection.

3. Region/nation profile - Northern Ireland. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/contents.aspx>
Based on 848,000 employed people in Northern Ireland in December 2021 – February 2022, corresponding to the midpoint of Understanding Society Wave 14 data collection.

This deepening mental health crisis will impact families, communities, workplaces and the economy as a whole.

Despite the recent spike in mental ill health, workers in Northern Ireland still record better mental health than those in England, Scotland or Wales.

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 over the past decade. In the most recent data, **one in seven workers (14.3%) – 126,000 people⁴ – felt stressed or unhappy most of the time due to their job**, a substantial increase from 9.1% in 2016/17.

Such an abrupt change in workforce mental health has real and immediate implications. It signals shifting

Workforce mental health trends diverge across the four nations

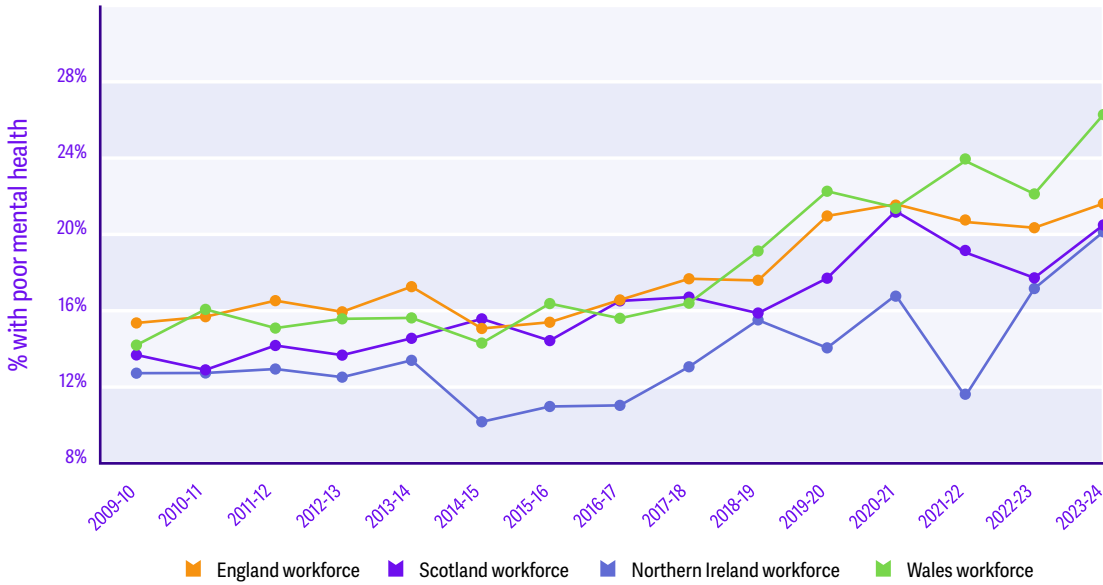


Figure 2. Workforce mental health in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 2009-2024.
Levels of poor mental health in the workforce (all employed adults) within each of the four UK nations over time. Percentage estimates calculated from the *Understanding Society* dataset based on the GHQ-12 cutoff score of four or more.



pressures on individuals, workplaces and public services, and suggests that longstanding protective factors may no longer be offering the same level of support. Understanding what has driven this change, and how it interacts with the distinctive economic, social and policy context of Northern Ireland, will be essential for developing effective, nation-specific strategies to support and protect workforce mental health in the years ahead.

We explored the factors shaping population mental health in Northern Ireland in-depth in *The Foundation Reports: The state of mental health inequality in the UK (2026)*.⁵ In the present analysis of workforce mental health, it's clear that financial insecurity driven by cost-of-living pressures is taking a substantial toll on Northern Ireland's working population.

Financial wellbeing is a fundamental pillar of workforce mental health, and recent negative trends in Northern Ireland paint a concerning picture.

The latest *Understanding Society* data reveal a sharp deterioration in how workers perceive their financial security: **over one third (37.2%) of workers now say they are not satisfied with their income, a dramatic rise from 24.8% just two years earlier.** Even more

concerning is the surge in workers who report that they are struggling financially. **In 2023/24, 8.1% of the workforce are facing financial hardship, triple the rate recorded in 2020/21 (2.7%).**

Although these figures remain somewhat better than the UK-wide averages of 42.7% and 10.2%, respectively, Northern Ireland has historically outperformed the rest of the UK on both financial wellbeing and mental health indicators. The recent and rapid escalation in financial strain therefore represents a meaningful break from long-standing trends. It signals not only a growing vulnerability among workers but also an emerging risk to the nation's overall mental health landscape.

The recent spike in financial strain is not simply an economic warning sign; it is a major public mental health concern.

Without targeted action to improve income security, reduce cost-related stress and strengthen workplace support systems, Northern Ireland risks seeing further deterioration in workforce mental health in the years ahead.



4. Region/nation profile - Northern Ireland. Nomis. Office for National Statistics. Accessed August 19, 2026. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/gor/contents.aspx>
Based on 879,000 employed people in Northern Ireland in December 2022 – February 2023, corresponding to the midpoint of *Understanding Society* Wave 14 data collection.

5. Lutz N, Berrington W, Lejac B, MacLeod C, Fitzroy V, Razzell C, Hough M, Barnswell I. The Foundation Reports: The state of mental health inequality in the UK. Mental Health Foundation. 2026. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://reports.mentalhealth.org.uk/foundation-reports/report/>

	% 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.

Compared to the UK average, Northern Ireland records better workforce wellbeing across all measures: mental health, job-related wellbeing, income satisfaction and financial situation.

However, recent declines across all wellbeing metrics signal that this relatively strong position cannot be taken for granted.

For up-to-date stats on the Northern Ireland labour market and economy, visit the [NISRA economic overview dashboard](#)



Labour market

Northern Ireland’s labour market is marked by low unemployment (2.2%) alongside the highest economic inactivity rate in the UK (26.7%), largely driven by long-term sickness and disability, including mental ill health.⁶ This is reflected in a wide disability employment gap (44%) and a substantial proportion of young people (11.6%) who are not earning or learning, most of whom are economically inactive rather than actively seeking work.⁷ Structural challenges are compounded by the absence of sustained funding for employability programmes and the need for more integrated approaches that connect health, education and employment support.⁸ These patterns highlight how mental health is a central factor shaping participation in the labour market.

Alongside high inactivity, Northern Ireland faces persistently low wages, weak productivity (12.4% below the UK average) and widespread in-work poverty.⁹ Median earnings are among the lowest in the UK, with 17% of workers earning below the real Living Wage and many households in poverty despite being in work.¹⁰ Financial insecurity, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, is strongly linked to poor mental health, particularly among young people. Improving job quality, income security and access to good work is therefore critical to addressing the increase in mental health problems and supporting inclusive economic growth.

Financial security is one of the most powerful determinants of mental health, and low income is a key driver of mental health inequality.¹¹

Northern Ireland 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.



6. Northern Ireland Labour Market Report: March 2026. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. 2026. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/economy-and-labour-market/labour-market-report-march-2026.html>

7. Table LFS-NEETs-Quarterly-Data-JM26: Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. 2026. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nisra.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fstatistics%2F2026-05%2FLFS-NEETs-Quarterly-Data-JM26.ods&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

8. Commission on Work and Wellbeing welcomed by Minister Lyons. Department for Communities. 2026. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/commission-work-and-wellbeing-welcomed-minister-lyons>

9. NI Productivity Tracker 2025. The Productivity Institute. 2025. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://www.productivity.ac.uk/research/northern-ireland-productivity-dashboard-2025/>

10. Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. 2025. Accessed August 13, 2026. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025>

11. Jowett S, Lutz N, Crepaz-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>

POLICY CALLS TO ACTION – WHAT CAN WE DO?



The Northern Ireland Executive has an opportunity to address the impact of work on our mental health by taking decisive action on some key policy areas.

- Urgently agree and implement the **Good Jobs Employment Rights Bill** to improve job security, pay and conditions. This includes tackling zero-hours contracts and enhancing flexible working rights.
- Invest sustainably in **skills and pathways** to support access to stable, well-paid employment, including targeted initiatives that support those most likely to experience barriers in accessing good work.
- Use a **mental health policy test** for all areas of policy to help government understand where policy and legislation will be protective or potentially harmful to population mental health.
- Introduce **cross-departmental budgeting** that targets funding at prevention and early intervention and recognises that tackling the social determinants of mental health can only work if there is a cross-departmental approach.
- Support and incentivise employers to create and sustain **mentally healthier workplaces** by reducing stigma and providing proactive support, alongside a good mental health framework for employers that focuses on prevention.
- The **Commission for Work and Wellbeing**, announced by the Department for Communities, and the subsequent announcement of the **£16m Pathways to Work and Wellbeing project** must ensure there is a focus on mental health. This must take a preventative approach, recognising the structural and systemic barriers that those most excluded from the workplace face.
- Prioritise and fund the **Anti-Poverty Strategy** that addresses both in- and out-of-work poverty, recognising that financial stress is one of the biggest contributors to poor mental health.
- Extend **childcare provision** in Northern Ireland, recognising its importance in supporting parents and carers to reduce barriers to work and additional financial stress.

Research methods

The figures here come from new analysis of the *Understanding Society* dataset¹² 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 982 employed people in Northern Ireland.



12. 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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Mental Health Foundation,
Studio 2, 197 Long Lane,
London, SE1 4PD

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Mental Health Foundation,
2nd Floor, Moncrieff House,
69 West Nile Street, Glasgow, G1 2QB

Belfast

Mental Health Foundation,
5th Floor, 14 College Square North,
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