



BMHP5019\_BIRM – Introduction to Independent Research Skills

## Component 2 Research Report

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### Title

A scoping Review of “Factors Affecting Mental Health Crisis Among Young People in the UK”.

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## Introduction

Mental health has become a major public health concern in the United Kingdom, particularly among young people. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being, emotional, psychological and social that enables individuals to cope with everyday challenges, realise their potential, work effectively and contribute positively to their communities (WHO, 2022). A mental health crisis occurs when a person's emotional or psychological state becomes so severe that they are unable to cope with daily life and may require professional support. In this review, the term young people refer to individuals aged 8–25 years, reflecting the age group used in UK mental health research and national statistics (NHS Digital, 2023). Understanding these key concepts is important because mental health crises during childhood and early adulthood can have lasting effects on education, employment, relationships and overall quality of life.

Mental health problems among young people have increased considerably across the United Kingdom in recent years (NHS Digital, 2023). NHS Digital (2023) reported that approximately one in five young people aged 8-25 years had a probable mental health condition, with the highest mental prevalence among those aged 17 –18 years (NHS England, 2023). Previous research has identified several factors associated with poor mental health, including academic pressure, social media use, poverty, loneliness, family difficulties, bullying, and unequal access to mental health services (Owens et al., 2022; Mental Health Foundation, 2018). These factors can negatively affect young people's wellbeing, educational achievement and future opportunities.

The growing number of young people experiencing mental health difficulties highlights the need to understand better the factors contributing to mental health crises. Although many UK studies have examined this issue, the evidence is spread across different settings and disciplines. This scoping review aims to synthesise existing research to identify the main factors associated with mental health crises among young people in the UK, examine the available evidence, and identify gaps requiring further investigation. The review is guided by two research questions: (1) What factors contribute to mental health crises among young people in the UK? and (2) What gaps exist in the current UK evidence? The findings may help inform future research, healthcare practice and policy development.



## Background

Mental health among young people has become an important issue within health and social care in the United Kingdom (Gilburt and Mallorie, 2024). Good mental health is essential for healthy, emotional, social and cognitive development. It enables young people to build positive relationships, achieve their educational goals and participate fully in society. In recent years, there has been a steady rise in the number of children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties (Plackett, Sheringham and Dykxhoorn, 2022). This has resulted in higher demand for health and social care services and greater pressure on available resources. Mental health problems during childhood and adolescence can have long-term effects. They may result in poor school performance, difficulty making friends, unemployment, substance misuse and increased risk of mental illness in adulthood.

Several UK policies and legislative frameworks have been introduced to strengthen mental health services and encourage early intervention. The Mental Health Act 1983 is the key piece of legislation that outlines the legal processes for assessing and treating individuals with severe mental health conditions, including children and young people, when necessary (Mental Health Act, 1983). This law applies to everyone, regardless of age. This means children can also be detained if they pose a serious risk to themselves or others. In addition, the Children Act 2004 places a legal duty on organisations to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including supporting their emotional and mental wellbeing (GOV.UK, 2004). The Equality Act 2010 protects children from discrimination in schools, healthcare, and social care settings (NSPCC, 2024). It also requires education and health services to make reasonable adjustments so that young people with mental health disabilities can access support fairly (Department of Health and Social Care, 2015). More recently, the NHS Long Term Plan (2019) committed to expanding access to specialist mental health services for children and young people and improving crisis support (Department of Health and Social Care, 2019).

Mental health support for young people in the UK is provided through services such as CAMHS, GPs, schools, and charities like YoungMinds and Mind. GPs are often the first point of contact and can refer young people to specialist services when needed. Support includes counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), family therapy, crisis care, and online services, all of which help improve mental wellbeing and provide support during difficult times.

Despite these developments, several challenges continue to affect the delivery of mental health services. Increasing demand has led to long waiting times for specialist services, workforce shortages, and unequal access to care across regions of the UK (CQC, 2026). Many young people also struggle when moving from CAMHS to adult mental health services (Rethink, 2023). Factors such as poverty, bullying, family problems, school pressure, and social media can also affect young people's mental health, showing the need for better support across health, education, and social care services (McGorry et al., 2025).

There is increasing research on young people's mental health in the UK, but the findings are not brought together in one place. Most studies focus on specific mental health conditions or individual risk factors, while less attention is given to the wider causes of mental health crises. More evidence is also needed on current services, interventions, and areas of knowledge gaps to help improve future mental health support.

## Methods

To identify relevant literature for this scoping review, I conducted a structured search of published research on the factors affecting mental health crises among young people in the United Kingdom. I searched academic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, UWTSD Library Search, and EBSCOhost. These databases were selected because they provide access to a wide range of peer-reviewed literature, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research topic.

I developed a search strategy using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to identify relevant studies. The Boolean operators AND and OR were used to broaden or narrow the search results as appropriate. The main search terms included "mental health," "mental health crisis," "factors," "causes," "young people," "children," "adolescents," "youth," "United Kingdom," "UK," "England," and "Wales." An example of the search strategy was: ("mental health" OR "mental health crisis") AND (factors OR causes) AND ("young people" OR children OR adolescents OR youth) AND ("United Kingdom" OR UK OR England OR Wales).

### Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Studies conducted in the United Kingdom only.
- Articles published in English
- Studies published between 2016 and 2026.
- Studies involving young people aged approximately 8–25 years.

- Research examining factors associated with mental health or mental health crises among young people.

#### Exclusion Criteria

- Studies outside the UK
- Articles published in languages other than English
- Studies before 2016
- Non-peer-reviewed literature, including conference abstracts, editorials, dissertations, opinion papers and reports. Studies that did not focus on young people.
- Studies that were not relevant to factors affecting mental health or mental health crises.

After screening, the selected studies were reviewed in detail, and key information was extracted, including author, publication year, study design, participants, aims, and main findings. The data was then analysed using Aveyard's (2007) simplified thematic analysis, which helped identify common themes, patterns, similarities, and differences across the studies. This approach supported the synthesis of findings and helped identify key factors affecting mental health crises among young people in the UK.

Once the relevant studies were identified and fully reviewed, key information was extracted from each paper, including the author, year of publication, study design, sample characteristics, aims, and main findings. This allowed the data to be organised in a structured way and ensured that important details from each study were consistently recorded.

## Ethical Considerations

As this study was a scoping review, no primary data were collected, and no human participants were involved. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. However, ethical principles were followed throughout the review. Bias was minimised by applying consistent inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only recent UK-based, peer-reviewed studies published in English were included. Transparency was maintained by clearly describing the search process, and all sources were accurately referenced to ensure honest and ethical reporting of the findings.

## Results

| Author(s)<br>year            | Research<br>objectives                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Methods                                                                                                                                                                               | Key findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Relevance<br>review question                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bell et al.,<br/>2019</b> | <p>Explore factors contributing to mental health problems among young people in the UK.</p> <p>Identify key social, educational, family, and environmental influences.</p> <p>Examine the perspectives of young people, parents, and professionals.</p> | <p>Qualitative study using interviews and focus groups.</p> <p>Data were analysed using thematic analysis.</p> <p>8 young people interviewed (3 individually, 5 in a focus group)</p> | <p>This study finds that anxiety among young people was linked to academic pressure, social media use, uncertainty about the future and the normalisation of mental health distress and self-harm. Highlight the influence of wider social and political changes on young people's mental health.</p> | <p>Identifies key factors affecting the mental health of young people in the UK.</p> <p>Highlight the impact of social media on young people's mental health.</p> <p>Provides evidence from the lived experiences of young people, parents and professionals.</p> <p>Explores the effects of academic pressure and future uncertainty.</p> |

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| <p><b>Deighton et al. (2019)</b></p> | <p>To investigate the prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents in England and identify the risk factors associated with poor mental health, including poverty, gender, age, ethnicity and additional support needs.</p> | <p>Large cross-sectional school-based study involving 28,160 adolescents aged 11–14 years from 97 secondary schools in England. Mental health was measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Multilevel logistic regression was used to examine associations between risk factors and mental health problems.</p> | <p>42.5% of adolescents showed signs of at least one mental health difficulty. Mental health problems were more common in girls. Older adolescents had higher rates of mental health difficulties.</p> <p>Young people living in poverty (eligible for free school meals) were more likely to experience mental health problems.</p> <p>Children in need had higher levels of mental health difficulties.</p> <p>Young people with special educational needs (SEN) were at greater risk of poor mental health.</p> <p>Some ethnic minority groups also showed increased mental health difficulties. The study identified socioeconomic deprivation as a major risk factor for poor mental health.</p> | <p>It identifies key risk factors contributing to poor mental health among young people in England. It provides strong UK evidence that poverty, deprivation, gender, age and social disadvantage are associated with increased mental health difficulties. The findings support the review by highlighting groups most at risk and emphasising the need for early intervention and school-based mental health support.</p> |
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| <b>(Wright et al., 2020)</b> | <p>To examine the mental health and wellbeing of secondary school pupils in the North of England.</p> <p>To identify the prevalence of mental health difficulties.</p> <p>To explore differences in mental health by gender and school year</p> | <p>Large population-based cross-sectional cohort study. Surveyed 6328 pupils from 21 secondary schools.</p> <p>Used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.</p> <p>Social media questionnaire</p> <p>Mental health questionnaire and the EQ-5D-Y.</p> | <p>1 in 10 pupils had very high-level mental health difficulties. Mental health differed significantly by gender and school years.</p> <p>Female pupils had more emotional difficulties than male pupils.</p> <p>Year 11 pupils had more emotional difficulties than pupils in Years 8 and 9. Year 11 pupils also had more prosocial (social behaviour) problems than younger pupils.</p> <p>Mental health among young children is increasing. Highlights the need for improved mental health support and services planning.</p> | <p>Provides recent UK evidence on adolescent mental health. Identifies important factors associated with poor mental health, including gender, age, school year and social media use.</p> |
| <b>(Jerrim, 2021)</b>        | <p>Investigate how adolescents' mental health changes during secondary school in England.</p> <p>Find out whether</p>                                                                                                                           | <p>Longitudinal quantitative study. Clinical Practice Research Datalink (CPRD) using NHS GP and hospital records. 81,493 adolescents from three school</p>                                                                                                  | <p>Mental health problems increased during secondary school. Girls experienced a much greater increase in mental health problems than boys. After controlling for age, the school year had little effect on</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p>Shows that age has a greater impact on adolescent mental health than school year. Challenges the idea that GCSE pressure alone</p>                                                     |

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|  | <p>changes in mental health are caused by age or school year group.</p> <p>Examine whether Year 11 (GCSE year) is linked to a higher risk of mental health problems.</p> | <p>cohorts (Years 7–11).</p> <p>Mental health conditions studied, Anxiety, depression, stress, eating disorders, OCD and self-harm.</p> <p>Used descriptive statistics and logistic regression while controlling for age, gender, previous mental health problems and socioeconomic status.</p> | <p>mental health. Age was a stronger factor than school year in explaining worsening mental health.</p> | <p>causes poor mental health.</p> <p>Suggests schools should provide mental health support throughout secondary school, not only during Year 11.</p> <p>Useful evidence for education policy, schools and mental health services.</p> |
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## Thematic Analysis

The findings from the four selected studies were analysed using thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged across the literature: social and educational influences, demographic and socioeconomic risk factors, changing patterns of mental health problems, and the importance of early intervention and support.

| Themes                                   | Evidence from the studies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
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| <b>Social and educational influences</b> | Bell et al. (2019) identified academic pressure, social media, uncertainty about the future and wider social changes as major influences on young people's mental health. Jerrim (2021) also acknowledged that school experiences affect wellbeing but found that increasing age, rather than school year, explained much of the rise in mental health problems. This suggests that educational pressures contribute to poor mental health, but they do not fully explain the increase observed during adolescence.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Age and Gender differences,</b>       | Age and gender were consistently identified as important risk factors. Wright et al. (2020) found that girls experienced greater emotional difficulties than boys, while boys had higher levels of conduct and hyperactivity problems. Older pupils, particularly those in Year 11, reported poorer emotional wellbeing than younger pupils. Similarly, Jerrim (2021) found that mental health problems increased with age and that girls experienced a greater rise in mental health difficulties throughout adolescence. Deighton et al. (2019) also identified girls and older adolescents as being at greater risk of mental health problems. These findings indicate that mental health support should consider both age and gender differences. |

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| <b>Prevalence and patterns of mental health problems</b> | <p>The studies consistently showed that mental health problems are common among adolescents, although reported prevalence varied. Deighton et al. (2019) found that approximately 42.5% of adolescents experienced at least one mental health difficulty, indicating higher rates than previous national estimates. Wright et al. (2020) reported that one in ten pupils experienced very high levels of mental health difficulties. Jerrim (2021) also found that mental health problems increased throughout secondary school, suggesting that adolescence is a critical period for the development of mental health difficulties.</p> |
| <b>Early intervention and support</b>                    | <p>All four studies highlighted the need for early intervention. Wright et al. (2020) recommended strengthening school-based mental health services to identify problems at an earlier stage. Deighton et al. (2019) supported greater investment in school mental health provision, particularly for disadvantaged young people. Bell et al. (2019) emphasised the importance of listening to the experiences of young people, parents and professionals when developing services. Jerrim (2021) suggested that support should be available throughout secondary school rather than focusing only on examination years.</p>             |

## Discussion

This scoping review aimed to explore factors affecting mental health crises among young people in the UK by examining evidence from four peer-reviewed studies (Bell et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020; Jerrim, 2021; Deighton et al., 2020). The review sought to explore the key factors contributing to poor mental health and understand how these findings can inform healthcare practice and policy. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that multiple interacting factors, including educational pressures, socioeconomic disadvantage, age, gender and wider social environments influence mental health crises among young people.

One of the most consistent findings across the reviewed studies is the importance of social and educational pressures. Bell et al. (2019) found that young people frequently associated anxiety with academic pressure, social media, uncertainty about the future and wider political and economic changes such as austerity. Unlike quantitative studies, Bell et al. (2019) explored these issues through interviews and focus groups, providing valuable insight into the lived experiences of young people, their parents and professionals. These findings suggest that mental health problems are not solely the result of individual vulnerability but are influenced by wider social circumstances. Similarly, educational stress emerged as an important factor within the literature, supporting the review objective of identifying the main contributors to poor mental health.

However, Jerrim (2021) presents a more complex interpretation of the relationship between education and mental health. While mental health problems increased throughout adolescence, the study found that this increase was largely explained by age rather than movement through different school year groups. This finding challenges the common assumption that examination years, particularly GCSEs, are the main cause of deteriorating mental health. Instead, the results suggest that normal developmental changes during adolescence may play a greater role than school progression alone. This difference highlights that educational pressure should not be viewed as an isolated cause but as one factor interacting with biological and psychological development. Consequently, interventions that focus solely on examination stress may overlook broader developmental needs.

Another important theme identified across the studies is the influence of age and gender. Wright et al. (2020) found that female pupils experienced significantly higher levels of emotional difficulties than male pupils, whereas boys showed greater conduct and hyperactivity problems. Similar findings were reported by Jerrim (2021), who demonstrated

that girls experienced a greater increase in mental health problems during adolescence. Deighton et al. (2020) also identified gender and age as significant predictors of mental health difficulties, with older adolescents showing higher levels of emotional problems. The consistency of these findings across different study designs strengthens confidence that age and gender are important factors influencing young people's mental health.

The reviewed studies consistently show that girls are more likely to experience mental health difficulties than boys. However, they mainly identify this relationship without explaining why it exists. The studies do not examine factors such as body image, hormonal changes, social expectations or online experiences in detail. This highlights a gap in the literature and suggests that future research should investigate why girls are more vulnerable to mental health problems.

Socioeconomic disadvantage emerged as another major factor affecting mental health. Deighton et al. (2020) found that young people living in poverty, those eligible for free school meals, children receiving social care support and those with special educational needs were significantly more likely to experience mental health problems. Their study involved over 28,000 adolescents across England, providing strong quantitative evidence that social inequality is closely linked to poor mental health. Bell et al. (2019) also identified financial pressures and wider social changes as contributing to increased anxiety among young people. Although both studies reach similar conclusions, they approach the issue differently. Bell et al. provides qualitative accounts explaining how financial insecurity affects young people's emotional wellbeing. In contrast, Deighton et al. provide statistical evidence demonstrating that deprivation is associated with increased mental health difficulties.

Together, these findings reinforce the importance of considering the wider social determinants of health rather than focusing solely on individual behaviours.

Although the studies reported similar findings, they used different research methods, which affects how the results should be interpreted. Bell et al. (2019) used interviews and focus groups to explore the experiences of young people, parents and professionals. This provided detailed information about the factors affecting mental health, but the small sample size means the findings cannot be easily applied to all young people in the UK. In comparison, Wright et al. (2020) and Deighton et al. (2020) collected data from thousands of adolescents, making their findings more representative. However, because both studies collected data at only one point in time, they cannot show whether the identified risk factors directly caused mental health

problems. Jerrim (2021) offers a methodological strength by using longitudinal data, enabling changes in mental health to be examined over time.

Further gaps in the research include the protective factors, such as family support, friendships and resilience, which may help improve young people's mental health. Equally, most studies focus on young people in mainstream schools, with little research on vulnerable groups such as children in care, young carers, young offenders and those who are not in education. More research is needed better to understand the mental health needs of these diverse groups.

The findings have important implications for both healthcare practice and policy. The evidence suggests that mental health services should adopt a holistic approach that recognises the interaction between educational, social and economic influences. Early identification of mental health difficulties within schools could enable timely intervention before problems become more severe. Strengthening collaboration between schools, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), primary care professionals, and community organisations may improve continuity of support for young people. In addition, the findings indicate that policies aimed at reducing child poverty and educational inequalities could improve mental health outcomes. Mental health support should also be tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including girls, older adolescents and young people experiencing socioeconomic problems (Sheikh et al., 2024). The findings support the idea that young people's mental health is affected by a combination of biological, psychological and social factors. None of the studies found that mental health problems are caused by a single factor. Instead, they show that various factors interact to affect mental health. This suggests that support should focus on both individual needs and wider social issues. Furthermore, mental health services should provide targeted support for vulnerable groups, including girls, older adolescents, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs.

## Conclusion

This scoping review aimed to identify the factors affecting mental health crises among young people in the UK by examining evidence from four peer-reviewed studies. The findings indicate that mental health difficulties result from a combination of educational, social, economic and personal factors rather than a single cause. Common risk factors identified across the studies included academic pressure, social media use, poverty, age, gender and wider social inequalities. These findings highlight that young people's mental health is influenced by multiple interacting factors, highlighting the complexity of mental health crises.

The review found that academic demands and uncertainty about the future contribute to increased anxiety. At the same time, girls, older adolescents and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are at greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties. Poverty, special educational needs and social disadvantage were also consistently associated with poorer mental health outcomes.

Despite providing valuable evidence, the reviewed studies identified several gaps in the literature. Most research focuses on identifying risk factors rather than evaluating interventions to prevent mental health crises. There is also limited evidence on protective factors, including resilience and coping strategies, while vulnerable groups such as children in care and young carers remain underrepresented.

The findings have important implications for practice and policy. Schools, healthcare professionals and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) should work collaboratively to identify difficulties early and provide timely support. Expanding school-based mental health services and improving access to early intervention programmes may help improve outcomes. Overall, a coordinated, holistic approach is essential to reduce mental health crises and promote the wellbeing of young people in the UK.

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