

General population surveys

- comparing student and non-student mental health

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Aims and scope of this resource

This document is a resource for quantitative analysts and research commissioners interested in using secondary analysis to compare the mental health and wellbeing of students and non-students in England. Many of the surveys available for understanding what is distinctive about student mental health are listed here, with a brief overview of the survey and links to further sources of information. This is not a comprehensive list, but a starting point.

The focus here is on general population surveys available for download. Surveys that cover the whole adult population (both current students and non-students) can be used to estimate prevalence, nature, and trends in student mental health, and because these are general population surveys they enable students to be compared with the rest of the population using consistently collected data.

Included in this review are surveys that:

- Use good quality random probability sample
- Give national coverage including England
- Are accessible to researchers through the UK Data Service archive¹
- Include data collected from adults (including those aged 18-24) since 2008
- Indicate whether participants were students around the time of the interview
- Include information on mental health, mental wellbeing, mental disorder or general distress
- Ideally, are cross-sectional in design and part of a series, so that trends can be produced

Additionally, some longitudinal and cohort surveys are mentioned, where the data for these are accessible.

There are many benefits to making use of general population surveys, especially for overarching framing and comparison. However, they also come with important limitations:

- Most general population surveys do not have good coverage of students whose main residence is university halls.
- Current students are a small minority of the population, and so also a small minority of general population samples. This means such surveys can be underpowered to examine student mental health in detail.
- Identification of student status in surveys tends to be crude, often without differentiation of education sector or whether it is part or full time study. On some surveys participants in employment are not asked whether they are a student. Questions can be flawed and sometimes biased.

Not covered in this review are the many surveys specifically of students, conducted by universities or others.

¹ Students and researchers can download most surveys immediately and without charge from the UK Data Service archive. Increasingly, some health surveys now require an application to be made to NHS Digital for approval to use the survey data. Realistically, 3 to 12 months should be factored in for this approval process, and it should be noted that approval may not be granted to students who are not employed by an institution.

Cross-sectional surveys

Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS)

What and when

APMS is a series of national mental health surveys conducted in 1993, 2000, 2007 and 2014, with the next planned for 2021. The most recent survey in the series was funded by Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), commissioned by NHS Digital, and conducted by National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and University of Leicester.

Who, how many, and where

The sample each time covers a fresh cross-section of the general population including around 7,500 adults aged 16+ living in private households in England. One adult is interviewed per household.

Cover

The questionnaire covers detailed assessments of different types of mental disorder, use of mental health treatment, and risk and protective factors including debt, poverty, housing conditions, and experience of bullying, abuse and violence.

Mental health coverage

While many surveys include questions that screen for general distress, this survey series is different in that it includes detailed assessments of specific disorders, many identified using clinical diagnostic criteria. Disorders covered include: depression, generalised anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, phobias, psychosis, alcohol dependence, drug dependence, personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, autism, self-harm/suicidal thoughts and behaviours, mental wellbeing. Self-identification and diagnosis are also asked.

Student status information

Student status is only asked of those not in paid employment at the time of the interview. 2% of adults age 16+ were identifiable in the 2014 sample as students (146/7546). It was not established what sector they were students in, e.g. whether further or higher education, nor if studying full or part time.

Strengths

- Validated assessments to diagnostic criteria of different types of mental disorder.
- Trend data to look at change over time.

Limitations

- Biased identification of student status – excluded students in paid employment.
- Permission to use the 2014 data requires an application for NHSD approval (assume 3 to 12 months).

Further information

Survey report: <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748>

Data, measures, documentation: <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/series/?sn=2000044>

Study website: <https://mentalhealthsurveys.org/>

Queries: Sally McManus sally.mcmanus@natcen.ac.uk

Health Survey for England (HSE)

What and when

HSE is a series of national general health surveys conducted annually since 1993, with surveys planned at least to 2022. It is funded by DHSC, commissioned by NHS Digital, and conducted by NatCen and University College London.

Who, how many, and where

The survey each year covers a fresh cross-sectional sample. The sample size varies, but is usually about 8,000 adults (aged 16+) and 2000 children (2-15) living in private households in England. Multiple participants are interviewed within each household.

Cover

Each year the survey provides data on core topics such as general health, social care, smoking and drinking, and objective measures including height, weight and blood pressure. Modules of questions are also asked on specific health issues such as cardiovascular disease, physical activity or respiratory conditions. These modules vary from year to year depending on the survey focus.

Mental health coverage

Most years include the 12 item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), some years also include the 14 item Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), which covers positive aspects of mental wellbeing. HSE 2014 included a module on mental health with questions on self-identified mental disorders, self-reported diagnosis, and medications.

Student status information

One question is asked of all adult participants (aged 16+) regarding whether they are: 'Going to school or college full-time (including on vacation)'

Strengths

- Inclusion of the GHQ12
- Trend data to look at change over time.
- Sample can be combined across years to increase number with student status.

Limitations

- Identification of student status is not ideal
- Permission to use the 2017 data may require an application for NHSD approval (assume 3 to 12 months).

Further information:

Survey report: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=2000021>

Study website: <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/health-survey-for-england/>

Queries: Anne Connolly anne.connolly@natcen.ac.uk

Taking Part

What and when

Taking Part is a series of national surveys about community, culture and leisure participation. It is funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and conducted by Ipsos MORI and NatCen.

Who, how many, and where

The Taking Part survey is a continuous face to face household survey of adults aged 16 and over and children aged 5 to 15 years old in England. It has run since 2005 and interviews around 10,000 people a year.

Cover

The questionnaire covers culture, adult learning, use of libraries, physical activity, leisure, use of online platforms for media consumption and other engagement in leisure activities.

Mental health coverage

Does not cover mental health/disorder, but has the ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, life satisfaction.

Student status information

Everyone is asked whether they are a full-time student at college or university.

Strengths

- Better student identification (includes those in employment)
- Available through the UKDS and includes a longitudinal component

Limitations

- Does not include an assessment of mental disorder.

Further information

Survey report: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/taking-part-survey>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8070>

Online analysis tool: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/taking-part-survey-data-analysis-tools>

Study website: <http://natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/taking-part>

Queries: hannah.morgan@natcen.ac.uk

Taking Part team: takingpart@culture.gov.uk.

Community Life Survey

What and when

The Cabinet Office commissioned the first Community Life Survey in 2012 to look at trends in areas such as volunteering, charitable giving, local action and networks and well-being. It is carried out by the market research company TNS BMRB.

Who, how many, and where

The survey has been carried out three times, at two-yearly intervals, with around 3000 adults each time.

Cover

The questionnaire covers views of the neighbourhood, civic participation, volunteering, activism, and caring responsibilities.

Mental health coverage – psychosocial context

Does not cover mental health/disorder, but has the ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, life satisfaction. Also asks about loneliness.

Student status information

Student status is asked of all participants and includes classification to part and full-time. The question is inclusively worded: 'Are you at present [at school or 6th form college] enrolled on any full-time or part-time education course excluding leisure classes? Please include correspondence courses and open learning as well as other forms of full-time and part-time education course'. Options include: Yes – full time student; Yes – part-time student.

Strengths

- More detailed student status classification.

Limitations

- No assessment of mental disorder.
- Small sample size.

Further information:

Survey report: <https://www.gov.uk/search?q=community+life+survey>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8294>

Study website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey>

Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

What and when

CSEW (formerly the British Crime Survey) is a series of annual, national surveys about crime victimisation and drug use. It is funded by the Home Office and Ministry of Justice and conducted by Office for National Statistics and Ipsos Mori.

Who, how many, and where

The survey is repeated every year with a fresh cross-section of the general population living in private households in England and Wales. Generally, one person is interviewed per household. Since 2009, the survey has been extended to include children aged 10-15 years.

Cover

The CSEW measures the amount of crime and public attitudes to crime in England and Wales by asking people about crimes they have experienced in the last year. This includes crimes not reported to the police, so it is an important alternative to police records.

Mental health coverage

Asks about mental health impact of crime; asks as follow-up question to health conditions whether this related to a mental health condition. The ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items are also included, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, and life satisfaction.

Student status information

Student status is asked of all participants and includes classification to part and full-time. The question is inclusively worded: 'Are you at present [at school or 6th form college] enrolled on any full-time or part-time education course excluding leisure classes? Please include correspondence courses and open learning as well as other forms of full-time and part-time education course'. Options include: Yes – full time student; Yes – part-time student.

Strengths

- Large sample size.
- Good identification of student status.

Limitations

- No assessment of mental disorder.

Further information:

Survey report: <http://www.crimesurvey.co.uk/en/index.html>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=200009>

Study website: <http://www.crimesurvey.co.uk/en/index.html>

English Housing Survey

What and when

The English Housing Survey is the main source of information about people's housing circumstances and the condition of homes in England. The study is funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and carried out by NatCen Social Research.

Who, how many, and where

It is carried out annually. In its current form, it was first run in 2008-09 and covers all England.

Cover

It collects information about people's housing circumstances and the condition and energy efficiency of housing in England.

Mental health coverage

Question on health conditions is followed-up with whether this was mental health related. The ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items are also included, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, and life satisfaction.

Student status information

All participants are asked for multi-coded main current activities, which includes an option for 'full-time student'.

Strengths

- Better coverage than other surveys of student halls of residence.
- Large sample

Limitations

- Does not include an assessment of mental health
- Only establishes full-time students.

Further information:

Survey report: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-housing-survey>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8384n>

Study website: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/taking-part/studies-in-field/english-housing-survey/>

Queries: kate.taylor@natcen.ac.uk

European Social Survey (ESS)

What and when

The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty nations since 2002.

Who, how many, and where

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since its establishment in 2001. Every two years, face-to-face interviews are conducted with newly selected, cross-sectional samples.

Cover

The survey covers some core topics every year and some new, it spans many different aspects of public attitudes, beliefs, identity and personality.

Mental health coverage

There are a few questions on mental wellbeing every year, and in two specific years more detailed modules of questions focused on subjective and mental wellbeing:

<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/findings/wellbeing.html>

Student status information

Everyone is asked, irrespective of whether they are also employed, whether they are: 'in education, (not paid for by employer) even if on vacation'.

Strengths

- Very large sample
- Cross-national comparisons
- Trends over time
- Online analysis tools and immediately downloadable data.

Limitations

- Little on mental disorder.

Further information:

Survey report: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/findings/topline.html>

Data, measures, documentation:

<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=8>

Study website: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

Annual Population Survey (APS)

What and when

APS is a major, complex annual survey series which aims to provide robust survey estimates to the local authority level. It consists of the Labour Force Surveys for each UK country. It's conducted by the ONS.

Who, how many, and where

Adults aged 16+, at least 510 economically active persons for each Unitary Authority (UA)/Local Authority District (LAD) and at least 450 in each Greater London Borough.

Cover

Topics covered include: household composition and relationships, housing tenure, nationality, ethnicity and residential history, employment and training (including government schemes), workplace and location, job hunting, educational background and qualifications.

Mental health coverage

A general question on physical and mental health is followed up with whether this is mental health related condition, impairment, and whether restricts activities. The ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, life satisfaction.

Student status information

Those not working full-time (including part-time workers) are asked whether this was because they are studying or training. Participants are asked whether they were a full-time student 12 months ago.

Strengths

- Extremely large sample

Limitations

- Does not include an assessment of mental disorder.
- Does not ask everyone about student status, nor details of student status.

Further information:

Survey report: <https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/doi/?id=8331#!#3>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=8331>

Study website:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/july2017tojune2018>

Queries: qualityoflife@ons.gov.uk

Food and You

What and when

Food and You provides data about the prevalence of different attitudes, reported behaviour and knowledge about food related issues. It is commissioned by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and currently carried out by NatCen Social Research (NatCen), in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

Who, how many, and where

A biennial, cross-sectional survey of about 3,000 adults aged 16 years and over living in private households in the UK (although Scotland was not in the latest survey).

Cover

Main focus is on the ways in which food is purchased, stored, prepared and eaten. The aims of the latest survey were to provide the FSA with data on food hygiene and food safety and other food-related issues.

Mental health coverage

Does not cover mental health/disorder, but has the ONS4 'subjective wellbeing' items, consisting of rating the following out of ten: anxious yesterday, happy yesterday, things do in life are worthwhile, life satisfaction.

Student status information

The 'main activity' question is asked. Participants are shown a list of activities and asked which their main one is. One of the options is: full-time student/ at school.

Strengths

- Food and You datasets are made easily accessible through the UKDS archive

Limitations

- Only identifies full-time students who are not also in employment.
- No measures of mental disorder.

Further information:

Survey report: <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/food-and-you/food-and-you-wave-four>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-and-you-w4-tech-report.pdf>

Study website: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/food-and-you>

Queries: Dhriti.Jotangia@natcen.ac.uk FSA: foodandyou@food.gov.uk

Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey

What and when

MHCYP is a series of national mental health surveys conducted in 1999, 2004, and 2017. The next is planned for 2024. It is funded by DHSC, commissioned by NHS Digital, and conducted by NatCen and Office for National Statistics.

Who, how many, and where

The sample for the latest survey covers a cross-section of 9,117 children and young people aged 2 to 19 living in private households in England. Information was collected on one child or young person per household. Data are collected from parents, children and teachers (depending on the age of the selected child).

Cover

Detailed assessments of a range of different types of mental disorder using the Development and Wellbeing Assessment (DAWBA) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), use of mental health treatment and services, and risk and protective factors including experience of bullying, social media, and education.

Mental health coverage

Detailed assessments of a range of different types of mental disorder, use of mental health treatment, and risk and protective factors.

Student status information

Most of the sample is of compulsory schooling age, but unlike the earlier surveys in the series (1999 and 2004) the upper age limit to participation was 19 and so some higher and further education students will have been included. However, it was not established what sector they are students in, e.g. whether further or higher education, nor if full or part time.

Strengths

- Excellent assessments of mental disorder and coverage of different types of disorder.

Limitations

- While the survey includes 18 and 19 year olds, the numbers for this subgroup are small and few in the sample are likely to be in higher education.
- Permission to use the 2017 data will require an application for NHSD approval (assume 3 to 12 months).

Further information:

Survey report: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

Data, measures, documentation:

Study website: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-survey/>

Queries: Sally.McManus@natcen.ac.uk

Longitudinal surveys

Understanding Society (USoc)

What and when

The Understanding Society study, or the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), which began in 2009, is conducted by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), at the University of Essex. As a multi-topic household survey, the purpose of Understanding Society is to understand social and economic change in Britain at the household and individual levels. It is anticipated that over time the study will permit examination of short- and long-term effects of social and economic change, including policy interventions, on the general wellbeing of the UK population. The Understanding Society study is a successor to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The BHPS sample forms part of Understanding Society from Wave 2 onwards.

Who, how many, and where

Understanding Society is the largest longitudinal study of its kind - around 40,000 households have contributed. The Study covers people of all ages. Data are collected annually so that short- and long-term changes in people's lives can be investigated. Information is collected on everyone in a household so inter-relations between generations, couples and siblings can be explored. All four countries of the UK are included allowing researchers to compare the experiences of people in different places and in different policy contexts.

Cover

Understanding Society covers a wide range of social, economic and behavioural factors making it relevant to a wide range of researchers and policy makers.

Mental health coverage

The GHQ12 is included every wave, as well as other health and subjective wellbeing items.

Student status information

Identification of student status is better than on the cross-sectional surveys. Not only are all students identified, but they are also classified as either full or part time, and to education sector (FE, HE college, university).

Strengths

- Large sample and longitudinal design enable exploration of impact of becoming a student
- Coverage of England and Scotland with comparable data allows role of introduction of student fees to be considered
- Good assessment of mental health.

Limitations

- Longitudinal analysis can be more complex to set up

Further information:

Survey report: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=2000053>

Study website: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

Queries: contact@understandingsociety.ac.uk,

South East London Community Health (SELCoH) study

What and when

The South East London Community Health (SELCoH) study is an epidemiological cohort study based in Lambeth and Southwark that is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM) and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London; The Guy's and St Thomas' Charity and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Who, how many, and where

There have been three survey waves among residents of Lambeth and Southwark, London. Data can be obtained through application to and in collaboration with Kings, the Principle Investigator is Stephani Hatch.

Cover

Similar to APMS, the questionnaire includes detailed assessments of different types of mental disorder, use of mental health treatment, and risk and protective factors including debt, poverty, housing conditions, and experience of bullying, abuse and violence.

Mental health coverage

Detailed assessments and/or screens of: depression, generalised anxiety disorder, OCD, panic disorder, phobias, psychosis, alcohol dependence, drug dependence, personality disorder, PTSD, ADHD, eating disorder, self-harm/suicidal thoughts and behaviours, mental wellbeing. Self-identification and diagnosis are also asked.

Student status information

Students can be identified in the sample, and classified as either not also employed, employed full time, or employed part-time.

Strengths

- Excellent measures of a range of different disorders
- Longitudinal design

Limitations

- Not national.

Further information:

Survey report:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/selcoh/publications/publications.aspx>

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/selcoh/collaborations/s3collaborations.aspx>

Study website: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/selcoh/index.aspx>

Queries: Selcoh@kcl.ac.uk

Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

What and when

MCS is a birth cohort study following a sample of children born in the UK in 2000.

Who, how many, and where

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), known as 'Child of the New Century' to cohort members and their families, is following the lives of around 19,000 young people born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000-01. The study began with an original sample of 18,818 cohort members. There have been six MCS sweeps to date. The most recent sweep was when cohort members were 14 years old. The next available sweep will contain data collected when they were age 17.

Cover

A wide range of topics have been covered, relevant to the age of cohort members and spanning education, health and social context.

Mental health coverage

Includes the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), other screening measures of general mental health and mental wellbeing, and a single item on self-harm.

Student status information

The cohort members are currently aged around eighteen. The study is listed here as the next wave will see some of them starting on Higher Education.

Strengths

- Longitudinal design.

Limitations

- Not yet old enough to be relevant for understanding current HE student mental health.

Further information:

Survey report: https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls_research/initial-findings-from-the-millennium-cohort-study-age-14-survey/

Data, measures, documentation: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/data-access-training/>

Study website: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/millennium-cohort-study/>

Queries: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/contact/>

Next Steps (LSYPE1) and Our Future (LSYPE2)

What and when

Next Steps is also known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE1). It was previously managed and funded by the Department of Education, and is now managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) and funded by the ESRC. It has a sister cohort called Our Future, or the second Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE2). This later cohort is about nine years younger than the first (similar age to the MCS sample). The two LSYPE cohorts are designed to be comparable.

Who, how many, and where

Next Steps began when young people were aged 14 and in Year 9. It initially followed the lives of around 16,000 people in England born in 1989-90. 7,707 cohort members took part in the age 25 sweep, providing insight into the millennial generation as they leave adolescence and enter early adulthood. The Our Future cohort was born in about 2000. It is intended that the later cohort will track a sample of 13,100 young people in England from the age of 13/14 annually for seven years, through to the age of 19/20.

Cover

This data allows exploration of how educational choices, family resources and experiences in adolescence influenced life chances. Particular themes include education, employment, income and wealth, expectations, attitudes and beliefs, health behaviour, physical and mental health.

Mental health coverage

The 12 item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) has been included in more than one sweep in both cohorts.

Student status information

Detailed questions were included on Next Steps about current and recent education and academic and vocational qualifications currently studying for, including which subject and university.

Strengths

- Longitudinal design.
- Provides a comparison/baseline for student mental health
- Data available through the UKDS archive

Limitations

- High levels of attrition mean the cohorts may not be fully representative of young people in the general population.

Further information:

Survey report focused on mental health: https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/UCL_MentalHealth_Brief_WEB.pdf

General report:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/599871/LSYPE2_w2-research_report.pdf

Data, measures, documentation:

<https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=2000030>

http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/5545/mrdoc/pdf/5545age_25_survey_questionnaire.pdf

Study website: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/next-steps/>

Queries: Lisa Calderwood l.calderwood@ucl.ac.uk