

A picture of mental health services in the NHS in England

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Around 25% of adults in the UK experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any given year. These health problems lead to significant personal, social and economic challenges, such as unemployment, social isolation, homelessness, imprisonment and poverty. Our study examined the volume and cost of mental health services provided by NHS mental health hospital trusts in England.

We calculated the total cost of these services for three financial years (2016/17 – 2018/19) and mapped differences by socio-demographic groups (age, sex, ethnicity and deprivation) and geographical regions for over one million patients in each year. During this time, the number of patients using these services increased by 8% and the total costs rose by 13%, from £5.1 billion to £5.7 billion. The average cost per patient increased by 5% from £4,717 to £4,945. Outpatient and community care costs grew the most, increasing by 27%, compared to 6% for inpatient care costs and a 4% reduction in mental health assessment costs.

There was a stark and growing overrepresentation of young people (aged 11-20) using the services, compared to the general population, representing around 6% of all

patients for females and 4-6% for males. Despite these high volumes, though, the highest cost per patient was for working-age males, averaging £10,000, compared to £6,000 for working-age females.

In terms of ethnicity, while most patients were of a White ethnicity group, accounting for around 75% of the total cost, those from Black ethnic backgrounds had the highest cost per patient of approximately £11,500, compared to less than £5,000 for the White ethnic group. We found a strong link between deprivation and higher mental health costs. Patients living in the most deprived areas accounted for 14% of all patients and their costs increased from £761 million to £840 million over the period. In contrast, patients living in the least deprived areas represented around 7% of the total, with costs rising from £240 million to £304 million. This is reflected in the cost per patient of £5,200 for those in the most deprived areas, compared to £3,600 for those in the least deprived areas.

Regionally, whilst the cost per patient was the highest in London, with an average cost of around £6,400, this cost grew more rapidly in the Northwest (11%) and the Southwest (7.2%) of England.

Variation in cost might suggest that scarce resources could be used more efficiently, while variation in the use of services could suggest there are socio-demographic or geographic inequalities in patient access to care. However, our research did not consider population need, severity of mental health condition, interactions between socio-demographic characteristics, or other factors that could potentially affect the results.

Future research could explore these factors further, helping to disentangle whether the variations our study found are unwarranted. This could support policy makers to identify actions to address any over- or under-utilisation of care and to determine whether there is inequity in the provision of services.

Read the full study on [The Health Foundation website](#).

This research on "What does higher mental healthcare expenditure achieve?" (Award Reference Number: FR-0003758) is supported by the Health Foundation, an independent charity committed to bringing about better health and health care for people in the UK.

November 2024