

Age, economic insecurity, and mental health in England across Covid-19 pandemic lockdown

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Key information

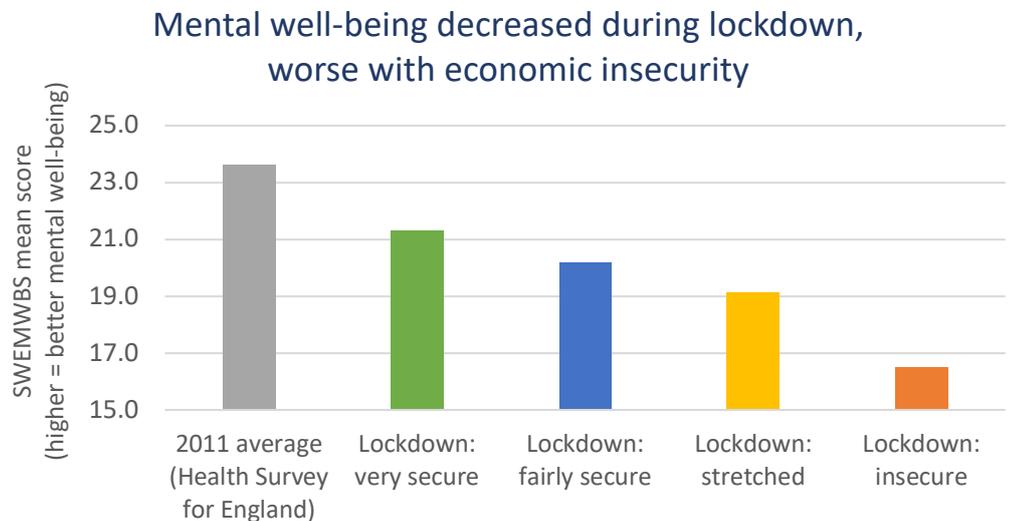
1. Mental well-being decreased across all groups
2. Health outcomes were generally worse among those experiencing economic insecurity
3. Young people reported the worst mental health outcomes, even after taking into account economic insecurity
4. Poorer health outcomes were linked to stress, decreased physical activity, and changed eating patterns

Methods

An electronic questionnaire survey of 1,109 adults age 18 to 87 years across England concerning mental health, eating, and physical activity before and during lockdown was carried out by the University of Oxford between 19th June and 31st July 2020.

Mental health

Lockdown exacerbated pre-existing mental health concerns, particularly: poor sleep, anxiety, persistent sadness, binge eating, and thoughts of suicide. Economic security was inversely related to well-being among the study population.



(SWEMWBS scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater mental well-being)

These quotes from the survey crystallise these quantitative observations:

'The uncertainty has taken a massive toll on my mental health. I've had to reach out to my therapist and resume therapy again.' (Female, 22, South East)

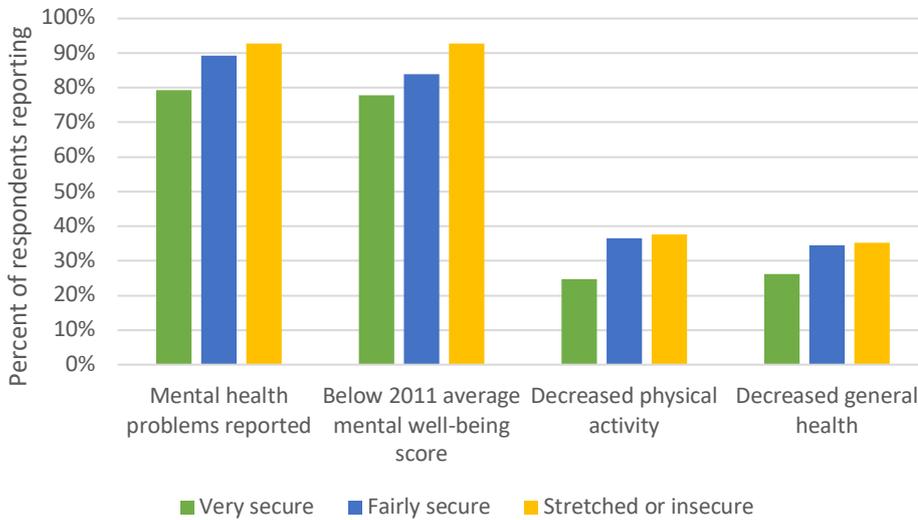
'Increased lethargy, return to depression that had been under control, forgetfulness, irregular sleep, massive anxiety, amplified bad habits/addictions.' (Male, 32, West Midlands)

'...comfort ate to block out the black thoughts. I comfort ate to stop my brain. Mental health which has always been my gremlin reared its head. No control on eating, exercise, life.' (Female, 67, South East)

Economic insecurity

Economic insecurity was a dominant driver of negative health patterns across the board and was associated with poor mental health outcomes and decreases in physical activity during lockdown.

Worse outcomes with economic insecurity



These quotes from the surveys illustrate this association:

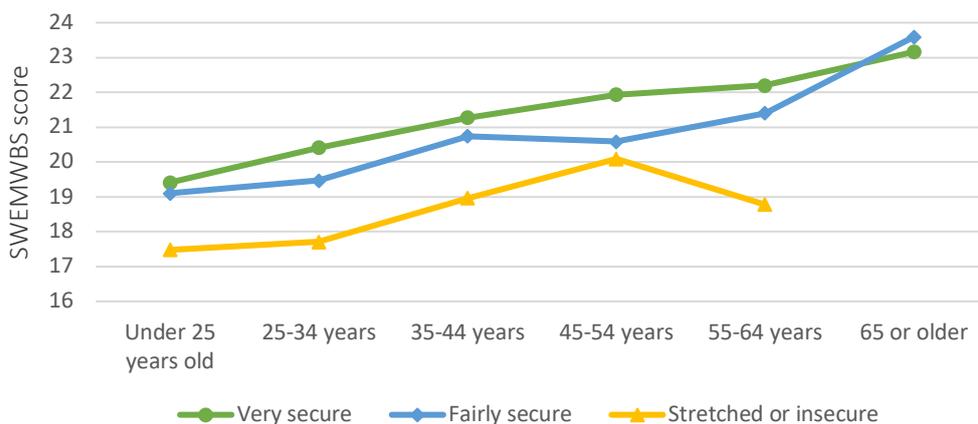
'Anxiety with the loss of income and concern how to manage next year's studies. Slipped through net and [universal] credit minimum. Difficult to focus because of anxiety. Concerned for elderly unwell parents and grandchildren. Found it hard to focus on doing my end of your assessment. [...] At the end I am very tired, stressed with dealing with elderly parents in pandemic.' (Female, 64, South East, insecure)

'I am a lot more anxious and despondent about life, and I am exhausted. I am not sleeping as well, and I am not eating as well either which has made me gain weight and feel sluggish [...] I have become far more sedentary because there is very little time or opportunity in which to exercise between work, childcare, household chores, and household management.' (Female, 37, South West, stretched)

'Lost weight due to change in diet, stressed due to no gym/pub and reduced social life. Also stressed due to balancing work and childcare.' (Male, 28, South East, stretched)

Age and insecurity

Mental well-being increases with economic security and age



Younger people experienced lower mental well-being than older ones, even after controlling for levels of economic insecurity.

'Feeling anxious about the future stemming from the fact that as a recent graduate struggling to find work I feel very useless.' (Male, 22, North West, very secure)

'My mental and emotional health is worse due to being isolated from all my family since I do not have any family who lives in this country.' (Female, 22, East, very secure)

'I have been having a huge issue with anxiety. Before coming back to the family home I couldn't leave my bed. I would just spiral into an anxious mess. The empty shelves and chaotic nature of supermarkets just before lockdown triggered this. [...] Before the pandemic I'd never felt anything like it.' (Female, 20, Greater London, fairly secure)

'Worried about the future constantly. I also find I get angry or irritated much more easily. Less exercise (used to frequent an indoor gym) may be a contributing factor.' (Male, 19, North West, very secure)