

POWER, TRUST AND CHANGE

How the General Election is impacting
young people and their mental health

YOUNGMINDS

INTRODUCTION

With an election looming, we asked young people how they are feeling about politicians, elections and their mental health. Many young people will be voting for the first time this election and all of them will have experienced a pandemic and three Prime Ministers since the 2019 election. It is the first opportunity for them to have their voices heard in a world that has changed hugely over the last few years.

Mental health has come out as one of the top two concerns for young people in this election¹ and many politicians and figures in the public eye are concerned about the amount of young people struggling with their mental health and what impact this will have on society.

Latest NHS data shows probable mental health problems have skyrocketed in the last few years. 1 in 5 young people now have a probable mental health condition up from 1 in 9 in 2017.² There are more referrals to services than ever before³ and a huge unmet need in the wider population of young people.⁴

Our research shows many young people think the main political parties running for the next election don't careⁱ about their mental health and that politicians don'tⁱ listen to them. Change is possible but politicians clearly have a huge task ahead of them to show young people they care about them and their mental health.

1 in 5

young people now have a probable mental health condition up from 1 in 9 in 2017.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,010 UK 18-25-year-olds (weighted to be nationally representative based on age, gender and region), between 16/04/24 - 24/04/24. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council.

Respondents were given a scale to use when answering some questions. Answers have been grouped together in the same way throughout the report, to give overall percentages. For example, 'strongly agree' and 'somewhat agree' have been combined to create one netted 'agree' statistic. See the footnotes for details.

1 Research from ITV and Savanta <https://www.itv.com/news/2024-04-17/major-poll-of-young-people-shows-over-half-say-politicians-dont-care-about-them>

2 NHS England data <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>

3 NHS England data <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-services-monthly-statistics>

4 NHS England data <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>

i Respondents who answered 'No, not really' or 'No, not at all'

KEY FINDINGS



YOUNG PEOPLE SEE THE VALUE IN VOTING

Most young people told us they believe voting is important and are hopeful about the General Election.

48%

of young people we surveyed will be voting for the first time this election.

80%

believe voting is importantⁱⁱ to influence the issues that most affect them.

63%

thinkⁱⁱⁱ the issues young people care about will be part of the upcoming General Election campaign.

YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL DISCONNECTED FROM POLITICS

Young people seem to feel disconnected to politics and not heard by politicians.

60%

don't thinkⁱ politicians listen to young people.

Of those, 70% said^{iv} not being listened to makes them feel powerless.

52%

said not being listened to motivates them^{iv} to take action on issues they care about.

Only **25%**

said^{iv} they believe politicians understand what it is like to be a young person today.

YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T THINK POLITICIANS CARE ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a big concern for young people, but most don't think the main political parties care about it.

64%

of those who don't think politicians listen to young people said^{iv} not being listened to negatively impacts their mental health.

56%

are hopeful^v the parties which might win the General Election will make positive changes for young people's mental health.

Only **43%**

thinkⁱⁱⁱ the main political parties care about young people's mental health.

ⁱⁱ Respondents who answered 'Yes, definitely' or 'Yes, somewhat'

ⁱⁱⁱ Respondents who answered 'Yes, definitely' or 'Yes, to some extent'

^{iv} Respondents who answered 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree'

^v Respondents who answered 'Very hopeful' or 'Somewhat hopeful'

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TAKING ACTION

Mental health is a big concern for young people, but most don't think the main political parties care about it.

52%

said not being listened to by politicians motivates them^{iv} to take action on issues they care about.

46%

of young people have talked with friends and family about an issue that's important to them.

34%

have signed a petition and 28% have posted on social media about campaigns or issues they care about.



Taking action has a positive impact on mental health with over a third of those who have taken action to make their voice heard (36%) saying it has made them feel more hopeful for the future and 32% said it made them feel listened to.

YOUNG WOMEN FEEL LESS CONNECTED AND LESS HEARD

Young women seem to be consistently less hopeful and feel less connected to politics and politicians.

Only **39%**

of young women thinkⁱⁱⁱ the main political parties running for the next election care about young people's mental health compared with 47% of young men.

65%

of young women think politicians don't listen to young people compared to just over half of young men (55%).

76%

of young women who don't think politicians listen to young people said^{iv} not being listened to makes them feel powerless compared to 64% of young men.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND VOTING

Nearly half (48%) of the young people we surveyed will be voting for the first time in the next general election. The results suggest that they see the value in voting: 80% believe voting is importantⁱⁱ to influence the issues which most affect them.

63% thinkⁱⁱⁱ the issues young people care about will be part of the upcoming General Election campaign.

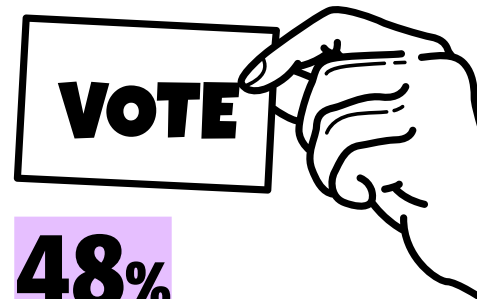
The findings suggest an engaged generation of voters that want to vote and fight for change on the matters they care about. This is an opportunity for politicians to harness and show young people they are listening.

“I am fearful of the next general election and the results for young people. At the moment, it feels like young people are being thrown under the bus and scapegoated as part of so called ‘culture wars’. I fear this is only going to increase as the election draws nearer.”

– Paddy, 19, YoungMinds Activist



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48%

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80%

believe voting is important to influence the issues which affect them.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS POLITICIANS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

The majority of those surveyed (60%) don't thinkⁱ politicians listen to young people and of those, 70% said^{iv} this makes them feel powerless.

32% of young people do not thinkⁱ the issues young people care about will be part of the upcoming General Election campaign. 43% of those who don't think voting is important to influence the issues which most affect them said they didn't see the point in voting while 37% said they didn't know who to vote for.

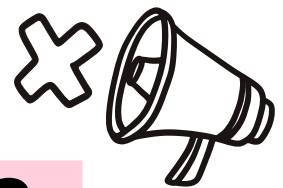
Young people say influencers (49%) and celebrities (37%) understand^{iv} what it is like to be a young person today, with around a quarter thinking older generations (27%) and politicians (25%) understand^{iv}.

To make politicians more relatable, half (50%) of young people want to see younger politicians. Talking openly about issues like how mental health personally impacts them would also help them be more relatable, according to 49%. Having more politicians from different social classes (48%) and diverse ethnic backgrounds (33%) would also make a difference.

It's clear politicians have work to do to be relatable and that a Parliament that reflects the diversity of people in the UK today would be a start. Politicians must also show they are listening to young people – 64% of those who don't think politicians listen to young people said^{iv} not being listened to negatively impacts their mental health. By showing they are listening to young people, politicians can seek to rebuild their trust.

“I am pessimistic about the impact of the next general election on young people’s mental health. At the moment, it seems the needs of young people are being ignored. There does not seem to be an acknowledgement of the adverse experience young people have been through with the pandemic.”

Paddy, 19, YoungMinds Activist



70%

of young people say not being listened to makes them feel powerless.



64%

of young people said not being listened to by politicians negatively impacts their mental health.

POLITICS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Overall, half of young people (50%) do not thinkⁱ the main political parties running for the next election care about young people's mental health.

More than half of young people (56%) are hopeful^v the parties which might win the General Election will make positive changes for young people's mental health.

When asked why young people think political parties don't care, 58% said they have other priorities, over half (52%) think there is a lack of understanding of what young people are going through, while over two in five (41%) think politicians don't believe the scale of the issue. Given the current lack of timely support for young people, it is no surprise many don't think politicians care about their mental health.

To rebuild this trust, politicians must show young people they are serious about championing policies that make their mental health better rather than worse and ensure services are able to keep up with demand. They must also do more to follow through with commitments for young people's mental health, rather than breaking promises and focusing on hot-topic issues that are not tackling the root causes of rising prevalence.

"There is such a huge disconnect between young people and some political parties. Young people should play a big part in politics as it decides our immediate future at such a vulnerable point in our lives. We're trying to make something of ourselves in life and become functioning, independent members of society, but the housing crisis, inadequate mental health services, the cost of living crisis, global warming, the threat of national service, and rising uncertainty in a world changing faster than ever, makes navigating this process incredibly difficult."

– *Matty, 20, YoungMinds Activist*



50%

of young people do not think the main political parties care about young people's mental health.

"Young people should play a big part in politics as it decides our immediate future at such a vulnerable point in our lives."

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TAKING ACTION

Young people are taking action in the absence of mental health support. While many are struggling with their own mental health, they're also helping their friends. Half (50%) have had conversations with friends who are struggling and 38% have taken steps to look after their own mental health.



Despite so many not feeling like they are listened to, there is still a desire to bring about change, and over half (52%) of those who don't think politicians listen to young people use this feeling^{iv} as motivation to take action on issues they care about.

Almost half (46%) of young people have talked with friends and family about an issue important to them while over a third (34%) have signed a petition. 28% have posted on social media about campaigns or issues important to them. Taking action also has a positive impact on their mental health with over a third (36%) of those who have taken action to make their voice heard saying it has made them feel more hopeful for the future, 32% said it made them feel listened to, 31% said it empowered them to speak out more and 28% said they felt part of a community.

This paints a picture of a generation that is connected to each other, fighting for their mental health even when it seems society is not.

"I hope that the next government makes ending the current mental health crisis a priority, particularly with a focus on young people's mental health. From personal experience, I know that early intervention can be crucial in both prevention and recovery, and I hope the next government funds and supports the establishment of early support hubs, and more mental health services for young people."

Chloe, 20, YoungMinds Activist



38%

of young people have taken steps to look after their own mental health.



34%

of young people have signed a petition about an issue that is important to them.

YOUNG WOMEN FEEL LESS CONNECTED AND LESS HEARD

Young women seem to be consistently less hopeful and less connected to politics and politicians than young men.

Only 51% of young women compared to 61% of young men feel hopeful^v the political parties who may win the election will make positive changes for young people's mental health.

Only 39% of young women thinkⁱⁱⁱ the main political parties running for the next election care compared with 47% of young men. And young women were more likely to think political parties don't careⁱ about young people's mental health (54% vs 46%), that politicians don't understand what young people are going through (56% vs 48%) and that politicians don't believe the scale of the issue (45% vs 36%).

This is in spite of young women being more likely to take steps to look after their own mental health: 44% compared with 32% of young men and help a friend to seek support for their mental health, 43% while for young men this is 31%.

Mental health received substantial media coverage, but young women are more likely than young men to think the media doesn't^{vi} paint a true picture of mental health, 41% compared to 29%.

It is clear politicians are failing to engage with young women in particular. This is perhaps related to the unequal representation of women in Parliament and the political sphere, meaning young women are even less likely than young men to find someone they relate to in politics. It may also be connected to the treatment of women in the public eye in recent years, which makes going into politics seem unsafe and unappealing. Their lack of trust in politicians may also come from the fact that among 17- to 25-year-olds, young women are twice as likely as young men to have a probable mental health condition.⁵ This situation will only snowball



Only

51%

of young women think there will be positive changes for young people's mental health.

vi Respondents who answered 'Strongly disagree' or 'Somewhat disagree'

5 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/part-1-mental-health>

if politicians fail to engage with young women's concerns, and if more is not done to ensure female politicians can do their jobs safely.

"I worry that young people are being neglected as parties focus on campaigning and political point scoring in the run up to the general election. I hope that the next government, whoever it is, will put young people at the forefront of their campaign, recognising our role as the next generation and what we can achieve if believed in."

Chloe, 20, YoungMinds Activist

"I hope that the next government, whoever it is, will put young people at the forefront of their campaign."



CONCLUSION

In the last five years, young people have lived through a period of history like no other – a global pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, devastating wars and growing climate anxiety. Their mental health has declined rapidly, with huge rises in referrals to services. Every generation has had to deal with difficulties, but it is clear that growing up today is tough.



The systems young people interact with every day and that are meant to support them are overstretched and historically underfunded. Schools and mental health services should be adapting to the changing world young people are facing, instead they are no longer fit for purpose.

Despite so many young people fighting for help from a broken system, our findings show they are still invested in changing the world around them and supporting each other in the absence of help.

This defiance embodies the power and determination of this generation but the failure of the systems around them is clearly taking its toll. It doesn't have to be this way – young people's mental health impacts us all and we should all be fighting to make things better.

The General Election is a huge opportunity for young people to use their voice by voting, but wider society must help bridge the gaps caused by disconnection and empower them to have their say. We also need a government with the courage to ask itself the right questions. We can no longer pretend the answers lie in tweaks to a broken system. We need to find a way to reduce the pressure young people are facing and we need politicians that don't trivialise the reasons why so many young people are struggling.

If we are truly to turn the tide on the prevalence of mental health problems in young people, politicians must start by trying to build bridges between young people and society. They must listen to the voices of young people and start tackling the deep-rooted causes of why so many are struggling with their mental health.



We need a government with the courage to ask itself the right questions.

We can no longer pretend the answers lie in tweaks to a broken system.



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