

Adult mental health

Good mental health is vital for people's ability to live healthy and productive lives. Living with a mental health issue can have a significant impact on people's lives, contributing to worse educational outcomes, higher rates of unemployment, and poorer physical health.

The pandemic exacerbated many risk factors associated with poor mental health and weakened many protective factors, leading to an unprecedented worsening of mental health in the first two years. Early in the pandemic, the prevalence of anxiety and depression doubled in some European countries (OECD, 2021^[1]); see also Chapter 1 for a discussion focusing on young people). Mental health was typically worst around pandemic peaks, with depression symptoms generally highest around the time of strict confinement measures.

Available data in some countries suggest that in the first half of 2022, depression symptoms were lower than during the peaks of 2020 and 2021, but remained higher than before the pandemic. In France, depression symptoms among adults peaked at over 20% during the lockdowns and were down to 15% in May 2022, a rate still higher than before the pandemic (13.5%). Similarly, in Belgium, while less than 10% of adults had depression symptoms in 2018, this proportion reached 20% and over during the pandemic peaks of 2020 and 2021 and decreased to 16% in March 2022.

In the first half of 2022, the mental health and well-being of many adults in EU countries remained affected by the ongoing impact and uncertainty around the pandemic, to which new issues such as rising cost-of-living and Russia's war against Ukraine have been added. Data from Eurofound's e-survey indicate that in the spring 2022, more than one in two people (55%) could be considered at risk of depression on average across EU countries (Figure 3.13). The share of people at risk of depression ranged from about 40% in Slovenia, Denmark and the Netherlands to about 65% in Poland, Greece and Cyprus. In nearly all countries, the share in the spring 2022 remained higher than in the spring 2020.

The risk of depression throughout the pandemic was higher among women, unemployed people, people with financial difficulties and younger people (Figure 3.14). The rate was nearly 60% among women, compared with 50% among men; nearly 70% among unemployed people, compared with slightly over 50% among those employed; 75% among those reporting financial difficulties compared with about 45% among those who did not report difficulties. Young adults reported poorer mental health than any other age group during the pandemic, a tendency that runs counter to pre-pandemic trends (see Chapter 2).

The pandemic heavily disrupted service delivery, although services were quickly adapted to new formats (e.g. online therapy). European governments have implemented a range of measures to protect and promote mental health, but unmet needs remain large (see Chapters 1 and 2).

Definition and comparability

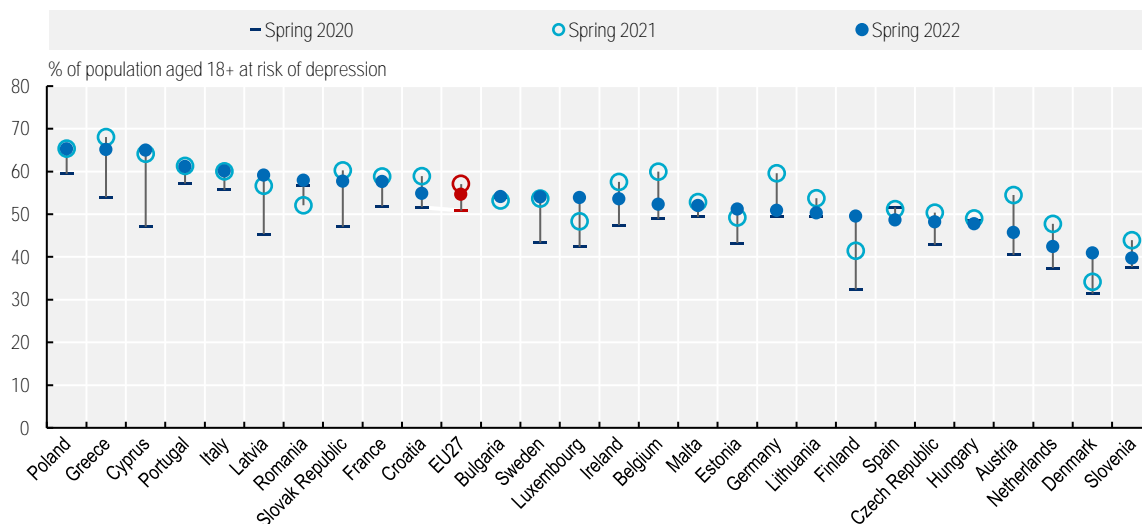
Data on risk of depression are based on different waves of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey*. Questions are based on the WHO module on mental health that includes five items: feeling cheerful, calm, active, rested, and that daily life is filled with interesting things. Responses are based on a 6-point scale ranging from "at no time" to "all of the time". Scores are aggregated to a total score from 0-100, where a higher value represents better mental well-being. People are considered to be at risk of depression if they scored below 50.

References

OECD (2021), *A New Benchmark for Mental Health Systems: Tackling the Social and Economic Costs of Mental Ill-Health*, OECD Health Policy Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4ed890f6-en>. [2]

OECD (2021), "Tackling the mental health impact of the COVID-19 crisis: An integrated, whole-of-society response", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0ccafa0b-en>. [1]

Figure 3.13. Share of adults at risk of depression, 2020-22

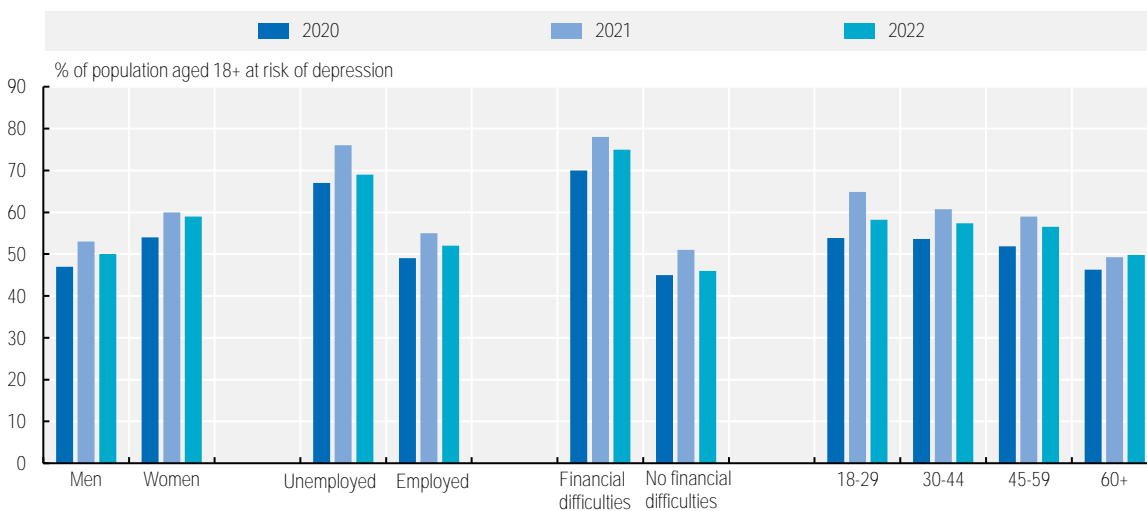


Note: A risk of depression is defined as people with a WHO-5 score of less than 50 on a scale from 0-100.

Source: Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey*.

StatLink <https://stat.link/qvcu7m>

Figure 3.14. Share of adults in the EU at risk of depression among selected groups, 2020-22



Note: A risk of depression is defined as people with a WHO-5 score of less than 50 on a scale from 0-100.

Source: Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey*.

StatLink <https://stat.link/zy645u>



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