

## Mental Health in Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Brief

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### Executive Summary

*Mental health problems affect a substantial proportion of the general population and are associated with considerable individual suffering and economic costs to the State. To determine what effect the COVID-19 pandemic had on the mental health of the Irish population, a study was established to track a nationally representative sample of Irish adults over the first year of the pandemic. Contrary to fears expressed by public mental health officials, there was a statistically significant decrease in the rate of common mental health disorders during the first year of the pandemic. In March/April 2020, 35% of people suffered from a common mental health disorder and in March/April 2021, this figure had dropped to 30%. Furthermore, 9-in-10 adults experienced no change or an improvement in their mental health during the first year of the pandemic. However, 1-in-10 adults experienced an increase in mental health problems, and they were characterised by being younger, living in a city, have or have had mental health problems, being more empathic, and being lonelier. Most Irish people (80%) believe that mental health services need additional funding because of the COVID-19 pandemic while a minority (23%) believe the Government is doing enough to address mental health issues during this time.*

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### The Problem

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Each year, 17% of the European Union's (EU) population experience a mental health disorder, and 84,000 people die as a direct consequence of mental-health related suicides. The economic burden of mental health problems to the EU stands at over €600 billion per year, or more than 4% of the EU's overall GDP.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many prominent public health and mental health officials expressed concern that there would be a surge in mental health problems in the general population.<sup>2,3</sup> The President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the United Kingdom warned that *'the prevalence of mental health issues is also expected to grow enormously due to the repercussions of the virus and the lockdown on mental health'*.<sup>3</sup>

Set against the already high levels of mental health problems in society and their associated human and economic costs, the potential for an enormous and rapid increase in mental health problems prompted us to establish a research study to examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the general adult population of the Republic of Ireland.

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## Key Questions

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We set out to answer the following questions:

1. Was there a change in the proportion of Irish adults suffering from a common mental health disorder during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Are there specific groups in the Irish population who are especially vulnerable to mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What are the risk factors for experiencing poorer mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What do the Irish public think the Government should do about mental health problems?

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## Approach

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To answer these questions, we gathered a nationally representative sample of 1,041 Irish adults. We followed these people for the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic surveying them five times. These surveys took place at the following times:

- Wave 1 data were collected from March 31<sup>st</sup> to April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- Wave 2 data were collected from April 30<sup>th</sup> to May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- Wave 3 data were collected from July 16<sup>th</sup> to August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- Wave 4 data were collected from December 2<sup>nd</sup> to December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.
- Wave 5 data were collected from March 19<sup>th</sup> to April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

We screened for three of the most common mental health disorders at each wave: Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

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## Key Findings

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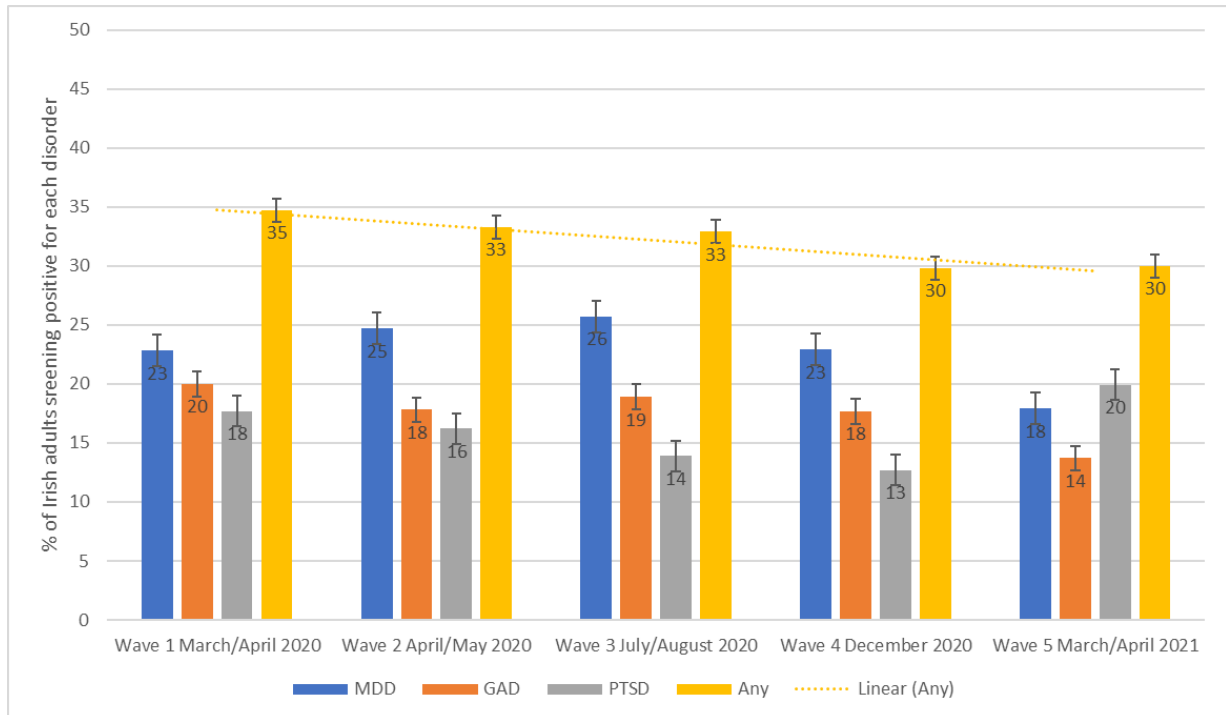
*Question 1: Was there a change in the proportion of Irish adults suffering from a common mental health disorder during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Answer: We found that the proportion of Irish adults suffering from a common mental health disorder significantly decreased from March/April 2020 to March/April 2021 (see Figure 1).

- Rates of MDD (blue columns) decreased by 4.9% from 22.8% to 17.9%
- Rates of GAD (orange columns) decreased by 6.3% from 20.0% to 13.7%
- Rates of PTSD (grey columns) increased by 2.2% from 17.7% to 19.9%
- The proportion of Irish adults suffering from any one of these common mental health disorders (yellow columns and trend line) decreased by 4.7% from 34.7% to 30.0%

Contrary to the concerns of many public health and mental health officials, significantly fewer adults in the Republic of Ireland were suffering from a common mental health disorder one year after the outbreak of COVID-19. These findings are not unique to Ireland. Studies reviewing international data have concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic has had no long-term negative effect on the mental health of the general population.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1. Changes in rates of common mental health disorders in Ireland during COVID-19.



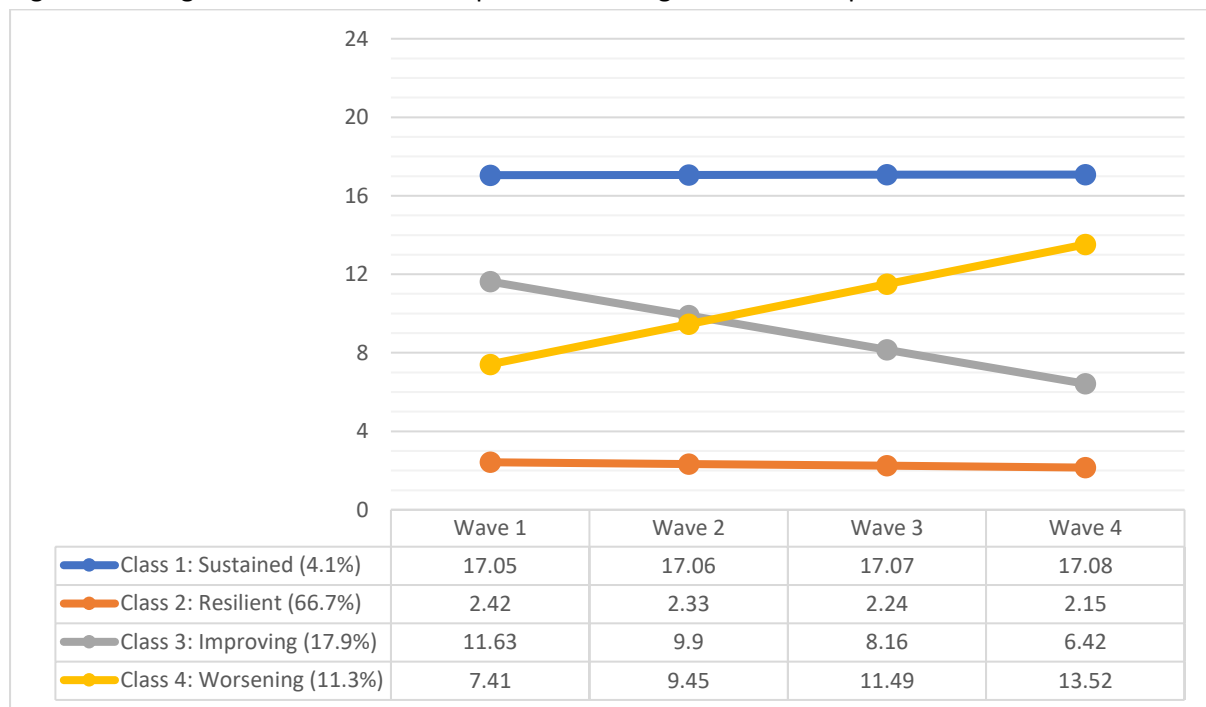
*Question 2: Are there specific groups in the Irish population who are especially vulnerable to mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Answer: Using data from the first four waves of our study,<sup>5</sup> we identified four groups in the population with different mental health responses during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2):

- Group 1 (the orange line) included 67% of people, and these people were characterised by having few mental health problems at the outset of the pandemic and who continued to have few mental health problems during the pandemic.
- Group 2 (the blue line) included 4% of people, and these people were characterised by having significant mental health symptom problems at the outset of the pandemic and who continued to have significant mental health problems during the pandemic.
- Group 3 (the grey line) included 18% of people, and these people were characterised by experiencing decreasing levels of mental health problems during the pandemic.
- Group 4 (the yellow line) included 11% of people, and these people were characterised by experiencing increasing levels of mental health problems during the pandemic.

Most Irish adults (71%) experienced no change in their mental health during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 18% experienced an improvement. However, a small proportion (11%) experienced a decline in their mental health during the pandemic. These findings are consistent with observations from Germany and the United Kingdom.<sup>6,7</sup>

Figure 2. Changes in the mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic.



*Question 3: What are the risk factors for experiencing poorer mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Answer: Having identified those Irish adults who experienced increasing mental health problems during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (the yellow line in Figure 2), we set about determining what demographic and psychosocial factors predicted having poorer mental health during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> We examined a wide array of possible risk factors and found that six variables predicted poorer mental health during the pandemic:

- Younger age
- Living in a city
- Having been treated for a mental health problem in the past
- Being currently treated for a mental health problem
- Having higher levels of empathy
- Having higher levels of loneliness

*Question 4: What do the Irish public think the Government should do about mental health problems?*

Answer: In April/May of 2020 (Wave 2), we asked the Irish public to indicate their agreement with the following statements:

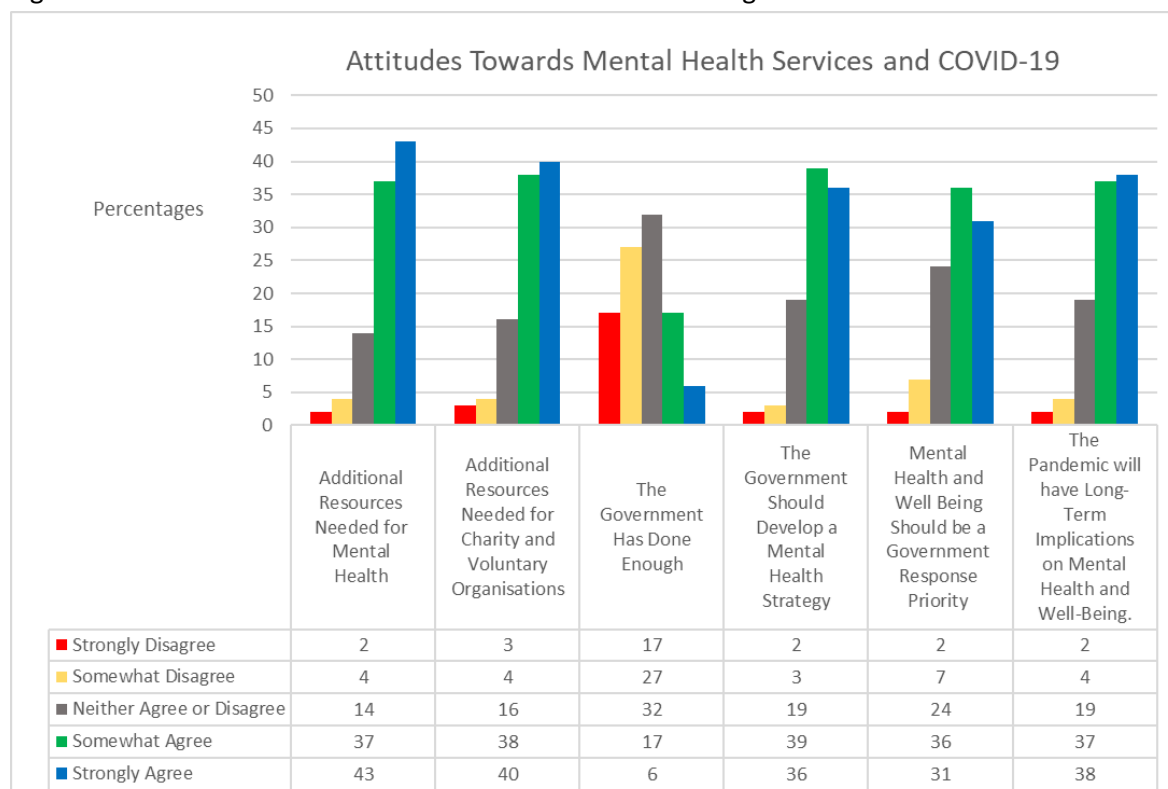
- a. Mental health services require additional resources to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.
- b. Charity and voluntary organisations require additional resources to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.
- c. The government has done enough to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.
- d. The Government should develop a mental health strategy to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- e. Mental Health and well-being should be a priority in the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- f. The COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term implications for the mental health and well-being in our society.

Figure 3 shows the proportion of people who agreed and disagreed with these statements.

- 80% agreed that mental health services require additional resources.
- 78% agreed that mental health charity organisations require additional resources.
- 23% agreed that the Government has done enough to address mental health issues.
- 75% agreed that Government should have a mental health strategy.
- 77% agreed that the Government should make mental health a priority.
- 75% agreed that the pandemic will have long-term implications for public mental health.

Most Irish people believe that the Government should prioritize mental health issues, and that additional resources should be provided to mental health services. However, only a minority of Irish adults believe that the Government is doing enough to address mental health issues.

Figure 3. Public attitudes toward mental health services during COVID-19.



### What can be done?

These findings are, by and large, extremely positive. These data show that the Irish adult population is resilient and has coped well with the stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a small but statistically significant drop in the number of people who are suffering from a common mental health disorder during the first year of the pandemic. Continued monitoring of the public’s mental health is warranted as normal life resumes in the country.

Moreover, 7-in-10 adults experienced no change in their mental health during the pandemic, while about 2-in-10 experienced an improvement in their mental health. Thus, approximately 9-in-10 Irish adults have experienced no change or an improvement in their mental health during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This clearly shows that the normative mental health response during this time of crisis is stability or improvement. However, a small proportion of people in the population – about 1-in-10 adults – suffered a decline in their mental health during the pandemic, and these people are typically younger, living in a city, have or have had mental health problems, are more empathic, and are lonelier. Limited mental health resources should be directed towards identifying and helping the small proportion of people most adversely affected by the pandemic.

Approximately 8-in-10 Irish adults see mental health as an issue that the Government should prioritise, and should do more to address, while only about 2-in-10 believe that the Government has done



enough to address mental health issues. There is a clear gap between what the Irish public value and what they perceive the Government as valuing. More Government investment to address mental health issues is required, and more public discussion of these problems is likely to result in public support.

Finally, it should be recognised that approximately 1-in-3 Irish adults were suffering from a common mental health disorder at any time during this study period. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has not exacerbated this problem, mental health remains a serious problem in Irish society. While the population are incredibly resilient, mental health problems pervade all of society and it is widely viewed as an area of under-investment by the Government.

## References

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