



Mental Health  
Australia  
Media release

## New national research shows alarming disparities in access to mental health care across Australia

10 October 2023

Stark disparities in access to mental health care services across Australia have been uncovered in groundbreaking new data modelling research from Mental Health Australia and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) at the University of Canberra.

Findings from the **Mapping Mental Health Care research project**, released on 10 October for World Mental Health Day, reveal that many communities with higher mental health care needs are disproportionately underserved, putting a spotlight on the urgent need for systemic mental health reform to ensure equitable access to care for all Australians.

The *Mapping Mental Health Care* research highlights demographics of major concern include people living regionally and remotely, younger people, people on low incomes, people who are unemployed, and people in single-parent households.

The findings underscore a concerning pattern of inequity, says Mental Health Australia CEO, Carolyn Nikoloski.

“It is completely unacceptable that some people who are more likely to experience high psychological distress and mental health conditions have less access to the services and supports they require,” Ms Nikoloski says.

“Government data shows there are nearly twice the number of psychologists per 100,000 population in major cities compared to regional areas, and more than twice as many psychiatrists. Our policymakers should be working towards eliminating this divide.”

The *Mapping Mental Health Care* research shows a clear pattern of lower use of Medicare-subsidised mental health services in regional and remote areas, despite the higher rates of psychological distress and mental health conditions experienced compared to major cities.



	% of people with high psychological distress	% of people with long-term mental health conditions	% of people accessing Medicare-subsidised mental health-specific services
Major Cities of Australia	20.72	21.81	11.76
Inner Regional Australia	24.91	26.91	11.17
Outer Regional Australia	23.90	25.46	9.02
Very Remote Australia	22.39	25.60	5.15
Remote Australia	22.17	28.69	6.00

The data also reveals the use of Medicare-subsidised mental health services is almost twice as high in affluent socioeconomic areas such as Sydney's Eastern Suburbs North region (15 per cent), compared to lower socioeconomic areas such as Auburn in Western Sydney (7 per cent), despite higher estimated rates of psychological distress and mental health conditions.

These inequities reflect workforce distribution challenges and financial barriers to accessing mental health care.

"We are calling on the government to work closely with the sector, and with people with lived experience and their family and carers, on the development and implementation of a multi-year mental health reform roadmap," Ms Nikoloski says.

"Mental Health Australia welcomes Minister Butler's attention to inequity in the mental health system in the wake of the Better Access evaluation, but now we need action."

Successive governments have been working to roll out free mental health services in priority areas through Head to Health Centres, and these additional services are welcome, however, broader change is needed to address fundamental inequities in the system.

"Through the roadmap, the Australian Government should ensure all people in Australia can get support for their mental health early, before problems snowball, by increasing access to early intervention and digital mental health supports. People should be able to access appropriate support, regardless of income or postcode," Ms Nikoloski says.

Mapping Mental Health Care presents some of the first public data on use of Primary Health Network (PHN) commissioned mental health services by region. These services are an important way of addressing service gaps and meeting local needs across the country, but only around 0.3 per cent to 1.6 per cent of the population in each region access these services. Further work is required to improve regional planning and commissioning of services and ensure transparency and accountability in outcomes.

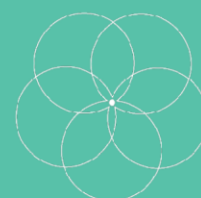
## ENDS

[Mental Health Australia CEO Carolyn Nikoloski is available for interviews](#)

View the Mapping Mental Health Care research project here:  
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/27450e995475415ea9263333f48b9545>Media Contact:  
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## Mapping Mental Health Care supplementary data

[The Mapping Mental Health Care](#) research highlights demographics of major concern including people living regionally and remotely, younger people, people on low incomes, people who are unemployed, and people in single-parent households.

The data below shows estimates of rates of people across different demographic groups experiencing high psychological distress and mental health conditions. These estimates are calculated from the National Health Survey 2020-2021, combined with data from the 2021 ABS Population and Housing Census and 2019-20 ABS Survey of Income and Housing, through NATSEM's Spatial Microsimulation model.

	Estimated % high psychological distress	Estimated % long term mental health conditions
All people	22	23
People aged 15 - 24yo	29	28
People aged 25 - 44yo	27	25
People aged 45 - 64yo	19	22
People aged 65 and over	12	16
Females (aged 15 and over)	23	25
Males (aged 15 and over)	20	21
People in single parent household	35	39
People in single person household	30	31
People in other family household	22	27
People in couple with children household	20	19
People in couple only household	18	19
People who are unemployed	38	37
People aged 15 to 64 who are not in labour force	31	32
People who are employed part time	24	26
People who are employed full time	19	19
People aged 65 and over who are not in labour force	14	17
People in low income households	24	22
People in lower middle income households	24	26
People in higher middle income households	21	23
People in high income households	17	19

