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Mental health survey of 16,000 UK adults finds up to one in four hold views indicating prejudice and exclusion against people with mental illness, with highest levels seen in London

Comprehensive study of knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, and barriers in each of 175 regions reveals pockets of concern across the four nations

LONDON, October 8, 2021 — On the eve of World Mental Health Day 2021, Surgo Ventures today released results from a comprehensive general-population mental health survey of 16,324 UK adults — **finding that in parts of the UK, up to one in four adults hold prejudiced views toward people with mental illness**, compared to the national average of one in seven. Prejudice is also rife in people who experienced mental illness themselves.

The survey, administered by research technology firm [Lucid](#) from August 15 through September 30, 2021, took the pulse of mental health awareness, stigma, prejudice, and access barriers among adults in each of 175 regions¹ across the four nations of the UK — the first general population study that covers all these dimensions at an unprecedented level of local detail.

“We cannot make mental health care for all a reality until we start tackling prejudice when and where it exists.” said Dr. Sema K. Sgaier, Co-Founder and CEO of Surgo Ventures and Adjunct Assistant Professor at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. “Our experience with COVID vaccination programs shows that campaigns that tackle prejudice against mental health would be most effective if implemented locally by the relevant civic and health authorities. High-level national and regional estimates can often miss out on local nuances.”

Surgo assessed participants’ responses to six negative statements² in the Community Attitudes toward the Mentally Ill scale. In doing so, their survey results revealed **an urgent need to fight prejudice and exclusion in local communities across the UK, particularly in major cities including London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Coventry**. Research³ shows that prejudice can lead to public acts of discrimination and stigma and discourage people from seeking care.

¹ International Territorial Level 3 regions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Grouped council areas in Scotland

² In the survey, ‘prejudice and exclusion’ were assessed by asking respondents about the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with six negative statements:

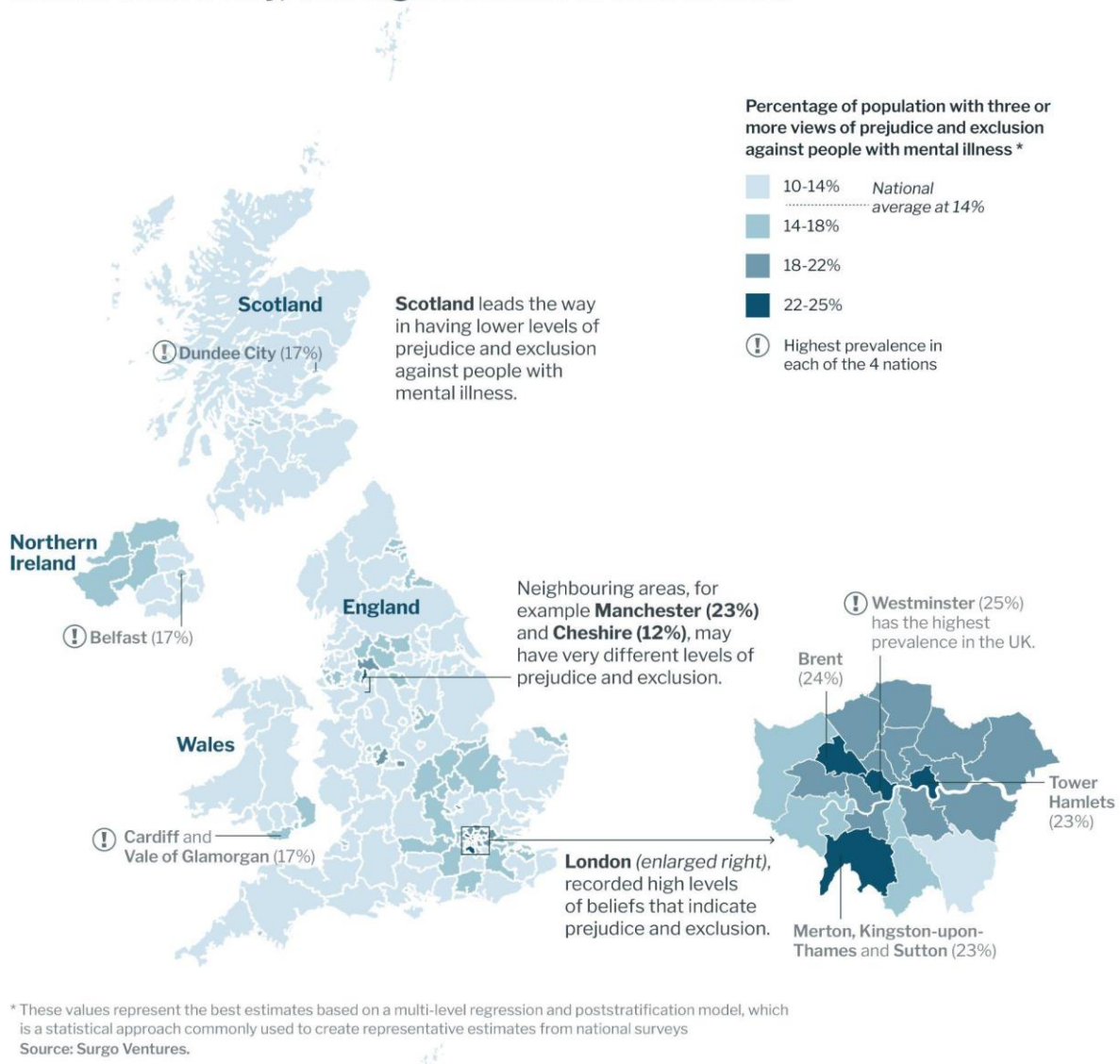
- One of the main causes of mental illness is a lack of self-discipline and will-power.
- There is something about people with mental illness that makes it easy to tell them from normal people.
- People with mental illness don’t deserve our sympathy.
- I would not want to live next door to someone who has been mentally ill.
- It is frightening to think of people with mental problems living in residential neighbourhoods.
- People with mental health problems should not be given any responsibility.

³ Source: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6609872/>

Surgo found that **young men aged 18-24 showed the highest levels of prejudice** (32% agreed or strongly agreed with at least 3 of the statements) while **women aged 65+ showed the lowest levels of prejudice** (only 4% agreed or strongly agreed with at least 3 of the statements).

Thanks to Surgo’s research, for the first time ever, decision makers and health organisation leaders can better understand which communities could benefit from localized action to reduce prejudice:

Views contributing to prejudice and exclusion against people with mental illness vary, with highest levels seen in London



The above map reveals that **there are pockets of prejudice against people with mental illness in various regions of the UK:**

- In general, **Scotland leads the way** in having lower levels of prejudice and exclusion.
- **London recorded the highest levels** of beliefs that indicate prejudice and exclusion.
- **Some neighbouring areas**, for example Manchester (23%) and Cheshire (12%), **have very different levels** of prejudice and exclusion.

The survey results released today are the first in a series of analyses Surgo Ventures will release over the next three months that uncover the knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, and barriers to care that influence access to mental health care across the UK⁴. A selection of top-level insights from the survey include:

- More than **one-third — 38% — of respondents reported having experienced psychological, emotional or mental health difficulties** that significantly affected their day-to-day functioning before the pandemic.
- **An additional 13% experienced these difficulties for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic**, representing a 33% increase.
- Among those who had experienced significant mental health difficulties in the past, **27% chose not to seek professional care at all**.
- About **one in three survey respondents met the screening criteria for potential diagnosis of anxiety (35% of respondents) or depression (34% of respondents)**. And 25% of respondents reported meeting the criteria for both depression and anxiety.
- **Young adults (those aged 18-34) are bearing the brunt**. Nearly 45% of people in that age group reported that on more than half the days or nearly every day, they felt one or more of: feeling nervous, being unable to stop worrying, having little pleasure in doing things, or feeling depressed or hopeless. This compares to 25% in those aged 35 or over and just 12% in those aged 65 or over.
- **Experience with the care system matters, whether positive or negative**, since it influences the likelihood of seeking care again if needed. Among those who received mental health care, 50% would seek care as soon as possible (e.g. within a month) if they were to face similar problems in the future, and 90% would do so within six months.
- **Preference for support channels varies by ethnicity**: Across the UK, respondents were most likely to reach out for support to health professionals (63%), family (54%), or friends (49%). However, support teams at their workplace, university or school were particularly important among Asians or Asian British (39%) and among Black or Black British (41%), compared to 25% among those identifying as White.
- **Strong demand for direct personal support rather than virtual alternatives**: Across all ethnic groups and all age groups, a significant proportion (71%) reported a strong preference for individual face-to-face sessions to receive this support — far higher than those who would accept virtual alternatives such as video calls (20%-40%).

“We encourage community mental health organisations, civic organisations, and Health Boards and Integrated Care Systems to contact us to get early access to results relevant to their region as they become available,” said Dr. Sgaier. “We intend to share the data set with researchers via HDR UK’s DATAMIND initiative in an effort to generate more insights from this extensive dataset.”

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About Surgo Ventures: Surgo Ventures, with headquarters in Washington, DC and a hub in the United Kingdom, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to solving health and social problems with precision. We do this by bringing together all the tools available from behavioral science, data science, and artificial intelligence to unlock solutions that will improve and save lives. We work globally; in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in low- and middle-income countries on issues including [COVID-19](#), tuberculosis, maternal and child health, housing, and more. Visit us at www.surgoventures.org.

⁴ This includes Wellbeing questions from the Office of National Statistics, and validated scales from [the INDIGO Network](#). Surgo Ventures would like to gratefully acknowledge the timely support and guidance of Prof Sir Graham Thornicroft, leader of the INDIGO Network.