

# Mental Health Inequalities in Times of Social Upheaval

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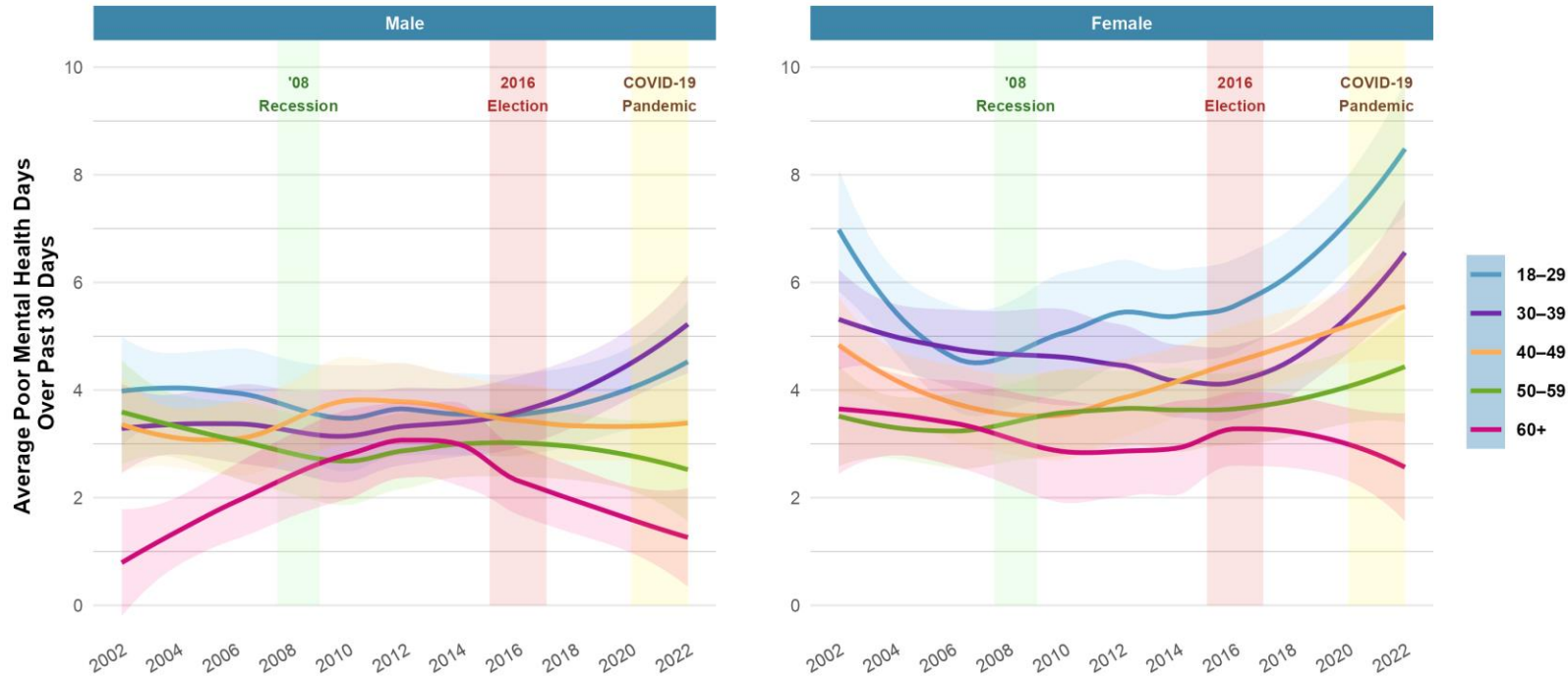




## We aimed to tackle the following questions:

1. How have patterns of self-reported poor mental health days changed among Americans from 2002 to 2022 across different age groups and genders?
2. Do defining national events (ie. economic recessions, political polarization) correspond to shifts in mental health across demographic groups?

## Defining Events and Mental Health: Americans by Age Group and Gender in 2002-2022



Notes:  $n = 13,118$ , Smoothed Conditional Means (Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing, 95% CI, Span: 0.75). American General Social Survey 1972-2022 Cumulative File, The National Data Program for the Social Sciences. Sample reduced to 2002-2022. Mental health measured in self-reported poor mental health days over the previous 30 days.

### Changing Patterns:

- Women → more poor MH days (all ages)
- Highest reports on poor MH: young women <30, men 40–49
- Post-COVID: sharper youth & gender divide

### National Events and Mental Health:

- Spikes: 2008 recession | 2016 election | COVID-19
- Men 40–49 ↑ in 2008
- Younger men & women <49 ↑ during COVID

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Mental health has become a barometer in measuring societal well-being as it shapes labour productivity, healthcare costs, and family stability. Persistent disparities in mental health across gender and age groups reveal how social structures, life-course transitions, and role expectations distribute psychological strain unevenly (Yu 2018; Moen 2022). Exogenous shocks, as political, economic and health crises intensify psychological strain and have compounded effects on some groups. Women, for example, bear disproportionate mental health burden during the COVID -19 pandemic (Ariha et al., 2024), while younger adults experience heightened anxiety tied to economic precarity and social instability (Vancea and Utzet 2017).

Our study investigates how patterns of self-reported poor mental health days changed among Americans between 2002 and 2022, across gender and age groups. We further explore whether defining national events (the 2008 financial crisis, 2016 Elections as a point of heightened political polarization, the COVID-19 pandemic) correspond with shifts in mental health patterns.

### 3. Data and methods:

Using data from the American General Social Survey (2002-2022) we analysed trends on the average number of self-reported poor mental health days per month, by survey year. We stratified results by gender and age cohorts, constructing time-series visualizations to identify both long-term trends and event-linked fluctuations.

### 4. Key findings:

Our analysis reveals three major patterns. First, women at all times and across all ages report more poor mental health days compared to men. Second, major crises have a compounding effect on the gender gap on self-reported mental health days. Third, we see a sharp rise in reported poor mental health days for younger women (18-34) beginning in the late 2010s, intensifying with COVID-19.

### 5. Implications:

These findings underscore the interplay between political-economic conditions and mental health. Structural shocks, whether economic recessions or heightened political polarization, reveal how uncertainty translates into individual psychological distress. Policymakers should view mental health not only as a clinical or individual concern but as a sensitive indicator of social stability and inequality. Without structural responses (i.e. more equitable labour protections, gender-sensitive social policy), each new crisis risks deepening the uneven psychological toll of social uncertainty.

## REFERENCES

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