Understanding inequalities in access to mental health services among children and young people in England

By Sarah Rufai
Department of Population, Policy and Practice, UCL GOS Institute of Child Health

1. INTRODUCTION

- Children and young people's (CYP) mental health is a growing public health priority in England, yet access to services remains unequal[1].
- Current research suggests that the prevalence of poor mental health and service use can be influenced by socioeconomic factors, but more evidence is required[1].
- Geographical location is another potential determinant affecting service use, and this requires further exploration[1].

2. OBJECTIVES

- To explore national trends in mental health service use among CYP in England.
- To examine whether there is an association between Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and referral rates to mental health services.

3. METHODS

Data sources:

- Mental Health Services Dataset (MHSDS) – a national NHS dataset capturing the activity for people in contact with mental health services.
- Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) – a composite measure of relative area-level deprivation using census-derived data across multiple domains.

Study population:

- CYP aged 0-25 referred to mental health services between 2016-2023.

Analysis:

- We performed descriptive analyses of aggregated referral data at the local authority (LA) level across 326 LAs in England to examine temporal trends.
- We examined the correlation between LA-level referral rates and IMD scores using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

4. RESULTS

- The overall national trend demonstrates a general increase in average and maximum rates of referral per 1000 to mental health services among CYP from 2016 to 2023.
- On average, 2017 had the lowest referral rate (18.15 per 1000) and 2023 had the highest referral rate (87.58 per 1000).
- There is a weak positive association between the average rate of referral per 1000 and IMD score (r = 0.28).

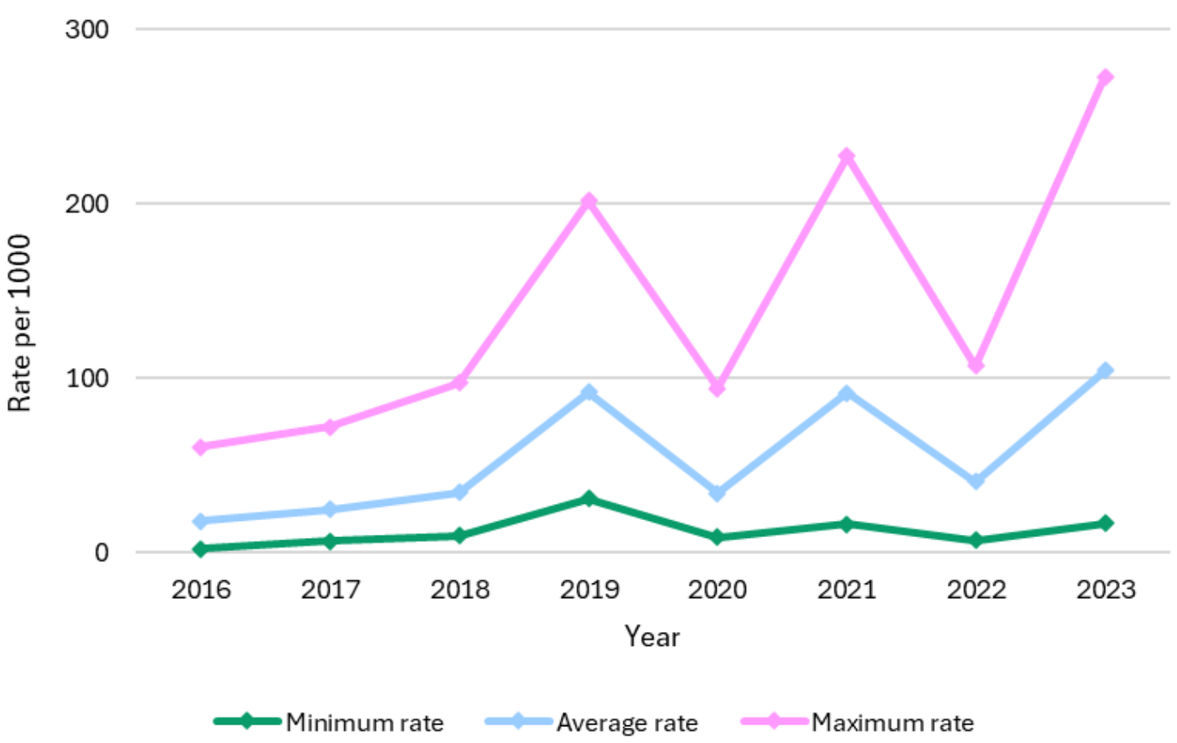

Figure 1. National trends of the rate of referral per 1000 to mental health services among children and young people (CYP) under 25 in England, 2016-2023.

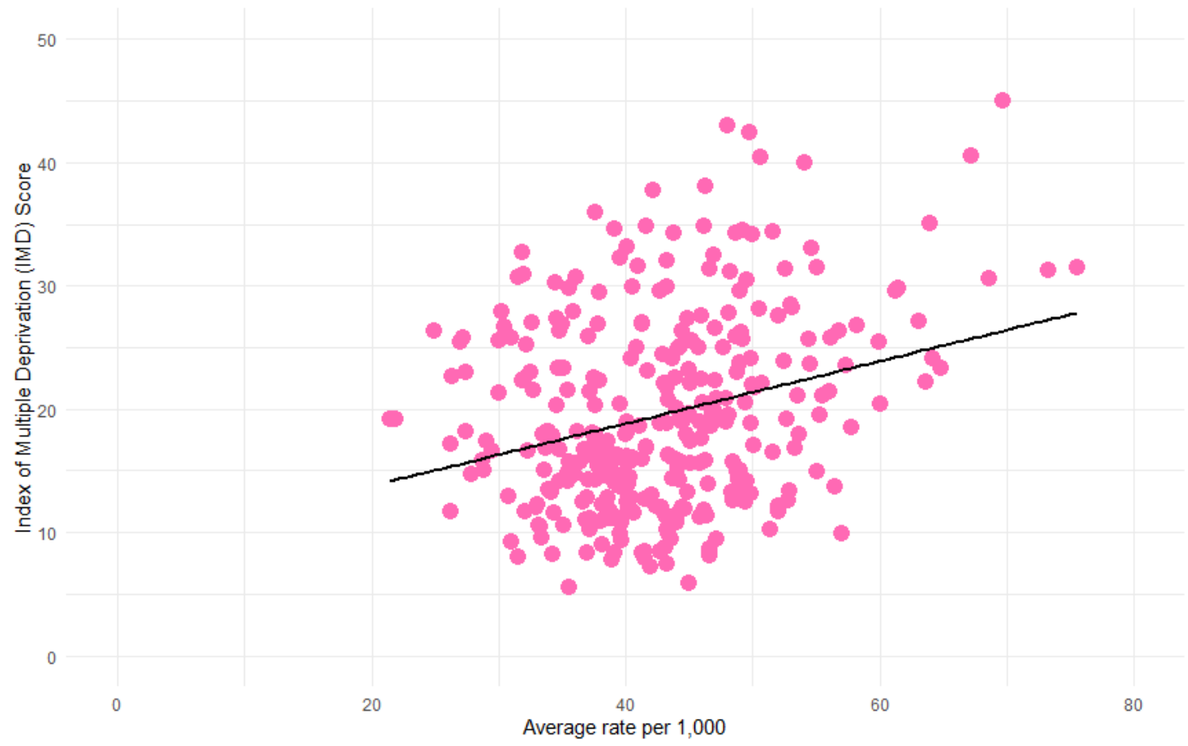

Figure 2. Relationship between IMD scores and the average referral rate per 1000 to mental health services among children and young people (CYP) under 25 for each local authority in England, 2016-2023.

5. DISCUSSION

- Referral rates to mental health services rose steadily from 2016 to 2023, with sharp declines in 2020 and 2022—reflecting systemic disruptions (COVID-19 pandemic and cyber-attack).
- The weak positive correlation between deprivation and referral rates at local authority level suggests area-level deprivation does not solely influence referral patterns.
- Research shows that even in the most deprived areas, where mental health issues are more likely, referral rates are not always higher[1]. This may reflect other barriers to access (e.g., service capacity or referral criteria) and individual-level socioeconomic factors that are not captured by area-level metrics like the IMD[2].

6. CONCLUSION

- Overall, mental health services referrals among CYP have generally increased over the last eight years.
- Future work should use individual-level socioeconomic data, such as household income or educational level, allowing for deeper insights into barriers and better targeting of services to ensure equitable access.

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[1] Ball, W.P., Black, C., Gordon, S., Ostrovska, B., Paranjothy, S., Rasalam, A., Ritchie, D., Rowlands, H., Rzewuska, M., Thompson, E., Wilde, K. and Butler, J.E. (2023). Inequalities in children's mental health care: analysis of routinely collected data on prescribing and referrals to secondary care. *BMC Psychiatry*, [online] 23(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-022-04438-5.
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