

**Revisiting the Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 on Young Adults in the UK:
Long-Term Trends, Temporary Setbacks, and Recovery**
Long-Term Trends, Temporary Setbacks, and Recovery

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Overview

Study covers the mental health of young adults (16-29 years) in the UK from 2001 to 2023.

Uses data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), its predecessor (BHPS) and its COVID-19 survey.

Focuses on long-term trends and the specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Research Objectives



Examine mental health trends before, during, and after COVID-19.



Understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on young adults' mental health.

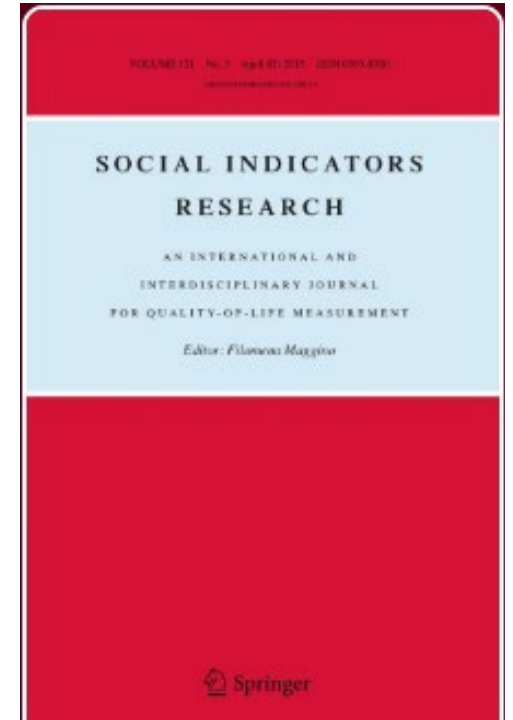


Analyse the influence of survey design differences in existing comparisons between the COVID and pre-COVID period.

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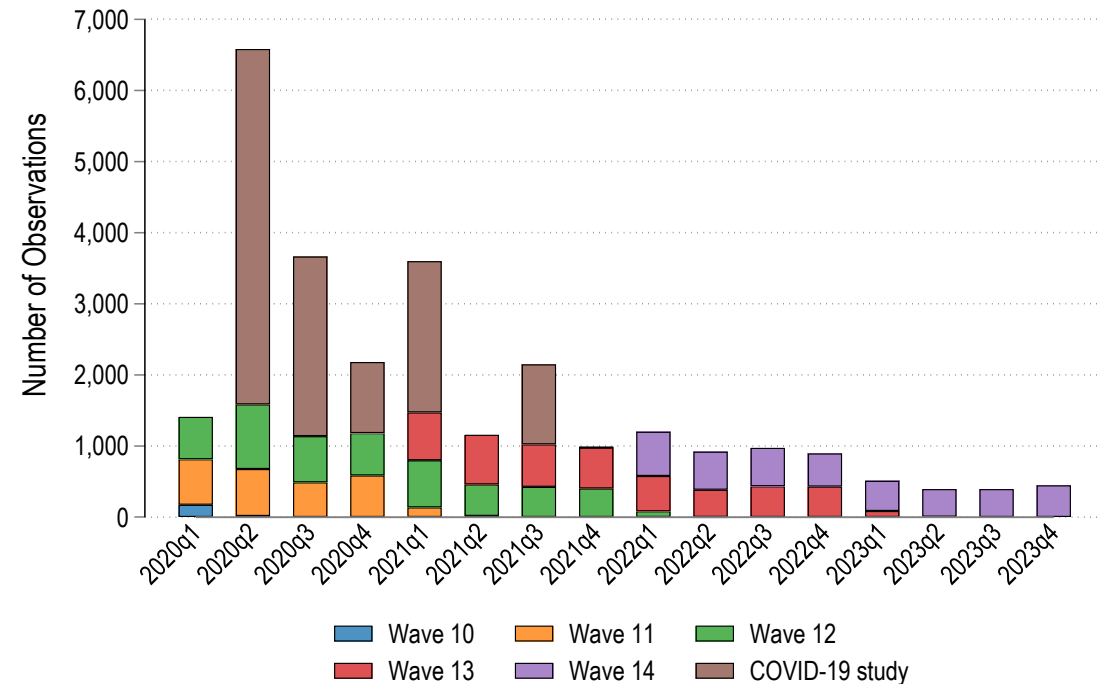


Literature Review

- Long-term decline in young people's subjective well-being in the UK and elsewhere (Blanchflower, Bryson, et al., 2024).
- Evident in lower life satisfaction (Gagné et al., 2022), increased symptoms of distress (Zhang et al., 2023), rise in self-harm (McManus et al., 2019).
- COVID-19 worsened mental health, particularly for young people (Pierce et al., 2020; Banks and Xu, 2020; Anaya et al., 2023).
- However, recent meta-analyses of global longitudinal studies found no or minimal pandemic-related mental health effects (Sun et al., 2023).
- Self-reported measures of well-being can be sensitive to small changes in survey design and administration (Conti & Pudney, 2011; Davillas et al., 2023).
- Limited research into mental health developments post-pandemic (Kozak et al., 2023; Neugebauer et al., 2023)

Data

- BHPS, UKHLS mainstage, and UKHLS COVID-19 surveys.
- Fully integrated panel studies.
- UKHLS was online between mid-March 2020 and April 2022.
- DV: Psychological distress measured by GHQ-12 (Likert score, threshold)
- IV: age, sex, ethnicity, in work, number of <5 in the household, income rank, sample/ interview date, dummies for the COVID-19 study



Analytical Approach

$$MH_{it} = \alpha_i + g(t) + X_{it}\beta + \delta_t D_{it} + \gamma_t COVID(t) + \gamma_s COVID(s) + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Individual Fixed effects
(e.g. cohort effects)

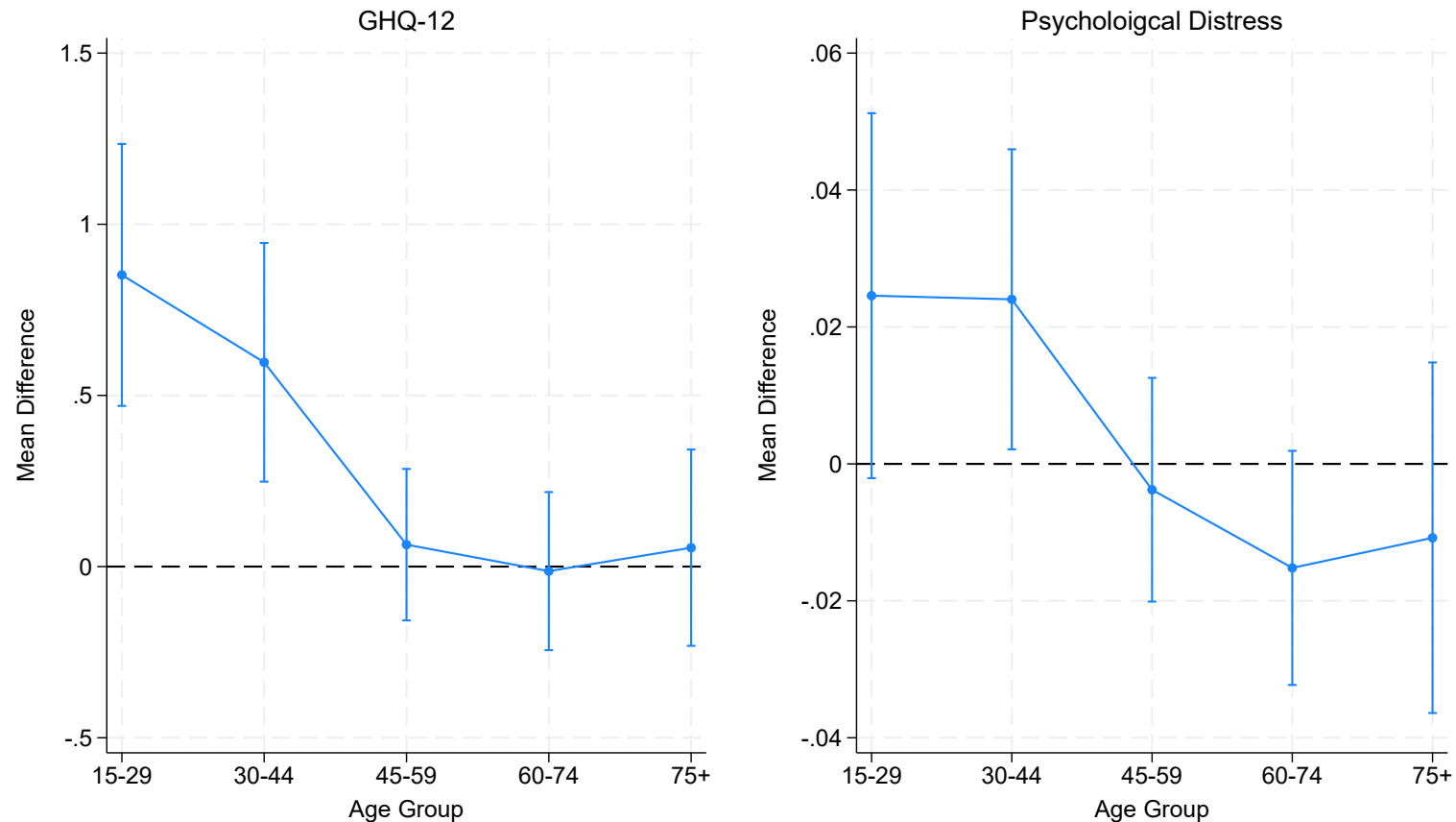
Time trend / Period effect

Control variables,
including
life course markers
(living as a couple,
parenthood)

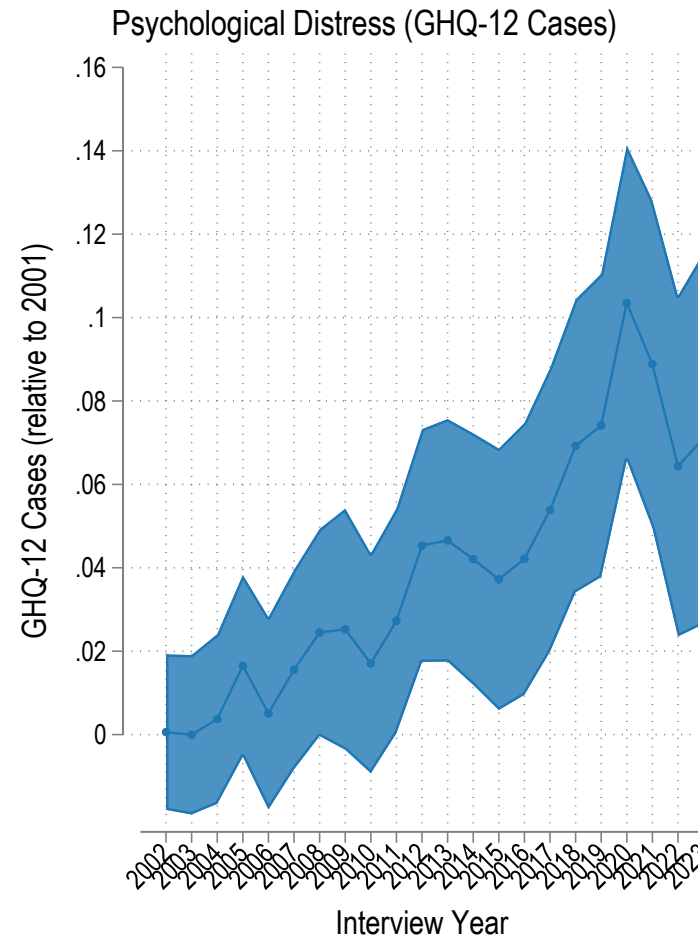
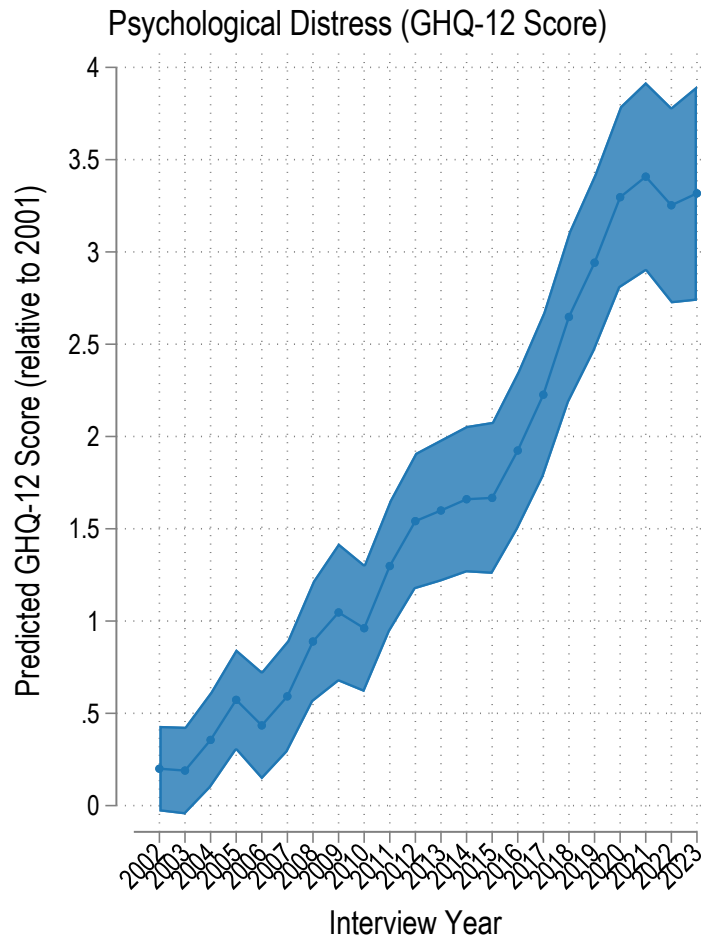
survey design effects

Linear Individual Fixed Effects Model

Average GHQ scores in the UKHLS mainstage and COVID-19 study



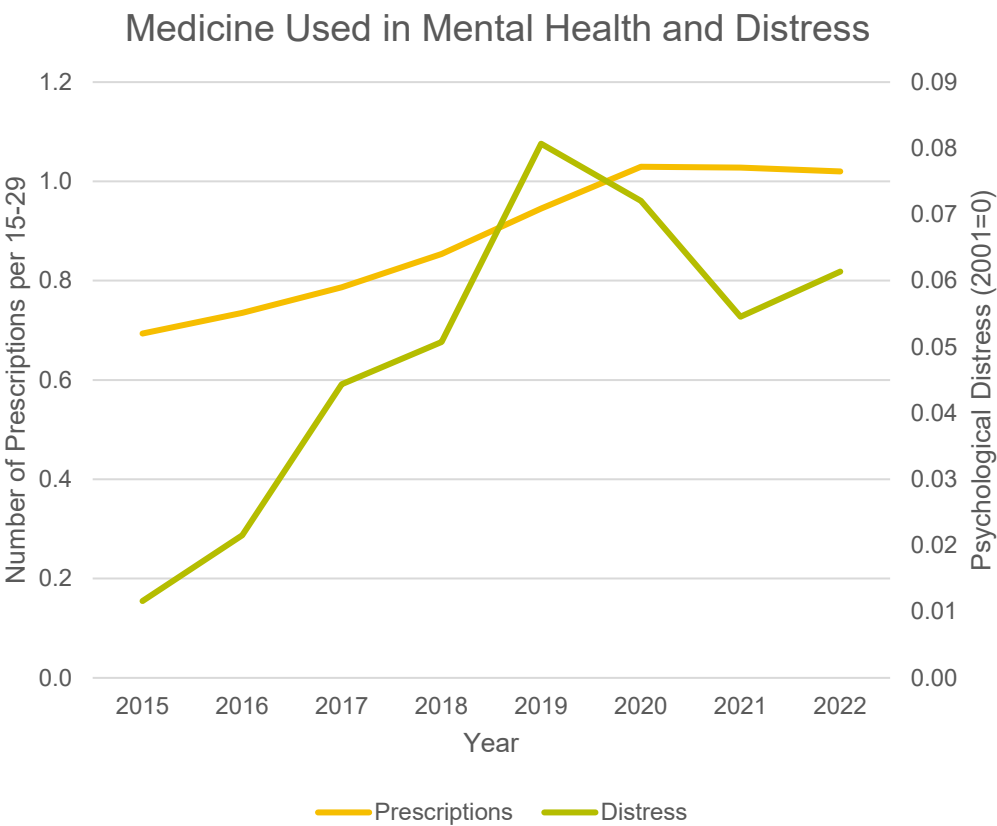
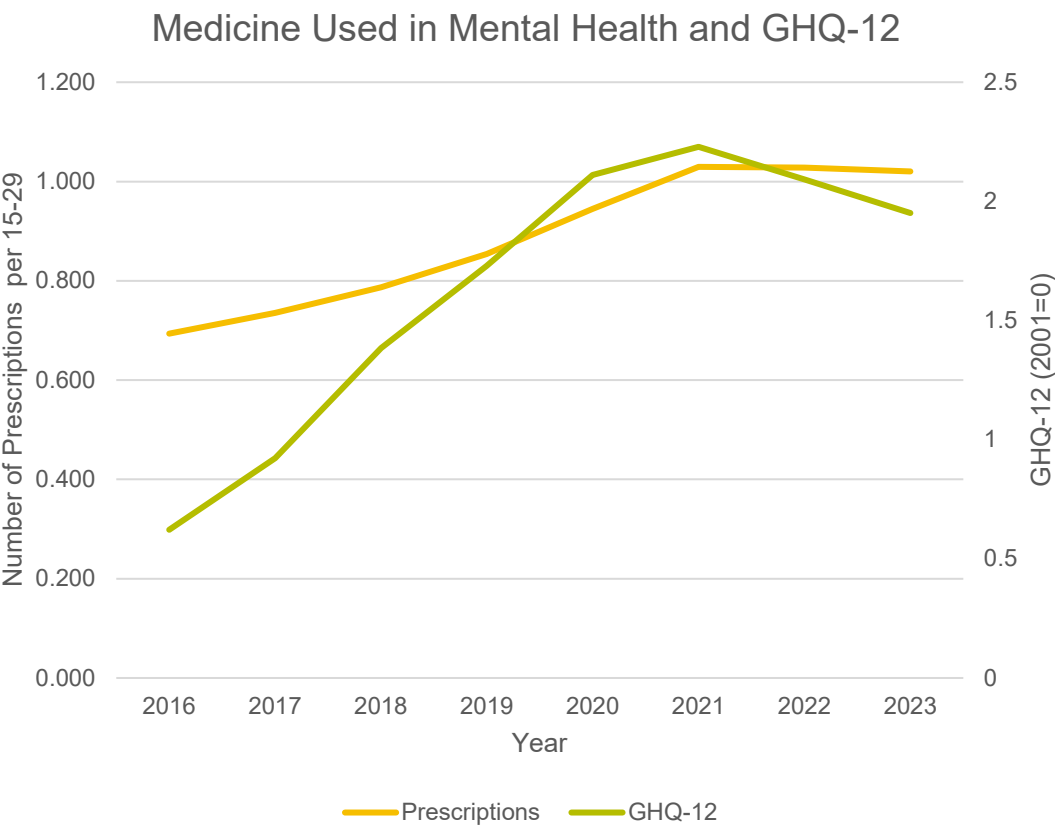
Mental Health Trends (2001-2023)



- Mean GHQ-12 score rose by 2.9 score points (50% of SD)
- Self-reported cases of psychological distress were 8.9 pp above 2001 values.

➔ 1.1m additional cases per year

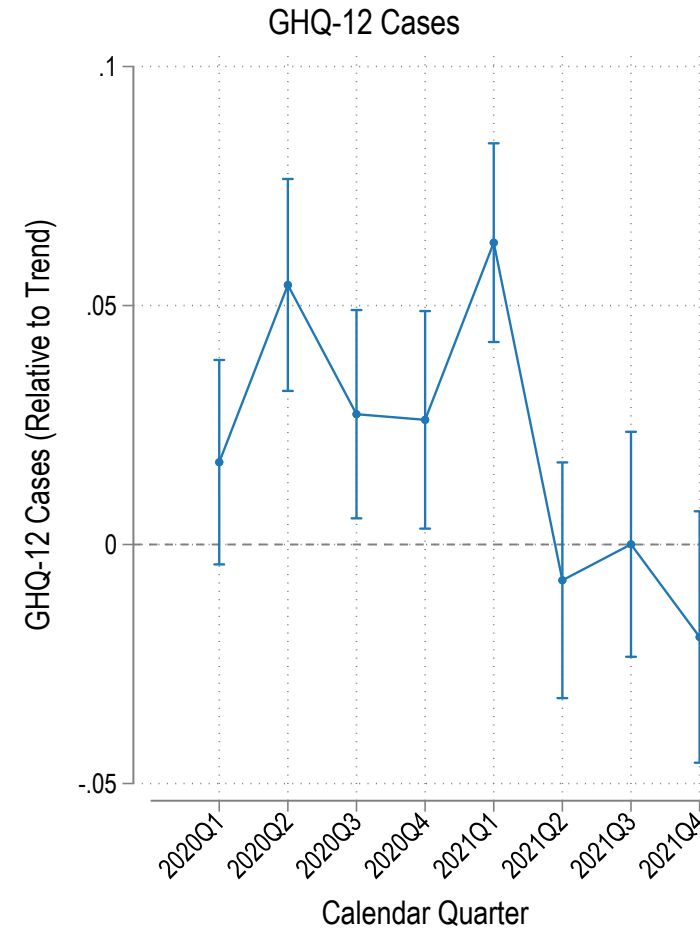
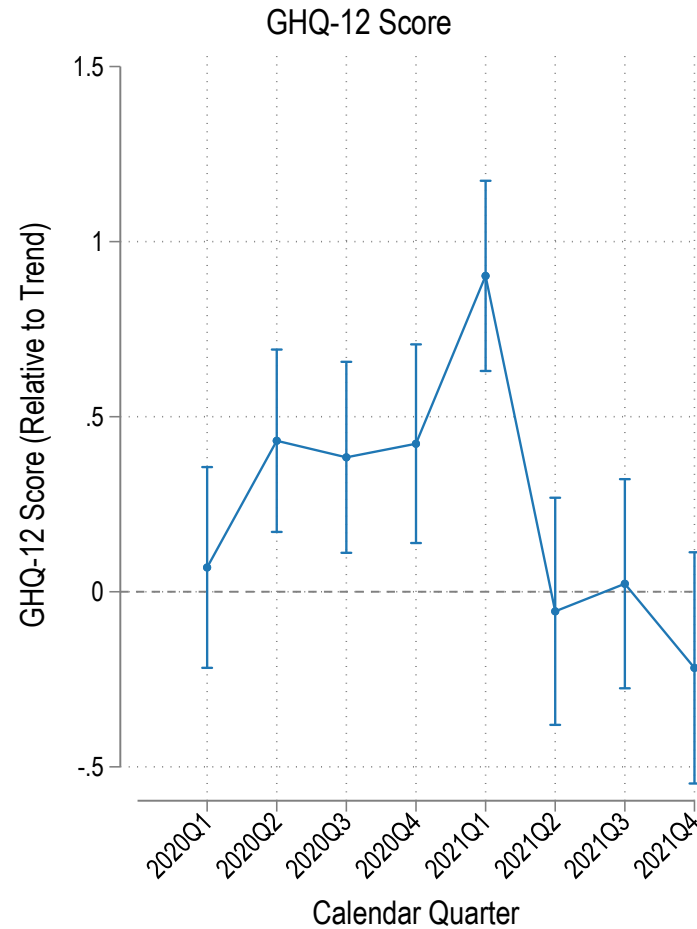
Estimated Psychological Distress and Prescriptions of Medicines Used in Mental Health, 2015-2023



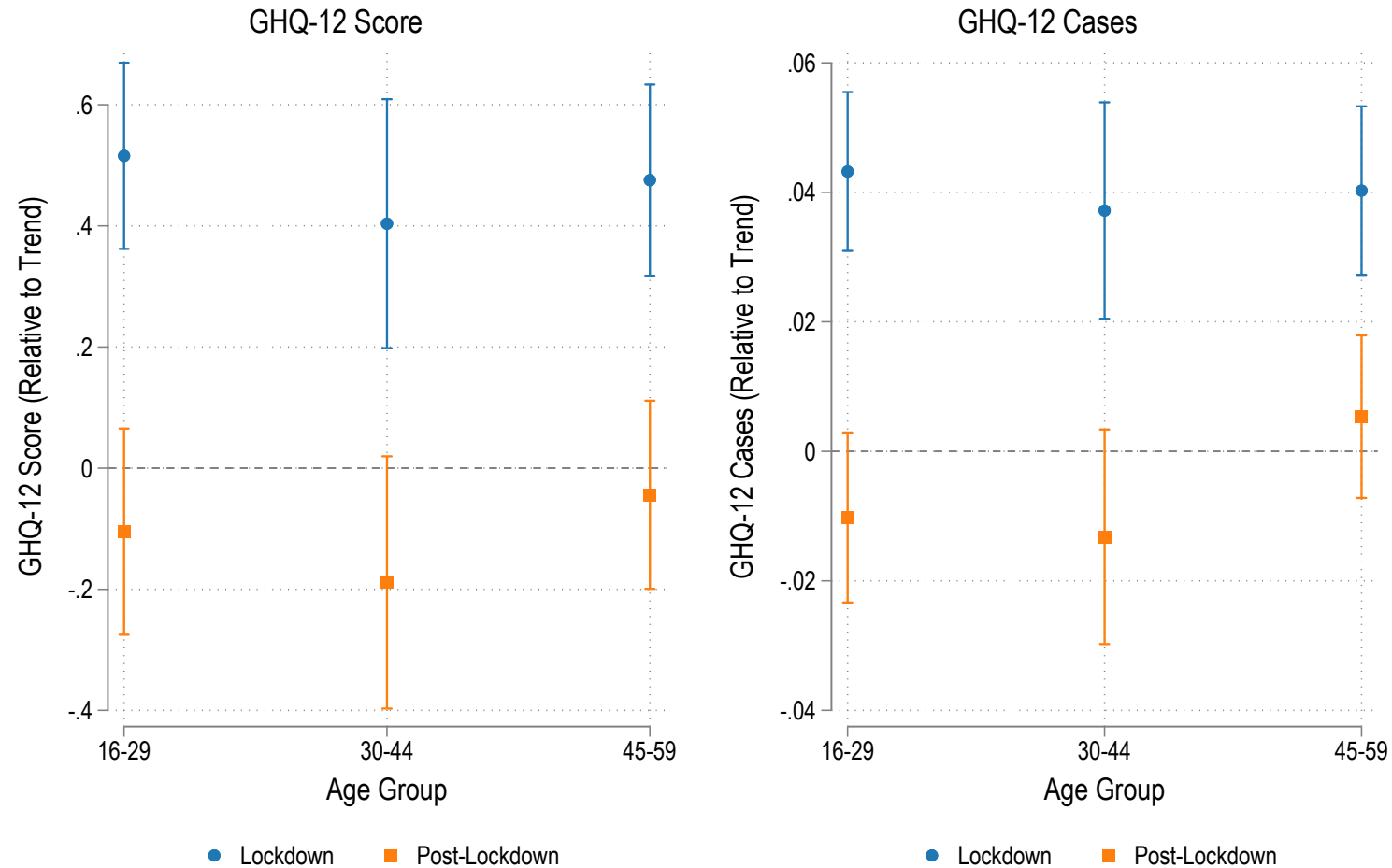
Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health (GHQ-12 Likert)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Trend adjusted	+ Design adjustment	Mainstage Only
Reference	(trend)	(trend)	(trend)
Lockdown Period	0.951 ^{***} (0.075)	0.538 ^{***} (0.080)	0.541 ^{***} (0.080)
Post-Lockdown Period	0.030 (0.087)	-0.150 (0.090)	-0.139 (0.091)
Observations	96,564	96,564	84,745
Individuals	18,027	18,027	17,985

Setbacks and Recovery Post-Lockdown



Did young people's mental health suffer more due to the pandemic?



Further Robustness Checks

Alternative Measures:

- Minimally higher-than-expected life satisfaction and lower-than-expected loneliness during the post-lockdown period, but no adverse pandemic effects

Panel attrition:

- No immediate evidence for attrition bias

Alternative Time Trend:

- Restricted cubic spline in the interview date with five knots confirm a modest and time-limited direct effect of the pandemic on young people's mental health

Placebo test:

- Pseudo-treatments (2017, 2018) were statistically insignificant

Key Findings

- The pandemic effects must be viewed within a broader context of more than two decades of increasing psychological distress.
- COVID-19 accelerated but did not cause a lasting increase in young adults' psychological distress.
- Young adults showed resilience, with most mental health impacts of the pandemic being short-lived, on average.
- Addressing underlying long-term issues is crucial for long-term mental health improvement.



Thank You!

