

A scoping review of the determinants of mental health difficulties and care provision in rural and coastal communities in the UK

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Background

Mental health remains a significant public health concern globally, with diverse populations experiencing varying levels of access to and quality of mental health care services. In the United Kingdom (UK), mental health is a paramount concern for government, service providers, and policymakers due to its substantial impact as the leading cause of disability, contributing significantly to an annual NHS expenditure exceeding £118 billion (NHS England, 2022). Mental health illness carries significant burden to individuals, society, and health and social care services.

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the impact of neighbourhood and social environmental location on mental health outcomes. A recent annual report from the Chief Medical Officer in England highlighted the importance in understanding the specific healthcare challenges within rural and coastal communities, highlighting that coastal communities have some of the worst healthcare outcomes in England (Whitty, 2021). Despite advancements in mental health awareness and service provision in recent years, disparities persist, particularly in rural and coastal communities. Rural and coastal communities in the UK face unique challenges that can exacerbate mental health difficulties among their residents. Compared to urban areas, these regions often have limited access to mental health services and face barriers such as geographical remoteness, sparse population densities, and inadequate infrastructure (Whitty, 2021). Recent calls have therefore been made to increase the investigation into mental health challenges facing coastal communities, which have typically received little attention in public health (Asthana & Gibson, 2022).

Findings in the literature regarding mental health outcomes across rural and coastal communities have been mixed, with some studies showing that living in coastal regions is associated with better self-reported health and well-being than those living in-land (Garrett et al., 2019; Wheeler et al., 2012, 2015; White et al., 2013), while others indicate that rural and coastal living is associated with increased mental health challenges and reduced access to care (Murray et al., 2024; Rost et al., 1998).

To date, much of our understanding of mental healthcare and outcomes has been gleaned from studies involving urban and city populations. This urban-centric focus means there is insufficient knowledge about how rural or coastal living impacts the mental health of around ten million people in rural areas (villages, hamlets, market towns) in the UK. The present scoping review therefore aims to investigate and summarise the available evidence on the key determinants of mental health difficulties and care provision in rural and coastal communities in the UK. The findings from this work will lay the foundations for future research, inform policy decisions, and guide the development of tailored interventions to address the specific mental health needs of these populations.

The questions that this scoping review seeks to understand

1. What evidence is available on mental health difficulties, mental healthcare, and social care provision in rural and coastal communities?
2. What are the key determinants of mental health difficulties, mental healthcare, and social care provision in rural and coastal communities?

The following objectives will be addressed:

- (a) To review and describe mental health difficulties, mental healthcare and social care provision in rural and coastal communities in the UK.
- (b) To summarise the type of mental health care or social support available and the presenting difficulty in rural and coastal communities across the UK
- (c) To examine and identify key determinants (including barriers, facilitators, social and environmental) linked to mental health difficulties mental health and social care provision in rural and coastal communities in the UK.
- (d) To identify gaps in the literature and opportunities for specific research subtopics to be addressed in future research

Methods

Scoping reviews aim to improve the understanding of a body of literature and to inform practice in the field (Munn et al., 2018). The majority of literature conducted on mental healthcare and provision has been conducted within urban areas, with less knowledge pertaining to rural and coastal populations. A scoping review is therefore necessary to summarise the literature regarding determinants within rural and coastal areas, where this information can potentially be utilised to inform policy on improving healthcare provision in rural and coastal areas. Our population of interest, people with mental health difficulties, is diverse and requires a broad review of the literature. The methods for the review are guided by Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020), including the reporting used PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018).

Participants

This review will include studies on individuals with mental health difficulties across all ages in rural and coastal areas of the UK. According to the National Health Service (NHS) one in four adults and one in 10 children experience at least one diagnosable mental health problem in any given year (NHS England, 2024). As such this scoping review will consider evidence describing diagnosable conditions including common and severe mental illness.

We use the term 'mental health difficulties' to capture any diagnosable mental health condition, including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, psychosis, personality disorders, addiction, suicide, eating disorders, learning disabilities, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autistic spectrum disorders.

Concept

This scoping review will map the existing literature on mental health difficulties and the provision of mental health and social care in rural and coastal communities in the UK. The review will therefore include studies that focus on mental health difficulties in rural and coastal areas in the UK; examine the provision of mental healthcare and social care in these communities; investigate the determinants of mental health difficulties – including social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors; and assess the availability and effectiveness of different types of mental health care and social support in rural and coastal areas. The main outcomes of the review will be to improve the understanding of mental health experiences in rural and coastal communities, including types of mental health conditions; factors associated with mental health and care provision; access to care; types of care provision; experiences of mental healthcare; experiences of help seeking.

Context

Our aim is to capture studies examining mental health challenges and care provision experiences of individuals residing within these settings. As we aim to understand research that can potentially impact UK policy and inform future research, we will include any type of evidence set within a UK context. By synthesizing the available literature, this review aims to inform policy and practice to improve mental health care provision in these underrepresented areas.

Search strategy

This scoping review will include a diverse range of study types that examine and report on mental health difficulties and care provision in rural and coastal areas. These will include quantitative studies; mixed-method and qualitative studies that explore the experiences of people in rural and coastal communities in relation to their mental health care; and grey literature, such as reports and policy documents that provide relevant data and insight but are not formally published in academic journals. For feasibility reasons, only studies written in the English language will be included. The search terms were determined in consultation with an institutional librarian and were set up utilising MeSH and truncation to capture all available evidence. The following databases will be searched for relevant published studies: MEDLINE, Scopus, PsycINFO, EMBASE, CINAHL and Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA). Grey literature will be searched using platforms such as Google Scholar, OpenGrey, and ProQuest – Dissertations, up to page 50 of search results in line with Haddaway et al. (2015) recommendations. Further searches will be conducted on the reference list and citations of studies that satisfies the inclusion criteria. Included studies will have a full text available in English.

Isolating relevant studies and sources

Titles and abstracts will initially be used to identify relevant papers for inclusion. Following the search, all identified citations will be collated and uploaded into Rayyan Systematic Review software to remove duplicates. A pilot test using Endnote X9 (Clarivate Analytics, PA, USA) will then be conducted, during which two reviewers will independently screen the titles

and abstracts of at least 40 papers to ensure agreement on inclusion for full-text review. Once a common and consistent understanding of the inclusion criteria is established, one reviewer will screen the titles and abstracts of the remaining papers for inclusion.

The full texts of the selected papers will then be read by one reviewer to determine if they meet the inclusion criteria. The reasons for excluding full texts from the review will be documented. Papers that are uncertain will be discussed, and if uncertainty remains, a third reviewer will check them. See Table 1 for Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. The PRISMA flowchart will be utilised in presenting the outcome of the screening.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Inclusion:	Exclusion:
Studies including individuals with mental health difficulties of all age groups in the UK	Studies including participants outside of the UK
Studies involving individuals with residing in rural or coastal regions in the UK	Studies involving individuals residing only in non-rural and non-coastal areas.
Studies reporting mental health outcomes and care provision	Studies involving individuals with only physical health difficulties.
Studies investigating key determinants, and experiences of mental health difficulties, and/or access to health services.	Studies without full text written in English language

Data extraction

Data will be extracted into a data extraction spreadsheet, which will be developed a priori. This will include: (i) publication details: author, title, year of study/publication; (ii) study characteristics: study design, aim of study, location of study, sample size, sample demographics, inclusion and exclusion criteria, funding sources; types of mental health conditions; (iii) criteria used for defining mental health conditions: self-report, primary care, etc.; definition of rural/coastal area (iv) criteria used for defining rural and/or coastal areas: rural/urban classification tool, coastal definition, population size, population density, social amenities, environmental features, etc.; (v) type of care provision: access to care, services available, service utilization, barriers/facilitators to care, quality of care; (vi) data collectors: use of community researchers; (vii) summary of key findings/recommendations; (viii) quotes/data.

Data analysis and Presentation

A narrative summary will accompany the tabulated results, providing an interpretation of how the findings address the research questions outlined in the scoping review. These results will undergo sense-checking by individuals with lived experience of mental health conditions who are representative of the populations being researched in this scoping review (Pollock et al., 2022). This involvement of Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) ensures that the perspectives and insights of those directly affected by mental health conditions in rural and coastal settings are integrated into the interpretation of the findings.

No minimum number of studies for inclusion is stipulated, as the primary aim is to comprehensively map the current landscape of knowledge regarding the mental health burden and care provision across diverse geographical settings. This approach allows for a thorough exploration of the existing literature, identifying trends, gaps, and areas needing

further investigation to inform future research, policy development, and service improvement efforts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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