

Exploring Ethnic Disparities in Access to Learning Disability Services in Wandsworth:

A retrospective Analysis of referral patterns.

Nyisha Macauley¹, Dr Barbara Santos Ferraz Veras³, Dr Ayodele Peters⁴, Dr Thilini Wickramaratna², Dr Stephanie Ewen² and Charlotte White¹
¹Assistant Psychologist, Wandsworth Learning Disabilities Team, South West London & St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (SWLSTG)
²Senior clinical fellow, Wandsworth Learning Disabilities Team, South West London & St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (SWLSTG)
³Core trainee, Wandsworth Learning Disabilities Team, South West London & St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (SWLSTG)
⁴Consultant Psychiatrist, Wandsworth Learning Disabilities Team, South West London & St George's Mental Health NHS Trust (SWLSTG)



Introduction

Evidence of persistent ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare is well established. Differences in access are influenced by institutional, cultural and socioeconomic factors, which may disproportionately disadvantage ethnic minority groups in accessing appropriate, culturally responsive and specialist care, including services for people with learning disabilities (LD). These barriers may contribute to marginalisation within healthcare systems, with inequalities evident not only in access to services but also across pathways into and through mental healthcare.

Ethnic inequalities have been identified at multiple stages of mental healthcare pathways, including referral, primary care involvement and access to specialist services (Bhui et al., 2003). While ethnic minority groups may be underrepresented in primary care and early intervention services, evidence suggests overrepresentation within secondary and crisis pathways (Bansal et al., 2022; Alonso et al., 2023). This pattern may reflect barriers to early help-seeking, difficulties accessing culturally responsive care, and unmet or unrecognised mental health needs.

For people from ethnic minority backgrounds with a learning disability, inequalities may be compounded by the intersection of ethnicity, disability and mental health needs (Cooper, 2007; Fulton & Richardson, 2010). Additional barriers may relate to communication, recognition of mental health needs, cultural understanding and the availability of appropriate systemic support. Examining the ethnic composition of referrals to specialist LD mental health services can therefore help identify potential inequalities in service access and determine whether local service utilisation reflects the demographic profile of the population served.

Aims and Hypothesis

- To examine whether referral rates to the Wandsworth Learning Disabilities health team vary by ethnicity considering the ethnic composition of the Wandsworth population.
- To identify whether particular groups are over- or under-represented among people referred to the team compared with the expected population distribution.
- To ascertain as to what specialties are getting the most referrals.
- To identify where our referrals come from and how to encourage others to refer to the team.

References

Cooper, S.-A., Smiley, E., Morrison, J., Williamson, A., & Allan, L. (2007). Mental ill-health in adults with intellectual disabilities: prevalence and associated factors. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 190(1), 27–35. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.106.022483>

Fulton, C., & Richardson, L. (2010). What equality means for people with learning disabilities. *Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities*.

Bhui, K., Stansfeld, S., Hull, S., Priebe, S., Mole, F. & Feder, G. (2003). Ethnic variations in pathways to and use of specialist mental health services in the UK: systematic review. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 182(2), 105–116.

Bansal, N., et al. (2022). Understanding ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare in the UK: a meta-ethnography. *PLOS Medicine*.

Alonso, J., et al. (2023). Understanding inequalities in access to adult mental health services in the UK: a systematic mapping review. *BMC Health Services Research*.

Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Census 2021: Ethnic group, Wandsworth*. Office for National Statistics.

Method

A retrospective analysis of referrals to the Wandsworth Learning Disabilities Health Team was undertaken to examine whether the ethnic distribution of individuals referred to the service differed significantly from the ethnic composition of the wider Wandsworth population. All referrals received between April 2024 and April 2026 were identified and collated using referral information recorded as part of the team's internal triage process.

Referral data were reviewed alongside outcomes discussed by the multidisciplinary referral panel during the team's twice-weekly referral meetings. The dataset included demographic and referral-related variables, including age, gender, ethnicity, professional discipline or specialty to which the referral was directed, and the source of referral. These data enabled examination of both the demographic profile of individuals referred to the service and the pathways through which referrals were received.

Ethnicity within the referral dataset was categorised according to the ethnic group recorded at the point of referral. To provide an appropriate population comparator, publicly available ethnicity data from the 2021 Census for Wandsworth were used to establish the expected ethnic distribution within the local population.

The observed ethnic distribution of referrals was compared with the expected distribution derived from the Wandsworth Census using a chi-squared goodness-of-fit test. This analysis was undertaken to determine whether differences between the ethnic composition of the referral population and the wider Wandsworth population were statistically significant. Additional descriptive analysis was undertaken to examine referral sources and the disciplines or specialties associated with referrals, with the aim of identifying patterns in referral pathways and potential opportunities to improve awareness and access to the service.

All statistical analyses were conducted using Stata. Data were analysed retrospectively and reported in aggregate to examine patterns of referral and service access across the study period.

Results

Using a chi-square test, we found a statistically significant difference between the ethnicities in the patient sample compared to the census population in Wandsworth ($p < 0.05$, $\chi^2 = 50.21$).

The data showed that people who were reported as White were the most represented ethnic group in the patient population, followed by Black/Black British, Asian/British Asian, Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, and finally Other ethnic groups.

The proportion of people who were reported as Asian/British Asian, Black/Black British, Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups and Other ethnic groups was higher in the patient sample population than in the Wandsworth population, while that of people reported as White was lower.

The team receives 47.3% of referrals from GP services with 43.8% of referrals going to Psychology.

Discussion

The analysis of referral data from April 2024 to April 2026 identified statistical differences in the ethnic representation of individuals accessing the service compared with the wider Wandsworth population.

The findings showed a statistical over-representation of referrals from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds. It also showed an under-representation of patients from a White background. The implication from the date is that we are receiving more referrals for patients from BAME backgrounds. It can be inferred that people with a Learning disability from BAME background are requiring more secondary care input as their needs are not been met by primary and grassroots services. There is also a possibility that families are not aware of resources available to provide support and how to get additional help. This suggest they then end up worse off and require secondary services.

Key findings

$p < 0.05$ | $\chi^2 = 50.21$
47.3% of referrals from GP services | 43.8% going to Psychology

Conclusion and Moving Forward

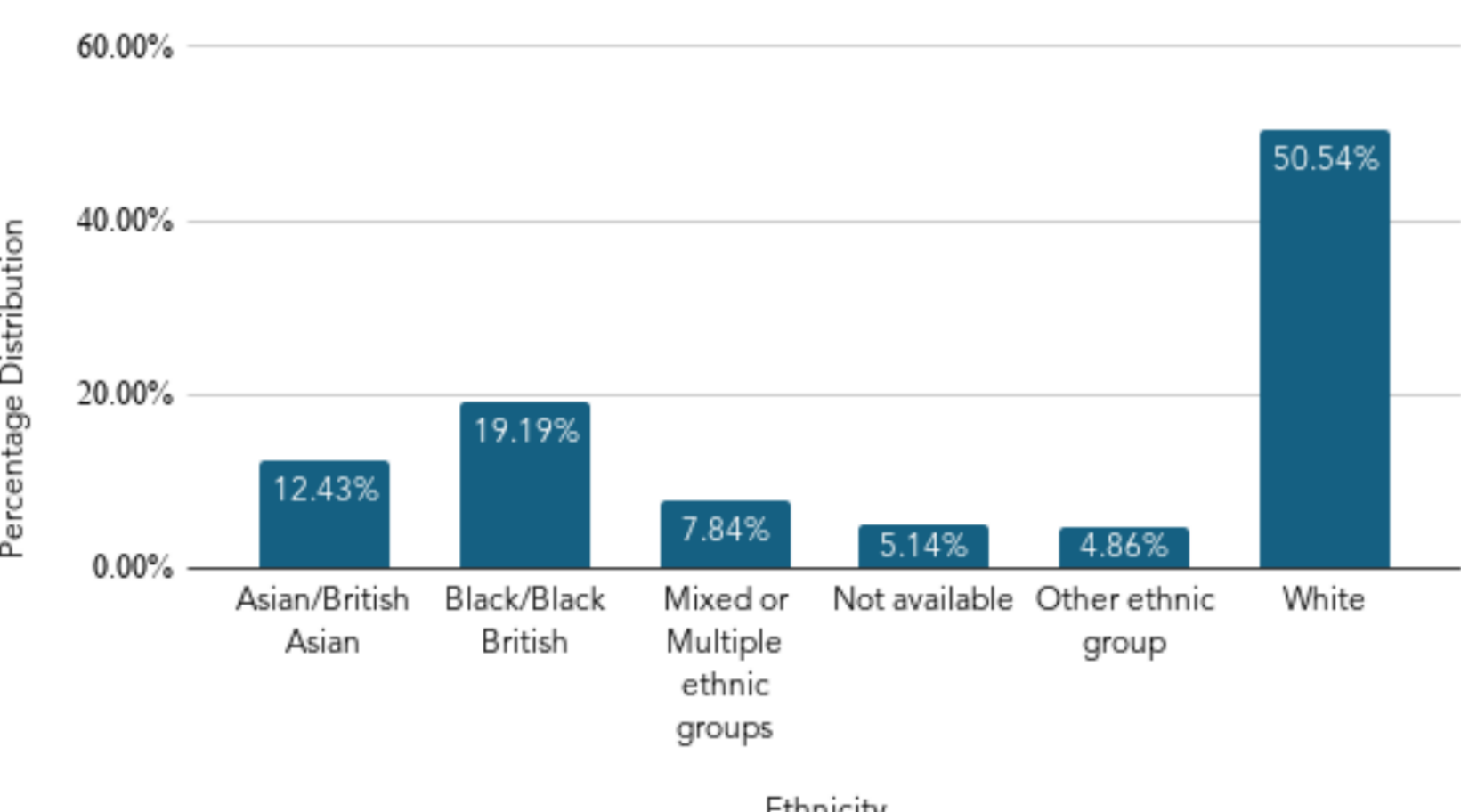
Our data has shown inequalities in the access to secondary care into Wandsworth LD team. From this findings, new pilots to go into local community groups and forums has been birthed. The team is doing outreach into Somali and Bangladeshi communities, educating families about seeking for help from health, social and housing services.

The team leaflets are being translated to Urdu, Arabic and Somali to be used at the carers forums.

Team posters and leaflets would be available in local community halls, salons, places of worship and shops.

The team would continue to audit ethnicity data yearly and observe the trends.

Ethnic Distribution of Referred Patients



Graphical representation of referral ethnicity and referral pathways

