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Experiencing the cost-of-living crisis: the impact on mental health

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Survey Context

The cost of living in the UK has risen to unprecedented levels and wage increases have not kept pace, leaving many people struggling to pay their bills and make ends meet. The worries and pressures associated with increasing costs also pose a major risk to mental health, and those with pre-existing mental health issues are more likely to be negatively impacted¹.

The Policy Institute and the ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health at King's College London have been conducting mixed-methods research that aims to understand how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting on people's everyday lives. As part of this, we conducted a two-wave longitudinal survey to track concerns about increasing costs, how people were coping, and attitudes towards welfare. As mental health and wellbeing emerged as a key concern in wave 1, wave 2 was developed to ask about mental health and wellbeing in more depth, including the use of validated mental health measures.

Methodology

On behalf of King's College London, Number Cruncher interviewed 1,671 GB adults between the 8th and 15th November 2022 and re-interviewed 1,001 of the same GB adults between 13th June and 11th July 2023. Each wave is weighted by age, sex, education, region and ethnicity to the profile of the population.

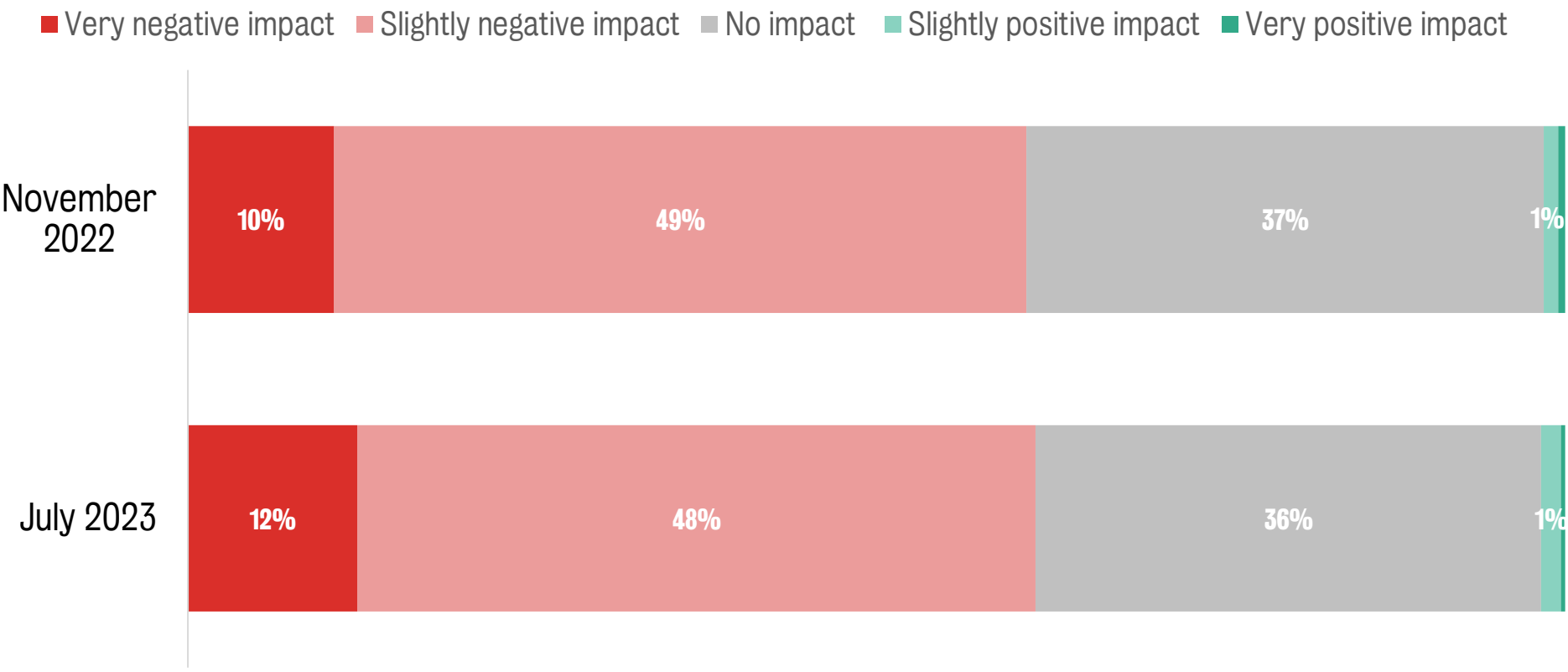
For longitudinal surveys, Number Cruncher uses a mix of panels designed to maximise both sample and response quality. The panels themselves recruit from a variety of online sources – when vetting them we aim to avoid those with atypically high engagement with news and politics, which is a problem that pollsters commonly encounter. In addition to optimising the raw sample, each poll uses poststratification weighting (and where appropriate, quotas) to balance the sample.

**Large proportions of the
British population say the
rising cost of living is harmful
for their mental health,
with some groups
much more affected
than others**



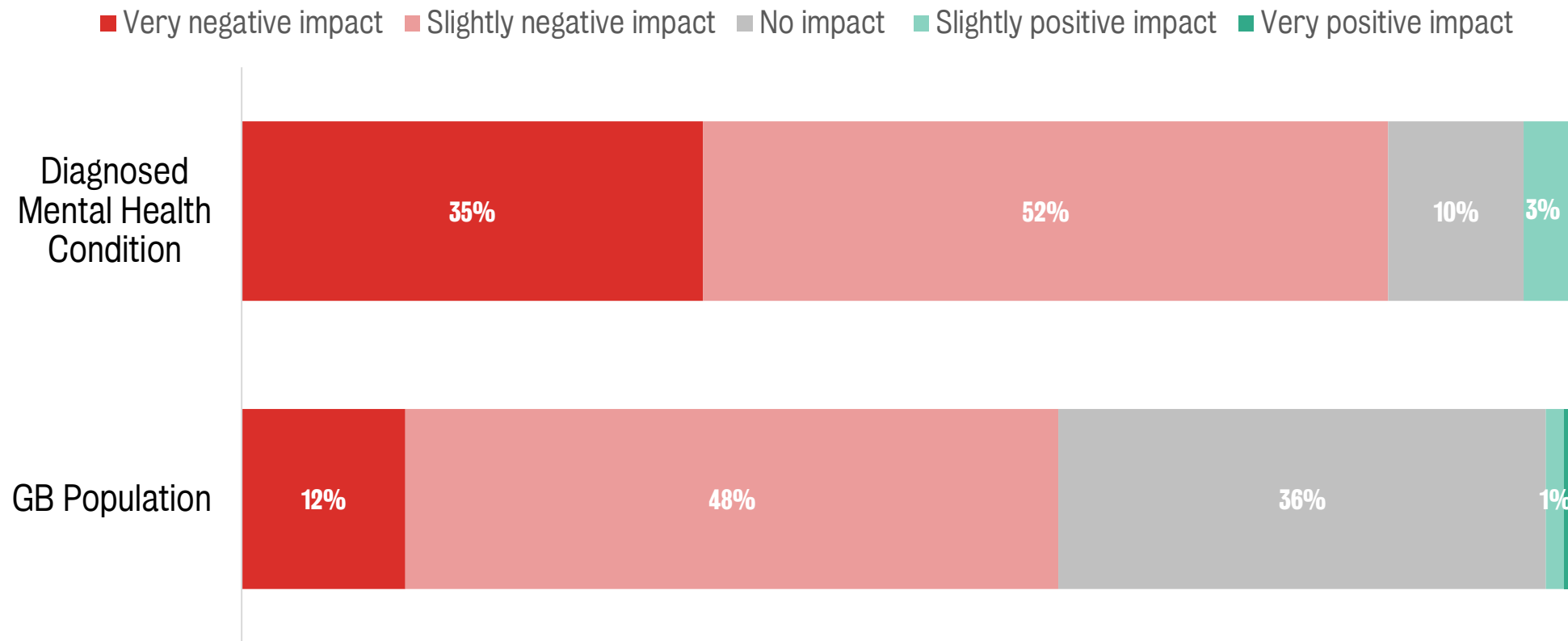
Three in five people said the rising cost of living had a negative impact on their mental health back in November last year, and this shows no sign of improving

How much of an impact, if at all, has the rising cost of living had on your mental health? (November 2022 and July 2023)



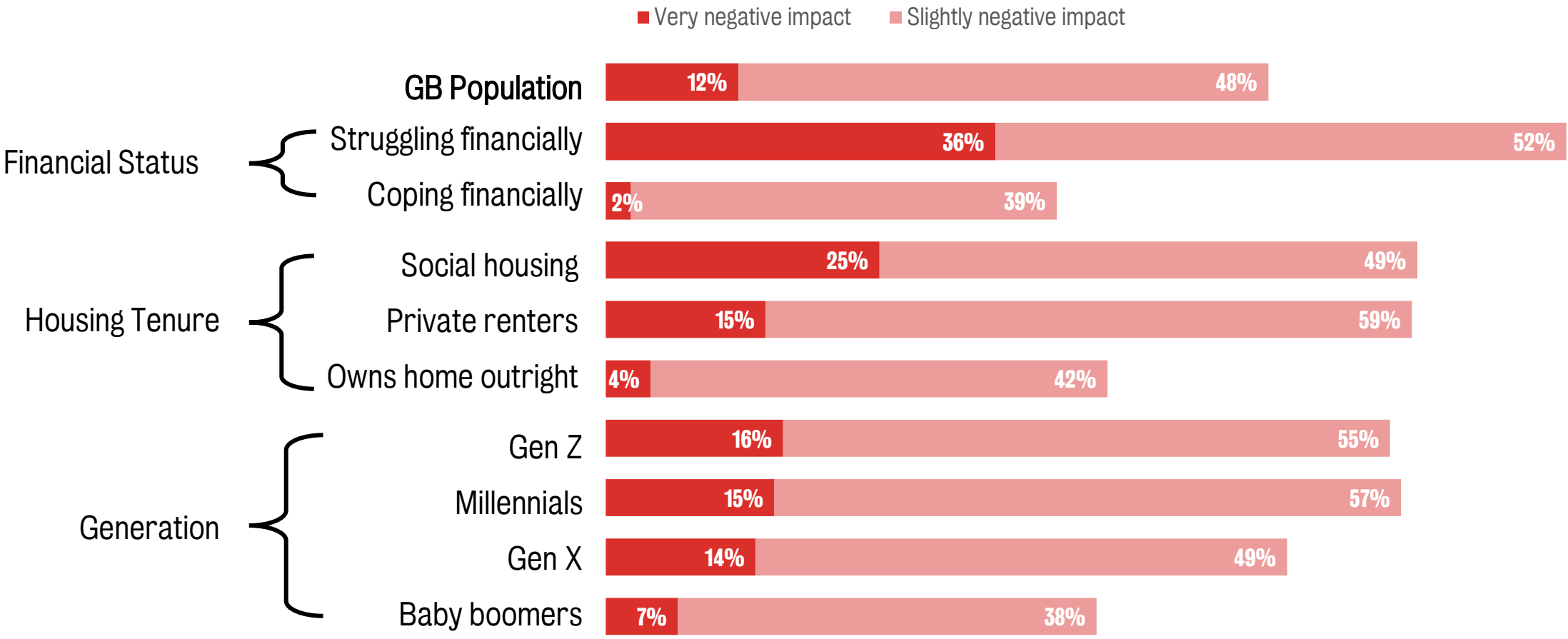
This rises to more than four in five people amongst those with a diagnosed mental health condition, of which a third say that rising costs have had a *very* negative impact

How much of an impact, if at all, has the rising cost of living had on your mental health? (July 2023)

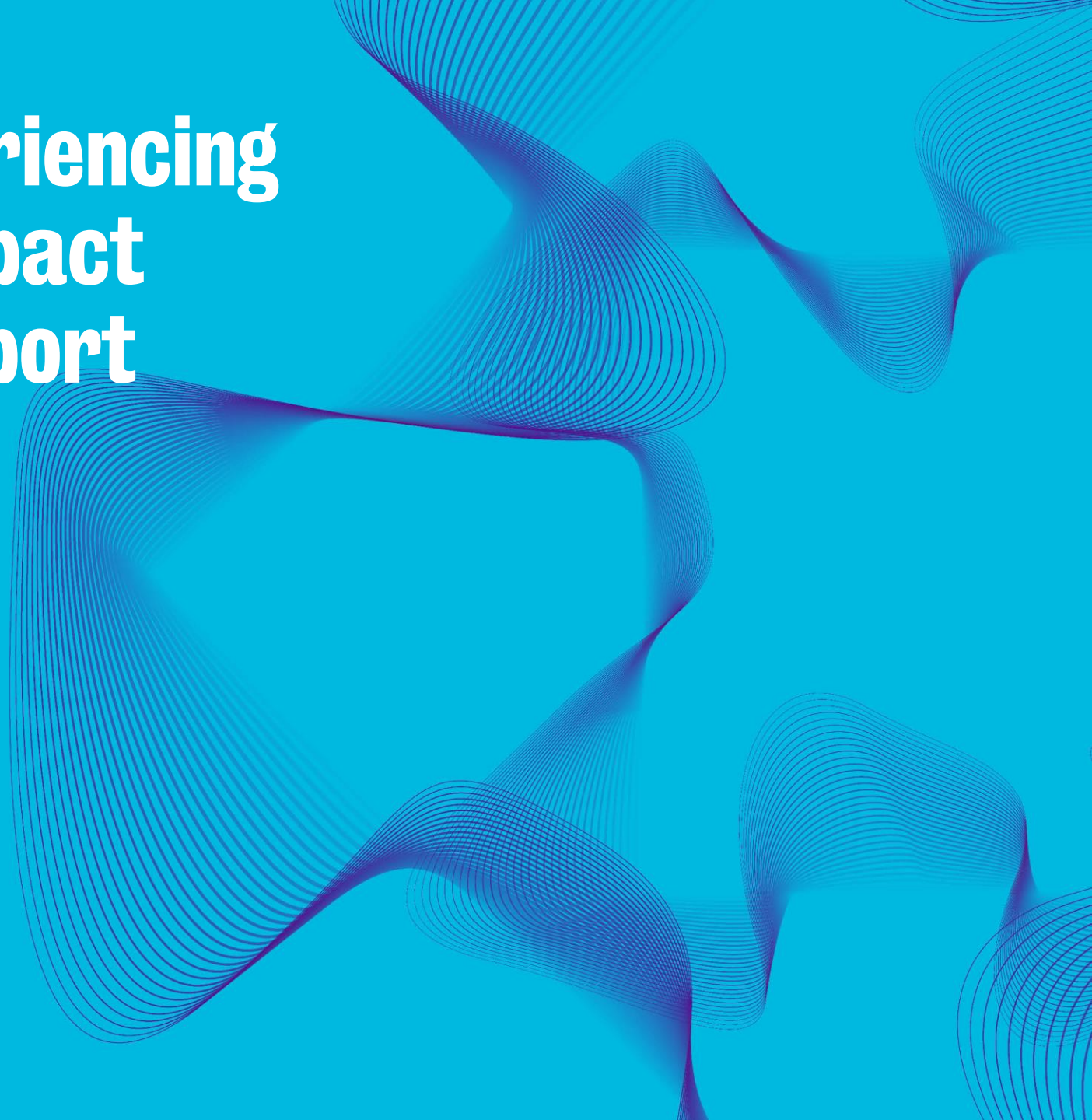


Other groups are also more likely to be experiencing the mental health impact of the crisis, including younger people, people who live in social housing or rent their accommodation, and those who report struggling with their finances

How much of an impact, if at all, has the rising cost of living had on your mental health? (July 2023)

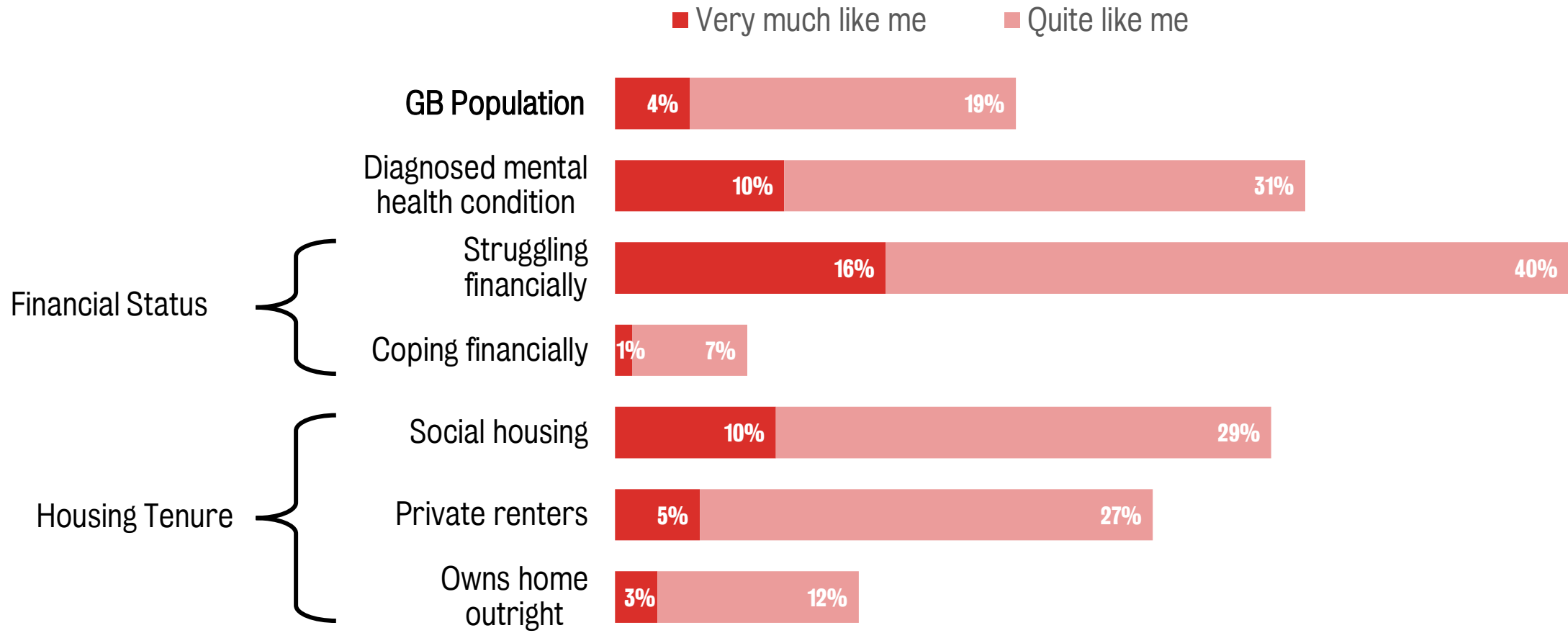


**Groups who are experiencing
the mental health impact
more acutely also report
poorer sleep and
wellbeing, as well as
greater negativity
and distress**



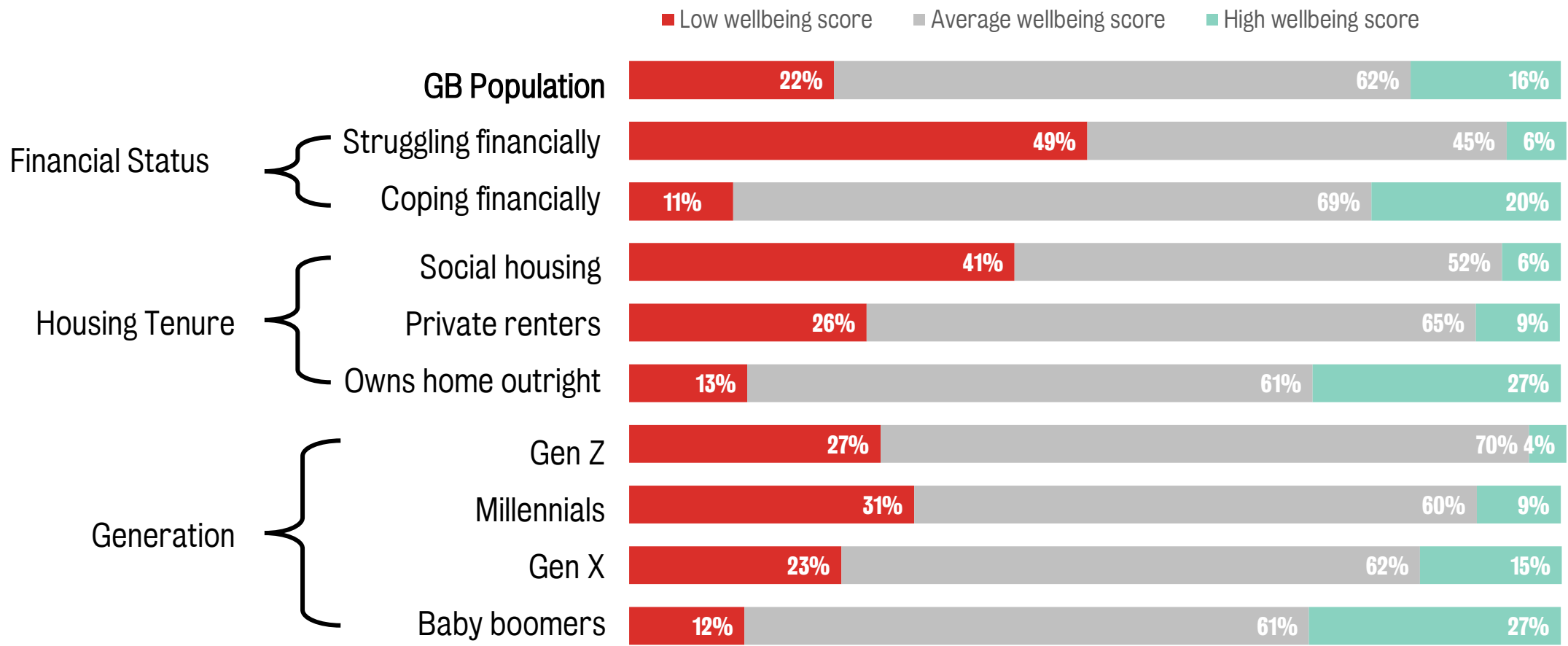
Around 25% of people say they are having trouble sleeping due to worry about rising costs. This rises to 56% of people who are struggling financially, compared to only 8% of those who are coping financially

How well, if at all, would you say the following statement describes you... ‘I am having problems sleeping as I am worried about the rising cost of living’? (July 2023)



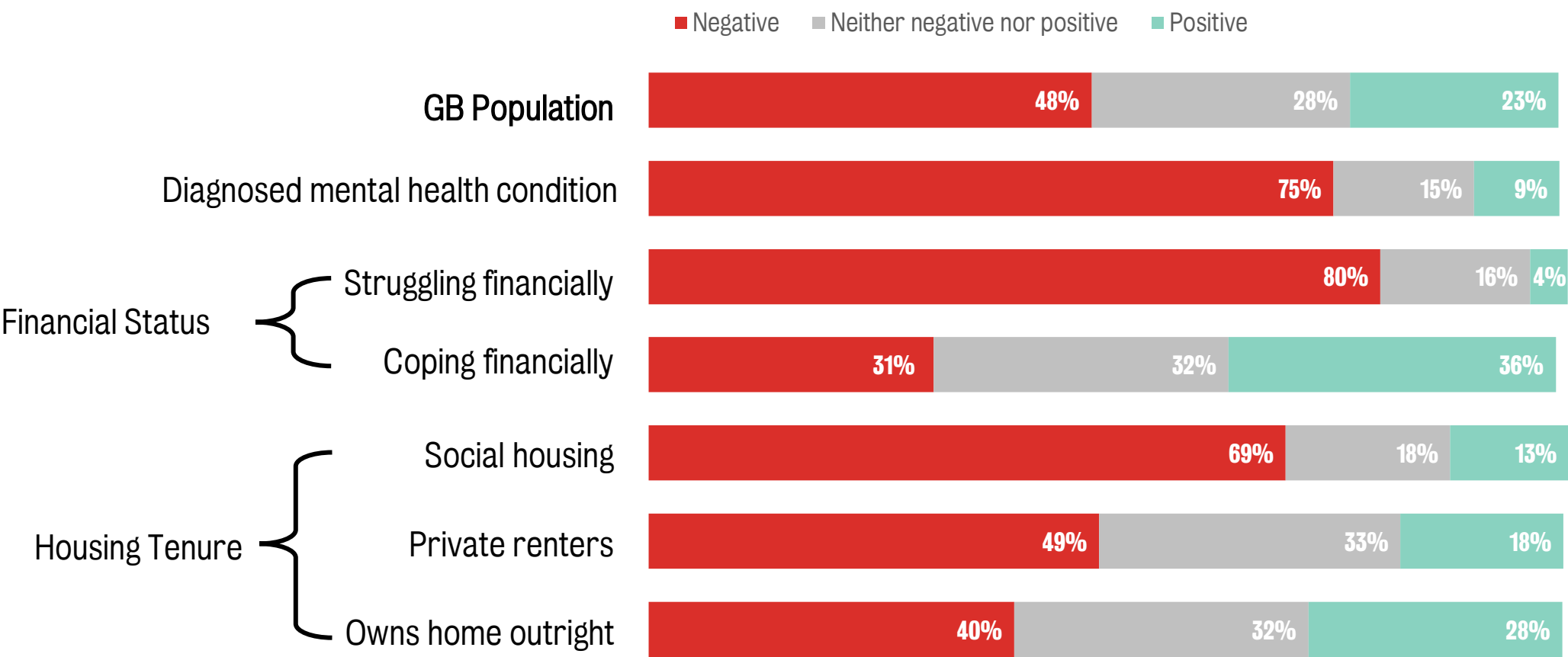
Younger people, people who rent privately or live in social housing, and people who are struggling financially are more likely to report poor wellbeing. Half of people who are struggling financially report poor wellbeing

Wellbeing scores using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS): 7-item response scale e.g., ‘How often have you been feeling close to other people during the last two weeks?’ For full measures see appendices (July 2023)



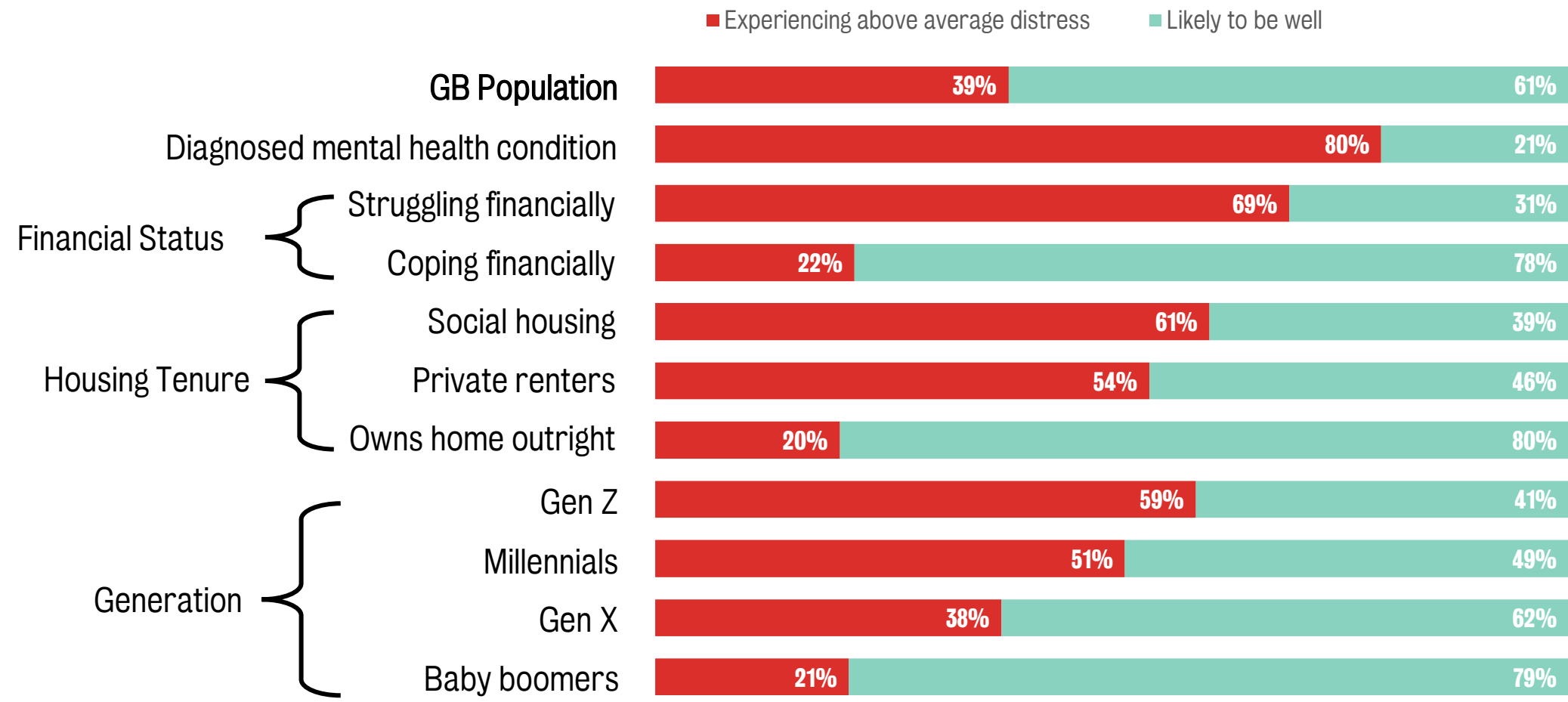
Almost half of people say they feel negative about life over the next year, given rising costs. Those with a diagnosed mental health condition, people struggling financially and those living in social housing are most likely to feel negative, while homeowners or people who are coping financially are most likely to feel positive

How positive or negative do you feel about life over the next year, given the rising cost of living? (July 2023)




Financially at-risk groups are also more likely to report high levels of general psychological distress, with a two- to three-fold disparity between the most and least distressed groups

Psychological distress scores using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10): 10-item response scale, e.g., ‘In the past four weeks, how often did you feel nervous?’ For full measures see appendices (July 2023)

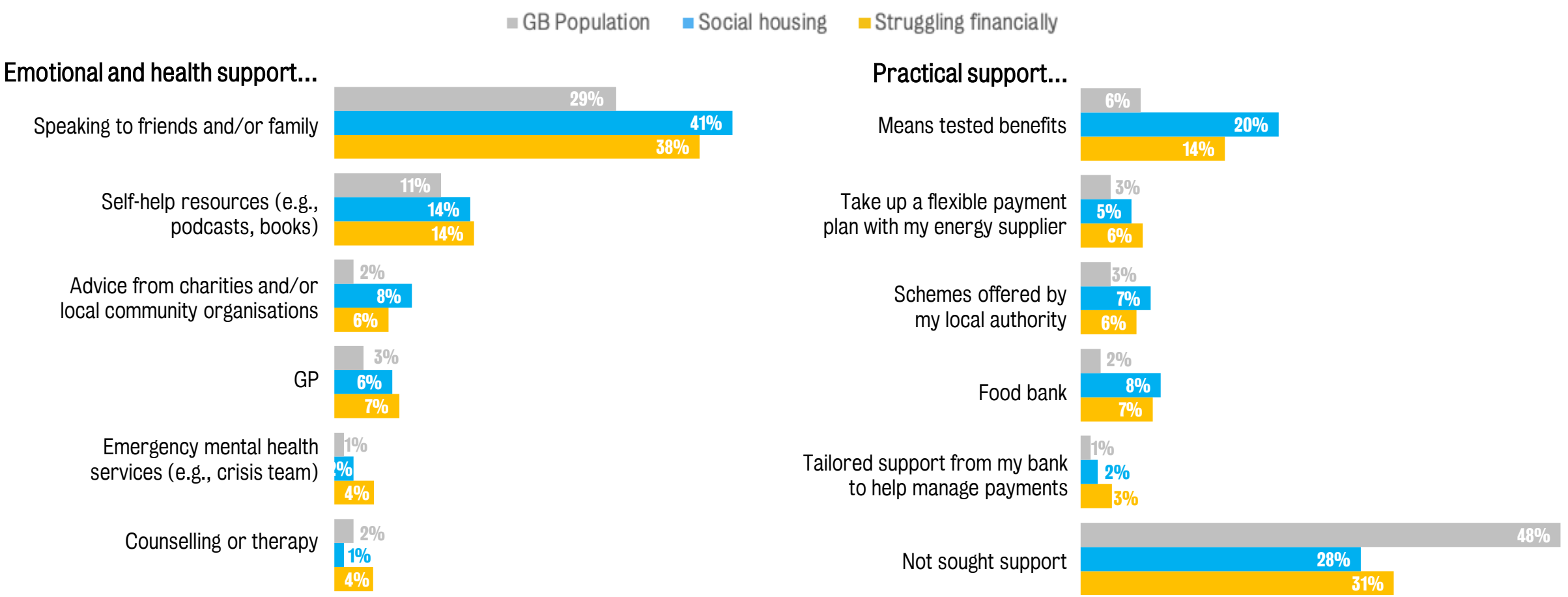


Those most impacted by the rising cost of living are attempting to seek help and support, but mostly in the form of speaking to friends and family

The background of the image is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this background are several abstract, wavy, and flowing lines in shades of blue and purple. These lines create a sense of movement and depth, resembling liquid or smoke. The lines are most prominent on the right side of the image, where they form large, swirling shapes that partially obscure the text. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

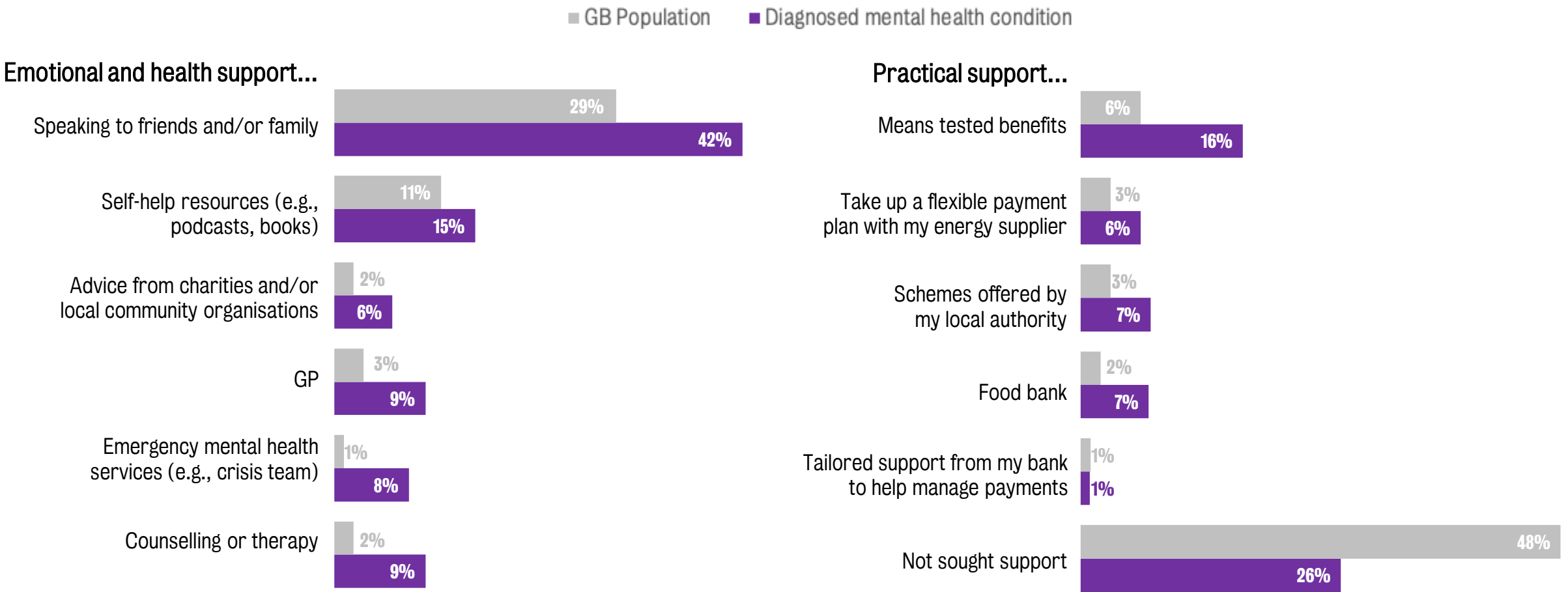
People struggling financially or living in social housing are more likely to say they have sought support to help deal with the rising cost of living, including emotional support like speaking to family and friends, and practical support like means-tested benefits

Which of the following, if any, have you done over the past six months to cope with the rising cost of living? (July 2023)



People living with a mental health condition are also more likely to have sought help to cope with the rising cost of living, including mental health support and practical support

Which of the following, if any, have you done over the past six months to cope with the rising cost of living? (July 2023)

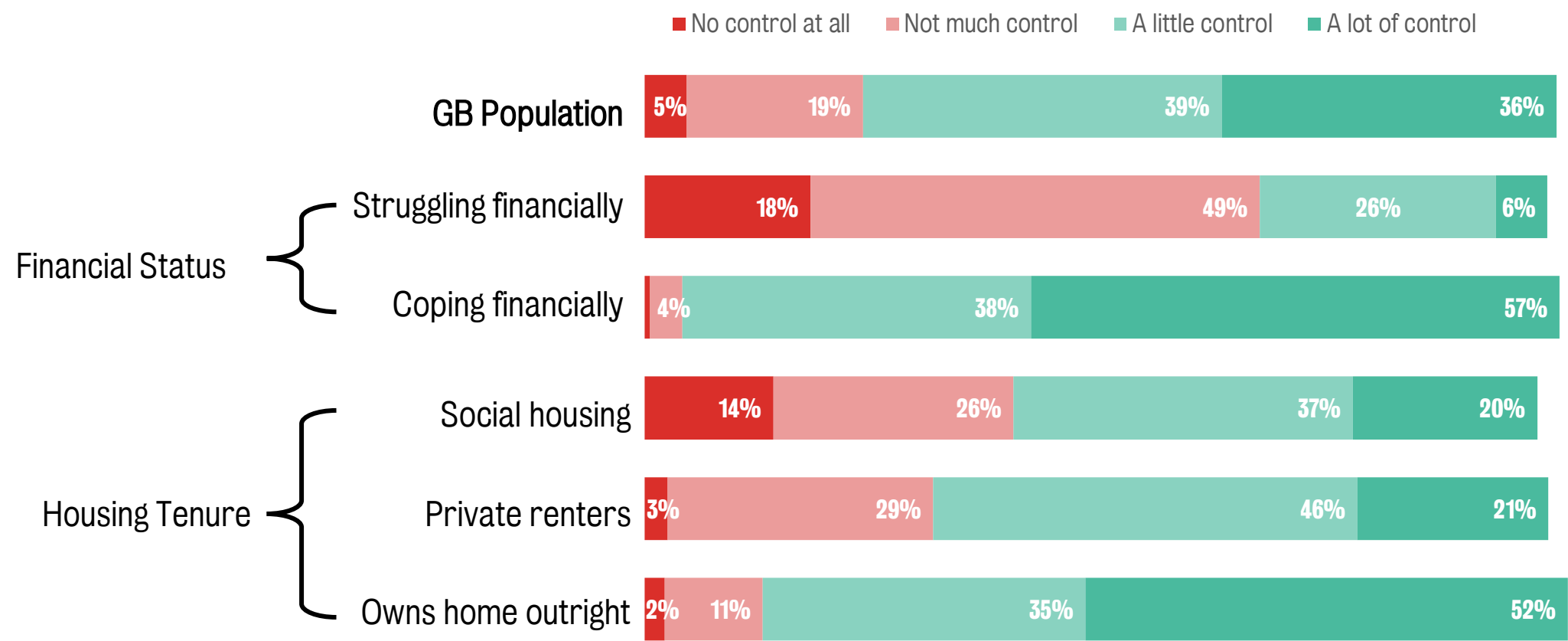


**But some nevertheless
still feel as though they
have lost control of
their finances**



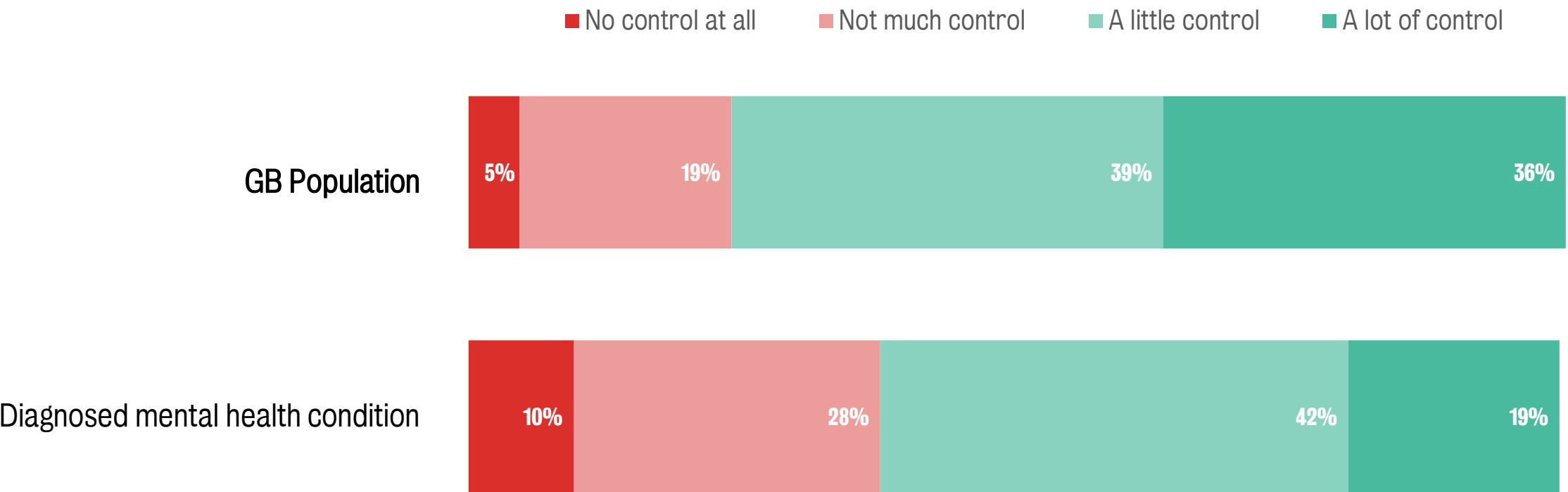
24% of people feel they are losing control over their finances. This rises to over 60% of people who are struggling financially, and more than 40% of people living in social housing

How much control do you feel you have over your finances? (July 2023)



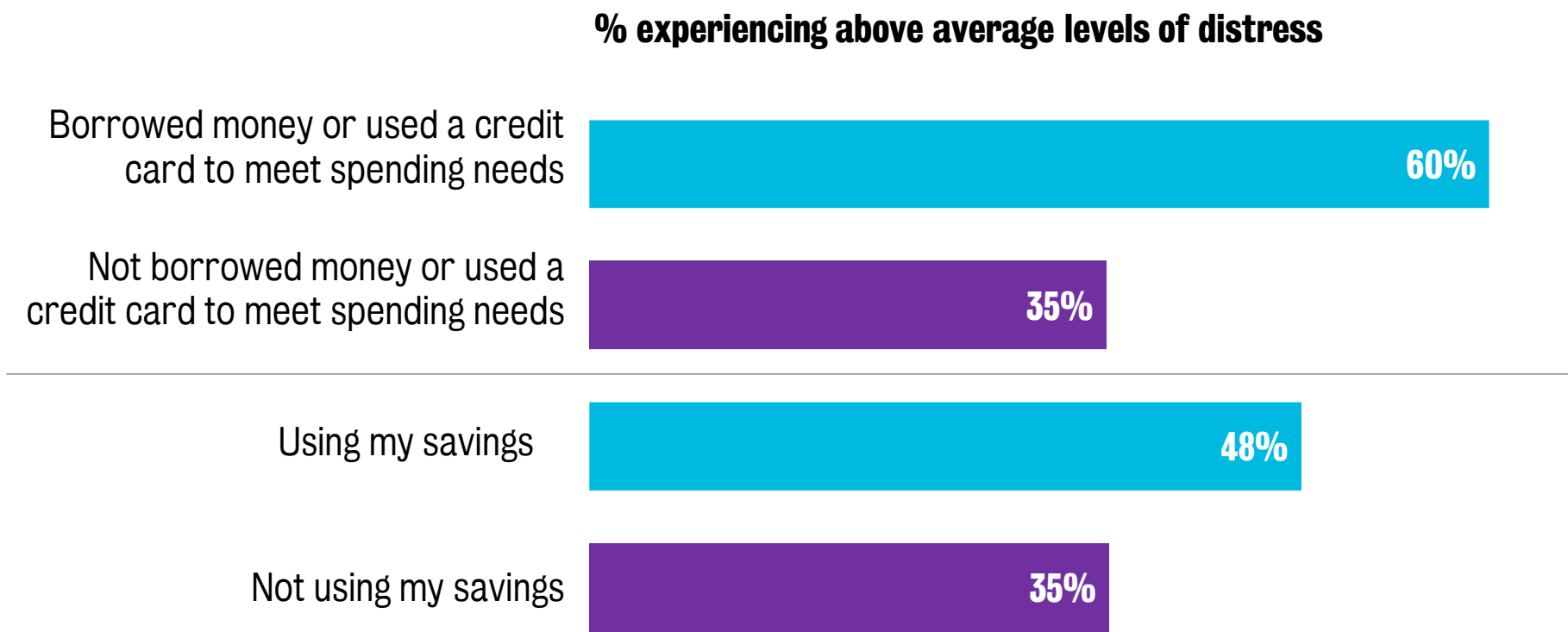
Four in ten people with a mental health condition feel they lack control over their finances, with one in ten feeling they have no control at all

How much control do you feel you have over your finances? (July 2023)



Using savings and borrowing money to cope were correlated with psychological distress, with three out of five people who borrowed money experiencing above average levels of distress

Which of the following, if any, have you done over the past six months to cope with the rising cost of living? Borrowed money or used a credit card to meet spending needs; Using my savings for everyday spending; cross-tabulated with psychological distress scores using the Kessler psychological distress scale (K10) For full measures see appendices (July 2023)

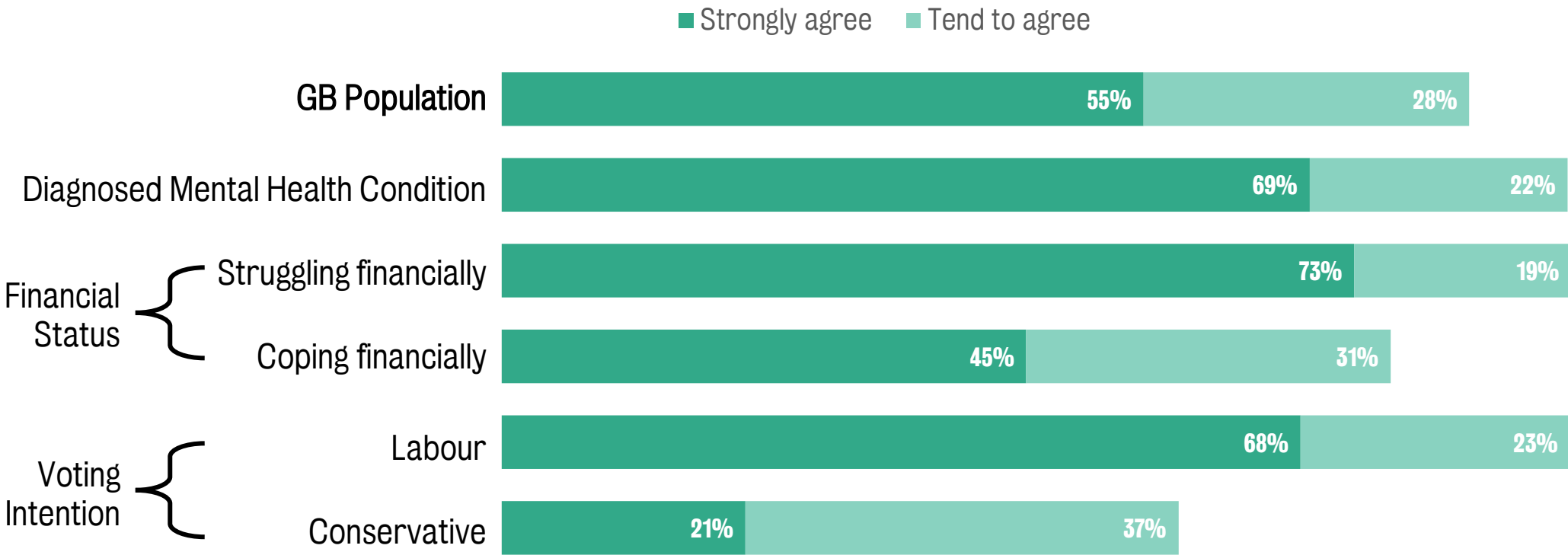


People are losing hope that the government is able to deal with the rising cost of living, with even conservative voters and financially secure groups not convinced



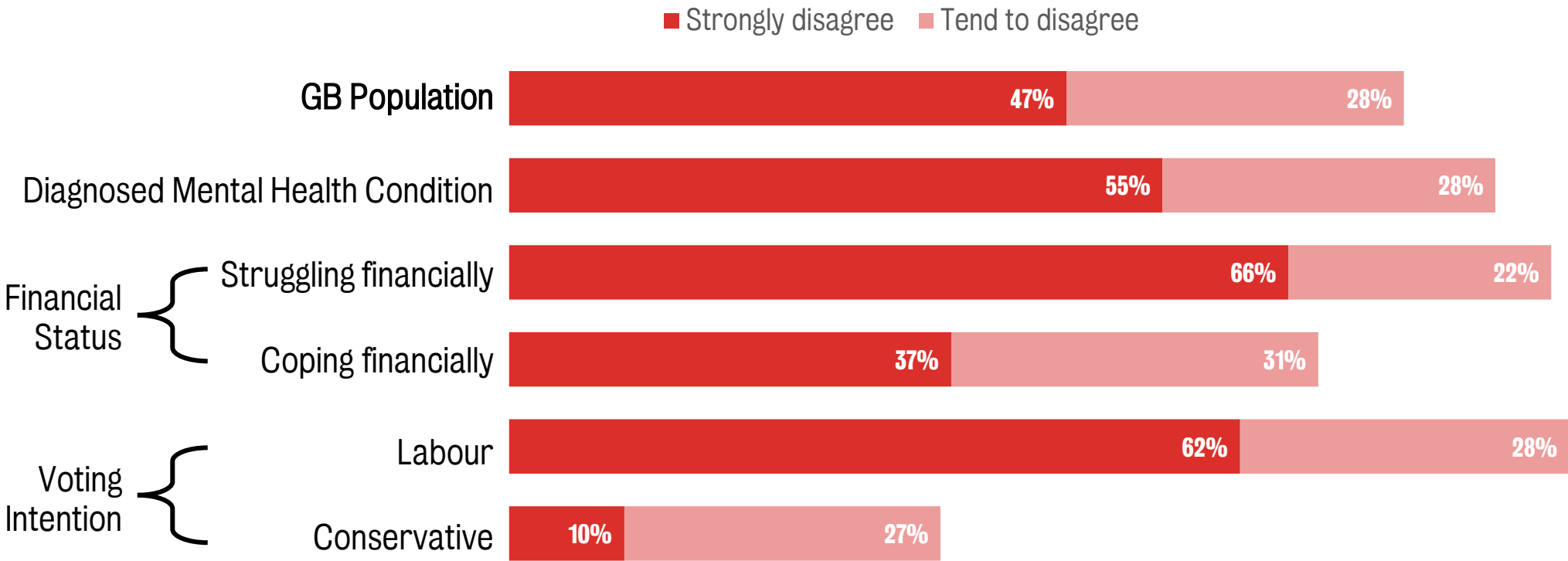
A majority of people think that the government is out of touch with how the rising cost of living is impacting everyday people. More than nine out of ten Labour voters and people struggling financially say this

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement... ‘The UK government is out of touch with how the rising cost of living is impacting the lives of everyday people’? (July 2023)



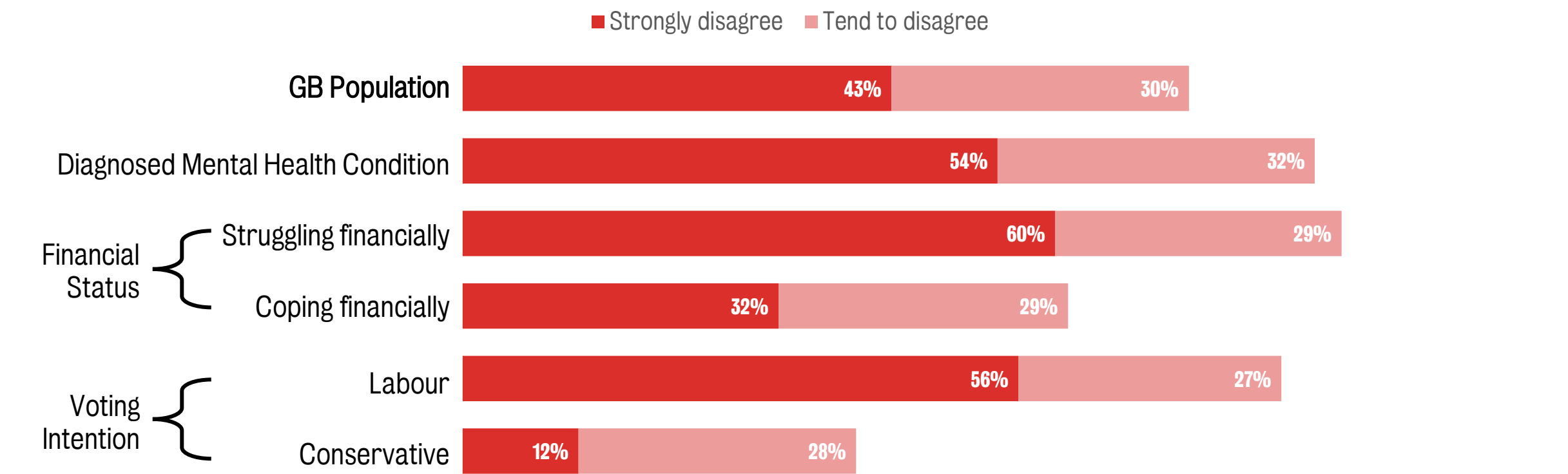
Three quarters of people feel that the government has handled the cost-of-living crisis poorly. Labour voters (90%) are amongst the most likely to think this, whilst conservative voters (37%) are significantly less likely to think this

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement... ‘The UK government has handled the cost-of-living crisis well’? (July 2023)

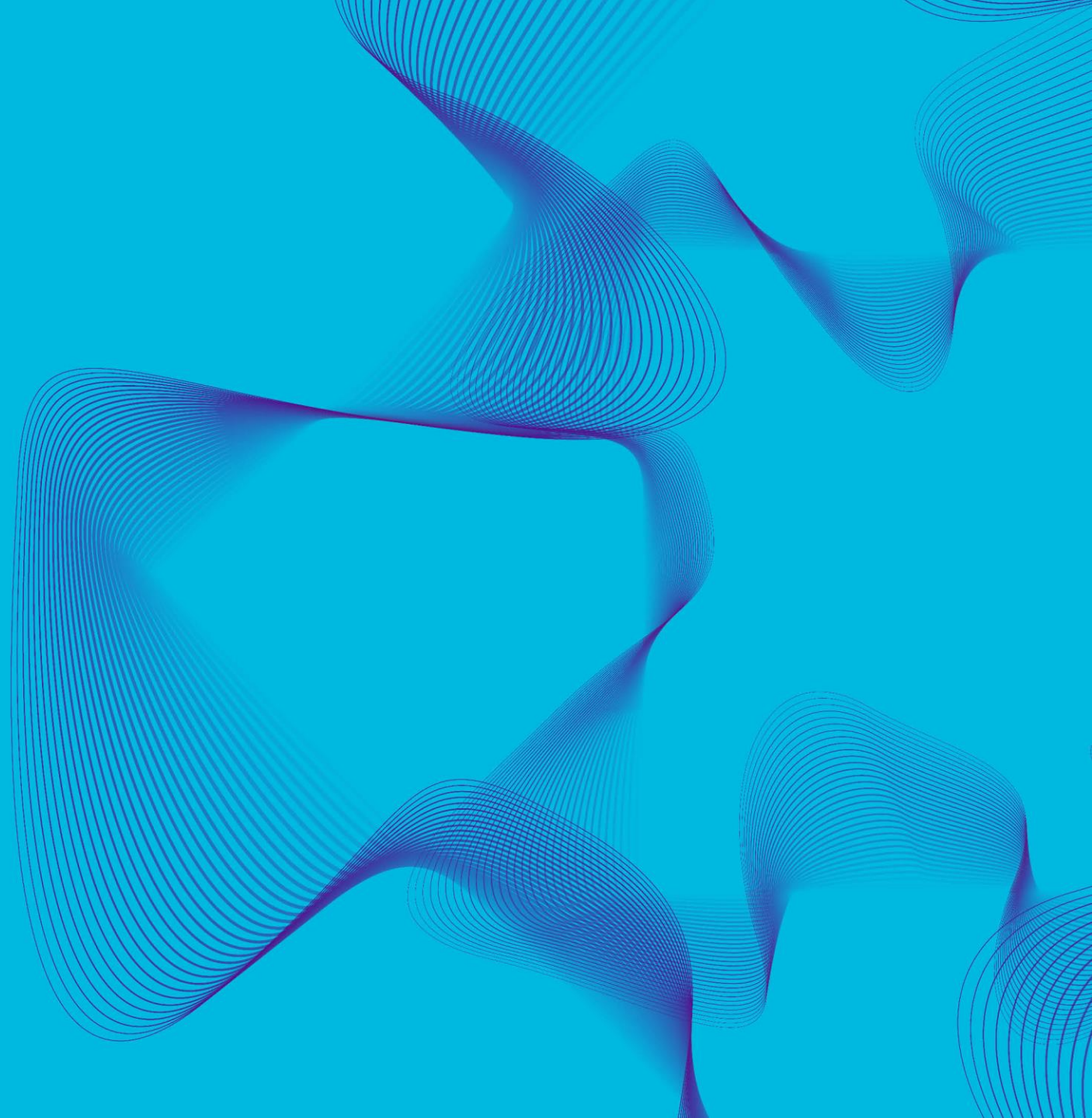


Most people think that the UK government does not care about people like them. Whilst Labour voters and people struggling financially are most likely to think this, even half of conservative voters think this

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement... ‘The UK government cares about people like me’? (July 2023)



Appendix



Appendix

Wellbeing Scores: The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)

We used the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) as a validated measure of wellbeing. SWEMWBS involves 7 simple questions about emotional states with a 5-point response scale. Each response is scored from 0 points ('none of the time') to 5 points ('all of the time'). The scores are then summed and converted to ensure they are in line with the full 14-item metric.

To interpret the results we used the SWEMWBS cut-off scores for the UK population. This is based on an approximately normal distribution of the population, placing 15% of the population into low wellbeing and 15% into high wellbeing categories. A score of <19.5 corresponds to low wellbeing, 19.5 – 27.5 corresponds to average wellbeing, and >27.5 corresponds to high wellbeing.

SWEMWBS Questions

How well, if at all, would you say the following statements describe your experience in the last two weeks?..

- I've been feeling optimistic about the future
- I've been feeling useful
- I've been feeling relaxed
- I've been dealing with problems well
- I've been thinking clearly
- I've been feeling close to other people
- I've been able to make up my own mind about things

Source: Ng Fat, L., Scholes, S., Boniface, S., Mindell, J., & Stewart-Brown, S. (2017). Evaluating and establishing national norms for mental wellbeing using the short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS): Findings from the Health Survey for England. *Quality of Life Research: An International Journal of Quality-of-Life Aspects of Treatment, Care & Rehabilitation*, 26(5), 1129–1144.

Psychological Distress Scores: Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10)

We used the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) as a validated measure of distress. K10 involves 10 simple questions about emotional states with a 5-point response scale. Each response is scored from 0 points ('none of the time') to 5 points ('all of the time'). The scores are then summed.

To interpret the results we used the binary K10 cut-off scores, whereby a total score 0 – 20 means a person is likely to be well, and a score of 21 – 40 means a person is likely to be experiencing abnormal levels of psychological distress.

K10 Questions

In the past four weeks, how often did you feel...

- ... tired out for no good reason?
- ... nervous?
- ... so nervous that nothing could calm you down?
- ... hopeless?
- ... restless or fidgety?
- ... so restless that you could not sit still?
- ... depressed?
- ... that everything was an effort?
- ... so sad that nothing could cheer you up?
- ... worthless?

Source: Kessler RC, Barker PR, Colpe LJ, Epstein JF, Gfroerer JC, Hiripi E, et al. (2003). Screening for serious mental illness in the general population. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 60(2):184-9.

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