



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***New Lancet Study Reveals Mental Disorders Now Affect 1.17 Billion People Worldwide; Burden Highest Among Adolescents***

***ASIA SenseMaker Conversation with Global Mental Health Experts Highlights Rising Burden, Persistent Treatment Gaps, and Growing Data Challenges***

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**New Delhi, India** — Mental illness has never affected more people globally. Yet just as the burden reaches historic levels, the world's ability to understand and measure the crisis may be weakening.

That was one of the central messages emerging from a recent ASIA SenseMaker conversation hosted by the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA) with Dr. Damian Santomauro and Dr. Alize Ferrari of the University of Queensland, co-authors of a major Lancet study on the global burden of mental disorders, ***“Updated trends in the global prevalence and burden of mental disorders, 1990–2023,” (21 May 2026)***.

Published in May 2026, the study estimates that 1.17 billion people were living with a mental disorder in 2023, up from approximately 599 million in 1990. Mental disorders have risen from the 12th leading cause of global disease burden in 1990 to the 5th leading cause today, making them one of the defining public health challenges of the twenty-first century.

Perhaps most strikingly, the burden now peaks among adolescents aged 15–19 years, a first in the history of the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Study.

Yet behind these alarming numbers lies a deeper concern.

***“The burden is rising, but our ability to understand why remains limited,” the researchers noted during the discussion.***

**A Crisis We Can See—But Not Yet Fully Explain**



The study confirms substantial increases in depression and anxiety disorders over recent decades, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation, economic uncertainty, disrupted education, and broader societal stressors have all contributed to worsening mental health outcomes.

But when asked why mental illness continues to rise globally, the researchers offered a remarkably candid assessment: current evidence explains only a fraction of the increase.

Many of the risk factors measured today account for less than one-fifth of the observed rise in mental health burden.

The implication is sobering. Mental health is increasingly recognized as a major development challenge, but the evidence needed to fully understand its drivers remains incomplete.

### **Adolescents at the Centre of the Crisis**

One of the study's most significant findings is the concentration of mental health burden among young people.

Researchers pointed to a combination of factors that may be shaping adolescent mental health, including the lingering effects of the pandemic, reduced social connectedness, uncertainty about employment and housing, climate anxiety, geopolitical instability, and concerns about the future.

While social media is frequently cited in public debate, the experts cautioned that evidence remains mixed and that no single explanation can account for the trend.

What is clear, however, is that young people are experiencing mental health challenges at a scale not previously observed in global health data.

### **India's Strength—and Its Remaining Gaps**

The discussion offered a rare positive note for India.

The researchers described India as one of the most data-rich countries in South Asia for mental health research. Multiple national surveys, state-level studies, and diagnostic datasets have provided valuable evidence for policymakers and researchers alike.



India remains the only country in the Global Burden of Disease Study where mental disorder prevalence is modelled separately for rural and urban populations.

Yet even here, important gaps remain.

Researchers highlighted the need for updated national surveys, stronger evidence on child and adolescent mental health, and long-term longitudinal studies capable of tracking changes over time.

Without such data, many questions about rising prevalence remain unanswered.

## **The World's Mental Health Data Problem**

A major theme of the conversation was the growing fragility of the systems that generate mental health evidence.

Professor Amogh Rai, Research Director at ASIA, raised concerns about the future of population health surveys following reductions in international development funding and uncertainty surrounding several long-standing data collection programmes.

For decades, large-scale health surveys have served as the backbone of mental health estimation across much of South Asia and Africa. Today, however, the sustainability of many of these systems is increasingly uncertain.

The consequences could be significant.

According to the researchers, approximately 75 countries worldwide still lack high-quality epidemiological mental health data. In many places, the challenge is not political resistance but simply the absence of resources, surveys, and research infrastructure.

As a result, some of the regions experiencing the fastest social and demographic change may also be those where mental health trends are least understood.

## **Measuring Mental Health Across Nations**

The researchers also highlighted a longstanding challenge in global mental health research: many diagnostic tools were originally developed in Western settings and do not always translate neatly across cultures.



In numerous societies, emotional distress may be expressed through physical symptoms such as fatigue, body pain, or chest discomfort rather than through terms associated with anxiety or depression.

This raises the possibility that mental disorders remain under-recognized and undercounted in many parts of the world.

To address these challenges, the *World Health Organization is actively working on developing new, freely accessible diagnostic instruments to improve mental health measurements globally. Initiatives such as WHO's FLI-11 programme designs for large scale surveys and clinical studies, the aim to strengthen data quality while making mental health research cost effective, collect consistent data across countries, more accessible for low- and middle-income countries.*

## **Treatment Remains Out of Reach for Most**

Even where mental illness is identified, treatment remains elusive for millions.

Researchers noted that India continues to face an estimated treatment gap of approximately 85 percent. Globally, only around 9 percent of people with major depressive disorder receive minimally adequate care.

The barriers are well known: shortages of trained professionals, affordability constraints, stigma, low awareness, and inconsistent quality of care.

Yet the experts argued that focusing exclusively on treatment is insufficient.

Mental health systems must invest not only in hospitals and specialists, but also in prevention—through schools, families, communities, and early intervention programmes that support mental well-being before disorders emerge.

## **The Missing Evidence**

According to both researchers, the single greatest gap in global mental health evidence is the absence of long-term longitudinal data.

*Without following populations over time, many of the most important questions remain unresolved:*



*Why is prevalence increasing?*

*Which risk factors matter most?*

*How much burden could be prevented through better treatment and prevention?*

*What interventions offer the greatest return on investment?*

Answering these questions will require not only scientific innovation, but sustained investment in data systems at a moment when many of those systems face growing financial pressure.

The challenge for policymakers is therefore twofold: responding to an escalating mental health crisis while ensuring that the tools needed to understand that crisis do not disappear.

## **About ASIA**

The Advanced Study Institute of Asia (ASIA) is an interdisciplinary policy and ideas institute dedicated to advancing understanding of South and Southeast Asia through research, dialogue, publications, and public engagement.

Guided by its institutional philosophy—Inquire. Interpret. Illuminate.—ASIA produces research that shapes policy, informs public debate, and strengthens analytical capacity across Asia.

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