

Economic Survey lays focus on mental healthcare for the first time

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Survey recommends policy measures for better implementation of mental health programmes



For the first time ever, the Economic Survey 2023-24 tabled by the Union Minister of Finance and Corporate Affairs Nirmala Sitharaman in Parliament on 22 July, talks extensively about mental health, its significance and implications on policy recommendations.

Acknowledging mental health as a principally impactful driver of individual and national development, the Survey notes that as per the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2015-16, 10.6% adults in India suffered from mental disorders while treatment gap for mental disorders ranged between 70% and 92% for different disorders.

Further, the prevalence of mental morbidity was higher in urban metro regions (13.5%) as compared to rural areas (6.9%) and urban non-metro areas (4.3%).

Citing NCERT's Mental Health and Well-being of School Students Survey, the Economic Survey highlights an increasing prevalence of poor mental health among adolescents exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with 11% of students reported as feeling anxious, 14% as feeling extreme emotion and 43% experiencing mood swings.

Recognising mental health as a fundamental aspect of overall well-being, the Survey underscores key initiatives and policies taken by the government in this regard such as National Mental Health Programme; National Tele Mental Health Programme; Increasing mental health personnel; and Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram.

The Survey stresses on proper implementation to accelerate the improvements made in mental healthcare on the ground and address gaps in the existing programmes to maximise their effectiveness.

Important policy recommendations include re-doubling efforts to increase the number of psychiatrists, from 0.75 psychiatrists per lakh population in 2021 to the WHO norm of 3 per lakh population; Developing comprehensive guidelines for the excellence centers' services alongside mental healthcare professionals and users to understand their needs; Assessing the effectiveness of the programmes by gathering feedback from the users, professionals, and stakeholders to make necessary changes and meet the needs of a wider population; Effective pathways for integrating mental health interventions in schools including developing an age-appropriate mental health curriculum for teachers and students, encouraging early intervention and positive language in schools, promoting community-level interactions, and balancing the role of technology.