

Survey reveals deterioration of physical and mental health among schoolchildren in Sri Lanka

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A 2024 joint survey conducted by the Ministries of Health and Education in Sri Lanka—under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO)—has revealed alarming trends in the physical and mental health of schoolchildren.

Titled *Global Student Health Survey, Sri Lanka* (GSHS), the study surveyed 2,912 students from Grades 8 to 12 (ages 13–17) across 40 schools in various parts of the island. It examined alcohol and drug use, eating behaviour, mental health, physical activity, safety factors, tobacco use, and injuries resulting from violence and neglect. The findings were based on students’ self-reported responses to a questionnaire.

Compared to the previous GSHS conducted in 2016, the latest data indicates a significant deterioration in the physical and mental wellbeing of students over the past eight years.

Dr. Alaka Singh, WHO representative in Sri Lanka, stated: “Key findings indicate an increasing trend in substance use, consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, physical inactivity, sedentary behaviour, and psychosocial issues compared to the 2016 GSHS. The findings reveal a double burden of malnutrition alongside high rates of smoking, serious injuries, physical fights, and cyberbullying.”

A major concern highlighted in the survey is poor weight management among students: 21.4 percent are underweight, 12.1 percent are overweight, and 3 percent are obese. Being underweight is typically a result of malnutrition, whereas overweight and obesity are linked to the regular consumption of unhealthy food, poor dietary habits and lack of physical exercise.

The survey found that 4.3 percent of students reported

feeling hungry due to a lack of food at home in the 30 days prior to the survey—an increase from 3.1 percent in 2016. Additionally, 1.8 percent said they had skipped breakfast due to food shortages in the seven days leading up to the survey.

Fruit and vegetable consumption remains “alarmingly low.” Nearly 24.9 percent of students reported not eating any fruit in the week prior to the survey, while 3.1 percent said they hadn’t consumed any vegetables. Only 26.1 percent of students reported eating vegetables three or more times per day.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), Dr. Lakmini Magodaratne, director of the Mental Health Division at the Ministry of Health, emphasised the growing prevalence of mental health issues among students: “The percentage of students without close friends has increased from 5.6 percent in 2016 to 7.5 percent in 2024. Feelings of loneliness have also risen significantly. In 2024, 22.4 percent of students reported feeling lonely in the past 12 months, compared to 9 percent in 2016.”

She added that 11.9 percent of students reported being unable to sleep due to anxiety—a sharp rise from 4.6 percent in 2016. “Eighteen percent of students reported symptoms of depression, with a particularly high rate of 26.3 percent among 16–17-year-olds,” she said.

The number of students who had considered suicide rose from 9.4 percent in 2016 to 15.4 percent in 2024, while suicide attempts increased from 6.8 percent to 9.1 percent. More than one-third—36.2 percent—had experienced severe psychological distress, yet only 2.1 percent had sought help from adolescent clinics.

When asked about the root causes of these issues, Dr.

Magodaratne told the WWS: “I basically believe that competition among children is the main cause of this mental stress. Because of competition, they are trapped in private tuition classes. There is no physical or mental rest. There is no time for sports, for being in nature, or for engaging in creative or artistic activities.”

Asked how these problems could be addressed, she suggested that the “New Education Reforms” planned by the current Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government would offer solutions. She claimed these reforms aim to eliminate competition in education and ensure access to quality learning.

Notwithstanding Dr. Magodaratne’s assertions, the government’s policies are unlikely to adequately address the worsening health crisis.

As the WWS explains in its August 12 article, “Sri Lanka’s Dissanayake government announces market-driven education reforms”: “Various academics have raised concerns that students will be forced to select subjects aligned with labor market demands rather than those essential for a comprehensive education, such as aesthetics and history. Instead of cultivating thoughtful, independent critical thinkers, the ruling elite aims to prepare youth for low-wage exploitation by local and global investors.”

Defending these reforms in Parliament on July 24, President Dissanayake said: “Our most valuable asset, the resource that needs to be sharpened and honed to build this nation, is our human capital... From an economic standpoint, we must secure a position in the advanced global labor market. For this, we require a high-quality system that acquires and disseminates knowledge emerging in the world at any given moment.”

In other words, the reforms are being shaped to serve the interests of both local and international big business.

Additionally, the GSHS 2024 report reveals that the use of drugs, violence, and student-related accidents have all increased in the past eight years.

The report recommends several solutions, stating: “Strengthening an adolescent-responsive health system must be a priority. This includes increasing resource allocation, ensuring all health service providers are trained to deliver adolescent-friendly services, expanding access to such services, and creating

widespread awareness among schoolchildren and adolescents.”

However, instead of increasing health sector funding, the JVP/NPP government is pushing forward with IMF-mandated austerity measures, which include further undermining the public health system. Public health expenditure, which stood at 410 billion rupees (\$US1.27 billion) in 2024, has been reduced to 383 billion rupees in 2025.

The growing competition among students is rooted in worsening social inequality, unequal access to quality education, and limited university placements and employment opportunities—outcomes of decades of austerity policies imposed by successive governments. Education spending has consistently remained between 1–2 percent of GDP, with projections indicating further cuts in line with IMF demands.

Rising student malnutrition reflects the broader social crisis. Poverty is worsening amid skyrocketing living costs and high unemployment. A recent UNICEF report stated: “2.3 million children in Sri Lanka do not have enough to eat. Families wake up every day to increased food prices, struggling to provide for their children in a country where vital services like healthcare and education are being pushed to their limits. Sri Lanka’s children are paying a heavy price for this crisis.”

Meanwhile, the World Bank reports that the national poverty rate is expected to rise to 22.7 percent this year. This situation will be worsened by the privatisation of hundreds of state-owned enterprises and the global economic fallout from the U.S.-China trade war, which has led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The deepening crisis outlined in the GSHS 2024 report can only be resolved through massive investments in public healthcare, education, and job creation. This requires the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to nationalising the banks, major corporations, and plantations under workers’ democratic control, rejecting foreign debt repayments, and implementing socialist policies.



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