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Editor's Note: The Global Mind Health in 2025 report, along with country-specific data, peer-reviewed background research and other supporting materials are available in our [embargoed online pressroom](#) (password: Health2026).

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New Study of 1 Million People Finds More than 40% of Young Adults Worldwide Face a “Mind Health” Crisis That Makes Daily Life a Constant Struggle — With Ultra-Processed Food, Smartphones as Key Culprits

Findings from Global Mind Health in 2025 report flips the script from the early 2000s when 18-34-year-olds led all age groups in mental well-being; now they are four times more likely than adults over 55 to report “clinically significant” mental challenges

Washington, D.C. (February 26, 2026) — A new analysis of data collected from some 1 million people in 84 countries reveals that 41% of the world’s Internet-enabled young adults (ages 18-34) now face a “mind health crisis” that substantially impairs their ability to navigate a constellation of cognitive, emotional, social and physical challenges and live a fully productive life.

The findings emerged from the [Global Mind Health in 2025 report](#), which was released today by [Sapien Labs](#), a Washington, DC-area nonprofit that is led by experts in neuroscience, psychology and computational science. Their study, which is based on data gathered through online surveys conducted across Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, documents a curious and concerning decline in the mental health of younger generations.

It notes that as of the early 2000s, this age group enjoyed “the greatest well-being of all age groups.” But now the opposite appears to be the case. For example, the Global Mind Health in 2025 report found that compared to adults over 55, today’s younger adults are four times more likely to suffer from “mental health challenges of clinical significance that substantially impact to their ability to function productively in their daily life.” It identifies four primary reasons for their struggles: smartphone adoption in childhood; increased consumption of ultra-processed foods; deteriorating family bonds; and diminished spirituality — ranking countries on each of these factors.

“The mind health crisis appears to be a progressive slide from generation to generation and goes far beyond rising rates of depression and anxiety in young adults,” said Tara Thiagarajan, Ph.D., lead author of the report and Sapien Labs’ founder and chief scientist. “The Global Mind Project asked respondents to assess a wide range of capacities that are essential for navigating life’s daily challenges as well as problems spanning major mental health disorders. We found that alongside

struggles with depression and anxiety, young adults often experience challenges on many other fronts, from emotional control to handling relationships with others to their ability to focus.”

While noting that there are many causes of the decline, the report highlights four key factors: Today’s young adults are the first generation that has been using smartphones since childhood; they are more likely to consume ultra-processed foods; they often report fraying family ties; and a growing number of them lack spiritual connections. Each area has been associated to varying degrees with an increased risk of mental health challenges and overall erosion of coping capacity.

Sapien Labs used the data gathered via the online surveys to produce a Mind Health Quotient or “MHQ” score to serve as an assessment of an individual’s “mind health” — with mind health defined as the full complement of emotional, social, cognitive and physical capacities that are key to managing and thriving in life, work and relationships.

There were notable geographic disparities in the findings that point to a potential inverse correlation between wealth and mind health. The data revealed that 18-34-year-olds in sub-Saharan Africa, which has the lowest per capita income of any region in the world, scored far better than their peers in the U.S., Canada, Europe, India, Japan and Australia, all of which were near the bottom of the rankings (see “More Information” for specific MHQ scores and rankings). The data also showed that young adults in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa ranked higher in the four key contributors to mind health. For example, they were more likely to report strong spiritual connections and less likely to have a smartphone in childhood. However, in all countries, the Internet-enabled young adults still fared worse than older adults.

Previous Sapien Labs research revealed that the gap between generations developed prior to 2020, with the mind health of young adults ages 18-34 dropping precipitously over the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, while older generations experienced a relatively miniscule decline. Over the past five years, this gap has not significantly changed. Dr. Thiagarajan said policymakers should be focused on the economic impacts caused by a large number of young people entering the workforce with compromised mind health.

“In the U.S., spending on mental health research and care has risen dramatically, by billions of dollars, as it has across western countries. And while important, it’s not moving the needle,” she said. “We need to stop chasing the symptoms and instead begin tackling the broader problems that erode the productivity and well-being of young adults around the world. For example, policy interventions that limit smartphone access in childhood and consumption of ultra-processed foods help safeguard the mind health of the youngest generations — without them, the global economy will flounder for the next several decades.”

The report notes that smartphones and ultra-processed foods, along with diminished spirituality and deteriorating family ties, together account for the majority of the mind health challenges that emerged from the survey data. It points to evidence to account for each of these influences. For example:

- **Smartphones:** Among those aged 18-24, the younger they were when they acquired their first smartphone in childhood, the more likely they are to have [struggles as adults](#).
- **Ultra-processed foods:** Mind health declines systematically with consumption of these products; after controlling for other factors, they are estimated to [contribute 15-30%](#) of the mental health burden.
- **Spirituality:** Defined as a sense or feeling of connection to a higher power, among the 18-34 age group, those with spirituality ratings of 7 or higher (out of 9) typically have MHQ scores 20 points or more higher than those with ratings below 3.
- **Family bonds:** Those with poor family relationships are almost four times more likely to have mind health scores in the distressed or struggling ranges compared to those who are close to many family members.

The report points to specific policy actions that can reduce their harms, particularly harms caused by early adoption of smartphones and increased consumption of ultra-processed foods. For issues linked to smartphones, the report calls for wider adoption of policies that ban their use during school hours and establish minimum age requirements for using social media. For ultra-processed foods, the report calls for new investments in research that can uncover the risks associated with the many different types of colors, flavors, preservatives, emulsifiers and other additives found in these products — and provide evidence to support regulations that can reduce their use.

“While the report is not the first to connect these influences to mental health challenges, the breadth and depth of the Global Minds data stands out for revealing the scale of the problems they are causing,” said David Blanchflower, Ph.D., professor of economics at Dartmouth College. “Because when you see evidence that almost half of all young adults globally — the heart of the workforce — are struggling with an array of mental health challenges, that means we are facing a crisis that can undermine the health of entire economies and societies. It’s a clear signal that we need to act to address the root causes.”

More Information:

The average MHQ scores of a number of nations follow:

- **Argentina:** With an average MHQ of 102 for those aged 55+ (35) but only 42 for those aged 18-34 (38 out of 84 countries).
- **Australia:** With an average MHQ of 83 for those aged 55+ but only 27 for those aged 18-34 (74 out of 84).
- **Canada:** With an average MHQ of 96 for those aged 55+ but only 32 for those aged 18-34 (65 out of 84).
- **Colombia:** With an average MHQ of 114 for those aged 55+ but only 47 for those aged 18-34 (25 out of 84).
- **Egypt:** With an average MHQ of 91 for those aged 55+ but only 32 for those aged 18-34 (65 out of 84).

- **Finland:** With an average MHQ of 105 for those aged 55+ but only 41 for those aged 18-34 (40 out of 84). Finland has the youngest age of smartphone use in childhood.
- **France:** With an average MHQ of 85 for those aged 55+ but only 36 for those aged 18-34 (58 out of 84).
- **Germany:** With an average MHQ of 72 for those aged 55+ but only 28 for those aged 18-34 (71 out of 84). Germany has the lowest spirituality worldwide.
- **Ghana:** With an average MHQ of 117 for those aged 55+ and 69 for those aged 18-34 (best in the world).
- **India:** With an average MHQ of 96 for those aged 55+ but only 33 for those aged 18-34 (60 out of 84).
- **Kenya:** With an average MHQ of 107 for those aged 55+ and 63 for those aged 18-34 (tied for 3rd out of 84).
- **Mexico:** With an average MHQ of 117 for those aged 55+ (3) but only 38 for those aged 18-34 (52 out of 84).
- **Nigeria:** With an average MHQ of 113 for those aged 55+ and 64 for those aged 18-34 (tied for 2nd best out of 84).
- **Peru:** With an average MHQ of 112 for those aged 55+ but only 39 for those aged 18-34 (46 out of 84).
- **Saudi Arabia:** With an average MHQ of 100 for those aged 55+ but only 47 for those aged 18-34 (25 out of 84).
- **South Africa:** With an average MHQ of 98 for those aged 55+ but only 39 for those aged 18-34 (46 out of 84).
- **Tanzania:** With an average MHQ of 108 for those aged 55+ but only 62 for those aged 18-34 (5th this year, 1st last year out of 84). Tanzania is ranked highest in terms of spirituality and average age for smartphone adoption.
- **UK:** With an average MHQ of 78 for those aged 55+ but only 20 for those aged 18-34 (81 out of 84, 4th worst in the world). UK has among the highest ultra-processed food consumption.
- **United Arab Emirates:** With an average MHQ of 104 for those aged 55+ but only 52 for those aged 18-34 (14 out of 84).
- **U.S.:** With an average MHQ of 100 for those aged 55+ but only 36 for those aged 18-34 (58 out of 84). U.S. has the highest ultra-processed food consumption.

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Sapien Labs is a non-profit organization that is focused on understanding the impact of our rapidly changing social, technological, and chemical environment on our brains and minds. The Global Mind Project is the largest and most comprehensive ongoing global data acquisition projects that tracks 47 aspects of mind health and a range of environmental and lifestyle factors across 85+ countries in 25 languages.