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## Infrastructure Services and Mental Health in Nepal

Based on the peer-reviewed publication Axinn et al. 2015, in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*<sup>1</sup>

Research conducted by the University of Michigan documents new evidence of the impact of community infrastructure services on mental health in Nepal.

Although support from family and close friends is very important to individuals dealing with mental health issues, this research found that schools, markets, health services, and organized support groups in Nepal offer additional support that serves to enhance mental health at the individual and community levels.<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief summarizes the findings from a study linking community-level infrastructure services to mental health in Nepal, highlighting

the need for a renewed commitment to mental health and recommending the use of a multi-pronged strategy focused on prevention through the use of community-level interventions.

“Mental health is a global problem, more so in low and middle income countries. Poverty, unemployment and recent major earthquakes in affected districts are further adding to the problem.”

- Dr. Kapil Dev Upadhyaya, CMC-Nepal

### Research Context

- Social support positively influences mental health. Social support is a person's connections to the larger community.<sup>1</sup>
- Social support typically comes from family and friends. These connections provide companionship, encouragement, and advice.
- Social support can protect us from negative outcomes of stressful life events through the emotional comfort that arises from connections to our peers.
- This support helps us recover from stressful events by enhancing feelings of attachment, security, and self-esteem.<sup>2</sup>

### Data Source

This study uses data from the Chitwan Valley Health and Stress Study (CVHSS), which is based on the sampling framework of the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) – a comprehensive mixed-method panel study of individuals, families, and communities in Chitwan, Nepal.

The CVFS investigates the relationships between changing social contexts, environmental factors, and population processes. CVFS data include full life histories for more than 10,000 individuals, tracking and interviews with all migrants, continuous measurement of community change, 21 years of demographic event registry, and data linking human and natural systems.

# Findings: How Infrastructure Services Improve Mental Health in Nepal<sup>1</sup>

In Nepal, research suggests that schools, health services, markets, and organized social groups are associated with lower odds of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), intermittent explosive disorder (IED), and anxiety disorders.

Interestingly, each infrastructure service was found to have a positive impact on different sets of mental health conditions, as outlined below. The mechanisms by which these resources may help reduce mental health problems are also summarized.

- **Schools** reduce depression, PTSD and IED. Schools provide skills and abilities, improve access to information, and change relationships within families, giving individuals resources to help manage adversities.

- **Health Services** significantly lower the odds of depression and PTSD.

Health services provide medicines, treatments, and support to individuals and conduct outreach programs to the community.

- **Marketplaces** reduce the odds of depression and IED.

Marketplaces offer sources of information, materials, transportation, and social relationships, which may alter the way individuals react to stressful and traumatic events.

- **Organized Social Groups** are significantly associated with decreased odds of depression.

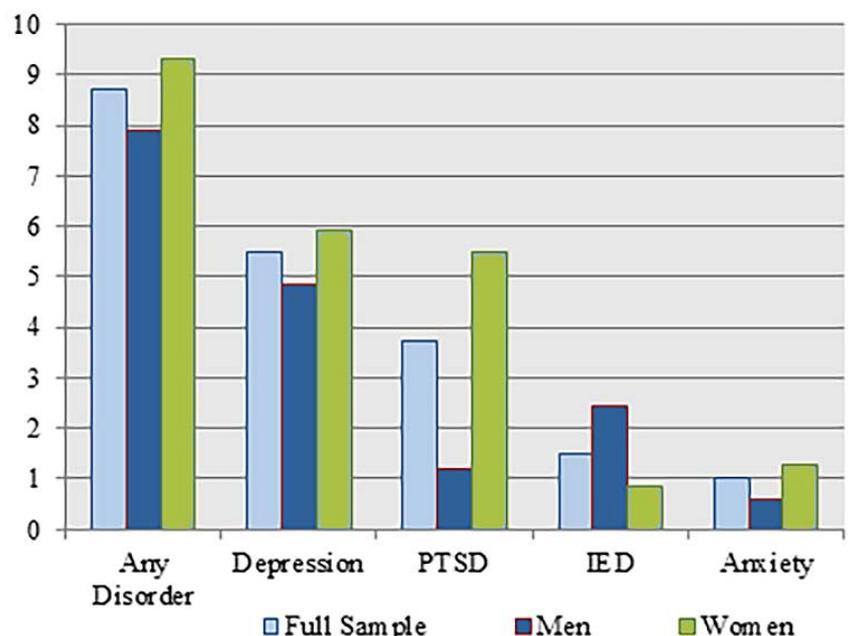
Social groups such as religious groups, youth clubs, interest groups, and community development committees may increase resilience by providing support outside the family.

## Mental Illness in Chitwan, Nepal<sup>1</sup>

Key findings from research in Chitwan, Nepal suggest:

- Infrastructure services may improve mental health.
- Schools, markets, health services, and support groups affect mental illness in different ways.
- Anxiety disorders and IED are rare in this population, but infrastructure services decrease the odds of having either.
- Living near schools, market places, health services, and social groups lowers the chances of having depression and PTSD.

Frequency of Ever Having Had a Psychiatric Disorder<sup>1</sup>



# Policy Implications

Research conducted in Chitwan, Nepal suggests that social support from community infrastructure services can improve mental health. Specifically, schools, markets, health services, and social support groups reduce the odds of having depression, PTSD, and IED.

**Looking Forward:** The World Health Organization identified five key challenges that must be addressed to improve mental health in Nepal:

- (1) Mental health is not included in the public health agenda;
- (2) The distribution of mental health services is uneven;
- (3) Mental health services are not integrated with primary care;
- (4) The infrastructure and health care worker training in mental health are inadequate; and
- (5) Public mental health leadership is inadequate.<sup>3</sup>

To date, successful interventions to improve mental health in Nepal have focused on promoting social support and community connectedness.<sup>4</sup> Outreach programs hosted by medical facilities in Nepal have been successful in the past.<sup>5</sup> These programs not only help connect those in need to salient resources, but provide health services focused on preventing mental illness.

Increasing the number of existing medical facilities that commit to these kinds of outreach and public health promotion efforts would help address many of the challenges identified by WHO.

**Conclusion:** Understanding that infrastructure services positively impact individual and community mental health through social support, as well as direct intervention, may help leaders in Nepal improve mental health for the country as a whole.

## Mental Health Care Resources in Nepal

### Community Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Programme:

- Operates in only a few districts in Nepal.
- Integrates mental health care into primary care.
- Hopes to improve health professionals' capacity through trainings.
- Raises awareness of mental illness by connecting patients, their families, and organizations.
- Helps form social support groups throughout communities.<sup>6</sup>



### Using Non-Specialist Health Workers to Deliver Mental Health Care:

- Shares mental health services with community members in Nepal.
- Local interventions have the ability to improve mental health.
- This program requires three things to succeed:
  - 1) Human resources,
  - 2) Supervised care, and
  - 3) Quality training of workers.<sup>7</sup>

# Footnotes and References

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