High fertility worsening mental illness — report

The State of Uganda Population Report 2025 links high fertility to escalating unemployment levels.

BY MARIA JACINTA KANNYANGE

A new government report has revealed that Uganda's high fertility rate could exacerbate the country's growing mental health crisis, particularly among young people struggling to find employment.

The State of Uganda Population Report (SUPRE) 2025, released yesterday by the National Planning Authority (NPA), links high fertility to escalating unemployment levels, warning that the trend is creating a fresh workforce that is increasingly unable to secure jobs.

While unveiling the report at the Uganda Media Centre in Kampala, Minister of State for Finance (Planning) Amos Lugoloobi described mental health as a "silent emergency" and an under-addressed determinant of Uganda's demographic and development outcomes.

"With a total fertility rate of about 4.5 births per woman, the country continues to experience rapid population growth and a high child and youth dependency burden," Mr Lugoloobi said.

He noted that high fertility, large household sizes, and socio-economic pressures associated with rapid population growth place significant psychological strain on families, caregivers, and young people.

"Addressing mental health is therefore not separate from the fertility and population agenda; it is central to converting Uganda's youthful population into a resilient human capital base that can sustain inclusive growth and long-term development," Mr Lugoloobi added.

According to figures from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), the country's total fertility rate has declined from about seven births per woman in 2002 to approximately 4.5 births per woman over the past two years. Despite this decline, the report warns that the pace of population growth continues to outstrip the country's capacity to provide essential social services, particularly in mental health care.

Teenage mothers in Tororo District. The report warns that the pace of population growth continues to outstrip the country's capacity to provide essential social services. PHOTO/FILE

Mr Lugoloobi highlighted that only one in 10 people in need of mental health services currently receive appropriate care. This is largely due to limited infrastructure, shortages of critical health personnel, persistent stigma, and constrained financing.

"Without accelerated investment in prevention, early identification, and community-based care, Uganda risks long-term productivity losses that could undermine the Ten-Fold Growth Strategy and the aspirations of the Fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV)," the minister said.

Echoing these concerns, Minister of Health Jane Ruth Aceng emphasised the dual social and economic burden of mental health disorders. She urged the government to address rising population levels in tandem with increasing mental health challenges among the youth.

"Uganda's population challenge is not only about how many we are. It is about how well we nurture and protect the well-being of each individual," Dr Aceng said.

Dr Juliet Nakku, the executive director of Butabika National Referral Mental Hospital, attributed the rise in mental health disorders to increased drug and alcohol use.

"Butabika Hospital is full, and many youths with mental health conditions cannot access the care they need. We no longer have the capacity to serve this population adequately," Dr Nakku said. She appealed to the government to extend services similar to those at Butabika to other referral hospitals across the country, citing drug and alcohol abuse as an epidemic affecting young people.

The SUPRE 2025 report shows that mental health cases increased by 71 percent between 2021 and 2024, rising from 494,326 to 843,295 cases. Population-based estimates suggest that mental health conditions affect approximately 24.2 percent of adults and 22.9 percent of children, accounting for roughly 13 percent of total disability-adjusted life years.

High-risk conditions, including depression, substance-use disorders, and self-harm, are on the rise, particularly among adolescents, youth, and working-age adults.

These trends are unfolding against a demographic backdrop dominated by a large youth population. More than 73 percent of Ugandans are under the age of 30, yet over half of young people aged 18–30 are neither employed, in education, nor in training.

BACKGROUND

Uganda's population currently stands at 45,935,046, up from 34.6 million in 2014, according to UBOS census results. The report warns that without targeted interventions to manage population growth and invest in mental health services, the country risks compounding its unemployment and social challenges, undermining broader development objectives.

The SUPRE 2025 report calls for urgent action to integrate mental health interventions into broader population policies, emphasizing prevention, early identification, community-based care, and the expansion of mental health infrastructure nationwide.