



UNICEF EDUCATION

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Case Study

KAZAKHSTAN

Mental health promotion and suicide prevention in schools

28 March 2022

In 2011, Kazakhstan had one of the highest adolescent suicide mortality rates in the world, suicide was the **leading cause of death** among adolescents aged 15–19.

Since 2012, UNICEF has collaborated with the Government of Kazakhstan to develop and implement the **Adolescent Mental Health and Suicide Prevention (AMHSP)** programme. This programme is an intersectoral, school-based response that aims to strengthen the national education and health system's ability to respond to adolescents' mental health and psychosocial needs. It does this by improving the early identification and referral of those at risk, building the capacity of school and public health professionals, and mental health literacy workshops and awareness-raising campaigns in the school community. The AMHSP programme also provides school and healthcare professionals with strategies to address stigma, including parent outreach, distributing awareness-raising materials, and organizing community and public health forums.

Between 2015–2018, the AMHSP was piloted in two regions reaching 232,000 adolescents (116,464 boys and 115,536 girls) aged 14–17 across 477 secondary schools. In 2018, UNICEF transitioned oversight of the AMHSP to partners the Bilim Foundation and the NCMH (National Centre of Mental Health), which have scaled up the implementation to an additional 1,124 schools across five regions. Partners have integrated a comprehensive digital monitoring system for identifying adolescents at high risk and referring them to trained mental health workers.

Most recently, UNICEF, with the support of USAID, developed a joint action plan with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Healthcare to ensure continued access to psychological counselling services during the COVID-19 pandemic and meet the emerging capacity building needs of the school counsellors. An [online counselling platform](#) for individual online counselling services was launched, and a [new page](#) with online training sessions for school psychologists was established, reaching educational professionals in all seventeen country regions. Today, UNICEF continues to provide technical guidance and the Government of Kazakhstan is embracing AMHSP as a centre piece of adolescent mental health services and has increased financing for mental health services by 25 per cent.

RESULTS

- An evaluation of the AMHSP pilot found that adolescents identified as at risk experienced a significant decrease in suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, and stress after receiving treatment.
- Approximately 116,000 school psychologists and school personnel received training on identifying and responding to adolescents' mental health issues.
- More than 10,000 adolescents who participated in the AMHSP pilot (4.5 per cent) received referrals to additional services.
- More than 1,500 primary health care and mental health workers were trained in managing adolescents with mental health issues or suicidal behaviour.
- The online training platform for school psychologists has reached more than 25,000 users.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Addressing stigma is critical to increasing access to mental health and suicide prevention services for adolescents.** This included working with parents and caregivers to address scepticism around adolescent participation in assessment or treatment and shifting the framing of the programme from a focus on suicide to an emphasis on mental health and wellbeing.
- **Prepare for scale.** The programme's success led to an influx of referrals, a higher demand for professional services, and thus, a need for greater support for school psychologists. Providing increased support, such as group counselling, to mental health service providers early in the programme would have helped meet the higher demand.
- **Leveraging the power of data in influencing advocacy and long-term change.** Data from the national study on adolescent suicide was key to securing buy-in from the MoES in implementing the AMHSP programme. Prioritizing the collection of data during implementation has allowed for evaluations findings to inform growing regional advocacy efforts.

NEXT STEPS

In 2022, UNICEF plans to continue scaling its online counselling platform, USupportMe, to ensure adolescents can access affordable and inclusive psychological counselling. UNICEF is also preparing to adapt and implement the [Magnificent Mei comics](#) and accompanying [Teacher's Guide](#) to help promote psychosocial wellbeing, prevent mental health conditions, and reduce risky behaviours in adolescents.

Cost effectiveness: UNICEF and the Federal Government of Kazakhstan contributed US\$587,287 toward the implementation of the AMHSP programme between 2015-2018, reaching 232,000 adolescents.