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 World Health
Organization

UNICEF and WHO Joint Programme on Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being and Development of Children and Adolescents

Summary Report | May 2025

Our vision: All children and adolescents achieve the highest possible standard of mental health and psychosocial well-being and development.

UNICEF and WHO Joint Programme on Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being and Development of Children and Adolescents

Background

Investing in the mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, and development of children and adolescents is a cornerstone of sustainable development. It is an ethical obligation and a strategic imperative—ensuring young people can learn, thrive, build meaningful relationships, and contribute to their communities. Yet, despite overwhelming evidence of its importance, youth mental health remains one of the most neglected global health challenges.

Despite its importance, mental health remains a neglected and underfunded. The average global government expenditure on mental health is just 2% of overall health budgets, only a fraction of which is allocated to children and young people.¹ In low- and middle-income countries, the scarcity of care is catastrophic, with fewer than one mental health professional for every million young people.

The cost of inaction is immense, and the potential returns are transformative. Evidence shows that implementing mental health interventions for adolescents yields a 23-fold return on investment,² meaning every dollar spent generates substantial long-term benefits in health, education, and economic productivity.

In 2022, UNICEF and WHO launched a catalytic **Joint Programme on Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being and Development of Children and Adolescents**. This strategic partnership accelerates country-level action to deliver systemic change at scale—promoting nurturing environments and improved access to quality mental health promotion, protection and care for young people, as fundamental human right.



1. Mental health ATLAS 2020. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

2. Stelmach et al, The global return on investment from preventing and treating adolescent mental disorders and substance use: a modelling study. BMJ Global Health. 2022 Jun 1;7(6):e007759.

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The Joint Programme approach

Since its launch, the Joint Programme has been working across 13 countries: Albania, Bhutan, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guyana, Jordan, Egypt, Malaysia, Maldives, Mozambique, North Macedonia, Papua New Guinea, and Serbia.



The Joint Programme comprises four **strategic priority areas**:

 Strengthen leadership, governance and advocacy An increased number of countries implement multisectoral and multi-stakeholder strategies and actions for mental health and psychosocial well-being for children and adolescents	 Strengthen service delivery and care systems An increased number of countries can offer improved access to quality care services (across health, education and social services/child protection services) for children and adolescents with mental health and neurological conditions, and their caregivers
 Improve promotion and prevention in mental health An increased number of countries are able to offer nurturing, supportive environments for children and adolescents and opportunities for them to strengthen cognitive and socioemotional skills	 Strengthen information systems, evidence and research An increased number of countries are able to generate and use quality data and evidence to inform multisectoral actions and policies for mental health and psychosocial well-being and development of children and adolescents

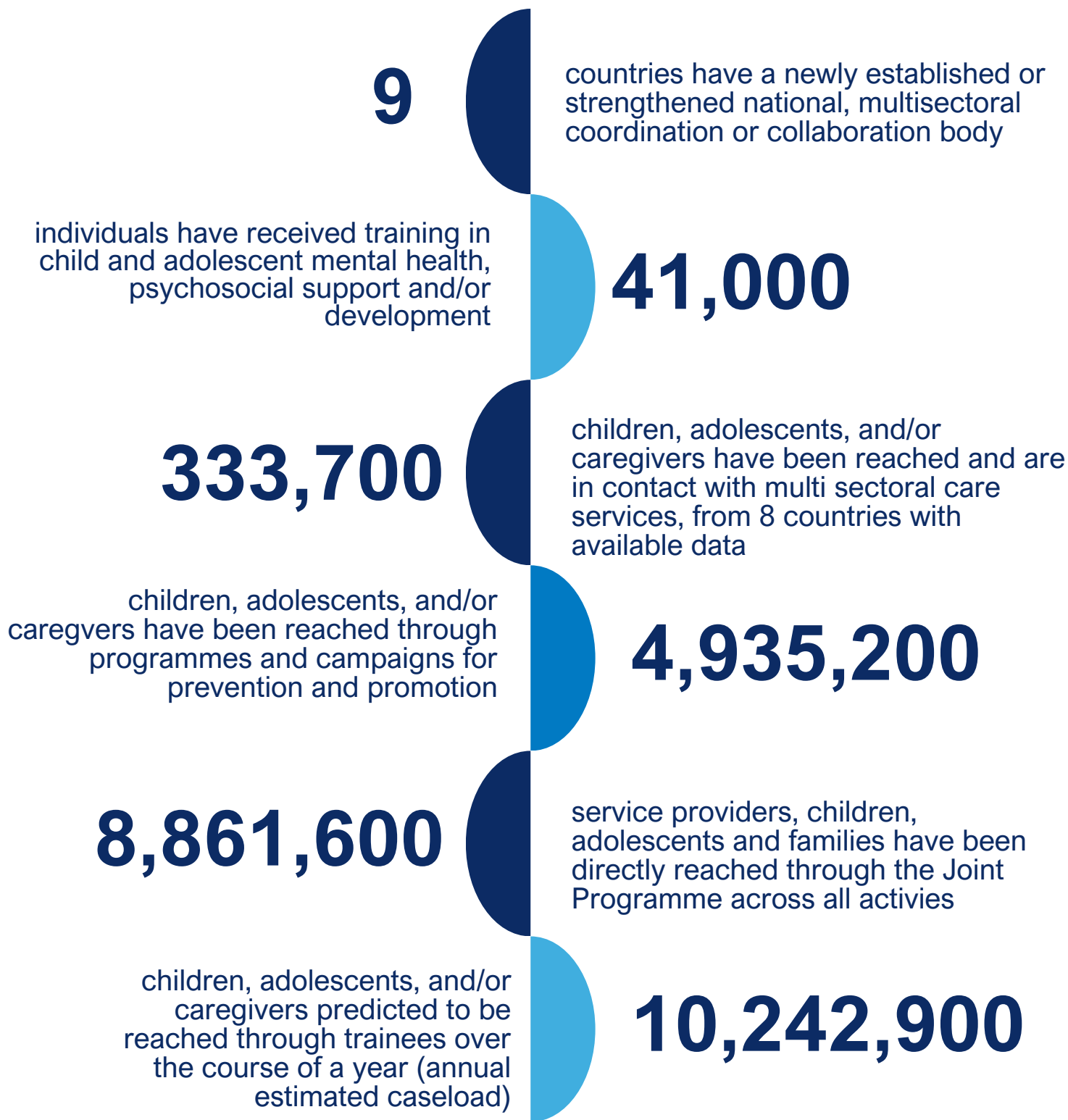
In each country, a **joint UNICEF-WHO-government team**, with **technical support from regional and headquarters offices**, drives systemic change through:

- Catalytic stakeholder consultations to identify high-impact opportunities that can promote nurturing, supportive environments, and improve access to networked child and adolescent mental health services, including prevention, care and support.
- Evidence-based action planning to develop costed, multisectoral and multiagency roadmaps aligned with local needs and global best practices.
- Strategic support to institutionalize capacity to scale interventions and strengthen service delivery through engagement of a range of local stakeholders, including youth-led organizations
- Reporting on core indicators and documentation and sharing of learnings.

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Key achievements

Since its inception, using seed funding of USD 6 million allocated from internal UNICEF and WHO resources, the Joint Programme has built solid foundations to improve mental health and development outcomes for children and adolescents in the above mentioned 13 countries.



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Spotlight: Strengthening multisectoral coordination and leadership



Representatives from MOH, WHO and UNICEF came together for the workshop on 'Development of Indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation plan of Action of Children and Adolescent Mental Health.' Photo credit: MOH

In **North Macedonia**, the Joint Programme supported the adoption of the first-ever national action plan for child and adolescent mental health, mapping out essential services and integrating mental health into school systems and community programmes. A similar process is near completion in **Malaysia**, where the National Centre of Excellence for Mental Health, with technical advice from WHO and UNICEF, led the development of a multi-sectoral national strategic action plan for CAMH and a related monitoring and evaluation framework.

Spotlight: Strengthening systems for delivery of services



Master training for adolescent mental health prevention and promotion in Colombia

In **Egypt**, where over 6,600 workers have been trained, the health and education sectors were supported to establish mental health centers in schools, which are accessible to the whole community, including Sudanese refugees, and integrated into government planning, budgeting, and human resource management. In **Colombia**, access to community services has been expanded in violence-affected areas, using a district level approach, combining development of local leadership with workforce training. In total 1935 workers have been trained, reaching over 2 million Colombians, including children, adolescents, and caregivers.

Spotlight: Leveraging diverse platforms to advance access to services



In Serbia digital platforms are playing a unique role in advancing access to MHPSS

In **Serbia**, a one stop shop digital hub, known as the SveJeOK platform, was launched by the government to provide online mental health services for young people, including information, interactive activities, and online counselling, reaching over 169,000 young people. In **Cote D'Ivoire**, the response to the Central Sahel crisis leveraged the existing cadre of social workers, training and supervising 32 workers deployed to refugee camps and affected host communities, reaching approximately 50,000 people.

Spotlight: Promoting nurturing environments across sectors



Facilitators engaged in hands-on training during a Training of Trainers Initiative in implementing promotive preventative Intervention tools

In **Maldives**, the Helping Adolescents Thrive (HAT) toolkit, co-developed by UNICEF and WHO, have been contextualized and adapted for use. Through these efforts, over 40 facilitators have been capacitated to deliver social and emotional learning programmes in more than 20 schools, reaching 2,500 adolescents and 110 caregivers. In **Guyana**, the JP has supported the establishment of 'Let's Talk' counselling benches for psychological support in 25 schools.

Insights from implementation to date



- At **country level**, a significant proportion of resources has been invested in building the foundations for child and adolescent mental health programming, including intersectoral collaboration, strategies to engage local partners and youth, and the development of a core set of indicators to monitor progress.
- At **global and regional levels**, the Joint Programme has focused on advocating for the importance of child and adolescent mental health to foster additional investments. The Programme has learned from these early efforts, gathered insights on what works, and adapted strategies to meet the needs of governments and local stakeholders.

Key challenges



- **Most countries have very limited capacity and resources** to develop child and adolescent mental health programmes and services. The Joint Programme is working to build capacity by strengthening collaborative approaches to child and adolescent mental health policy and service planning.
- **Current investments are massively inadequate to meet needs.** Although funds have been mobilized in some countries as a result of the momentum created by the Joint Programme, resource levels remain grossly inadequate. The Joint Programme is advocating with national governments, partners and international donors for increased funding to support this area.

Key enablers



- **Even modest levels of dedicated funding have sparked change.** Combining the knowledge and efforts of UNICEF, WHO, and key stakeholders has helped to ensure that minimum resources are used for maximum impact.
- **Multisectoral collaboration has been essential** to support integrated services and harness resources to the best possible effect. Integrating child and adolescent mental health across, inter alia, health, education, and social systems can be highly effective, enabling a 'whole-of-systems' approach to mental health, and embedding services and strategies where children and adolescents are already accessing support.
- **Fostering local partnerships** has helped to ensure that programmes and policies are relevant and culturally effective. Moreover, regional collaboration and knowledge-sharing has bridged gaps in capacity and supported the development and adaptation of programmes across diverse contexts.
- **Opportunities for knowledge exchange** within and between countries are important. They have allowed stakeholders to learn from each other's successes, challenges and innovations.

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Working towards transformative change



Joint Programme priorities for next phase of implementation:

- **Expand partnership and secure sustainable funding** to support growth in the above mentioned 13 countries and in new countries.
- In new countries, **support assessment of catalytic opportunities** for driving changes in ecosystems and services for child and young people's mental health and psychosocial well-being.
- **Support context-specific and data-informed efforts** to improve access to resources, services and supports for mental health promotion and protection - through scale up of local solutions, development of workforce across sectors and reorienting and expanding community-based service networks.
- **Promote greater accountability** for child and adolescent mental health commitments, by sustaining, deepening and expanding partnerships with local governments, civil society organizations and specifically youth-led and caregivers-led organizations