



NATIONAL AUDIT
OFFICE OF LITHUANIA
• BRINGING BENEFITS •

MITIGATING THE CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON MENTAL HEALTH

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SUMMARY

The Relevance of the Assessment

The long-standing global COVID-19 pandemic, having caused fear, insecurity, loss of social stability, loss of income and loss of loved ones, is making a significant negative impact on people's mental health, and is leading to increasing levels of stress and anxiety in society. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health will be felt long after the public health crisis has subsided¹.

The consequences of the pandemic on mental health in Lithuania are reflected in the following indicators: the general level of stress in society has increased by about 2 times compared to the pre-pandemic period (before the pandemic, 14% of the population felt stressed; after the pandemic – 26–48%), the levels of feelings of anxiety, anger, and sadness have also increased by about 1.5 times². A survey conducted by the Ministry of Health in February 2021 showed that the emotional state of half (49%) of the respondents worsened during the second wave of COVID-19 (from September 2020 onwards) compared to the summer period (13% – significantly worsened, 36% – slightly worsened). Although the total number of suicides in 2020 did not change significantly compared to 2019, there was an increase of 24% on average in the post-pandemic period (June–August 2020).

Children and adolescents have become a particularly vulnerable group, as quarantine and distance education have increased social isolation, thus due to unmet social and communication needs leading to the feeling of loneliness. According to the survey³, during

¹ Mental health and the pandemic living, caring, acting! 10/05/2021 Conference report, European Commission. Internet access: https://ec.europa.eu/health/non_communicable_diseases/events/ev_20210510_en (accessed on 09/06/2021).

² Results of Baltic Surveys' survey on people's views of their psychological well-being.

³ Vilnius University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology 2020 survey "Children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: spring and autumn". Internet access: <https://lt.mediavaikai.lt/> (accessed on 09/06/2021).

the first quarantine (spring 2020), more than half (54%) of parents reported that their child had behavioural or emotional difficulties, while during the second quarantine (autumn 2020), 32% reported behavioural or emotional difficulties. This is also evidenced by a doubled increase in suicide topic (between 9% and 18%) when calling the “Children’s Line”⁴.

European Union countries are taking a number of actions to address this situation, and several of them, including Lithuania, have an action plan in place to mitigate the long-term negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To assess the planning and implementation of actions taken to mitigate the long-term negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the availability of mental health services, we carried out an assessment of the measures taken to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 on mental health. This assessment is not an audit and no recommendations are made on the basis of its results. The scope of the audit and the applied methods are described in more detail in Annex 1 “The Scope and Methods of the Assessment”.

Objective and Scope of the Assessment

The objective of the assessment is to provide structured information on the measures taken to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and the funds allocated and used to implement them and to identify risks.

Key areas of assessment:

- consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on population’s mental health;
- availability of mental health services during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- planning and implementation of measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.

The entity assessed is the Ministry of Health. Information was also collected from the Ministries of Social Security and Labour, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, and 45 municipal public health offices.

Assessed period – 2020–2021. In order to assess changes, we have also used data from previous years.

Key results

The waiting queues for services to an adult psychiatrist and a medical psychologist remained the same as in the pre-pandemic period, while the number of queues at children’s and adolescent psychiatrists increased by 23%; too little attention is paid to informing the population about the availability of services

In 2020, the number of people receiving primary mental health care services was about 17% higher than in 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of services to an

⁴ The Lithuanian Association of Emotional Support Services (LEPTA) analysis of emotional helplines in Q1 2020 and Q1 2021. Internet access: <http://www.klausau.lt/index.php?p=31> (accessed on 09/06/2021).

adult psychiatrist and a medical psychologist did not change significantly, however, 23% of people had to wait for the services of medical psychologists more than 7 calendar days (of which 10% for 8 to 14 days and 13% for more than 15 days), and 33% – for adult psychiatrists (of which 15% for 8 to 14 days and 18% for more than 15 days; as of April 2021). Access to child and adolescent psychiatrists worsened in 23% of cases during the pandemic, and in 44% of cases, there was a wait of more than 7 calendar days for these services (of which 34% were between 8 and 14 days and 10% were more than 15 days; as of April 2021). The implementation of the recommendations of the National Audit Office's previous audit reports⁵ on improving the accessibility of services, the management of waiting queues and the lack of health care professionals would improve the mental health situation.

The results of the surveys⁶ commissioned by the National Audit Office showed that 65.7% of respondents had no knowledge of psychological support during the pandemic period; 55% of the population interviewed are unaware that free psychological support is available at the Mental Health Centre and 69% are not aware that such services are provided by municipal public health offices. The lack of timely attention to awareness-raising on the possibilities of psychological support discourages people from contacting professionals when needed, which can lead to the emergence of more severe mental illnesses and increase the burden on the health sector.

Planning and implementation of measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health need improvement

Actions are being taken to implement measures to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health: a plan⁷ has been approved, but the most at-risk groups have not been identified and not all measures are supported by the necessary funds for their implementation. In 2020, 56% of the plan's measures have been implemented (30% of funds used). As the plan does not envisage the criteria for assessing the effectiveness of the measures, the impact of the measures implemented has not been measured. During the assessment, the plan has been improved⁸, however, there is a lack of more measures for children and young people and a lack of more precise planning of the funds to be allocated (it is not clear from which funds the measures will be implemented). The update of the plan in 2021 includes criteria for assessing implementation, but the indicators are focused on measuring the process of implementation rather than the results, as a result, it will not be possible to determine whether the measures implemented have had an impact on mitigating the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health.

Not all the measures planned for 2020 were implemented on time – three out of 32 (2020–2021) were delayed. The prolonged inclusion of the service in the list of personal health care services covered by the State Social Insurance Fund did not lead to an increase in

⁵ "The Accessibility of Health Care Services and the Orientation Towards the Patient", 16/11/2018, No. VA-2018-P-10-1-10; "Suicide Prevention and Aid to Individuals Related to the Risk of Suicide", 23/02/2017, No. VA-P-10-5-2; "Is Vocational Training Organised Efficiently", 31/01/2020, No. VAE-2.

⁶ Number of respondents –1001.

⁷ Action Plan for mitigating the long-term negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public mental health has been approved by the 03/07/2020 Order No V-1596 of the Minister of Health.

⁸ 13/05/2021 Order No V-1087 of the Minister of Health amending 31/07/2021 Order No V-1596 of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Lithuania on the approval of the Action Plan for mitigating the long-term negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public mental health.

the number of psychologists working in mental health centres, as well as the suspension of these services did not lead to the development of psychosocial rehabilitation services, and the development of the availability of psychological assistance for personal health professionals was postponed until 2021. For these reasons, it was not possible to provide more services during the period when those services were most needed.