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for every child



Policy brief:
**Keeping families
together in Central Asia**

The goal: By 2030, zero children in institutional care in Central Asia

Every child has the right to grow up in a nurturing family environment. Yet nearly 60,000 children aged 0-17 years across five countries in Central Asia¹ are growing up in residential care, despite the well-known and devastating impact of family separation and child institutionalization. This figure may well be the ‘tip of the iceberg’, given current limitations in data availability, consistency and coverage.²

The rate of children in residential care can reflect the strength of a country’s child protection system, with a higher rate signaling a system that is failing to keep families together. Today, an estimated 203 children for every 100,000 children, on average, live in residential care across Central Asia³, almost double the global average of 105 per 100,000.⁴

The impact of family separation and institutionalization on children can be lifelong. When children are separated from their parents it is often under tragic circumstances, triggered by distressing and traumatic events. Family separation can leave children – and their parents – feeling worthless, and imprint lasting scars on their mental health and psychological well-being.

Children who are housed in large-scale institutions face emotional neglect, abuse and exploitation that compound their distress and trauma, with an impact that often

extends into adulthood. Child institutionalization has serious consequences for children, families and for society by perpetuating stigma and social isolation, and feeding an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

Children who are already vulnerable as a result of poverty, disability and lack of support services are the most likely to grow up in an institution. Children with disabilities, for example, are up to 30 times more likely to live in residential care facilities in some countries in the region than other children. And marginalized families are more likely to miss out on the basic services that help families stay together, including childcare, healthcare, education, early intervention and family support services. Child and family support and child protection services often lack the resources – financial and human – to prevent family separation.

UNICEF’s position is clear: no child should ever be placed in alternative care because of poverty, disability or challenging behaviour, or because their family lacks access to services they need to care for their own child at home. On the rare occasions when alternative care is in the child’s best interests, it should always be family-based – never institutional. Keeping families together will help to end the region’s long history of institutionalizing children, and support the creation of social services that meet the needs of all vulnerable children and their families.



Every child has a right for an inclusive and safe learning environment. These children are playing together in one of the inclusive kindergartens in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Key facts

60,000 Children

Around 60,000 children are in residential care across Central Asia.

203
Central Asia

105
Global

There are an estimated 203 children for every 100,000 children in residential care in Central Asia,⁵ compared to an estimated global rate of 105 per 100,000.

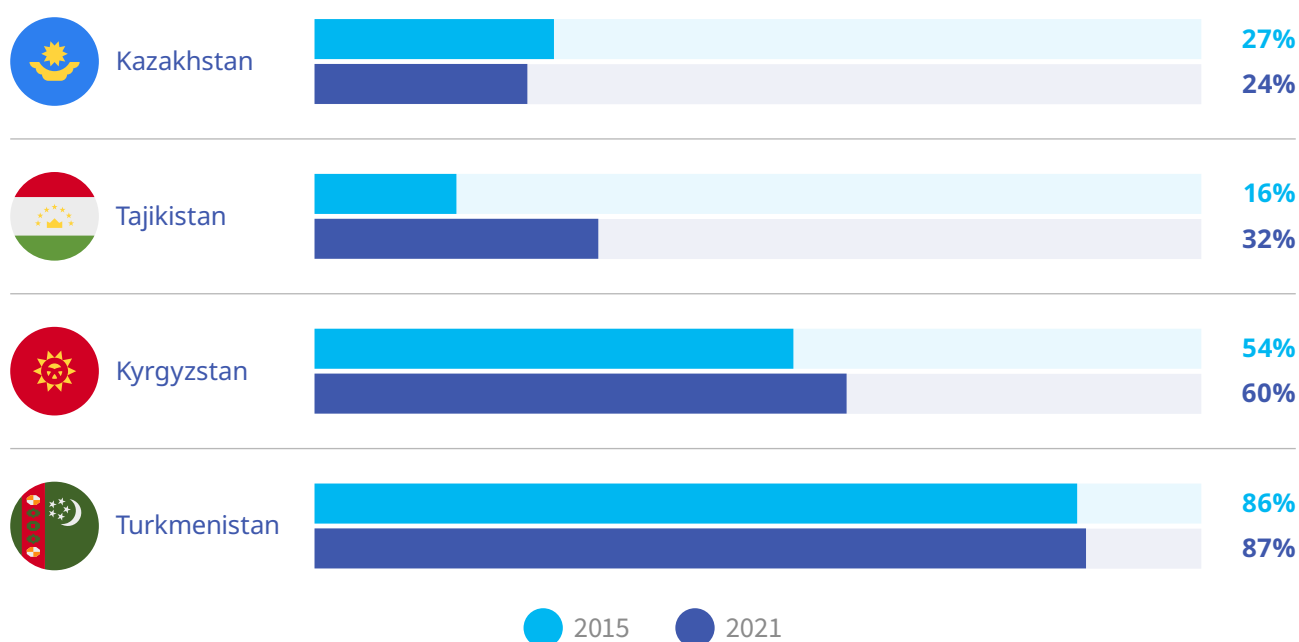


In the four Central Asian countries with available data, children with disabilities accounted for between 24 per cent of all children in residential care facilities in 2021 in Kazakhstan, rising to 87 per cent in Turkmenistan.



With the exception of Kazakhstan, the share of children with disabilities in residential care increased in these Central Asian countries between 2015 and 2021.

Percentage of children with disabilities aged 0-17 years in formal residential care of the total number of children in formal residential care in 4 out of 5 countries in Central Asia with available data for 2015 and 2021.



Source: TransMonEE, 2023. Note that only countries with five observations or more are included. For more details, see the TransMonEE Database Explorer | UNICEF TransMonEE.



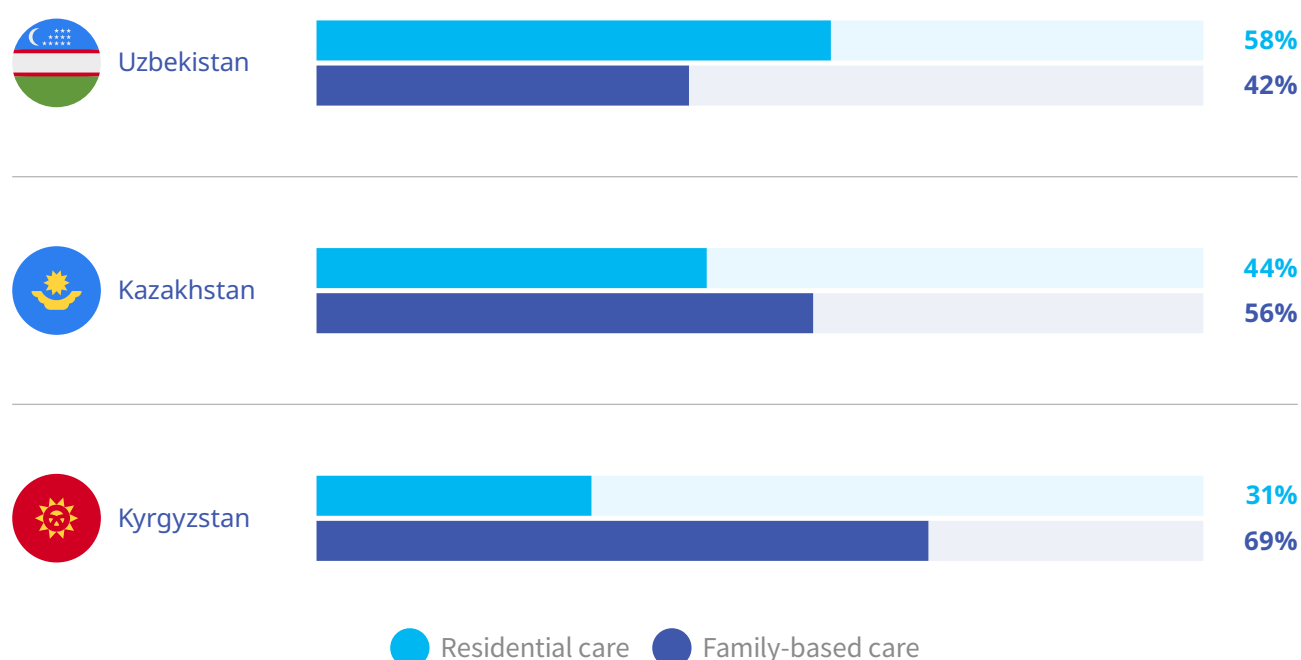
The challenges

The impact of family separation and institutionalization on children is severe and can last a lifetime. Children placed in institutions are deprived of the social, emotional and intellectual stimulation that is critical for the healthy development of their brains.⁶ The younger the child when they are removed from their family, the greater the potential damage, yet child institutionalization often signals a lack of support for parents during a child's earliest months of life.⁷

Shut away from mainstream society, children in institutions are vulnerable to violence, neglect and abuse. In later life, children who have grown up in institutional care are more likely to face continued exclusion from society, more likely to struggle with alcohol and drug abuse, and more likely to experience violence, arrest and imprisonment. The long-term impact is so damaging that it is harder to reunite children who have been institutionalized for prolonged periods of time with their biological parents or place them with relatives or in other forms of family-based alternative care.⁸

There is a continuing reliance on institutional care for children who have been separated from their families in parts of Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, for example, most children in care are still living in residential institutions: 58 per cent compared to 42 per cent for children in family-based care. These percentages are almost reversed in Kazakhstan, where 44 per cent are in residential institutions and 56 per cent are in family-based care. In Kyrgyzstan, 69 per cent of children in care are in family-based care, compared to 31 per cent in residential care – but this may well mask considerable numbers of children who are being cared for through informal family arrangements that are not monitored or captured in the data as they fall outside the main child care system. Indeed, all data should be treated with caution, given current limitations, as they do not include all children in alternative care or reflect the precise proportions of children in institutions, formal family-based care, or informal care arrangements.

Percentage of children aged 0-17 years in formal residential and family-based care of the total number of children in formal alternative care in 2021 for 3 out of 5 countries in Central Asia



Source: TransMonEE, 2023. Note that only countries with five observations or more are included. For more details, see the TransMonEE Database Explorer | UNICEF TransMonEE.



Key reasons for child institutionalization



Institutionalization is fuelled by deep-rooted social norms, particularly for children with disabilities. A combination of persistent stigma, negative social attitudes and limited community-based services around disability hampers the prevention of family separation, the return of children to their families and efforts to recruit suitable foster parents.



Social norms also support a 'medical model' of disability across the region that focuses on children's conditions, rather than their potential. This feeds into the view that institutions – rather than families – are the best option for children with disabilities, a view reinforced by a lack of community-based services that can support them and their families.



The placement of children in institutions is also linked to economic and social inequality, as well as a lack of social protection that can help families stay together, such as child benefits, community-based family support services, adequate housing, and inclusive education and healthcare.



The institutionalization of children – as well as the over-use of alternative care – has a disproportionate impact on particular groups, such as children with disabilities, children affected by migration, and those living in poverty, all of whom are more likely than other children to be placed in alternative care.⁹

Recent reductions in the institutionalization of children in Central Asia are a positive shift. However, other types of formal alternative care are increasing, including foster care and guardianship. In Kyrgyzstan, the government is working to ensure formal guardianship arrangements for the children of parents who migrate for work, in a context where informal support is often provided by relatives. Nevertheless, an increase in alternative care signals that many children are still being separated from their families. While family-based arrangements – formal or informal – may be preferable to child institutionalization and may reflect a strong tradition of family support across Central Asia, they are no substitute for enabling a child to stay with their immediate family if at all possible.¹⁰



A carer plays with a group of children in the Specialised children's house in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The Specialized children's house in Astana provides medical assistance to orphans and children with severe central nervous system disorders aged 0 to 4 years. Founded on March 7, 2000, its mission is to nurture and medically support children without parental care and facilitate their adoption or placement in foster families. The facility features various group settings, including inclusive and family-type groups, and offers comprehensive medical and rehabilitative services.



Support to keep families together

UNICEF is working with governments and partners in every Central Asian country to support the development of robust family support services, the closure of

large-scale residential facilities for children, and the transition to family-based alternatives to institutional care.



Keeping families together in Uzbekistan

More than 30,000 children remain in residential care facilities in Uzbekistan, the vast majority of them children with disabilities. UNICEF and the Government are making strenuous efforts to change this, and Uzbekistan is now spearheading Central Asia's efforts to keep families together.

Presidential Decree No. 6275 'On Measures to Further Improve the System of Ensuring the Guarantees of the Rights of the Child' adopted on 9 August 2021 halted the creation of new large-scale residential care facilities for children and set out to close all four of the country's 'children's towns', 14 of its 16 orphanages, and two of its 11 baby homes. As a result, between 2021 and 2022,

hundreds of children were either reunited with their families or placed in family-based care, including foster care. The remaining residential care facilities came under increased scrutiny, and a facility for girls was closed as reports of systemic abuse and appalling conditions came to light.

The Decree also mandated the development of a national strategy for deinstitutionalization and the scaling-up of family-based alternative care solutions. As a result, a new Social Worker Centre of Excellence will train thousands of additional social workers in the coming years - a critical investment in Uzbekistan's deinstitutionalization efforts. Social workers will receive specialist training to help keep families together and provide ongoing support to children in foster care.



A young boy holds the hand of his carer and looks outside the window of the Specialised children's house in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The Specialized children's house in Astana provides medical assistance to orphans and children with severe central nervous system disorders aged 0 to 4 years. Founded on March 7, 2000, its mission is to nurture and medically support children without parental care and facilitate their adoption or placement in foster families. The facility features various group settings, including inclusive and family-type groups, and offers comprehensive medical and rehabilitative services.



After being diagnosed with delayed psycho-verbal development, Abdukholik, 3, is attending the former Baby-Home transformed into Child & Family Support Centre, where he has improved his speech and became more sociable and started playing more with other children. Since 2017, UNICEF has been working closely with the Government of Tajikistan to promote family-based care for children, including helping to transform the system of residential childcare institutions so-called 'Baby-Homes' into Child & Family Support Centers.

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Practical, family-centred support in Tajikistan

UNICEF and its partners in Tajikistan are working to help children grow up in family settings rather than institutions. The Family and Child Support Centre in Istaravshan city for example, opened by the President of Tajikistan in 2021, is one of a number of 'baby homes' in the country that has been transformed into a family-oriented centre with UNICEF's support. The services offered by these centres include:

- early intervention and rehabilitation services for children with disabilities and their parents
- day care for children while their parents are at work
- 'five-day care' for parents of children facing difficult life situations
- 'respite care' or 'give a mom a break' services for parents of children with disabilities
- mother-and-child units for mothers who are facing a crisis, including those who have given birth to a child

with a disability and who, in the absence of support, might feel they have no option but to place their child in an institution

- multidisciplinary teams of professionals who can connect children and caregivers with other services.

The main goal is to ensure that each child is integrated into their biological family – or when this is not feasible, to place the child in an alternative family-based form of care.¹¹ Within its first year of operations, the country's four Family and Child Support Centres provided support to 359 families, and 373 children (including 322 with disabilities) were diverted from institutional care.

The partnership between UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population has included providing parents and other caregivers with online support to help them build their skills and prevent the placement of children in residential care. In all, 928 children, including children with disabilities received online support in the initiative's first year, including information on how to prevent COVID-19, legal support to access medical and social services, and psychosocial support.¹²



Recommendations to governments

UNICEF calls on governments and institutions in countries across Central Asia to keep families together wherever possible and end the institutionalization of children by 2030. This requires strong support for families and action to address the heightened risks faced by the most vulnerable children.

A policy framework for action is already in place, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keeping families together: the policy framework



Convention on the Rights of the Child

ARTICLE 7

The child has the right, as far as possible, to know and be cared for by his or her parents.

ARTICLE 8

Children have the right to preserve their identities, including family relations.

ARTICLE 9

Children cannot be separated from their parents against their will, unless this is in the best interests of the child.



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

ARTICLE 7

States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.



Sustainable Development Goals

TARGET 16.2

End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.



UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

GENERAL PRINCIPLE A.3

The family being the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children, efforts should primarily be directed to enabling the child to remain in or return to the care of his/her parents, or when appropriate, other close family members.

Government and non-government stakeholders in child care reforms are urged to close all large-scale residential facilities for children by 2030.

To achieve this, they should take the following steps.

- 1 Design and implement effective child care reforms**, based on international commitments to keep children with their families where possible. They should plan for the gradual closure of large-scale institutions and the development of a comprehensive continuum of child and family support and protection services. This means reallocating resources from today's residential facilities for children to high-quality family support services, family- and community-based alternative care and inclusive education.
- 2 Invest in the development of a range of child and family support services, including statutory family support services, and a strong social service workforce**, for the early identification of, and intervention in, situations when children are at risk of separation. Authorities across Central Asia need to increase the number of trained, community based social workers who work with children at risk of family separation or in alternative care.
- 3 Ensure that alternative care is family-based.** This includes strengthening support for extended family members who care for children, ensuring they have the resources and guidance they need; investing in the development of professional foster care services; and implementing strategies to keep siblings together where possible, recognizing the importance of family bonds for child development.
- 4 Ensure that children who are already in alternative care** are protected against violence, neglect and abuse. This includes robust safeguarding policies and practices (such as safe channels for the reporting of sexual exploitation and abuse), returning children to their families wherever possible, or finding other appropriate, safe permanent family-based solutions.
- 5 Invest in more and better data on children who are at risk of family separation, in alternative care or who have left care.** Countries are encouraged to increase investment in the availability, quality and international comparability of data on family support and alternative care by strengthening administrative data collection and management systems and integrating them with other information management systems related to children's well-being. Importantly, children in alternative care and care leavers should be incorporated into national surveys and censuses.
- 6 Raise public awareness of the benefits of keeping families together** and the urgent need to prioritize family-based care, using robust data and other evidence, including examples of best practice, and sharing family- and child-friendly information on the services and support that is available.
- 7 Ensure that children have a voice in the decisions that affect them and are consulted when new policies and practices are developed to meet their needs and rights.**



A group of children join a music session in the music room at the Specialised children's house in Astana, Kazakhstan.

References

1. Data source: [TransMonEE Database Explorer | UNICEF TransMonEE](#).
2. Ibid.
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4. World estimates based on 131 countries with 76 per cent of the world's population aged 0-17 years; East Asia and Pacific based on 13 countries with 91 per cent of the regional population aged 0-17 years; Europe and Central Asia based on 36 countries with 77 per cent of the relevant population of children; Latin America and Caribbean – 36 countries / 100 per cent; Middle East and North Africa – 9 countries / 65 per cent; North America – 1 country / 91 per cent; South Asia – 7 countries / 84 per cent; Eastern and Southern Africa – 14 countries / 61 per cent.
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6. Berens, Anne, E., Charles A. Nelson, 'The science of early adversity: is there a role for large institutions in the care of children?', *The Lancet*, Volume 386, Issue 9991, 25-31 July 2015, pages 388-398.
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8. Ibid.
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10. UNICEF, Pathways to better protection: Taking stock of the situation of children in alternative care in Europe and Central Asia, UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, Switzerland, 2023 (<https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/pathways-better-protection>).
11. UNICEF Tajikistan, 'Working Together to End Child Institutionalization in Tajikistan', Dushanbe, 1 June 2021 (<https://www.unicef.org/tajikistan/working-together-end-child-institutionalization-tajikistan>).
12. UNICEF Tajikistan, 'Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2: Reporting period – 1 January–31 December 2021', Dushanbe, 2022, p. 3 (<https://www.unicef.org/documents/tajikistan-humanitarian-situation-report-no-2-end-year-2021>).

Dilnoza, 6, is learning new motor skills with the social worker in UNICEF-supported Family and Child Support centre, Tajikistan.

For past 6 months, she is attending the former Baby-Home transformed into Family and Child Support Centre after being diagnosed with cerebral palsy. Specialists at the centre found that her muscles were poorly developed, that she had limited mobility in her left arm and leg, and that her speech was not as advanced as is usual for a child her age.

But after only a few months of rehabilitation at the centre, Dilnoza's speech improved and she also had better muscle movement, allowing her to do things like hold a spoon, eat and dress independently, and play some new games.

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**Published by UNICEF Europe and Central Asia
Regional Office**

UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office
Routes des Morillons 4, CH-1211, Geneva

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Cover photo:

Abdukholik, 3 and his mother join a session at the former Baby-Home, now Child and Family Support Centre in Istaravshan, Tajikistan. After being diagnosed with delayed psycho-verbal development the centre has helped Abdukholik improve his speech and became more sociable.

Since 2017, UNICEF has been working closely with the Government of Tajikistan to promote family-based care for children, including helping to transform the system of residential childcare institutions so-called 'Baby-Homes' into Child & Family Support Centres.

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