

Improving Youth Mental Health in South Korea

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), depression is “a leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease”.¹ Realising this crisis of worsening mental health, the United Nations (UN) in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases such as suicide by one-third, through prevention, treatment, and the promotion of mental health and well-being by 2030.² According to the WHO, mental health refers to “a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.³ The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this crisis. The WHO asserts that self-isolation and quarantine have altered the normalcy of life which consequently increased depression, suicidal behaviour, and other mental health issues.⁴

Mental health conditions, like physical health conditions, can significantly impact an individual's life particularly in their capacity to participate in society.⁵ When individuals fail to participate actively in society, especially through building a career, it is likely that society will suffer economically, which translates into societal issues. In particular, youth mental health is of dire concern.⁶ According to the WHO, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29-year-olds.⁷ Furthermore, youths are most vulnerable to mental health issues⁸ as they are in a stage of identity formation. By tackling worsening youth mental health, we ensure a happier and healthier⁹ future workforce essential to the economy.¹⁰ Thus, it is critical to focus on the youth mental health crisis.

¹ “Depression,” World Health Organisation, September 13, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>.

² “Health - United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations. Accessed December 15, 2021. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/>.

³ Silvana Galderisi, Andreas Heinz, Marianne Kastrup, Julian Beezhold, and Norman Sartorius, “Toward a New Definition of Mental Health.” *World Psychiatry* 14, no. 2 (2015): 231. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20231>

⁴ Anant Kumar, and K. Rajasekharan Nayar, “COVID 19 and Its Mental Health Consequences.” *Journal of Mental Health* 30, no. 1 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2020.1757052>.

⁵ “Mental Health: Burden,” World Health Organisation, accessed January 24, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_2.

⁶ “Youth,” United Nations, accessed January 26, 2022. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>. The UN defines ‘youth’ as referring to individuals between the ages 15 and 24 years

⁷ “Mental Health: Overview,” World Health Organisation, accessed January 25, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_1.

⁸ Stan Kutcher, and David Venn, “Why Youth Mental Health Is So Important,” *The Medscape Journal of Medicine* 10, no. 12 (2008): 275.

⁹ Ibid. 275.

¹⁰ “Poor Mental Health Days May Cost the Economy Billions of Dollars,” Penn State, July 30, 2018, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180730120359.htm>.

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South Korea has the highest suicide rate among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries – it stands at 2.4 times higher than the average suicide rate of other OECD countries.¹¹ This case study explores South Korea's youth mental health crisis. First, the case study dissects the youth mental health crisis in South Korea by examining the causes behind the deterioration of their mental health. These causes can be categorised as (1) factors leading to stress among youths, and (2) societal stigma which prevents youths from seeking help. This is followed by an analysis of the possible solutions the South Korean government can implement to address the problem. Thereafter, we examine the current solutions taken by the South Korean government to address the problem. Lastly, the case study examines how solutions account for South Korea's unique culture which is characterised by the phenomenon of "face", a concept that "[rests] on the basis of status" in society.¹²

Cultural background in South Korea

South Korean society is deeply influenced by Confucian principles, where there is a strong emphasis on filial piety and family ties to maintain respect and harmony within families.¹³ Confucianism's emphasis on respect manifests in the hierarchical Korean language where honorifics, which are words used to indicate one's standing in social hierarchy, are used.¹⁴ The emphasis on honorifics when addressing people and in schools and workplaces¹⁵ has caused individuals to feel highly self-conscious about their "face". While the concept of "face" is Chinese in origin, it is intimately linked to Confucianism, where it is deemed inappropriate to disgrace one's family and hence, lose "face".¹⁶ As the concept of "face" notably affects stigma surrounding mental health, it is important to consider South Korea's conservative culture when considering the youth mental health crisis.

Overall, South Korea's mental health crisis involves stakeholders such as youths, their parents, the government, schools, communities, and society-at-large. In general, worsening mental well-being in South Korea is attributed to society's "lack of understanding and supportive infrastructure regarding mental illness" and "unfavourable government policies and public perceptions".¹⁷ This suggests how awareness about mental well-being and accessibility to intervention are instrumental in alleviating the issue. Among youths, society's emphasis on both academic and economic success, as well as stigma surrounding mental illness, are considered to be key factors that lead to worsening mental health.

Problem

South Korean youths are reportedly less satisfied with their lives than their peers from other countries. In 2018, 22.8% of South Korean students reported feeling "not satisfied" with their lives, compared to the OECD

¹¹ Sang-Uk Lee, Jong-Ik Park, Soojung Lee, In-Hwan Oh, Joong-Myung Choi, and Chang-Mo Oh, "Changing Trends in Suicide Rates in South Korea from 1993 to 2016: A Descriptive Study," *BMJ Open* 8, no. 9 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023144>.

¹² David Yau-fai Ho, "On the Concept of Face," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 no. 4 (1976): 867, <https://doi.org/10.1086/226145>.

¹³ Insook Han Park, and Lee-Jay Cho. "Confucianism and the Korean Family." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 26, no. 1 (1995): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.26.1.117>.

¹⁴ Jessie McNeill, "Language in the Korean Workplace: An Analysis of Hierarchical Language Use in the Drama Misaeng," Portland State University, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.435>: 4.

¹⁵ Ibid. 4

¹⁶ David Yau-fai Ho, "On the Concept of Face," *American Journal of Sociology* 81, no. 4 (1976): 867–84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2777600>.

¹⁷ Andrew Scull, "South Korea," essay, in *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: An A-to-Z Guide*, 830–31, Los Angeles, CA: Sage reference, 2014.

average of 16.2%.¹⁸ In addition, suicide rates among university students increased by 60% between 2012 and 2018.¹⁹ This phenomenon of poor mental health has two aspects – factors leading to stress among youths and societal stigma which prevents youths from seeking help.

Academic pressure

Globally, South Korea is known for its hyper-competitive schooling system. With more than 70% of primary and secondary school students attending private tuition classes,²⁰ education fever²¹ clearly has a strong foothold in South Korea. The focus on education is partly due to parental perceptions of the importance of attaining good academic credentials, especially at the college level, as a means to achieve social mobility and success.²² In particular, parents aim to send their children to the most prestigious universities which can improve their children's job prospects. This desire has in turn led South Korean parents to engage private tutors and register their children in cram schools, known as *hagwons*,²³ which offer after-school tutoring. Parents believe these efforts increase their children's admission chances to a specialised school with a higher success rate for university admissions,²⁴ and improve their children's performance in high-stakes college entrance examinations. In 2019, nearly 75% of the South Korean students between ages 9 and 24 received private tuition,²⁵ with the total amount spent on *hagwons* and tuition amounting to 1.1% of South Korea's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)²⁶.

Overall, this tremendous academic pressure has a profound impact on youth mental health in South Korea. First, the time spent on private tutoring results in less time for leisure activities, which is associated with greater depressive symptoms among South Korean students.²⁷ Second, the failure to enter top universities has led students to feel hopeless²⁸ and feel even greater pressure as they must now work harder to build an attractive résumé, in order to secure employment in a highly-competitive job market. These psychological effects are reflected in the 2018 survey carried out by the National Youth Policy Institute. Among the 33.8% of adolescents who reported experiencing suicide ideation, 37.2% specifically cited academic pressures as their

¹⁸ OECD, "Students' life satisfaction and meaning in life," *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III): What School Life Means for Students' Lives*, (2020): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c414e291-en>.

¹⁹ Hyerim Han, and Jimin Lee, "The Relationship between Korean University Students' Suicidal Ideation and Risk Factors: A Meta-Analysis," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2021.1974901>.

²⁰ "Korea," NCEE, accessed January 24, 2022. <https://ncee.org/country/korea/>.

²¹ Kyunghye Shin, Kyung Eun Jahng, and Dongjin Kim, "Stories of South Korean Mothers' Education Fever for Their Children's Education," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 39, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 349, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2019.1607720>.

"Education fever" refers to the "high parental investment in education" and "high expectations and pressure to achieve".

²² Linda Phosaly, Daniel Olympia, and Sarah Goldman, "Educational and Psychological Risk Factors for South Korean Children and Adolescents," *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology* 7, no. 2 (April 3, 2019): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2019.1578709>.

²³ Shin, Jahng, and Kim, "Stories of South Korean Mothers' Education Fever for Their Children's Education," 349.

²⁴ Charlene Tan, and JeongA Yang, "Path-Dependency or Path-Shaping? An Analysis of the Policy to Target Exam-Oriented in South Korea," *Critical Studies in Education* 62, no. 2 (March 15, 2021): 201-202, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1611612>.

²⁵ Kyung-don Nam, "[Graphic News] 75 Percent of S. Korean Students Get Private Tutoring: Survey," *The Korea Herald*, May 18, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200517000272>.

²⁶ OECD, "Youth Employment and Education in Korea," *Investing in Youth: Korea* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/63797b4a-en>.

²⁷ Phosaly, Olympia, and Goldman, "Educational and Psychological Risk Factors for South Korean Children and Adolescents," 116.

²⁸ Cho Hae-joang. "The Spec Generation Who Can't Say 'No': Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea." *positions: asia critique* 23, no. 3 (2015): 449, muse.jhu.edu/article/593179.

reason for contemplating suicide. Academic stress also emerged as the top reason for adolescents' engagement in suicide ideation.²⁹

Youth unemployment

The issue of academic stress is worsened by youth unemployment. This may come as a surprise given that South Korea's official youth unemployment rate of 9.3% in October 2021 is lower than the OECD average of 12.3%.³⁰ However, as a significant proportion of South Korean youths engage in non-regular work, meaning that they hold jobs with lower wages and face weaker job security,³¹ the official unemployment rate does not accurately reflect the realities of the labour market for youths. Instead, one would have to consider the expanded unemployment rate, which takes part-time job holders and those who have given up on job-searching into consideration, to better understand the challenges faced by youths in the labour market. At 21.7%,³² South Korea's expanded unemployment rate is more than twice the official unemployment rate. This disparity in statistics is not only indicative of the weak job security experienced by youths, but also the high competition they face when entering the labour market.

This high competition can be attributed to a job-skills mismatch and a lack of opportunities in large firms. In 2016, the IMF reported that while there were unfilled positions available in small and medium enterprises (SMEs), these jobs tended to require the skills of high-school graduates. With 69.8% of South Koreans between ages 25 and 34 having attained college degrees in 2020,³³ these unfilled positions do not match the skillsets of South Korean youths. South Korean youths, many of whom are highly educated, are thus put into a tough spot – by accepting these lower-skilled jobs, they may jeopardise their future career progression.³⁴ Yet, it is difficult for them to find job opportunities in larger firms which match their skills sets and tend to offer higher wages.³⁵ While large firms dominate the South Korean economy, only 14% of the workforce is employed by them³⁶. Consequently, competition for jobs in large firms remains intense. Youths are keenly aware of these challenges, which add pressure as they prepare to enter the job market.³⁷ Even after entering prestigious colleges, students will have to maintain good results and participate in other programmes such as internships and overseas exchanges in order to boost their résumé. Ultimately, as job searches are linked to the establishment of “emotional independence, social adjustment, and self-identity”,³⁸ the failure to find one will negatively impact youths psychologically.

²⁹ Yonhap, “Nearly 34% of S. Korean Adolescents Have Thought about Suicide over Academic Pressure: Poll,” *The Korea Herald*, July 24, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190724000749>.

³⁰ “Unemployment - Youth Unemployment Rate - OECD Data,” OECD, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://data.oecd.org/unemp/youth-unemployment-rate.htm>.

³¹ Johanna Schauer. “Labor Market Duality in Korea.” *IMF Working Paper*, no. 126 (June 1, 2018): 5, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2018/06/01/Labor-Market-Duality-in-Korea-45902>.

³² Joori Roh, “S.Korea Jobless Rate Hits Record Low as Jobs for Public Sector, Part-Timers Grow,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/skorea-jobless-rate-hits-record-low-jobs-public-sector-part-timers-grow-2021-09-14/>.

³³ “Korea: Overview of Education,” OECD, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=KOR&treshold=10&topic=EO>.

³⁴ International Monetary Fund Asia and Pacific Dept. “Youth (UN)Employment in Korea—Recent Trends and Drivers” in *Republic of Korea: Selected Issues, IMF Staff Country Reports* 2018, no. 041 (February 13, 2018): 72, <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781484341636.002.A006>.

³⁵ OECD, “Youth Employment and Education in Korea”.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hyerim Han, and Jimin Lee. “The Relationship between Korean University Students' Suicidal Ideation and Risk Factors: A Meta-Analysis,” 407.

³⁸ Mijeong Park, and Doonam Oh. “Factors Associated with Job Search Self-Efficacy of Unemployed Youth Based on the Neuman Systems Model.” *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 21, no. 2 (2021): 302, <https://doi.org/10.5392/JKCA.2021.21.02.301>.

Furthermore, the pervasiveness of non-regular youth employment, as seen from the fact that 41.7% of South Korean college graduates were offered work contracts shorter than one year in 2021 alone,³⁹ is worrying as weak job security arising from the lack of permanent and secure job opportunities may cause youths to feel greater anxiety amid a bleak-looking future during the pandemic. This then contributes to a higher proportion of youths facing mental health challenges. Indeed, research suggests that those who either work temporary jobs or are unemployed experience greater mental health challenges than those who hold permanent jobs.⁴⁰ While the issue of weak job security existed prior to 2020, COVID-19 has heightened the problem. In an interview, Dr. Park Chanmin, the founder of the Seoul Central Mental Health Clinic, noted an emerging trend of South Koreans becoming increasingly worried about employment,⁴¹ which is expected given the pandemic-induced economic downturn.⁴² As youths tend to have less job experience and are more dispensable, they are likely to be among the first to be retrenched during an economic downturn, resulting in a greater reliance on less stable employment opportunities such as contract jobs.⁴³ With weaker job security arising from youth unemployment, the mental state of youths has correspondingly declined.

Bullying and school violence

Apart from academic pressure and job search related stress, hostile school environments as a result of violence and bullying are also detrimental to youth mental health. According to the 2021 National Research on School Violence and Cyber Violence published by the Blue Tree Foundation, which is dedicated to preventing school violence, 6.7% of students reported being victims of school violence.⁴⁴ Although South Korean students experience less bullying than their counterparts in other OECD countries such as Norway,⁴⁵ bullying continues to be a significant contributor to poor youth mental health due to the severe psychological damage it inflicts on victims. Youths subjected to bullying are not only more likely to develop depression and anxiety, but also more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and develop suicide ideation.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the advent of technology has also led to cyberbullying. Between 2019 and 2020, the proportion of school violence victims who were cyberbullied increased from 5.3% to 16.3%.⁴⁷ With COVID-19 resulting in

³⁹ Choi Min-jung, "Nearly Half of Graduates in S. Korea Had Contract Jobs as First Employment in 2021: Statistics Korea," *Arirang*, December 10, 2021, http://www.arirang.com/news/News_View.asp?nseq=289254.

⁴⁰ Se Jin Park, Soo Yeon Kim, Eun-Sun Lee, and Subin Park, "Associations among Employment Status, Health Behaviors, and Mental Health in a Representative Sample of South Koreans," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 7 (January 2020): 11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17072456>.

⁴¹ Julian Ryall, "South Korea's Soaring Suicide, Self-Harm Rates Pinned on Pandemic," *DW*, September 15, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/south-koreas-soaring-suicide-self-harm-rates-pinned-on-pandemic/a-54931167>.

⁴² International Labour Organisation, "Republic of Korea: A Rapid Assessment of the Employment Impacts of COVID-19," November 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_760063.pdf.

⁴³ International Monetary Fund Asia and Pacific Dept. "Youth (UN)Employment in Korea—Recent Trends and Drivers" in *Republic of Korea: Selected Issues, IMF Staff Country Reports* 2018, no. 041 (February 13, 2018): 70, <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781484341636.002.A006>.

⁴⁴ Cyber Jungle Guardian, "2021 National Research on School Violence and Cyber Violence," accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.bepuco.or.kr/pages/news/detail/246>.

⁴⁵ OECD, "Bullying," *PISA 2018 Results (Volume III)*, (2020): 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1787/cd52fb72-en>.

⁴⁶ Raúl Navarro, Santiago Yubero, and Elisa Larrañaga, *Cyberbullying Across the Globe: Gender, Family, and Mental Health* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 121, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-25552-1>.

⁴⁷ Eunsun Choi, and Namje Park, "Can Online Education Programs Solve the Cyberbullying Problem? Educating South Korean Elementary Students in the COVID-19 Era," *Sustainability* 13, no. 20 (January 2021): 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011211>.

school closures in South Korea,⁴⁸ bullying has shifted to the cyberspace as youths become more active online.⁴⁹ Online, bullies ostracise their victims by excluding them from online activities and insult them on social media platforms.⁵⁰ In 2013, research conducted by Hwang et al. claimed that an estimated 40% of middle and high school students were victims of cyberbullying in the past year, revealing the prevalence of cyberbullying.⁵¹ This is in part due to the anonymity afforded by social media handles,⁵² which allows bullies to escape the consequences of bullying. Moreover, social media platforms enable bullies to detach themselves from the emotional reactions of their victims as they are unable to witness their victims' reactions,⁵³ permitting bullying to take place with less hesitancy. As technology continues to be an integral part of our lives, the prevalence of cyberbullying has also increased over the years.⁵⁴ With cyberbullying comes the negative psychological impact on victims who are unable to escape their bullies even when they are at home.

Stigma towards mental health conditions

In the 2016 epidemiological survey of mental disorders carried out by the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 25.4% of survey respondents reported having "experienced a mental disorder more than once in their lifetime". However, only 9.6% of them had sought professional help.⁵⁵ While the aforementioned factors (i.e., academic pressure, unemployment, and school violence) have contributed to the worsening mental state of South Korean youths, they do not account for their reluctance to seek help. Hence, one must consider the stigma which underpins this reluctance to seek help.

Social stigma is a significant barrier to seeking help⁵⁶ as individuals fear that they will be discriminated against due to their mental health condition.⁵⁷ Such stigma surrounding mental health exists across the globe, and South Korea is no exception. Common stereotypes of those with mental illness include the view that they are "strange, dangerous, unpredictable and out of control".⁵⁸ In South Korea, negative perceptions towards those with mental illnesses can be seen from how residents from a South Korean neighbourhood purportedly objected to the building of a planned psychiatric hospital⁵⁹ in the vicinity of their homes. Among youths, there are also concerns that disclosing their mental health status may result in job discrimination and diminished

⁴⁸ Sangmi Cha, "South Korea Orders Schools to Shut as COVID-19 Cases Spike," *Reuters*, December 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-southkorea-idUSKBN28O090>.

⁴⁹ So Young Shin, and Yeon-Jun Choi, "Comparison of Cyberbullying before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic in Korea." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 19 (January 2021): 1. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph181910085>.

⁵⁰ Navarro, Yubero, and Larrañaga, *Cyberbullying Across the Globe*, 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 154.

⁵² *Ibid.* 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 2.

⁵⁴ Jun-tae Ko. "[Newsmaker] School Violence Halved, but Cyberbullying Rises in Pandemic." *The Korea Herald*, January 21, 2021, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20210121000674>.

⁵⁵ Paul Youngbin Kim, and Kyu Jin Yon. "Stigma, Loss of Face, and Help-Seeking Attitudes Among South Korean College Students," *The Counseling Psychologist* 47, no. 3 (April 1, 2019): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000019872790>.

⁵⁶ Jieun Jang, Sang Ah Lee, Woorim Kim, Young Choi, and Eun-Cheol Park, "Factors Associated with Mental Health Consultation in South Korea," *BMC Psychiatry* 18, no. 17 (January 22, 2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-018-1592-3>.

⁵⁷ "Stigma, Prejudice and Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness," American Psychiatric Association, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/stigma-and-discrimination>.

⁵⁸ Mao-Sheng Ran, Brian J. Hall, Tin Tin Su, Benny Prawira, Matilde Breth-Petersen, Xu-Hong Li, and Tian-Ming Zhang. "Stigma of Mental Illness and Cultural Factors in Pacific Rim Region: A Systematic Review." *BMC Psychiatry* 21, no. 8 (January 7, 2021): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02991-5>.

⁵⁹ KPMG, "The Rising Social and Economic Cost of Major Depression: Seeing the Full Spectrum," (March 2021): 12, <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/sg/pdf/2021/03/Depression-Spectrum-in-the-Asia-Pacific.pdf>.

education opportunities in the future.⁶⁰ While mental health professionals are obliged to maintain confidentiality,⁶¹ this does not appear to alleviate the concerns of youths, who are still worried about the possible repercussions of divulging their mental health conditions.

Furthermore, as South Korean society is highly collectivistic and Confucianist in nature, a lot of emphasis is placed on family ties and the notion of “face”.⁶² With societal stigma towards mental health conditions, having a diagnosed family member may be considered disgraceful for the family. Already, mothers with mentally ill children in South Korea have reported feeling “scorned and looked down upon by others”⁶³ due to their children’s condition. As these negative feelings arising from social stigma may negatively impact family relations,⁶⁴ youths may be unwilling to reveal their mental health challenges to their family for fear of ostracism and familial tension. In certain cases, family members may even prevent youths from seeking treatment in order to avoid societal judgement.⁶⁵

Policy Options

Due to the multifaceted nature of the issue, the policy options that are considered by the South Korean government are diverse in nature. Policy options can be divided into two categories – those which target the root causes of deteriorating youth mental health, and those tied to improving access to mental health resources. *Table 1* lists seven policy options that address the causes. Options 1 and 2 aim to address the problem of academic pressure, Option 3 the issue of bullying and Option 4 the issue of youth unemployment. Options 5, 6 and 7, on the other hand, are focused on reducing societal stigma and providing access to mental healthcare. These options are explicated in this section.

Targeting Root Causes	Improving Access to Mental Health Resources
Option 1: Regulating the Private Tutoring Industry Option 2: Total ban on tuition Option 3: Bullying Intervention a) Zero Tolerance School Policies b) Anti-Bullying Programmes Option 4: Policies Targeting Youth Unemployment	Option 5: Public Campaigns Targeting Stigma Option 6: Student Support Services Option 7: Shift Towards Community-Based Care

Table 1: Overview of Policy Options

⁶⁰ Marian Chu, “Why is mental health treatment sluggish in Korea?” *KBR*, January 12, 2018, <http://www.koreabiomed.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=2342>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Myung-Sun Hyun, Hyang-In Cho Chung, and Hyunlye Kim, “Experiences of Family Stigma among Mothers of Adult Children with Mental Illness in South Korea,” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 38, no. 10 (October 3, 2017): 850. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2017.1335361>.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 849.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 847 - 849.

⁶⁵ Zhisong Zhang, Kaising Sun, Chonnakarn Jatchavala, John Koh, Yimian Chia, Jessica Bose, Zhimeng Li, et al, “Overview of Stigma against Psychiatric Illnesses and Advancements of Anti-Stigma Activities in Six Asian Societies.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 1 (January 2020): 10. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17010280>.

Option 1 – Policies to regulate the private tutoring industry

Given that academic stress and the lack of leisure time arising from participating in private education are key contributors to poor youth mental health, a possible policy would be the regulation of the private tutoring industry. Regulation can come in the form of implementing a set of industry standards which private tutoring centres have to abide by. This approach has been taken by Macau since 1998, when it launched the law titled “Regulating Private Supplementary Pedagogic Supporting Centres”. Under this piece of legislation, tuition centres have to abide by the standards set by the government and be licensed in order to operate legally.⁶⁶ While these standards mainly relate to safety issues such as fire safety, the South Korean government could tailor regulations to suit the country’s needs. These regulations can include a limit to the time youths spend on tuition, which will give students time for leisure and better their mental health. Furthermore, such legislation will encourage a shift in mindset among youths by sending a signal for them to prioritise their mental health and spend more time on non-academic activities, which can reduce their academic stress. However, regulations might not be popular among some stakeholders involved and lead to backlash for the South Korean government. In particular, parents and owners of private tuition centres who are supportive of private education may oppose such measures as they infringe upon their ability to participate in shadow education.

Option 2 – Tuition ban

Alternatively, a more extreme form of regulation would be a total ban. A prisoner’s dilemma-like situation has emerged for some parents with regards to private tuition – if other parents were to send their children to tuition, my child would also need to attend tuition classes in order not to lose out. On the other hand, if other parents do not send their children for tuition, my child would be ahead of his/her peers by attending tuition classes. Hence, by eliminating the tuition industry completely and resultantly, the tuition dilemma,⁶⁷ academic competition among youths may be reduced. However, with demand for private tutoring still present, a black market may be created. China, which has implemented a ban on for-profit tutoring since July 2021,⁶⁸ has seen the emergence of a tutoring black market.⁶⁹ As parents wish to keep their children ahead of their peers, they have continued to hire underground tutors,⁷⁰ limiting the effectiveness of such bans.

Option 3A – Zero tolerance policy for bullying

To target youth mental health issues arising from bullying and school violence, bullying cases can be curbed via a zero-tolerance policy towards bullying. Typically, this entails disciplinary action against bullies such as suspensions or even expulsions in severe cases.⁷¹ These harsh consequences are believed to deter youths from

⁶⁶ Titus Siu Pang Li, and Ben Cheong Choi, “Private Supplementary Tutoring in Macao: Past, Present and the Future,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 34, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 511–12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2014.978743>.

⁶⁷ Kelvin Seah, “Why Banning Tuition Will Only Make Things Worse,” *The Straits Times*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-banning-tuition-will-only-make-things-worse>.

⁶⁸ Alexandra Stevenson, and Cao Li, “China Targets Costly Tutoring Classes. Parents Want to Save Them,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/business/economy/china-education-tutors.html>.

⁶⁹ Brenda Goh, “China Bans Private Tutors from Giving Online Classes,” *Reuters*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-private-tutors-will-not-be-able-offer-classes-online-2021-09-08/>.

⁷⁰ Alice Yan, “Chinese Parents Turn to Black Market to Raise Kids’ Grades after Tutor Ban,” *South China Morning Post*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/social-welfare/article/3150726/chinese-parents-turn-black-market-after-school>.

⁷¹ Susan M. Swearer, Meredith Martin, Marc Brackett, and Raul A. Palacios. “Bullying Intervention in Adolescence: The Intersection of Legislation, Policies, and Behavioral Change.” *Adolescent Research Review* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-016-0037-9>.

bullying as youths are made aware of the consequences of such behaviour. By reducing the number of bullying cases, youth mental health issues arising from bullying will consequently reduce as well.

In recent times, however, zero tolerance policies have been criticised for their ineffectiveness.^{72,73} In the US, it was found that zero tolerance policies had little effect on school violence and bullying.⁷⁴ Instead, zero tolerance policies could even be counterproductive as bullies become incentivised to shift to more covert and non-physical tactics, since zero tolerance policies in schools are targeted at more obvious cases of bullying.⁷⁵

Option 3B – Programmes for bullying

While zero tolerance policies are punitive in nature and are crucial for after bullying has taken place, policies which take a preventive and rehabilitative approach to reduce the risk of bullying are another option. Like the zero tolerance policy, the aim of such interventions is to reduce the prevalence of school bullying, which would improve youth mental health. Such a preventive approach was undertaken by the Norwegian government who supported the implementation of anti-bullying programmes (ZERO and the Olweus program) under the first Norwegian Manifesto Against Bullying in 2002.⁷⁶ According to research, these programmes encourage the instilling of empathy and helpful bystander behaviour.⁷⁷ Since bullies in South Korean schools have been found to have less empathy,⁷⁸ the development of empathy may be useful in preventing bullying and encouraging bystander intervention.

Option 4 – Employment policies

With job search stress affecting older youths, employment policies which help with job searches can help to alleviate the stress associated with job searches and enable a smoother transition from school to the labour force. This can be done via a dual apprenticeship system which combines general education and vocational education.⁷⁹ In Germany, schools work together with companies to provide students with work experience and training for up to three years as part of a dual apprenticeship system. In addition, the Vocational Training Act of 1969 helps to facilitate this collaboration.⁸⁰ Such a system where students are exposed not only to their academic subjects but also to real life working experience is effective in equipping them with skills and experience before entering the workforce. Furthermore, such an arrangement, if sustained over an extended period, can provide students with the relevant and crucial experience of having to adapt to changes that the

⁷² William Hall, "The Effectiveness of Policy Interventions for School Bullying: A Systematic Review," *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 8, no. 1 (2017): 48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690565>.

⁷³ Maggie Fox, "Why Zero-Tolerance for Bullying Doesn't Fix the Problem," *NBC News*, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/zero-tolerance-bullying-doesn-t-work-experts-say-n571326>.

⁷⁴ K. Borgwald, and H. Theixos, "Bullying the Bully: Why Zero-Tolerance Policies Get a Failing Grade," *Social Influence* 8, no. 2–3 (April 1, 2013): 150, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15534510.2012.724030>.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 151.

⁷⁶ Erling Roland, "The Broken Curve: Effects of the Norwegian Manifesto against Bullying," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 35, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 383–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025411407454>.

⁷⁷ Paul Stephens, "Preventing and Confronting School Bullying: A Comparative Study of Two National Programmes in Norway," *British Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 3 (2011): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411921003692868>.

⁷⁸ Yang, Seung Ae, and Dong Hee Kim, "Factors Associated with Bystander Behaviors of Korean Youth in School Bullying Situations," *Medicine* 96, no. 32 (August 11, 2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1097/MD.00000000000007757>.

⁷⁹ Werner Eichhorst, and Ulf Rinne. "Promoting Youth Employment in Europe: Evidence-Based Policy Lessons." In *European Youth Labour Markets*, edited by Miguel Ángel Malo and Almudena Moreno Mínguez, 189–204. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-68222-8_13.

⁸⁰ "The German Vocational Training System," BMBF, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/en/education/the-german-vocational-training-system/the-german-vocational-training-system_node.html.

company undergoes during their internship experience. For instance, a three-year long attachment to a company can give students ample time to see a company evolve and adapt to changes in the economy. However, it is important to note that a three-year attachment may bring about problems of commitment. It will take deliberate effort to ensure this attachment can be carried out for such an extended time.

Option 5 – Public campaigns

While the above policies address youth mental health issues resulting from academic pressure and school bullying, they do not address the stigma towards mental health issues, which remains a key factor preventing those with mental health conditions from seeking help. To reduce social stigma, public campaigns that raise awareness about mental health can be rolled out. These public campaigns may target the stigma surrounding mental health by spreading awareness about the importance of caring for one's mental health. They can also correct the misconceptions people may have about mental illnesses and mental health.

For example, public campaigns such as the *Beyond the Label* campaign in Singapore, which uses social media to amplify the message of caring for one's mental well-being,⁸¹ can be rolled out to further erode the stigma surrounding mental health. Through social media, *Beyond the Label* exposes individuals to the dire need to care for mental well-being and increases discussion on this topic. Similar to South Korea, the stigma surrounding mental health in Singapore is severe. According to the Singapore Mental Health Study 2016, one in seven adults have experienced a mental health condition in their lifetime; but more than three-quarters of them did not seek any professional help. By adopting such campaigns, South Korea can destigmatize mental health and increase the chances of individuals receiving professional help. However, these campaigns have to be long-term ones as it takes time for mindsets to be changed. Piecemeal solutions will not be effective.

Option 6 – Student support services

While school-wide approaches are an option, the South Korean government could also consider counselling programmes which would provide individualised support to those suffering from mental health challenges. Typically, students selected as peer counsellors provide mental health support to their struggling peers by being a listening ear.⁸² Given that peer counsellors spend more time in close proximity with other students as compared to teachers, they are able to better identify peers who are at risk and provide support to those who need it. Singapore, for instance, plans to implement a peer support network by 2022 to support students experiencing high levels of academic stress, so that their teachers and counsellors can be activated to provide support at the earliest opportunity.⁸³ Research has found that peer counselling programmes help peers to develop empathy whilst improving peer relationships for those receiving counselling.⁸⁴ In multiple studies conducted in the US, it was found that positive peer relationships helped to alleviate depression and anxiety symptoms and reduce suicide ideation and suicide attempts.⁸⁵ This reveals the usefulness of peer support services as a policy to tackle youth mental health.

⁸¹ "Beyond the Label - Mental Health Stigma Campaign: NCSS Singapore," NCSS, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.ncss.gov.sg/our-initiatives/beyond-the-label/about-the-campaign>.

⁸² William A. Haseltine, "How Peer Counseling Can Address Barriers to Student Mental Health," *Forbes*, August 9, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2021/08/09/how-peer-counseling-can-address-barriers-to-student-mental-health/?sh=1c17ebd01638>.

⁸³ Amelia Teng, "Parliament: All Schools to Have Peer Support Networks by 2022; More Emphasis on Mental Health Education," *The Straits Times*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-all-schools-to-have-peer-support-networks-by-2022-more-emphasis-on-mental-health>.

⁸⁴ Seung-ha Lee, and Keumjoo Kwak, "Bullying Research and Intervention in South Korea," In *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Bullying*, 547–70, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118482650.ch63>.

⁸⁵ Ashley Roach, "Supportive Peer Relationships and Mental Health in Adolescence: An Integrative Review," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 39, no. 9 (September 2, 2018): 733–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2018.1496498>.

In addition, student support could be strengthened through the assignment of trained counsellors to schools. In a survey conducted in the UK, school counselling was perceived to be beneficial as students viewed school counsellors as a possible avenue to turn to when they needed to talk to someone. This was especially the case when friends, teachers and parents were not viewed as possible sources of help.⁸⁶ By instituting school counselling in South Korea, youths would have easier access to youth mental health services. Furthermore, with academic pressure and school violence being significant contributors to youth mental health issues in South Korea, the presence of school-based counselling could allow for these school-related problems to be addressed in a more timely manner, before the mental state of youths deteriorates further.

Option 7 – A shift towards community-based care

To increase accessibility and receptivity towards receiving professional help, South Korea may consider shifting away from inpatient services and towards Community-Based Care.⁸⁷ According to the WHO, Community-Based Care should be centred around caring for individuals' emotional needs and human rights.⁸⁸ A study done by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in the US has shown that support involving community resources was effective in children's mental health recovery, as there were more resources that allowed for customisation of solutions to more effectively meet the needs of children. Consequently, school attendance of youths who participated in the study increased, and suicide numbers fell.⁸⁹ In Brazil, community-based mental health centres, known as Centro de Atenção Psicossocial (CAPS), have been set up. These centres provide long term and customised community-based mental health support even in times of crisis such as occurrence of suicidal thoughts.⁹⁰

South Korea can learn from Brazil by providing a safe refuge for individuals, especially in times of crisis. This safe refuge can engage different stakeholders in the community such as volunteers, non-profit organisations, and schools. Engaging other stakeholders in the community is a form of community integration where individuals with mental health conditions are eased into the community as they engage in activities and connect emotionally with the community. Research has shown that community integration is integral in enhancing recovery for individuals with mental health conditions.⁹¹ Moreover, the community can also serve as a strong support system for individuals, especially youths who lack such support at home. Ultimately, tapping into community resources can be helpful in motivating individuals to seek recovery.

⁸⁶ Claire L. Fox, and Ian Butler, "If You Don't Want to Tell Anyone Else You Can Tell Her': Young People's Views on School Counselling," *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* 35, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 104–09. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880601106831>.

⁸⁷ Young-Chul Chung, Subin Park, Sungwon Roh, Bomi Lee, Youngmin Lee, FatimaZahra Rami, Ling Li, and Jie Shen, "Mental Health Services and Research and Development in South Korea," *Taiwanese Journal of Psychiatry* 35, no. 2 (2021): 52, https://doi.org/10.4103/tpsy.tpsy_22_21.

Community-Based Care "refers to the management of chronically ill patients and education for the general public for the purpose of promoting mental health and social rehabilitation services (e.g., housing support, day rehabilitation)"

⁸⁸ "Guidance on Community Mental Health Services: Promoting Person-Centred and Rights-Based Approaches." World Health Organization. World Health Organization. Accessed December 1, 2021. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240025707>.

⁸⁹ Andrew Scull, "Children," Essay, In *Cultural Sociology of Mental Illness: An A-to-Z Guide*, 107–8, Los Angeles, Calif: Sage, 2014.

⁹⁰ "Community-Based Mental Health Services Using a Rights-Based Approach," World Health Organization, World Health Organization, accessed December 1, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/community-based-mental-health-services-using-a-rights-based-approach>.

⁹¹ Won Hee Jun, and Eun Joung Choi, "The Relationship between Community Integration and Mental Health Recovery in People with Mental Health Issues Living in the Community: A Quantitative Study," *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 27, no. 3 (2019): 298. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpm.12578>.

Resolution

In response to the evolving and multifaceted nature of the youth mental health crisis, the South Korean government has implemented a combination of the above policies, which have evolved across the years.

Policy development

Regulating the private tutoring industry

With regards to the private tutoring industry, the South Korean government has chosen to implement restrictions on the industry instead of implementing a total ban. In 2000, Gyeongbuk province became the first to implement a curfew on cram schools. Soon after, Gangwon, Seoul, and Daegu followed suit. It was, however, only by 2009 that a 10 p.m. curfew on *hagwons* was implemented across all provinces in South Korea⁹² under the “Act on the Establishment and Operation of Private Teaching Institutes and Extracurricular Lessons”, otherwise known as the Hagwon Act.⁹³

However, this decision was unpopular among some stakeholders, such as hagwon owners and parents. They believed that the policy would not reduce the time spent on attending tuition classes, and instead cause students to attend earlier classes over the weekends.⁹⁴ To oppose the decision, a challenge was raised to the Constitutional Court on the basis that the curfew “violated children’s educational rights”.⁹⁵ In addition to the lack of public support, there were also issues with compliance. Some *hagwons* reportedly still teach outside the *hagwons* after 10 p.m.⁹⁶ Due to the ongoing demand for such services, the effectiveness of a curfew in reducing academic pressure is limited.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of this policy in reducing participation in the private tutoring industry was limited by the Lee Myung-Bak-led government. The plan to “[foster] competition and [secure] excellence in education”⁹⁷ entailed the deregulation of the South Korean education system in addition to the establishment of new high schools, including elite ones.⁹⁸ Such a political pledge put forth by Lee Myung-Bak’s government might have sent mixed signals to the general public as the government appeared to endorse the academic competition feeding South Korea’s private tutoring industry. As a result, the number of *hagwons* continued to increase during this period, in spite of the curbs in place.⁹⁹

Nonetheless, despite the challenges associated with implementing restrictions, restrictions were still preferable. This is unsurprising given the failure of the “7.30 Educational Reform Measure” in 1980, which prohibited cram schools and for-profit private tutoring by college students and school teachers to reduce

⁹² Hoon Choi, and Álvaro Choi, “Regulating Private Tutoring Consumption in Korea: Lessons from Another Failure,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 49 (July 1, 2016): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.03.002>.

⁹³ Huiyan Piao, and Hyuna Hwang, “Shadow Education Policy in Korea During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *ECNU Review of Education* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 653, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20965311211013825>.

⁹⁴ Choi, and Choi, “Regulating Private Tutoring Consumption”, 147-48.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 147.

⁹⁶ Sonia Exley, “Locked in: Understanding the ‘Irreversibility’ of Powerful Private Supplementary Tutoring Markets,” *Oxford Review of Education*, (May 2, 2021): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.1917352>.

⁹⁷ Jeongwon Kim, and Taewan Kim, “Korea: Fostering Competition and Securing Excellence in Education,” in *Education Policy Reform Trends in G20 Members*, edited by Yan Wang, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 129–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-38931-3_7.

⁹⁸ Rahn Kim, “Teachers Polarized over Lee Myung-Bak’s Pledge,” *koreatimes*, October 10, 2007, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2021/09/113_11682.html.

⁹⁹ Shin-who Kang, “Hagwon Mushrooming despite Economic Slump,” *koreatimes*, July 16, 2009, <https://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=48606&KK>.

household expenditure on shadow education.¹⁰⁰ The ban was ultimately found to be ineffective as it led to the creation of a black market for the tuition industry where parents and students could continue to engage in shadow education illegally.¹⁰¹ Though the ban was eventually overturned in 2000,¹⁰² a similar ban would still likely be both ineffective and unpopular among South Koreans given the popularity of engaging in private education.

Tackling youth unemployment

Since 2014, the South Korean government has implemented the Korean Work-Learning Dual System. Like the German apprenticeship system, South Korean companies provide on-the-job training for youths. Youths who pass the internal and external evaluations are eventually accredited at the end of the programme and can continue working for the company they were attached to during the programme duration.¹⁰³ In doing so, the government addresses the job-skills mismatch problem in the private sector, which is hindering youths from finding suitable employment. Youths who have participated in the programme have expressed learning relevant skills which could help them gain employment¹⁰⁴ and thus, see their job search stresses be alleviated. Furthermore, the programme benefits participating organisations as they are able to train youths to fill available positions. By inculcating relevant skills, these organisations may also see higher levels of employee retention.¹⁰⁵ Overall, the Work-Learning Dual System implemented by the South Korean government targets a core reason for youth stress – unemployment, while benefiting the country's economy. However, it must be noted that as of 2016, the bulk of companies participating in the programme (95.9%) were SMEs¹⁰⁶. Given that youths continue to prefer working in larger enterprises, this may deter some youths from joining the programme.

Anti-bullying measures

With regards to addressing youth mental health issues arising from school bullying, the South Korean government has implemented anti-bullying programmes and a zero-tolerance policy. Under Article 15 of the 2009 “Act on the Prevention of and Countermeasures against Violence in Schools”,¹⁰⁷ school violence prevention education is mandated. Currently, most prevention programmes in South Korea are primary prevention programmes which focus on preventing bullying from developing.¹⁰⁸ One example of an anti-bullying programme implemented by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2012 is the Harmony Program. Students in the Harmony programme undergo different modules and activities such as group counselling in order to foster empathy and improve bullying awareness.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰ Chong Jae Lee, Heesook Lee, and Hyo-Min Jang, “The History of Policy Responses to Shadow Education in South Korea: Implications for the next Cycle of Policy Responses,” *Asia Pacific Education Review* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 100–101, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9064-6>.

¹⁰¹ Seah, “Banning Tuition.”

¹⁰² Exley, “Locked in,” 7.

¹⁰³ Dae Seok Chai, Sehoon Kim, and Minjung Kim, “A Work and Learning Dual System Model for Talent Development in South Korea: A Multiple Stakeholder View,” *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 20, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 413, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422318803085>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 419–20.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 420–421.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 417.

¹⁰⁷ “Act On The Prevention Of And Countermeasures Against Violence In Schools”, South Korean government, accessed January 25, 2022, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=24031&type=new&key=

¹⁰⁸ Keumjoo Kwak, “Intervention Programs in South Korea,” In *School Bullying in Different Cultures*, edited by Peter K. Smith, Keumjoo Kwak, and Yuichi Toda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 351, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139410878.020>.

¹⁰⁹ Phillip T. Slee, and Grace Skrzypiec, *Well-Being, Positive Peer Relations and Bullying in School Settings* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43039-3>.

While prevention programmes focus on education, zero-tolerance policies serve as a punitive measure against bullying. Set against the backdrop of multiple student suicides, South Korea's Ministry of Education implemented a zero-tolerance policy which would "impose stricter punishment on perpetrators of school violence and allow intervention by police" in the event of physical violence.¹¹⁰ Ranging from community service to school expulsion,¹¹¹ these punishments reflect an intolerance towards school bullying and violence.

Overall, however, the policies tackling bullying continue to heavily focus on school bullying despite growing concerns over cyberbullying. While the South Korean government amended the "Act on the Prevention of and Countermeasures against Violence in Schools" in 2012 to categorise cyberbullying as a form of school violence, there are little to no programmes or legislation targeting cyberbullying specifically.

Reducing stigma

To reduce public stigma towards mental health conditions, the South Korean government embarked on public campaigns to increase mental health awareness. In 2012, a television campaign aimed at raising awareness on suicide crisis hotline numbers was launched.¹¹² However, this was not a long-term campaign and was supposedly shorter than similar public campaigns aimed at smoking cessation.¹¹³ Hence, while there was an increase in usage of the hotlines during the campaign period, the conclusion of the campaign saw the number of calls to the hotline return to pre-campaign levels,¹¹⁴ showing the ineffectiveness of short-term campaigns. Overall, however, the use of public campaigns to reduce stigma does not appear to be a policy option frequently employed by the South Korean government. This could be a result of social stigma towards mental health issues, which has caused mental health issues to be deprioritised as opposed to other illnesses.¹¹⁵

Youth mental health support

On the front of youth mental health support in South Korea, support has come in two forms – community-based support and school-based support.

To strengthen community-based support for youths, South Korea expanded access to its existing resources to youths. While the One Stop Support Centre was initially targeted at female victims of sexual crime, they now provide medical, legal and counselling support to victims of school violence.¹¹⁶ Youth Counselling and Welfare Centres have also been set up across the country¹¹⁷ to provide youths with counselling services. The Centres provide a suite of services ranging from one-to-one in-person sessions to cyber counselling¹¹⁸ to aid different groups of youths.

¹¹⁰ Woo-young Lee, "Tough Measures Set on School Violence," *The Korea Herald*, February 6, 2012. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120206001212>.

¹¹¹ Namei Kim and Insoo Oh, "Analysis of Stakeholders' Perceptions of Zero Tolerance Policy for School Violence in South Korea," *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy* 14, no. 1 (2017): 62.

¹¹² In Han Song, Jung-Won You, Ji Eun Kim, Jung-Soo Kim, Se Won Kwon, and Jong-Ik Park, "Does a TV Public Service Advertisement Campaign for Suicide Prevention Really Work?" *Crisis* 38, no. 3 (May 1, 2017): 195–201, <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000434>.

¹¹³ In Han Song, "Can TV PSA Campaigns Help Reduce Suicide Rates?," February 2017, https://www.yonsei.ac.kr/en_sc/research/archive-view.jsp?article_no=167079&board_no=584&title=can-tv-psa-campaigns-help-reduce-suicide-rates.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Anita McKay, "Korea Neglecting Mental Health Issues: Experts," *The Korea Herald*, July 10, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170710000535>.

¹¹⁶ UNESCO, *School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report* (2017), 46, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246970>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 46.

¹¹⁸ KYCI, "Korea Youth Counselling & Welfare Institute," 2013, https://www.kyci.or.kr/fileup/lib_pdf/2013-42.pdf.

In school, support is strengthened by peer counselling programmes and school counsellors. The peer counselling programme under the purview of the Korean Youth Counselling and Welfare Institute (KYCWI) was expanded in 2015 to include youths of different backgrounds.¹¹⁹ Under the programme, students chosen as peer counsellors are trained to not only support their peers emotionally, but also help them in resolving their challenges.¹²⁰

Historically, South Korean schools have had a long history of school counselling due to the influence of American educators. However, it was only after the promulgation of the Elementary and Secondary School Education Act (ESSEA) in 2004 that full-time counsellors were employed.¹²¹ As schools and universities could access federal funds to develop counselling services¹²² under ESSEA, the number of trained school counsellors correspondingly increased and by 2018, there were over 6,900 school counsellors in the nation.¹²³ Nonetheless, despite the strengthening of school-based mental health resources, confidentiality in school counselling remains a concern as counsellors are sometimes required to work closely with teachers in order to support struggling students.¹²⁴ This may lead to a breach in confidentiality that further deters students from subscribing to school counselling services.

Epilogue

In spite of the policies mentioned above, there is still a long way to go for South Korea in alleviating the youth mental health crisis. This is because the South Korean government needs to account for differing demographics and South Korea's deep connection with Confucianism. In attempts to more effectively alleviate the crisis, there are two pertinent questions to ask: how can change be accessible to all youths? What can be done to ensure that change is sustainable and will not revert to its prior state?

In addition, inequality is a growing problem across the world, and South Korea is not exempted from it.¹²⁵ As inequality affects one's access to resources in society, which includes resources to mental health care, actions must be taken to tackle inequality so that the effects of mental health policies trickle down to all in society and not just the wealthy.

Finally, more consistent and long-term efforts are needed to tackle South Korea's conservative culture and stigma towards mental health. Being deeply entrenched, these mindsets which intensify the crisis and impede efforts to alleviate the problem will require a long time to shift.

¹¹⁹ Lee, and Kwak, "Bullying Research and Intervention in South Korea," 547–70.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 547–70.

¹²¹ Lee, Sang Min, and NaYeon Yang, "School-Based Counseling Policy, Policy Research, and Implications: Findings from South Korea," in *International Handbook for Policy Research on School-Based Counseling*, edited by John C. Carey, Belinda Harris, Sang Min Lee, and Oyaziwo Aluede (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 305. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58179-8_19.

¹²² Sang Min Lee, and Eunjoo Yang. "School Counseling in South Korea: Historical Development, Current Status, and Prospects." *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 2008, 161.

¹²³ Sang Min Lee, and Mike Trevisan, "Evaluation in Support of School Counseling in Korea: A Proposal," *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy* 16, no. 1 (2019): 65, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/2252312054/abstract/1D0183729CAF4882PQ/1>.

¹²⁴ Lee, and Yang, "School-Based Counseling Policy," 312.

¹²⁵ Hagen Koo, "The Changing Faces of Inequality in South Korea in the Age of Globalization," *Korean Studies* 31 (2007): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23720158>.

Discussion questions

1. How do you think cyberbullying can be addressed by governments?
2. What more do you think can be done to address the issue of academic pressure in South Korea?
3. How applicable are these solutions to other countries facing similar issues, such as Singapore?
4. What potential is there for governments to destigmatize mental health?