YO-VID22: Youth wellbeing and support structures before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic:

NATIONAL REPORT FOR SLOVENIA

Andrej Naterer
Vesna Vuk Godina
Rudi Klanjšek
Suzana Košir
Danijela Lahe
Miran Lavrič
Minea Rutar

February 2025


YO-VID22

Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly reshaped the lives of young people across Europe, exposing and amplifying long-standing structural vulnerabilities in areas such as education, employment, housing, health, and social relationships. In Slovenia, as elsewhere, the pandemic served not only as a health crisis but also as a social stress test—magnifying existing inequalities while generating new forms of precarity. This report is a part of project task T3.2 and presents a project deliverable D 3.1 as delineated within the YOVID22 project (ARIS project J7-4597)[1]. It offers an in-depth analysis of youth well-being in Slovenia during and after the pandemic, combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine both short-term disruptions and longer-term transformations in the lives of young people.

The YOVID22 project aims to capture the experiences, coping strategies, and socio-economic realities of youth across multiple dimensions of well-being. The Slovenian national report presents findings from a representative survey conducted in 2023, contextualized through longitudinal comparisons with pre-pandemic data from 2018. The data provide insights into how young Slovenians have navigated the shifting landscape of everyday life, with particular attention to the interplay between structural conditions—such as labour market shifts, educational transitions, and housing instability—and subjective experiences, including stress, satisfaction, mental health, and social connectedness.

The report is structured around key thematic areas, each of which has been deeply impacted by the pandemic and its aftermath. The findings reveal a complex picture: while certain domains show signs of resilience and recovery, others point to persistent and even deepening challenges. For instance, the pandemic exacerbated existing housing difficulties, delayed transitions to independent living, and contributed to emotional distress and loneliness. At the same time, many young people demonstrated adaptability and agency, continuing their education, engaging in meaningful work, and sustaining supportive family and peer relationships under increasingly constrained conditions.

Drawing from robust empirical evidence, the report offers detailed conclusions and policy recommendations designed to inform national youth strategies and EU-level initiatives. These include proposals for mental health support, educational reform, improved housing access, and labour market integration, all framed within a broader call for youth-centered recovery and inclusive social development.

[1] This report represents extended version of the original report, developed in February (project month 17) and presented during the international meeting in Zagreb in December 2024.

Ultimately, this report not only documents the toll of the COVID-19 crisis on youth in Slovenia but also highlights opportunities to build more equitable and resilient systems that can support young people's well-being in the years to come.

Andrej Naterer,

project manager

1. Housing and living conditions of youth on Slovenia and Croatia – Caught between covid-19 and structural challenges

Rudi Klanjšek

The issue of housing and living conditions is central to youth well-being across Europe. Adequate and affordable housing not only provides shelter but also serves as a foundation for education, social integration, and mental health (Bambra, Riordan, Ford, & Matthews, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the existing housing vulnerabilities. Numerous young individuals experienced increased housing insecurity due to economic challenges, employment losses, and campus closures. This instability frequently resulted in elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, affecting various aspects of their lives and future prospects. For example, closure of university dormitories, necessitated students to secure alternative accommodations. This abrupt displacement frequently resulted in financial burden and logistical difficulties, particularly for international students or those from remote locations. Next, the economic downturn caused by the pandemic resulted in job losses, particularly in sectors that typically employ young people, such as retail and hospitality. This loss of income made it difficult for many youth to maintain their housing arrangements. As a consequence, many relocated to parental or guardian residences, potentially straining familial relationships (Šinko et al., 2021).

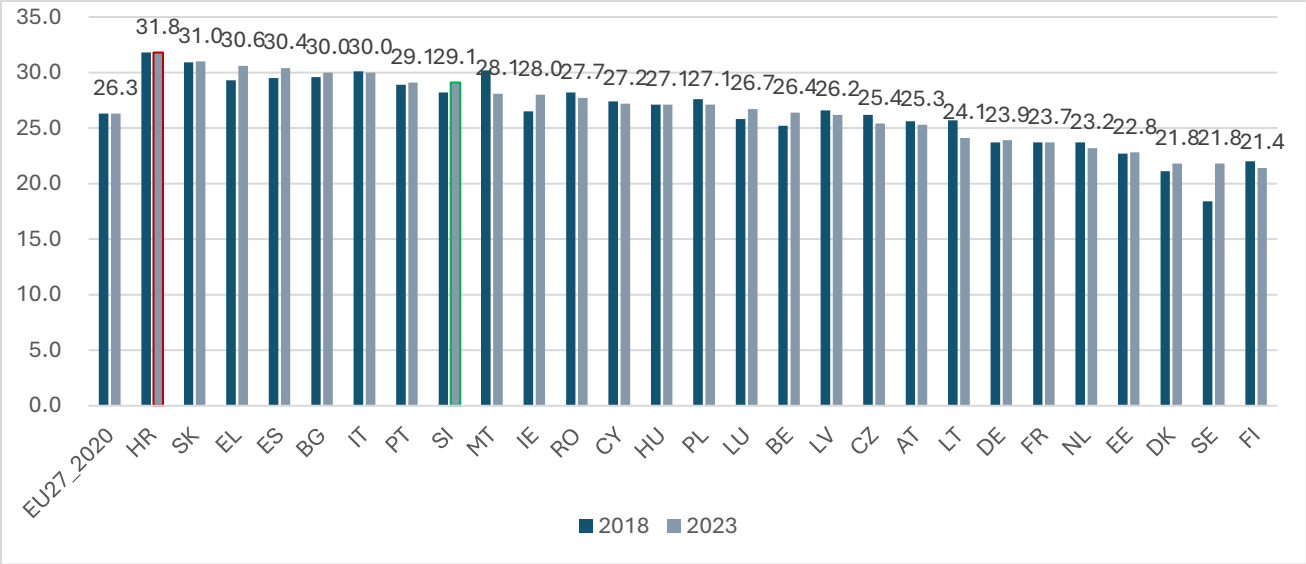
The pandemic's effect on housing prices has significantly influenced youth living conditions. Research indicates that housing prices surged in certain areas during the pandemic, exacerbating affordability issues for low-income families and youth (Jiao et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2021). The increase in housing prices, juxtaposed with prolonged economic instability, has led to a precarious situation for many youth, making stable housing increasingly challenging to obtain (Rugh, 2021; Bhat et al., 2021). This financial strain is compounded by documented increases in domestic violence, further threatening the housing security of youth in vulnerable situations (Balma et al., 2023).

This review examines housing and living condition of youth in Croatia and Slovenia taking in the consideration COVID-19 pandemic and broader EU context.

1.1. Leaving the parental home

According to the Eurostat data (2024) the average age at which young individuals moved out of their parents' homes across the European Union in 2023 was 26.3 years and remained unchanged in last five years. This figure, however, differed significantly among EU member states. Some countries, including Croatia (31.8), Slovakia (31.0), Greece (30.6), Spain (30.4), and both Bulgaria and Italy (30.0), reported the highest average ages, all 30 or above (Slovenia: 29.1). On the other hand, Finland (21.4), Sweden (21.8), Denmark (21.8), and Estonia (22.8) had the lowest average ages, all below 23. The consistency of these patterns over time suggests enduring differences in multigenerational living arrangements across EU nations, where, at least on average, the pandemic did not change this situation.

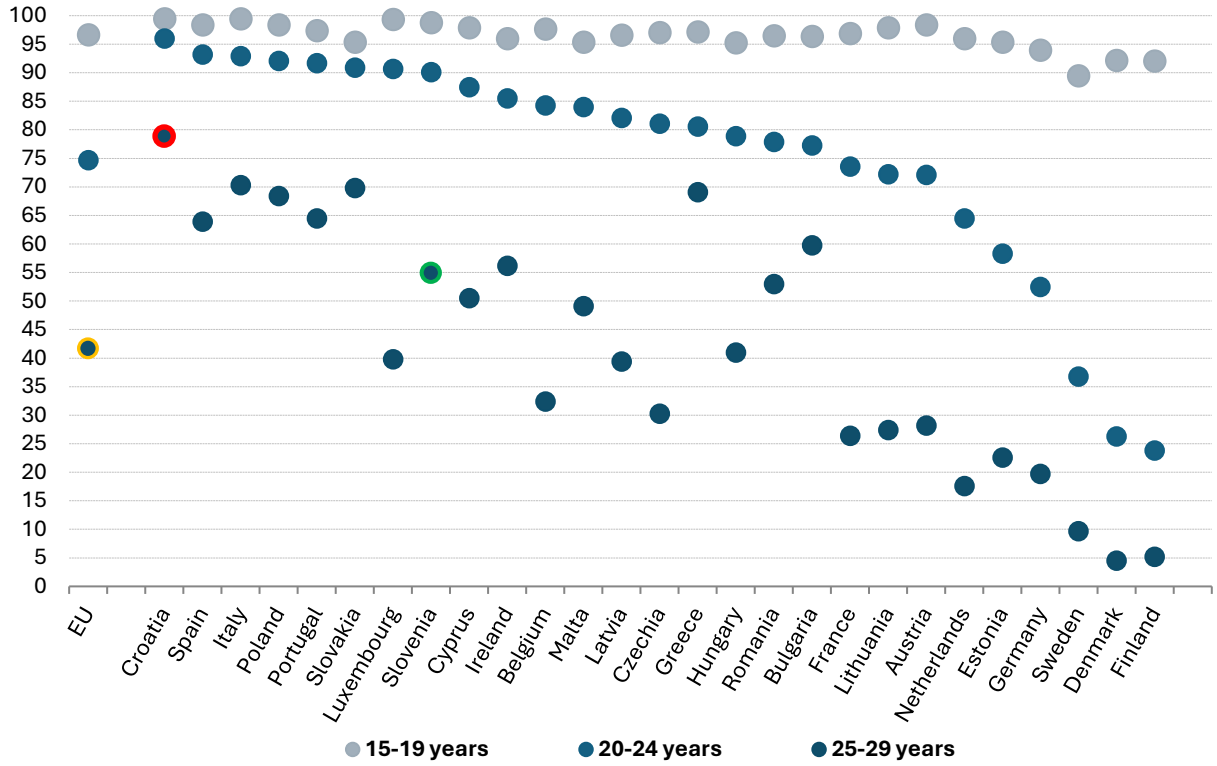
Figure 1.1: Estimated average age of young people leaving the parental household, 2018 & 2023



Source: Eurostat (online data code: yth_demo_30)

Further analysis by age groups (15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 years old - Figure 2) reveals additional disparities.

Figure 1.2: Young people living with their parents or contributing to/benefiting from the household income, 2023 (%)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lpvs08)

In Croatia, Spain, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, and Greece, the majority of young individuals reside with their parents or contribute to/benefit from the household income. This includes over 95% of 15-19 year olds, more than 80% of 20-24 year olds, and over 60% of 25-29 year olds. Conversely, in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, 8-10% of 15-19 year olds already live independently. Moreover, in these countries, more than 63% of 20-24 year olds and over 90% of 25-29 year olds have moved out of their parental homes.

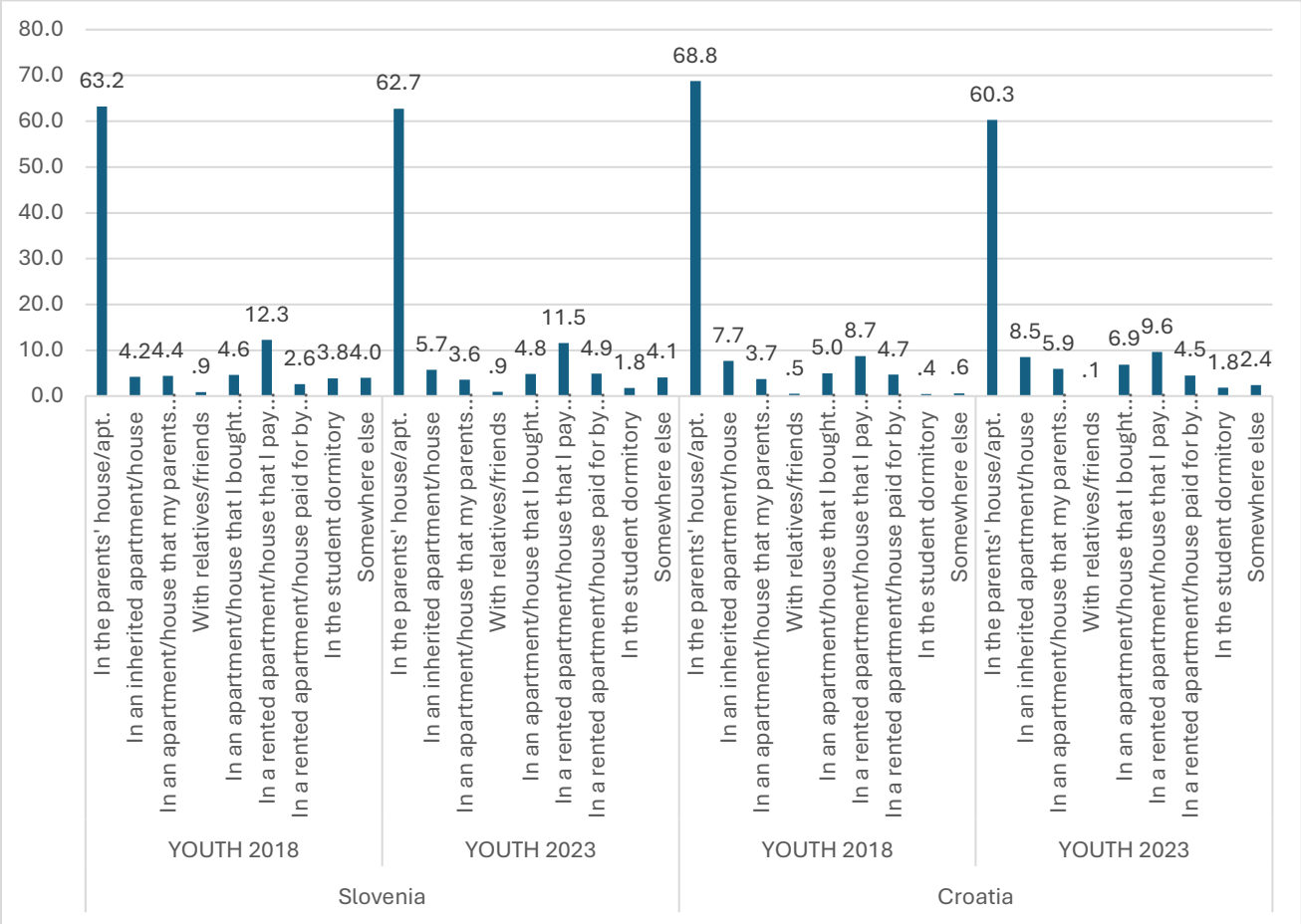
Slovenia, with its 55 % of 25-29 year olds still living with their parents stands above EU average of 42%, however, it is important to note that this share decreased over the years. In 2010 around 66 % of 25-29 year olds were living with their parents. This indicates a certain break from the "Mediterranean pattern" found, for example, in Croatia and Italy, where the share of 25-29 year olds living with their parents increased in the same time period (2010-2023), from 66% to 79% and from 62 % to 70% respectively.

As indicated in the Figure 3, this pattern could not be fully replicated by our data, as in both countries the share of youth living in their parents's house/apartment decreased from 2018 to

2023. Furthermore, Croatia showed a more dramatic decrease in parent-house/apt. living (-8.5 percentage points) compared to Slovenia (-0.5 percentage points).

Both countries show somewhat different patterns in housing transitions: while in Croatia more young people moving to owned properties (both self-bought and parent-bought), in Slovenia there is increase in rental properties paid by others and inherited apartments. Student dormitory living shows opposite trends: decreasing in Slovenia and increasing in Croatia. As expected, in both countries the share decreases with respondent's age (Slovenia: $-0.30 < r < -0.37$; $p<0.001$; Croatia $-0.29 < r < -0.40$; $p<0.001$).

Figure 1.3: Where youth live, by category in percent – 2018 and 2023 Youth Study



The decision or ability of youth to depart from their parental residence is influenced by multiple factors. These include their educational pursuits, labor market volatility, economic independence, and housing costs. Additionally, their interpersonal relationships with family and peers, as well as their personal values, all play a significant role. In this context, an expedited departure from the familial home may be associated with the increasing individualization of youth adults, as manifested in their evolving values and perspectives, and with a substantial reduction in youth

unemployment – youth unemployment rate (15-24) decreased from 15% in 2010 to around 10% in 2023.

The importance of finance (that is often tied to the unemployment) is well indicated by the fact that there is a high percentage of Slovenian youth who are motivated to leave their parents' home, but are unable to do so because of the financial constraints. Specifically, 48% say that they would like to live alone, but they cannot afford to do so (in turn, 41 % of youth say that they live with their parents because this is the most convenient and comfortable option for them).

In Croatia, the share of like-minded youth stands at 41%, indicating lower motivation to leave parents' home. Additionally, in Slovenia, living with parents is associated with having own room (only in 2023 sample; $r=0.19$; $p<0,001$) and with higher financial status of the household (in both samples; $p<0,01$). In Croatia, there is only one significant association, i.e., between living in parents' house/apt. and financial situation of family's household in 2023. This indicates that in Slovenia youth stays at home more often if the living and financial conditions of the family is better, where in Croatia such factors do not equally important role, suggesting a stronger role of cultural factors. Still, better financial status of the household is associated with leaving parent's home later in both 2023 samples, where, interestingly, there is no relationship between living with parents and level of parent-child discord, even after controlling for sex, age and financial situation of the household. Furthermore, in Croatia, those who live with their parents report better mental health, again after controlling for sex, age and financial situation of the household.

1.2. Overcrowding[2] rate

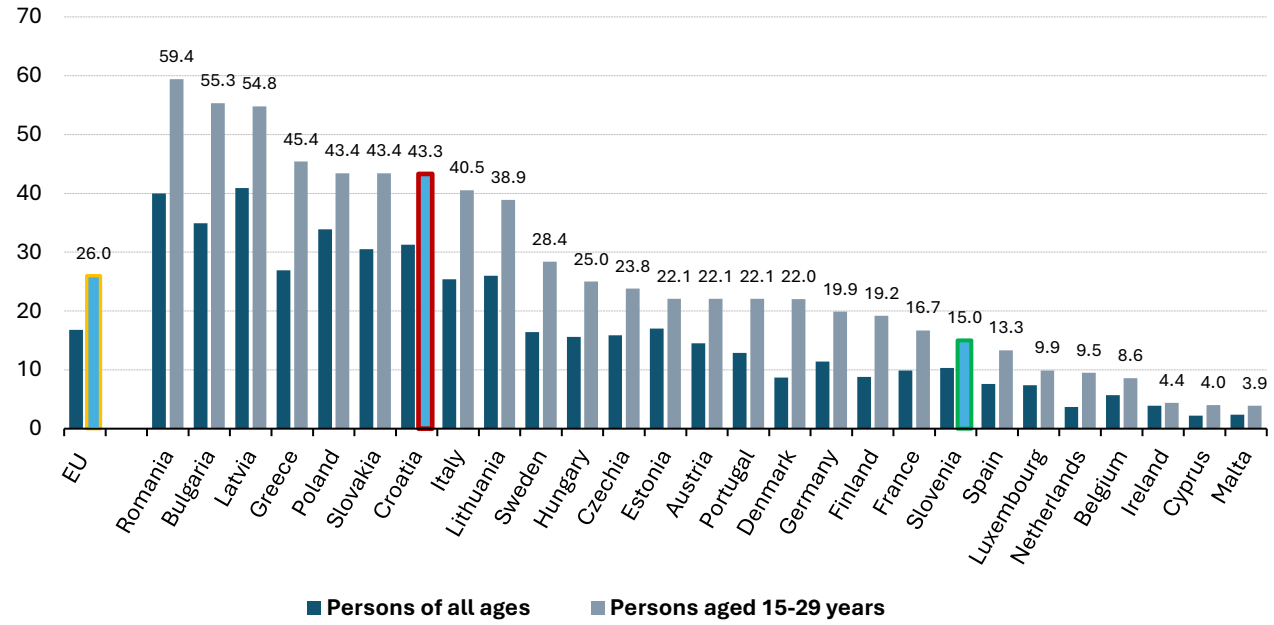
The overcrowding rate for individuals aged 15-29 in 2023 was 26.0%, demonstrating a marginal decrease of 0.2 percentage points from 2022. Young people across all EU nations exhibited a higher propensity to reside in overcrowded households compared to the general population. The youth overcrowding rate surpassed the overall population's rate by 9.2 percentage points, with the latter being 16.8%.

Substantial variations in overcrowding rates exist among EU countries. In 2023, Malta exhibited the lowest rate with 3.9% of young people residing in overcrowded dwellings, while Romania demonstrated the highest rate at 59.4%. Bulgaria and Latvia also reported over half of their youth population living in overcrowded conditions. Greece, Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Italy, and Lithuania each had more than a third of their young residents in overcrowded households (Figure 3).

[2] The overcrowding rate is defined as the percentage of the population living in an overcrowded household. A person is considered as living in an overcrowded household if it does not have at a minimum number of rooms available that is equal to the sum of:

- one room for the household;
- one room per couple in the household;
- one room per single person aged 18 or over;
- one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17;
- one room per single person between 12 and 17 and not included in the previous category;
- one room per pair of children under 12.

Figure 1.4: Overcrowding rate in the EU, 2023

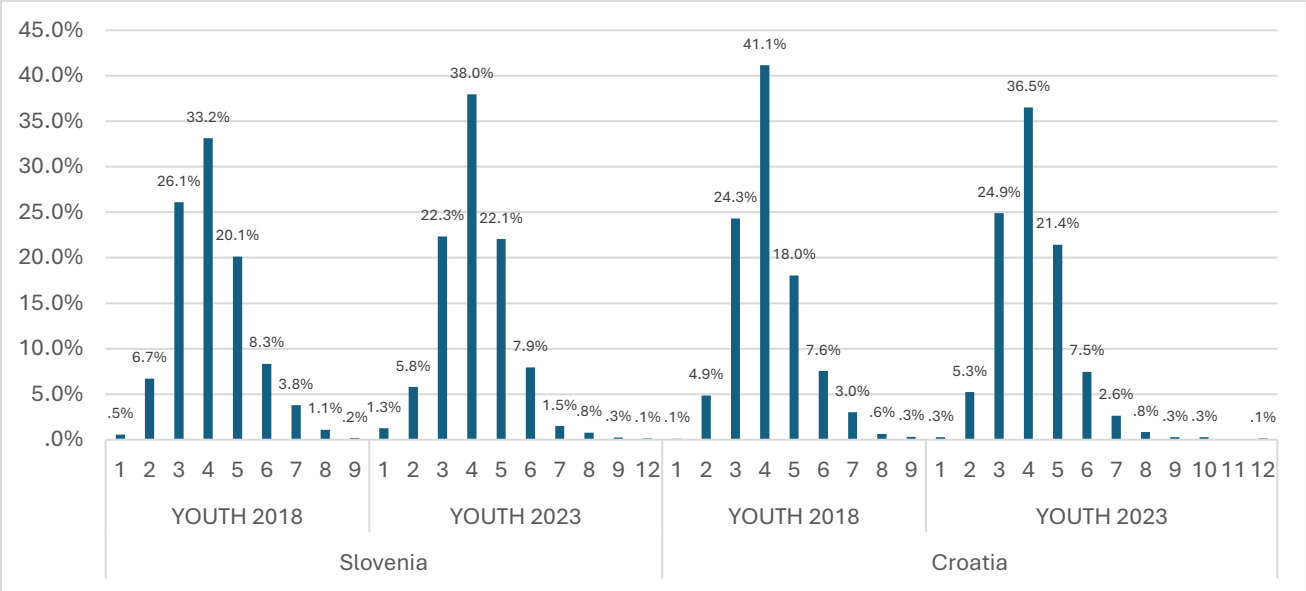


Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lvho05a)

Again, notable differences can be observed between Croatia and Slovenia – the overcrowding rate for youth in Croatia is almost three times higher than in Slovenia. This is also reflected in the YOVID data – while 17% of Croatian youth said "no" when asked if they have their own room in the household, in Slovenia this share was notably lower - 10% (those who live with their partners were omitted from the analysis).

Relatedly, when omitting those who do not live in parents' house/apartment, average number of people living in family household slightly changed from 2018-2023 – while in Slovenia decreased from 4.12 to 4.10, in Croatia increased from 4.12 to 4.17. Considering that average number of rooms in Slovenia is higher and increasing (4.10→4,59; Croatia: 3.31→3.93), it is indeed possible to say that the problem of overcrowding is more present in Croatia. Interestingly, number of rooms or having its own room was not associated (p>0,05) with subjective wellbeing when controlled for sex, age, financial situation and number of people living with respondents.

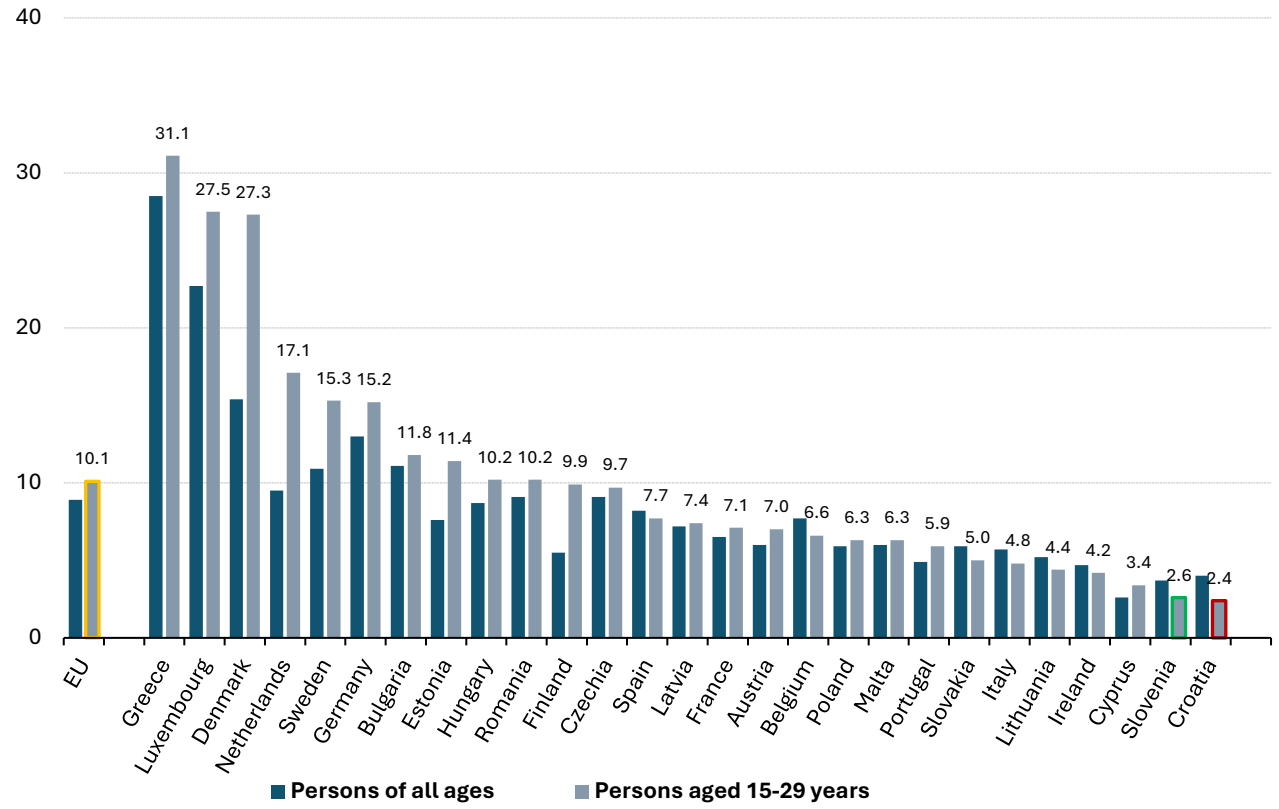
Figure 1.5: Composition of households in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 Youth Study



1.3. Housing cost overburden rate

According to Eurostat data from 2023, 8.9% of households in the European Union allocated 40% or more of their disposable income to housing expenses (see Figure 6).

Figure 1.6: Housing cost overburden rate in the EU, 2023

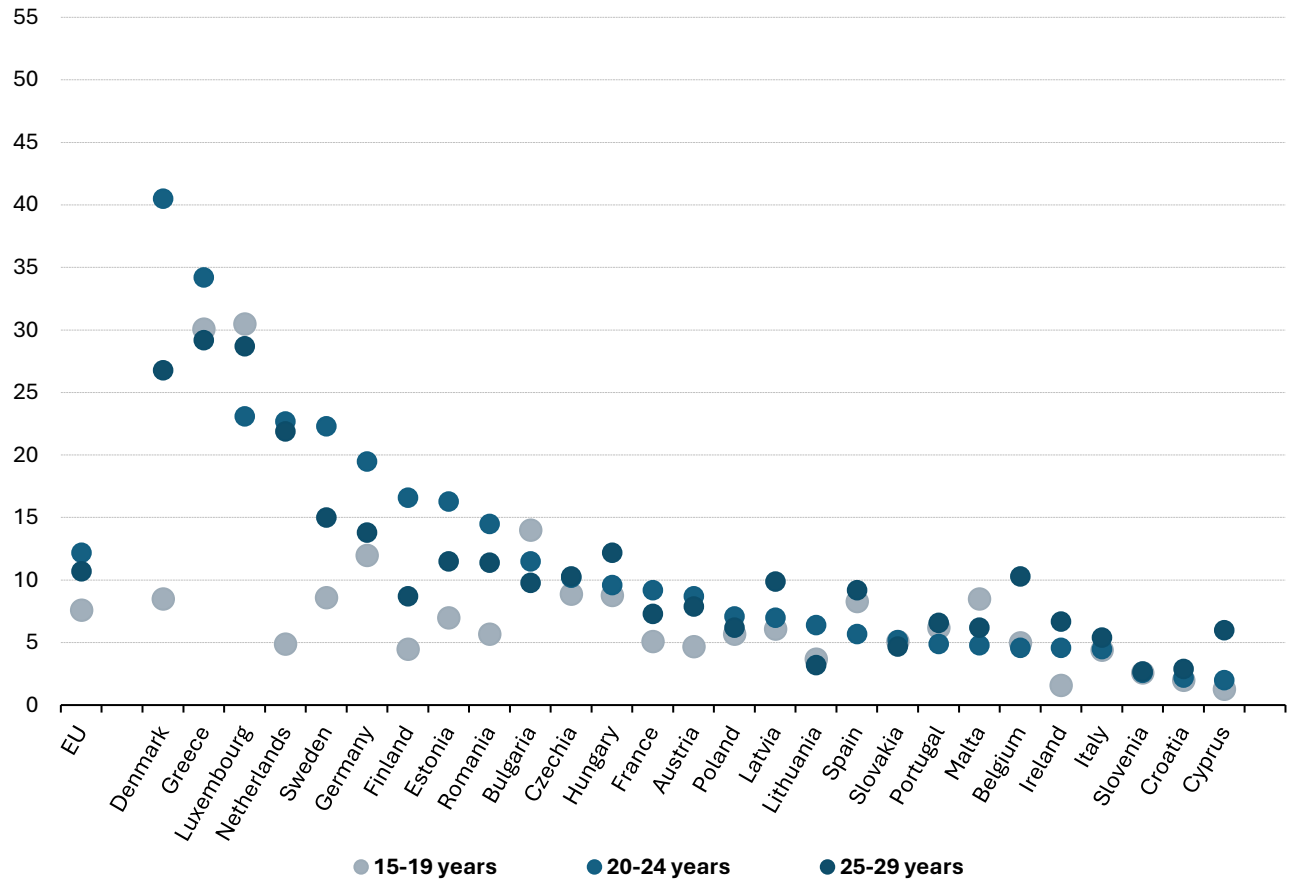


Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lvho07a)

The percentage was slightly higher for young individuals, reaching 10.1%, a difference of 1.2 percentage points. However, significant variations exist among EU member states. Interestingly, the lowest housing cost overburden rates for young people were observed in Croatia (2.4%) and Slovenia (2.6%), while Greece (31.1%), Luxembourg (27.5%), and Denmark (27.3%) experienced substantially higher rates. The EU average of 10.1% was surpassed by nine countries. Croatia and Slovenia are also among rare countries where the housing cost overburden (HCO) rate for youth was not higher than HCO for the population overall.

A more detailed examination of the situation is presented in Figure 5, where the youth are divided into smaller age brackets (15-19, 20-24, and 25-29). Within these subgroups, individuals aged 20-24 experienced the highest housing cost overburden rate at 12.2%, while those aged 15-19 had the lowest at 7.6%. This pattern was consistent across most countries in the European Union.

Figure 1.7: Housing cost overburden rate for young people (aged 16-29 years), by age group, 2023



Source: Eurostat (online data code: ilc_lvho07a)

In certain nations where young adults tend to leave home earlier, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, and Finland, the financial burden of housing costs for youth is more significant. Conversely, countries like Cyprus, Croatia, and Italy, where young people typically remain in their parents' homes longer, generally report lower levels of housing cost strain. Nonetheless, in Greece and Bulgaria, despite the older average age at which individuals move out of their family residences, young people still face a substantial housing cost burden.

1.4. living conditions and Housing deprivation

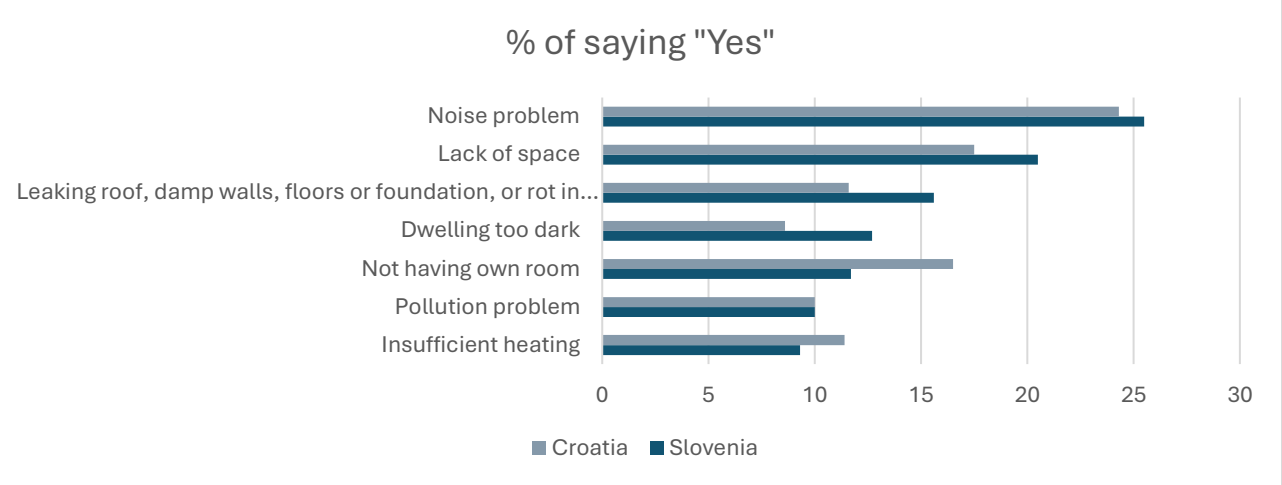
There are various indicators, used to measure quality of living conditions, including those assessing space, pollution burden and what is understood as measures of housing deprivation.

The latter is, according to the EU definition, conceptualized as the percentage of population living in the dwelling which is considered as overcrowded, while also exhibiting at least one of the housing deprivation measures: having a leaking roof, having no bath/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling that is considered too dark.

In 2023, 10.6% of people in the EU lived in households unable to afford keeping their home adequately warm (see Figure 2). Among EU countries, the lowest rates were observed in Luxembourg (2.1%), Finland (2.6%), and Slovenia (3.6%; Croatia 6,2). By contrast, the highest rates were recorded in Lithuania (20.0%), Bulgaria (20.7%), and Portugal and Spain, both at 20.8%. Compared with 2022, the percentage of people in the EU living in households unable to keep their homes adequately warm increased by 1.3 percentage points (pp), rising from 9.3% to 10.6% in 2023. However, the share of those not being able to heat their homes properly increased by 53 percent in 2021-2023 period (from 6,9 to 10,6 percent).

As indicated in the Figure 8, although the heating problem is among the rarest reported, youth tend to report higher percentages than those found in general population: 9,3 in Slovenia and 11,4 in Croatia.

Figure 1.8: Living conditions and housing deprivation indices for young people (aged 16-29 years), by Country, 2023



Simple correlational analysis reveals that housing deprivation measure, operationalized as a summation scale of all individual measures, is significantly associated with lower financial status of the household, with living in more urban, densely populated areas, and with various aspect of subjective well-being, satisfaction and mental health (Table 1).

Table 1.1: housing deprivation, SES, residence type and well-being indices for young people (aged 16-29 years), by Country, 2023

SI\ CRO	1. Housing depriv.	2. Fin. Sit. Household	3. Urbanity	4. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale	5. Life satisfaction	6. Satisfaction with family life	7. Satisfaction with friends	8. Satisfaction with mental health	9. Satisfaction with physical health	10. Satisfaction with physical appearance
1.	1	-,245**	,084**	,257**	-,163**	-,185**	-,156**	-,209**	-,139**	-,087**
2.	-,324**	1	,003	-,149**	,140**	,122**	,107**	,103**	,091**	,062*
3.	,146**	-,039	1	-,011	-,029	-,050	-,020	-,051	-,007	,001
4.	,289**	-,173**	,067*	1	-,445**	-,345**	-,360**	-,535**	-,374**	-,345**
5.	-,276**	,198**	-,044	-,476**	1	,512**	,406**	,602**	,504**	,466**
6.	-,278**	,158**	-,046	-,355**	,502**	1	,391**	,487**	,365**	,353**
7.	-,177**	,079**	-,028	-,334**	,413**	,419**	1	,433**	,376**	,333**
8.	-,189**	,107**	-,062*	-,566**	,614**	,438**	,426**	1	,540**	,503**
9.	-,189**	,112**	-,023	-,396**	,479**	,334**	,304**	,481**	1	,563**
10.	-,178**	,099**	-,011	-,345**	,523**	,306**	,310**	,507**	,509**	1

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

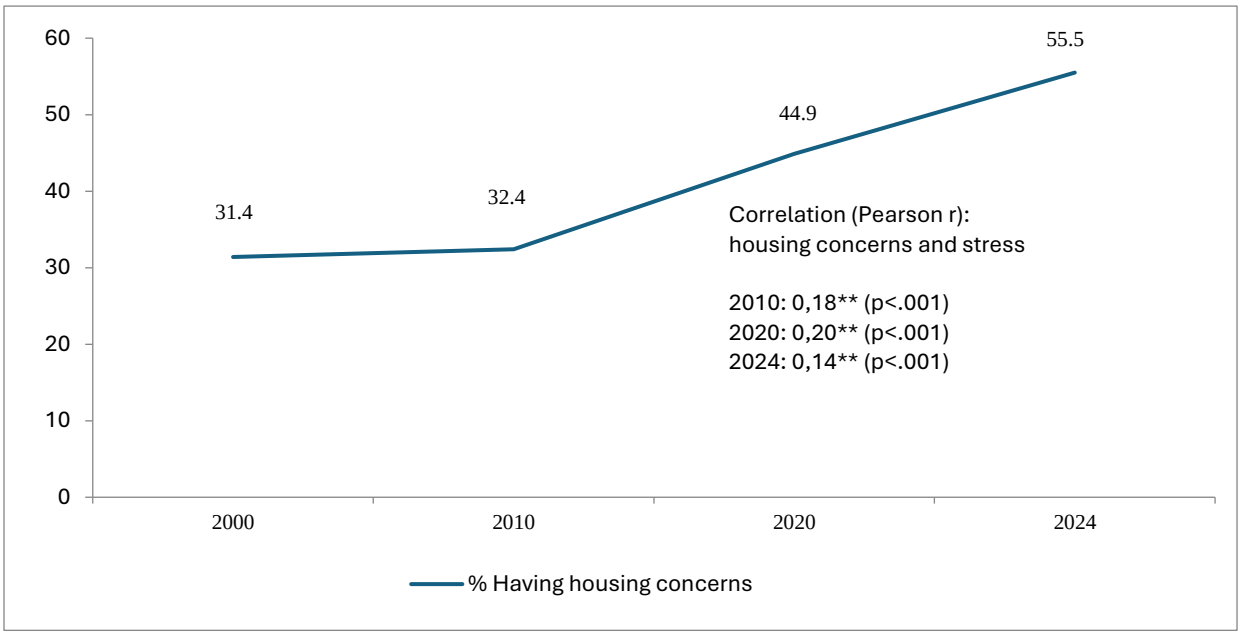
1.5. The question of affordability

Across the European Union, young people face a range of challenges related to housing affordability and quality. High rental prices, limited availability of affordable housing options, and an increasingly competitive urban housing market are common issues (Pape, 2024). For example, in the 2010-2021 period, a household's disposable income per capita in real terms in the EU grew by 12% (Eurostat – Housing in Europe, n.d.), while rents increased by 16% and housing prices increased by 42% (Eurostat, 2021). This trend continued in 2022. In the fourth quarter of 2022, rents and housing prices increased (compared with the same period in 2021) by 3 and 4% respectively, while real disposable income decreased by less than 1% (Eurostat, 2023). And, as many studies have indicated, rising housing costs, coupled with precarious employment conditions, have led to delayed home-leaving and extended reliance on family households (OECD,

2019; Eurofound, 2018). These challenges are compounded by structural shifts in labor markets and welfare policies that often fail to provide sufficient support for independent living among youth (Klanjsek, 2022).

Similar trends could be observed in Slovenia and Croatia as both countries have been grappling with long-standing housing market challenges even before the pandemic. In Slovenia, high housing prices relative to income, coupled with a shortage of affordable rental options, have made it difficult for young people to secure independent living arrangements (Zupančič & Novak, 2021; Klanjšek 2022). Specifically, the Statistical Office of Slovenia (SURS, 2024) reported that property prices rose by over 86% from 2015 to 2023; most significantly in the last three years (Klanjšek, 2022). It is thus not surprising, that the share of Slovenian youth that express fear of housing as a concern is steadily increasing, from 31.4% to 55.5% in 2024 (Klanjšek, 2024). Importantly, housing concerns proved to be significantly connected to stress (Klanjšek, 2024; Figure 6), which known to be a significant factor that impacts (mental) health (Pearlin et al., 1981).

Figure 1.5: % of youth having a housing concerns and association with stress, 2000-2024



Source: Klanjšek , 2024

Similarly, in Croatia, limited access to affordable housing and a tendency for young adults to remain in family homes well into adulthood are symptomatic of deeper structural issues in the housing market (Novak & Petrovic, 2020). In Croatia, the post-2020 surge in real estate prices and rents has created an acute affordability crisis. Mid-income youth—often overlooked in policy discussions—struggle with high living costs, unattainable loans, and inflationary pressures. A

2024 study notes that Croatia's housing market fails to meet international obligations for ensuring the right to affordable housing, with youth disproportionately affected by speculative pricing and limited social housing initiatives (Lulić, Muhvić & Pašuld, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges by disrupting labor markets and increasing the financial insecurity of many young Europeans (Bambra et al., 2020). Lockdowns and social distancing measures have further highlighted the inadequacies in housing conditions, particularly in urban areas where overcrowding and limited living space can exacerbate stress and impede effective remote working and learning. In this context, the intersection of housing instability, economic uncertainty, and mental health has become a critical area of inquiry for policymakers and researchers alike. Additionally, the pandemic has further illuminated the precarious nature of youth housing. Economic disruptions have led to increased uncertainty about future housing prospects, and the shift to remote education and work has underscored the importance of adequate living conditions. Youth in both Slovenia and Croatia are now facing compounded challenges: not only must they contend with the high cost of housing, but they must also navigate the effects of overcrowded or substandard living environments on their educational outcomes and mental health.

In sum, at a structural level, the challenges facing youth housing in the EU—and in Slovenia and Croatia in particular—are rooted in broader socioeconomic and policy dynamics. The housing affordability crisis is driven by factors such as market deregulation, urbanization, and insufficient public investment in social housing (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2019). While governments in both Slovenia and Croatia have introduced policies aimed at increasing housing accessibility for young people, the effectiveness of these measures remains mixed. Critics argue that piecemeal approaches fail to address the underlying issues of income inequality, labor market precarity, and the lack of coordinated social policies (Zupančič & Novak, 2021).

Recent studies suggest that integrated policy strategies—combining housing, education, and employment initiatives—are necessary to create sustainable improvements in youth living conditions (Eurofound, 2018). The pandemic has further underscored the need for such comprehensive interventions, as the intersection of economic insecurity and inadequate housing has led to significant adverse outcomes in mental health and overall well-being (Bambra et al., 2020).

1.6. Conclusions and recommendations

Main findings:

1) COVID-19 Impact: The pandemic exacerbated housing insecurity among youth, leading to increased financial strain, mental health challenges (stress, anxiety), and forced relocations (e.g., moving back to parental homes). Campus closures and job losses in sectors like retail/hospitality disproportionately affected young people.

2) Delayed Home-Leaving: In Slovenia and Croatia, youth leave home later than the EU average (Slovenia: 29.1 years; Croatia: 31.8 years). Financial constraints are a primary barrier, with 48% of Slovenian and 41% of Croatian youth unable to afford independent living despite wanting to.

3) Overcrowding and Housing Deprivation: Croatia has nearly triple Slovenia's youth overcrowding rate (17% vs. 10% lack own rooms). Housing deprivation (overcrowding, poor conditions) correlates with lower household income, urban living, and reduced well-being (e.g., higher depression, lower life satisfaction).

4) Affordability Crisis: Housing prices in Slovenia rose 86% (2015–2023), outpacing income growth. Croatia faces speculative pricing and insufficient social housing, disproportionately affecting mid-income youth.

5) Structural Challenges: Labor market precarity, insufficient public investment in housing, and market deregulation underpin affordability issues. Existing policies in both countries lack coordination and fail to address systemic inequalities.

Policy Recommendations:

1) Increase public investment in social housing and rent-controlled units.

2) Introduce rent subsidies or tax incentives for landlords offering affordable rates to youth.

3) Create youth-specific housing grants or low-interest loans to ease transitions to independent living.

4) Strengthen minimum wage policies and job security in sectors employing youth (e.g., gig economy).

5) Link housing policies with employment programs (e.g., apprenticeships, remote work infrastructure) and education (e.g., financial literacy training).

6) Address regional disparities by tailoring policies to urban vs. rural needs (e.g., incentivize developers to build affordable housing in high-demand areas).

7)Implement anti-speculation taxes on vacant properties and short-term rentals (e.g., Airbnb).

8) Advocate for EU-funded housing initiatives (e.g., expanded Youth Guarantee programs) and knowledge-sharing platforms to replicate successful models (e.g., Finland's social housing system).

Addressing youth housing challenges requires a dual focus on immediate COVID-19 recovery and long-term structural reforms. Policies must balance affordability, quality, and accessibility while integrating cross-sectoral support to enhance youth well-being and economic resilience.

1.7 References

Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J., & Matthews, F. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 74(11), 964–968. https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-214401

Bhat, M., Jiao, J., & Azimian, A. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on home value in major Texas cities. International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis, 16(3), 616–627. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHMA-05-2021-0058

European Commission (EC). (2024). Living conditions in Europe - housing. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_housing

Eurofound. (2018). Youth employment and housing in Europe. Retrieved from https://www.eurofound.europa.eu

European Commission. (2020). Youth in Europe — A new agenda for education and training. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.

Eurostat. (2021). Housing statistics in Slovenia and Croatia. Retrieved September 14, 2023, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat

Eurostat. (2023, May 5). EU Q4 2022: Rents rise, house prices fall. Eurostat News. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230404-2

Eurostat. (2024). Young people - housing conditions. Retrieved January 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_housing_conditions

Jiao, J., Bhat, M. R., Azimian, A., Mandalapu, A., & Farahi, A. (2022). Housing market price movements under tech industry expansion during COVID-19. International Journal of Housing Markets and Analysis, 16(3), 628–641. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHMA-02-2022-0022

Klanjšek, R. (2022). Housing and living conditions and health assessment among youth in Slovenia in the context of adverse structural conditions and living preferences. Teorija in Praksa, 59(2), 548–567.

Klanjšek, R. (2024). [Title of the work]. [Unpublished manuscript or Journal Name, Volume(Issue), page range]. DOI/URL.

Leventhal, T., & Newman, S. (2010). Housing and child development. Children and Youth Services Review, 32(9), 1165–1174. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.03.008

Lulić, M., Muhvić, D., & Pašuld, S. (2024). Challenges and issues for (the right to) affordable housing in Croatia. EU and Comparative Law Issues and Challenges Series (ECLIC), 8, 580–610. https://doi.org/10.25234/eclic/32293

Novak, I., & Petrovic, M. (2020). Housing challenges in Croatia: The youth perspective. Journal of Housing Studies, 34(2), 123–145.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2019). Housing, wealth accumulation and wealth distribution: Evidence and stylized facts (OECD Economics Department Working Papers No. 1588). https://doi.org/10.1787/86954c10-en

Pape, M. (2024). Social and youth housing in the EU. European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757653/EPRS_BRI(2024)757653_EN.pdf

Pearlin, L. I., Menaghan, E. G., Lieberman, M. A., & Mullan, J. T. (1981). The stress process. Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 22(4), 337–356. https://doi.org/10.2307/2136676

Qian, X., Qiu, S., & Zhang, G. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on housing price: Evidence from China. Finance Research Letters, 43, 101944. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2021.101944

Rugh, J. (2021). From crisis to progress: Housing and Latino youth since 2000. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 696(1), 46–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211041364

Šinko, L., He, Y., Kishton, R., Ortiz, R., Jacobs, L., & Fingerman, M. (2021). "The stay at home order is causing things to get heated up": Family conflict dynamics during COVID-19 from the perspectives of youth calling a national child abuse hotline. Journal of Family Violence, 37(5), 837–846. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00290-5

Solari, C. D., & Mare, R. D. (2012). Housing crowding effects on children's well-being. Social Science Research, 41(2), 464–476. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.09.012

Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS). (2024). Indices of residential property prices by type of residential property, Slovenia, annual [Data set]. Retrieved from https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/Data/0419005S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

Zupančič, M., & Novak, P. (2021). Youth housing affordability in Slovenia: A post-COVID analysis. Central European Journal of Housing, 12(1), 56–78.

2. Well-being and health

Minea Rutar & Rudi Klanjšek

Subjective well-being (SWB) encompasses both a person's cognitive evaluations, such as life satisfaction and happiness, and affective evaluations, including positive and negative emotional states (Deiner et al., 2002). In recent decades, there has been a growing focus on measuring and monitoring SWB, especially among children, adolescents, and young adults (Marquez and Long, 2021). On the one hand arguments could be made for the well-being of youth either decreasing or increasing given the multitude of opposing factors affecting youth (J. Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025). These range from rising individualism to increased school pressures and decline of in-person interaction. Moreover, the same factors affect different aspects of youth well-being in different ways; for example, individualism has been on the rise which has historically been linked to higher well-being (Diener et al., 1995) but has later turned out to negative affect some other measures of well-being (Humphrey et al., 2020). However, a substantial body of research now indicates a troubling decline in youth mental health, characterized by reduced life satisfaction, increased psychological distress, and, in some countries, even a rise in suicide rates. Despite these findings, the research remains somewhat inconsistent, with variations emerging across different outcome measures. In this report we present various well-being measures of Slovene youth.

2.1. Life satisfaction

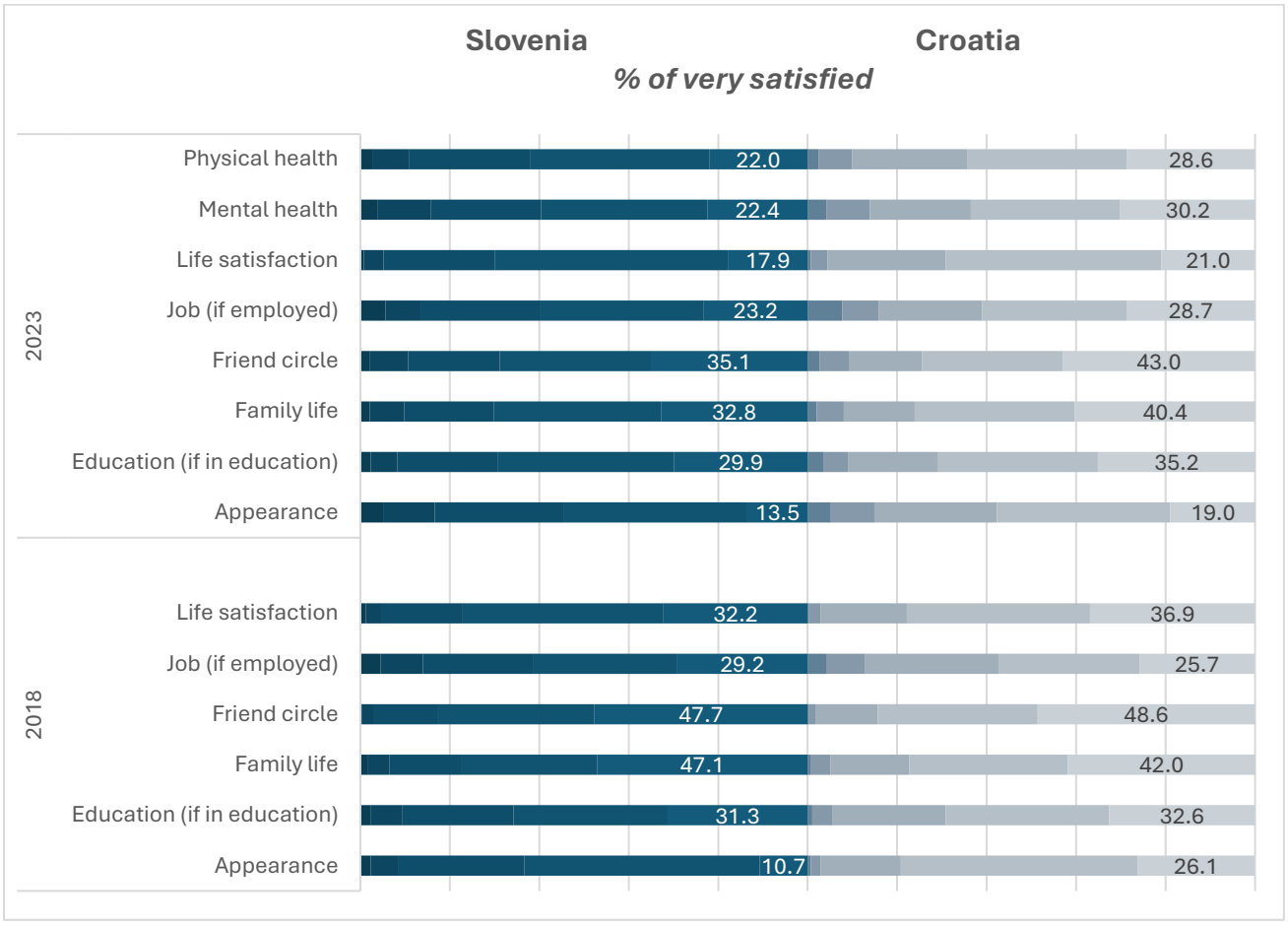
Life satisfaction among youth has been shown to be declining globally (Handa et al., 2023; Marquez & Long, 2021; J. Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025; J. M. Twenge, 2019). However, important country differences exist in these trends and in baseline life satisfaction.

According to our findings, average life satisfaction of Slovene youth was 7.04 (SD=1.81) on a 0-10 scale, with substantial variation between sexes (M=7.13, SD=1.82 for men, M=6.93, SD=1.80 for women). On a 1-5 scale, the average score was 3.82 (SD=0.80), with men scoring 3.86 (SD=0.80) and women 3.77 (SD=0.80). Depending on the area of life satisfaction, women's satisfaction varied on a scale from 1 to 5 from the lowest being satisfaction with physical appearance (M=3.35, SD=1.01) to the highest being satisfaction with education (M=3.91, SD=0.98). For men, satisfaction was the lowest as well regarding physical appearance (M=3.57, SD=1.04) and the highest was

satisfied with the friend circle (M=3.98, SD=1.02). We found that 12.6% of men and almost a fifth of women (19.2%) are either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied (1 or 2) with their mental health. Youth in Slovenia in 2023 are the least satisfied with their appearance and the most satisfied with their friends and family.

In comparison to Croatia, Slovene youth in 2023 reported slightly lower mean level of general satisfaction, but this difference was not significant. Same insignificant differences were found in relation to job and education satisfaction. However, in every other domain Slovene youth reported significantly ($p<0.05$) lower levels of satisfaction than their Croatian counterparts. This is reflected in frequency distributions as shown in Figure 1.

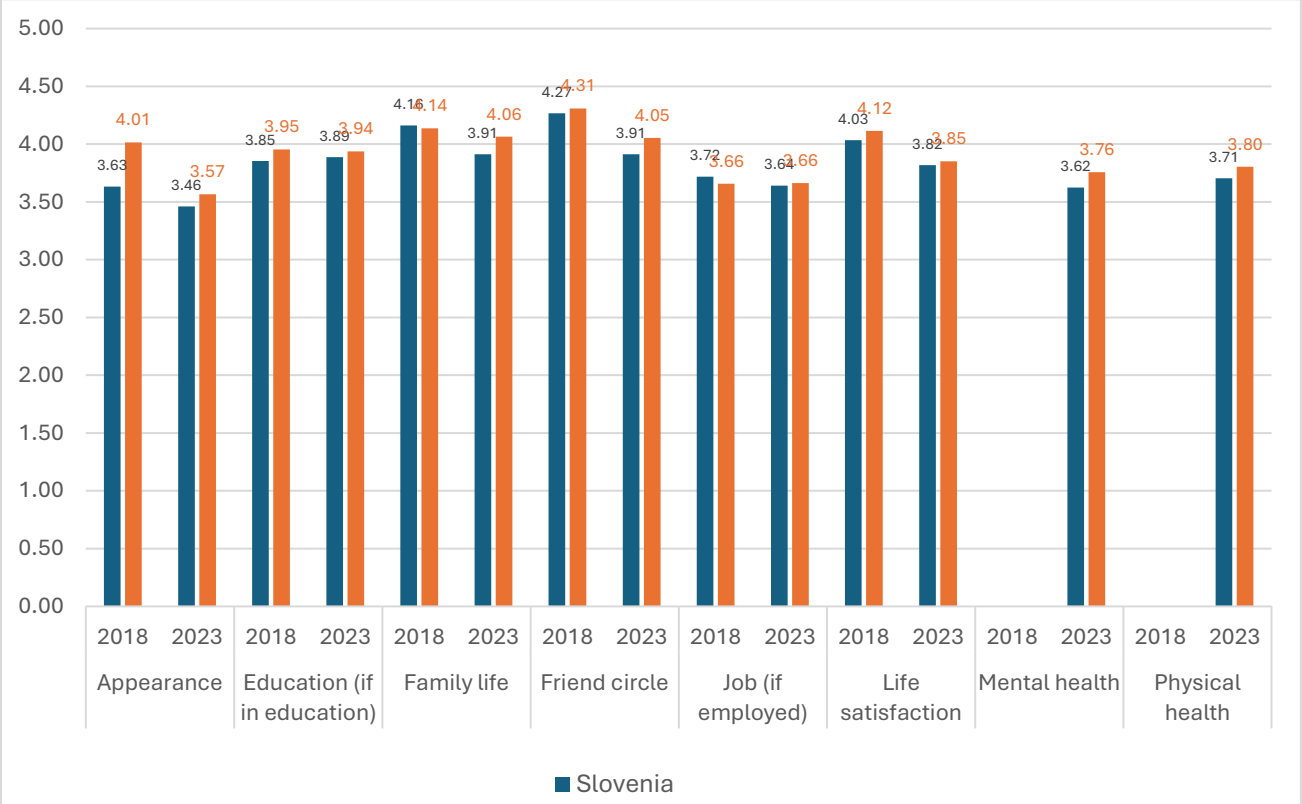
Figure 2.1: Satisfaction with various aspects of life for youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018-2023, percentages



Comparing the results to the previous survey, we see that the percentage satisfied or very satisfied In Slovenia dropped notably from 2018 to 2023 for satisfaction with one's friend circle (a

reduction of 14%), physical appearance (a reduction of 8%), and family life (a reduction of 7%). Overall life satisfaction notably decreased as well from 77 to 70% reporting being very satisfied or satisfied, and mean life satisfaction in 2018 (M = 4.03, SD = 0.87) being significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher than in 2023 (M = 3.82, SD = 0.80). The only domains where there was no change in satisfactions were "job" and "education".

Figure 2.2: Mean level domain specific satisfaction, 2018 vs 2023, by Country



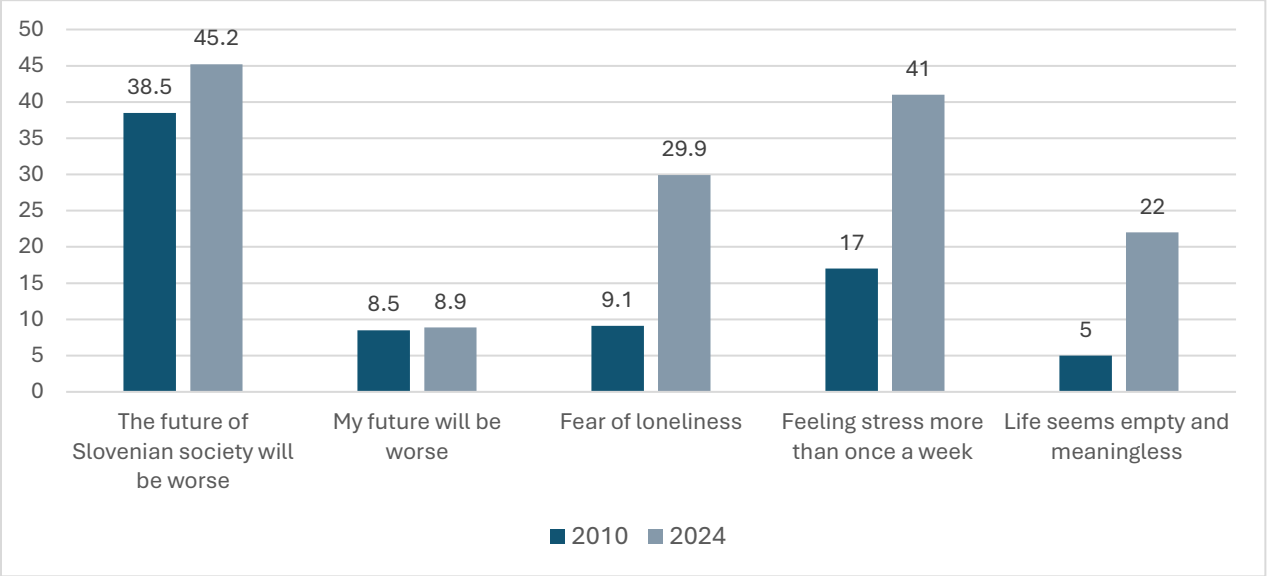
Same time pattern could be observed in Croatia, where, for example, the share of those who reported being very satisfied in 2018 decreased by 43 percent in 2023.

These declines are in line with previous research documenting similar declines in English-speaking countries (J. Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025), France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden (Blanchflower et al., 2024), Ex-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2025), and most recently, in most UN countries (Blanchflower, 2025).

2.2. Sense of meaning and loneliness

Overall, our findings indicate that 60% of respondents experienced a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. In contrast, 12% (with 13.9% of women and 12.3% of men) reported rarely or never feeling this sense. Additionally, about one-sixth of respondents (15% overall, with 12.5% of men and 17.7% of women) stated that they felt lonely often or very often, with women reporting these feelings at a higher rate than men. These patterns echo previous youth studies that have documented a rise in stress, meaninglessness, and pessimism among Slovene youth over the past 15 years, particularly in recent years (see Figure 3). They also resonate with previous research reporting increasing levels of loneliness among young people worldwide (J. M. Twenge et al., 2021). The observed trends have been discussed in the context of "liquid modernity" (Ünal, 2018), building on foundational sociological insights (Bauman, 2013; Giddens, 2023). This theoretical framework suggests that the erosion of stable social structures contributes to historically unique dilemmas of identity among youth, potentially fueling the observed increases in meaninglessness and loneliness. These results are particularly concerning given that both a crisis of meaning (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013; Schnell et al., 2018) and persistent loneliness (McClelland et al., 2020; Schinka et al., 2013) have been independently linked to higher risks of suicidality in young people. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that address these critical aspects of youth mental health.

Figure 2.3: Pessimism, stress, and meaning of life among Slovene youth (percentage that agrees), 2010-2024



Source: Youth 2010 (Lavrič et al., 2011)

2.3. SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Despite the concerning trends in loneliness and a diminished sense of purpose, the majority of respondents demonstrated strong social connectedness. More than two-thirds of participants (71.9% of women and 69.7% of men) felt they had reliable people in their lives, while over half (57% of women and 52.4% of men) frequently experienced a sense of importance to others. When considering these findings alongside the earlier evidence of rising meaninglessness and loneliness, a more complex picture of youth well-being emerges. Although many young people report heightened levels of stress and isolation, the substantial degree of social support among the majority suggests a protective factor that may help mitigate the negative mental health trends. This duality implies that while targeted interventions are urgently needed to address feelings of meaninglessness and persistent loneliness, especially given their links to other negative mental health outcomes and suicidality, it is equally important to bolster and leverage these existing strong social connections to foster resilience and overall well-being.

2.4. Depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout

We also measured young people's negative mental health outcomes with two distinct measures, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS), and the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT), which measures it as a prolonged state of physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic stress. The latter is especially important given that burnout is increasingly recognized as a critical issue among adolescents and young adults and can have serious repercussions for mental health (Walburg, 2014) but remains understudied in youth.

Our results show roughly a fifth of respondents reported they often or most of the time felt they were worried about situations in which they could be panicked or embarrassed (21.3%), felt upset (21.3%), had difficulty in getting themselves to do anything in the past week (20.5%); that they didn't have anything to look forward to (18%), that they couldn't get excited about anything (16.8%), were overreacting to situations that didn't warrant such a response (16.7%), felt on the verge of panic (13.7%). On average, men scored lower on the DASS scale (M = - 0.19, SD = 0.89) than women (M = 0.13, SD = 0.98). They also scored lower on the BAT scale (M = -0.18, SD = 0.92) than women (M = 0.24, SD = 0.93).

2.5 The effects of COVID-19 on youth well-being

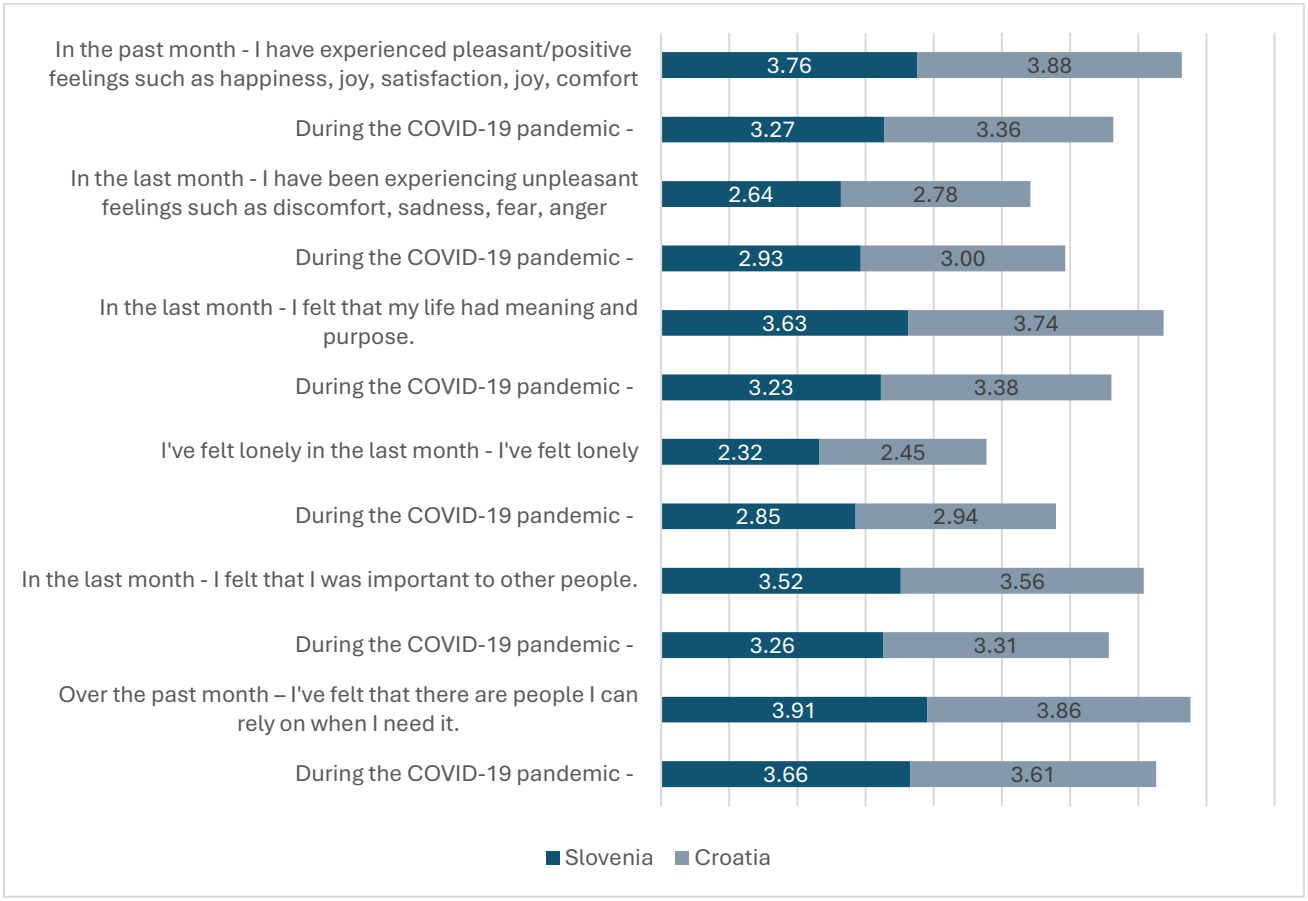
The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted youth well-being, reshaping their daily lives, social interactions, and family relationships (Ellis et al., 2020). The pandemic introduced an unprecedented period of disruption, causing stress, uncertainty, and isolation (Xiaochen et al., 2021), particularly during crucial developmental transitions related to education, employment, and social engagement (Gruber et al., 2021).

School closures, restrictions on in-person interactions, and economic instability further exacerbated these challenges, leading to significant disruptions in young people's academic progress, career prospects, and overall sense of stability. The abrupt shift to remote learning created disparities in access to education, disproportionately affecting those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who faced barriers such as limited digital resources and inadequate learning environments (OECD, 2021). This period of instability significantly influenced young people's mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Research has highlighted a marked rise in psychological distress among youth, with reports of heightened

emotional difficulties stemming from social isolation, fear of infection, and concerns about the future (Van de Velde et al., 2024).

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on youth well-being is clearly is manifested in Figure 4, which shows mean responses regarding various aspects of youth lives. Specifically, youth were asked to assess how they felt last month and how they felt during the pandemic.

Figure 2.4: Mean level agreement with various items measuring youth well-being last month and during COVID-19, by country



Note: 1= rarely/never; 5=often/always

Both, youth in Slovenia and Croatia reported lower levels of well-being during the pandemic, i.e., less joy, more unpleasant feelings, less purpose, more loneliness, less connectedness, less social support.

Based on the findings in this report, interventions and policies aimed at improving youth well-being should take a multifaceted approach, addressing both individual and social determinants of mental health. First and foremost, mental health support needs to be made more accessible and less stigmatized. This could involve expanding school- and university-based counseling services, offering low-cost or free psychological support, and ensuring that young people are aware of how and where to seek help. Public awareness campaigns, tailored specifically for youth, can play a crucial role in reducing the stigma around mental health issues and encouraging open conversations about emotional well-being.

Second, the declines in life satisfaction and the relatively high levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout underscore the need for targeted preventative measures. Schools and universities could integrate social-emotional learning programs that help students build resilience, manage stress, and develop healthy coping strategies. These programs might include workshops on time management, stress reduction, and mindfulness techniques, as well as training teachers and staff to identify early warning signs of mental health challenges. Additionally, policymakers should consider reducing excessive academic pressure by reevaluating curricula, grading systems, and standardized testing requirements, thereby creating a more balanced environment that supports both learning and well-being.

Third, the report highlights the importance of social connectedness in mitigating negative mental health trends. Even though many respondents reported strong social support, significant proportions still experience loneliness or a lack of meaning. Community organizations, youth clubs, and local government can partner to develop peer-support networks, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities that foster deeper interpersonal connections. Encouraging volunteering, group projects, and community-based initiatives can help young people develop a sense of purpose and belonging, which in turn can protect against burnout and other mental health risks.

Finally, gender-specific considerations should be taken into account, given the differences observed in life satisfaction, DASS, and BAT scores. Tailored interventions for women, who consistently reported higher levels of psychological distress and burnout, might include mentorship from female role models, support groups focusing on body image and self-esteem, and dedicated mental health resources. Men, who also face unique pressures, may benefit from

targeted outreach programs that address barriers to help-seeking behavior, such as stigma or cultural norms discouraging emotional expression.

Taken together, these recommendations aim to create a supportive system for youth that addresses both the personal and environmental factors influencing well-being. By prioritizing accessible mental health resources, promoting balanced academic and work expectations, strengthening social support networks, and considering gender-specific needs, stakeholders can work collectively to reverse the troubling trends in youth mental health and foster more positive outcomes for the next generation.

2.7 References

Bauman, Z. (2013). Liquid modernity. John Wiley & Sons.

Blanchflower, D. G. (2025). Declining Youth Well-being in 167 UN Countries. Does Survey Mode, or Question Matter? National Bureau of Economic Research.

Blanchflower, D. G., & Bryson, A. (2025). The Mental Health of the Young in Ex-Soviet States. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Blanchflower, D. G., Bryson, A., Lepinteur, A., & Piper, A. (2024). Further evidence on the global decline in the mental health of the young. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Diener, E., Diener, M., & Diener, C. (1995). Factors predicting the subjective well-being of nations. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69(5), 851.

Giddens, A. (2023). Modernity and self-identity. In Social theory re-wired (pp. 477–484). Routledge.

Handa, S., Pereira, A., & Holmqvist, G. (2023). The Rapid Decline of Happiness: Exploring Life Satisfaction among Young People across the World. Applied Research in Quality of Life, 1–31.

Humphrey, A., Bliuc, A. M., & Molenberghs, P. (2020). The social contract revisited: A re-examination of the influence individualistic and collectivistic value systems have on the psychological wellbeing of young people. Journal of Youth Studies, 23(2), 160–169.

Kleiman, E. M., & Beaver, J. K. (2013). A meaningful life is worth living: Meaning in life as a suicide resiliency factor. Psychiatry Research, 210(3), 934–939.

Marquez, J., & Long, E. (2021). A global decline in adolescents' subjective well-being: A comparative study exploring patterns of change in the life satisfaction of 15-year-old students in 46 countries. Child Indicators Research, 14, 1251–1292.

McClelland, H., Evans, J. J., Nowland, R., Ferguson, E., & O'Connor, R. C. (2020). Loneliness as a predictor of suicidal ideation and behaviour: A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies. Journal of Affective Disorders, 274, 880–896.

Schinka, K. C., Van Dulmen, M. H., Bossarte, R., & Swahn, M. (2013). Association between loneliness and suicidality during middle childhood and adolescence: Longitudinal effects and the role of demographic characteristics. In Loneliness Updated (pp. 108–121). Routledge.

Schnell, T., Gerstner, R., & Krampe, H. (2018). Crisis of meaning predicts suicidality in youth independently of depression. Crisis.

Twenge, J., & Blanchflower, D. G. (2025). Declining Life Satisfaction and Happiness Among Young Adults in Six English-speaking Countries. National Bureau of Economic Research.

Twenge, J. M. (2019). The sad state of happiness in the United States and the role of digital media. World Happiness Report, 2019.

Twenge, J. M., Haidt, J., Blake, A. B., McAllister, C., Lemon, H., & Le Roy, A. (2021). Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness. Journal of Adolescence, 93, 257–269.

Ünal, S. (2018). The Meaning Crisis of Youth in A World of Risky Strangers: Mental Disorders and Suicides. Journal of Current Researches on Social Sciences, 8, 129–154.

Ellis, W. E., Dumas, T. M., & Forbes, L. M. (2020). Physically isolated but socially connected: Psychological adjustment and stress among adolescents during the initial COVID-19 crisis. Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 52(3), 177-187.

Gruber, J., Prinstein, M. J., Clark, L. A., Rottenberg, J., Abramowitz, J. S., Albano, A. M., ... & Weinstock, L. M. (2021). Mental health and clinical psychological science in the time of COVID-19: Challenges, opportunities, and a call to action. American Psychologist, 76(3), 409-426.

Xiaochen, Y., Jingfen, Z., Ziyue, C., Yinliang, T., Yaping, H.E. (2021). Influence of individual and family characteristics on middle school students' mental health status during COVID-19 pandemic. Scl Health China. 42:858–62. doi: 10.16835/j.cnki.1000-9817.2021.06.014

Van de Velde, C., Hardy, C., Boudreault, S., Richard, J., & Tennessee, K. (2024). Youth, Interrupted? Young Adults, Time and the Future During the Covid-19 Pandemic. Sociological Research Online, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804241298621

3. Educational trajectories and labour market

Suzana Košir & Danijela Lahe

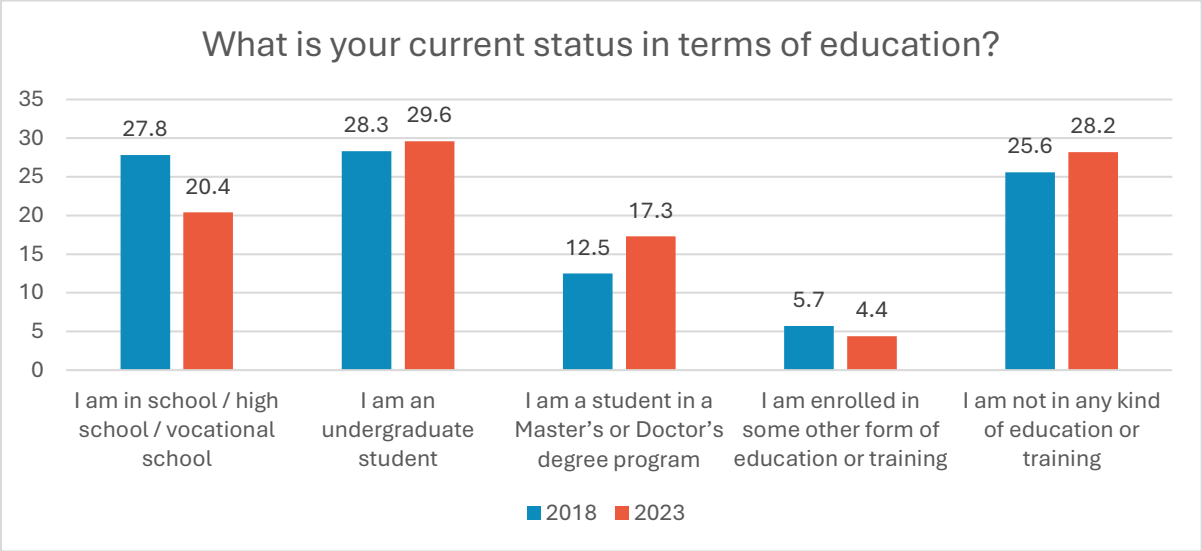
3.1 Education

Over the past few decades, education has gained increasing global importance driven by policies from organizations such as the United Nations, OECD, and the European Union. Their goals—promoting equitable access, improving quality in order to enhance the acquisition of knowledge and competences, and fostering lifelong learning (see, for example, Europe 2020 strategy, 2010; Council of Europe, 2024)—have spurred significant changes, notably the growth of secondary and tertiary education and recognition of non-formal and informal learning pathways.

The latest OECD data (2024) show that Slovenia's enrolment rates in formal education remain among the highest compared to other EU member states: in 2022, Slovenia was placed 3rd in the 15-19 age group, with 94.8% enrolled and 7th in the 20-29 age group, with 34.9% enrolled. Although tertiary education enrolment rates have been slowly declining by 2023 (SURS, 2024), the share of tertiary educated young people in Slovenia is still on the rise from a longitudinal perspective (Eurostat database, 2024). Thus, since 2014 share of 25-34 year old with tertiary education has increased from 39.9% to 51.1% in 2022, and is substantially above the EU-27 average (43.1%).

The results of our research also show that enrolment in tertiary education is increasing. The share of those enrolled in tertiary education has increased from 40.8% in 2018 to 46.9% in 2023, while there has been a decline in the number of those enrolled in (high) school or vocational schools. Tertiary education in Slovenia is mostly tuition-free (only 18.3% of young people pay tuiton fees), with many advantages in the form of student welfare and a relatively low challenge level, as shown by the Youth 2013 study (Tavčar Krajnc, Flere, & Lavrič, 2014). Participation in tertiary education could thus act as a form of safety valve, allowing young people a softer and more prolonged transition to adulthood. Additionally, there has been an increase in the proportion of young people not participating in any form of education and training, possibly due to workforce entry, financial constraints, or other societal factors.

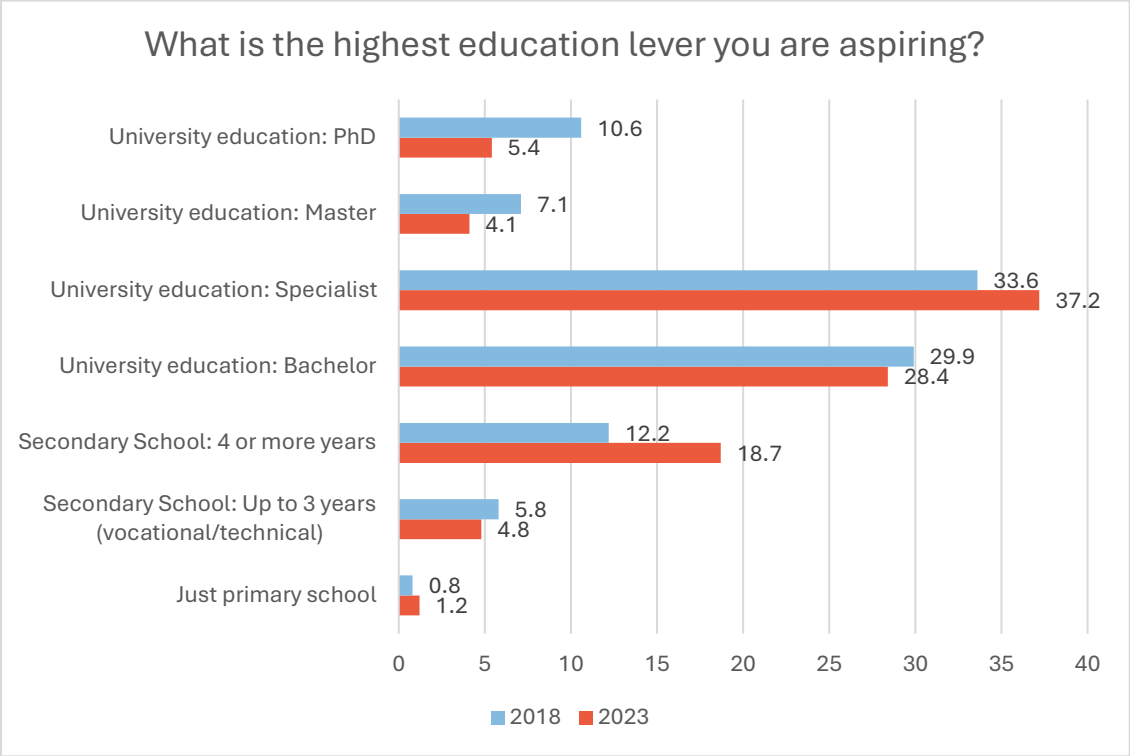
Figure 3.1: Current educational status (%), 2018 and 2023.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Expectations about higher education are central to modern youth identities. Thus, it is not surprising that their educational aspirations were generally high, since more than two-thirds (75.1%) wanted to acquire some sort of university degree (Figure 2). There were statistically significant differences in sex ($p<0.05$), with women having higher aspirations ($M=4.44$) than men ($M=4.27$), and educational aspirations also increased with age ($rho = 0.103$, $p < 0.01$). Between 2018 and 2023, there was a shift toward more practical and intermediate educational goals, particularly in Specialist and Secondary schools. At the same time, aspirations for master 's and PhD degrees have declined, which may suggest a growing awareness of their time, cost, or perceived return on investment.

Figure 3.2: Educational aspirations among Slovenian young people (%), 2018 and 2023.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

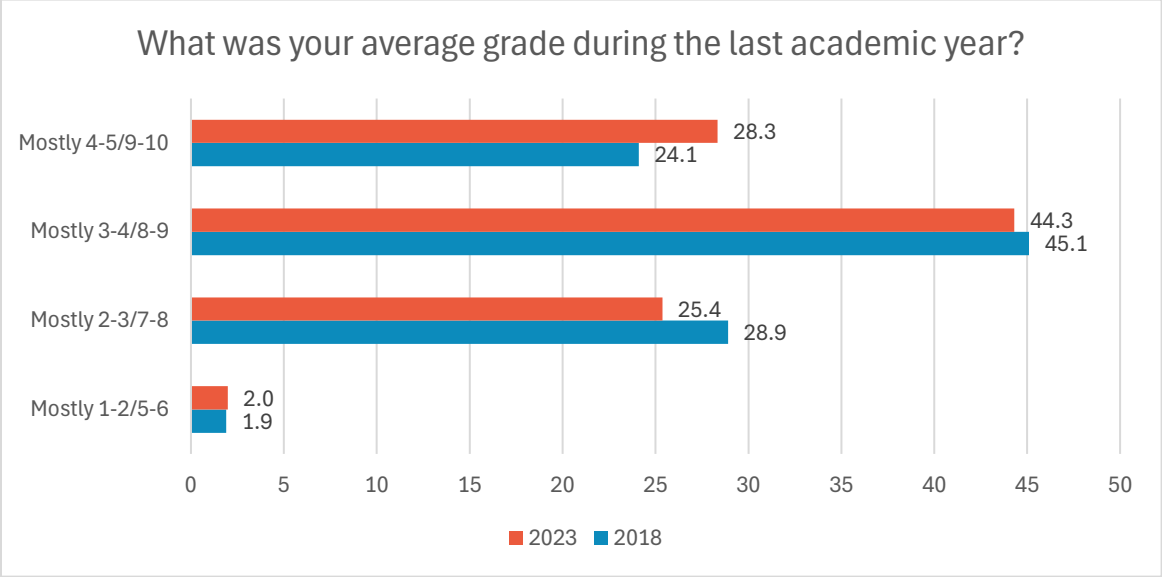
EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT, SUBJECTIVE SCHOOL PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCE

Previous studies on Slovenian young people have indicated that the educational system in Slovenia is relatively friendly and has been perceived as predominantly undemanding (Flere and Tavčar Krajnc, 2011, Tavčar Krajnc, Flere & Lavrič, 2014), but sometimes particularly stressful (Cupar & Lahe, 2019). Our findings corroborate some of these trends, although the pandemic's impact offers some new perspectives.

The majority of young Slovenian people (72.7%) had relatively high educational achievements, with average grades ranging from good to excellent (Figure 23). Higher educational achievement was related mainly to a range of school factors, such as higher educational aspirations (rho = 2,72, $p < 0.01$), higher level of schooling (rho = 0.137; $p < 0.01$), as well as mothers (rho = 0.70, $p < 0.01$) and fathers' educational level (rho = 0.96, $p < 0.01$). Statistical differences were also identified by gender, with females (M=3.11) achieving higher scores than males (M=2.93). In general, young people's achievements (M = 3.08) were higher than in 2018 (M = 2.91).

The results demonstrate a statistically significant negative correlation between the impact of the pandemic and young people's educational achievements (rho = -0.102; p < 0.01). As expected, those who were less affected by the pandemic scored higher.

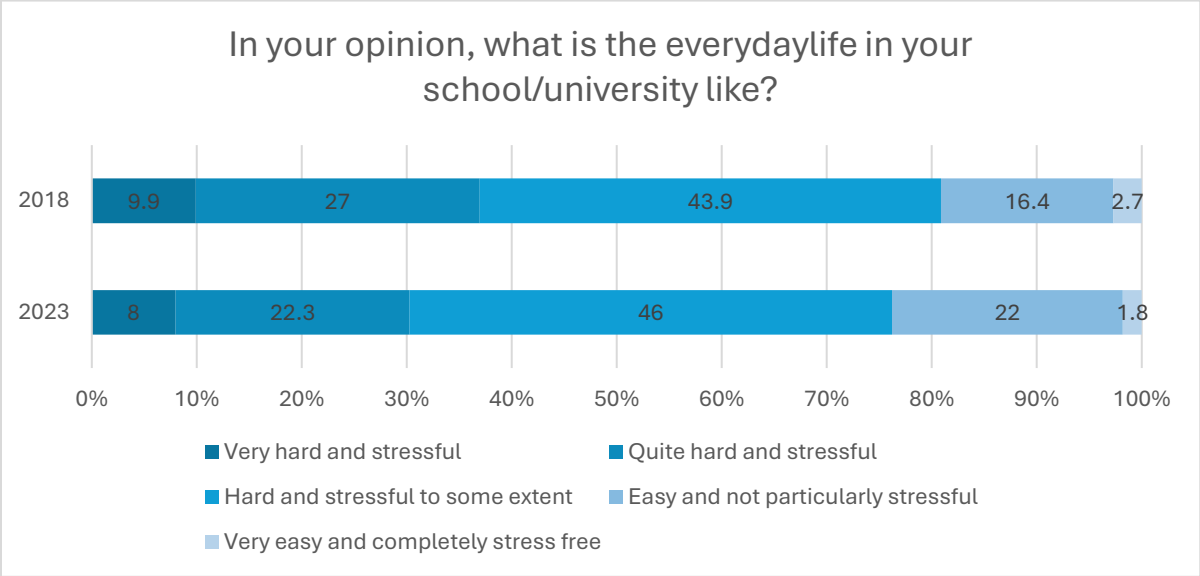
Figure 3.3: Average grade during the last academic year among Slovenian young people, 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

In general, the majority (76.3%) of young people in Slovenia perceived school as stressful, at least to some extent. While the perception of school stress remained high, it was lower than in 2018 (Figure 24). Greater stress at school is related to a negative pandemic impact (rho = -0.098, p < 0.01) and higher school achievement (rho = 0.079, p < 0.01), and is more prevalent among men (M=2.93) than women (M=2.71).

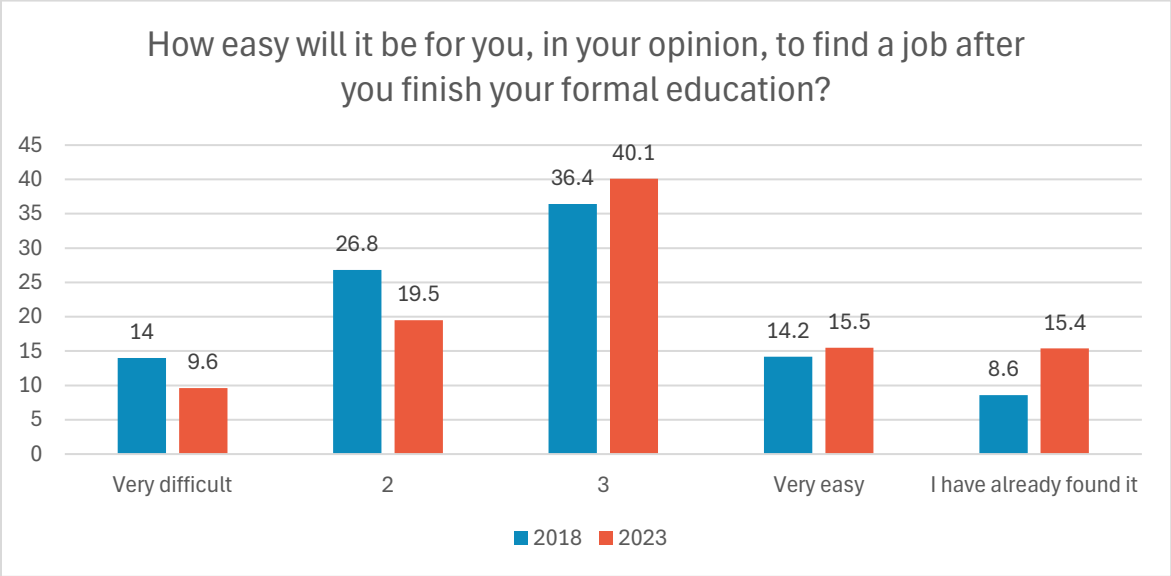
Figure 3.4: Perception of stress at school (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Between 2018 and 2023, there was a clear decline in pessimism about job prospects among young people. The share of those who reported difficult or very difficult to find a job after finishing formal education declined from 40.8% in 2018 to 29.1% in 2023, while the share of young people who had already found a job grew significantly from 8.6% in 2018 to 15.4% in 2023. Additionally, the perception of those who think it is easy or very easy to find a job has also increased. The increase in those already employed, coupled with more neutral and positive expectations, suggests a more optimistic and proactive outlook on employment, potentially shaped by the adaptive changes brought about by the pandemic and increased integration of work during studies.

Figure 3.5: Finding a job after finishing formal education (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

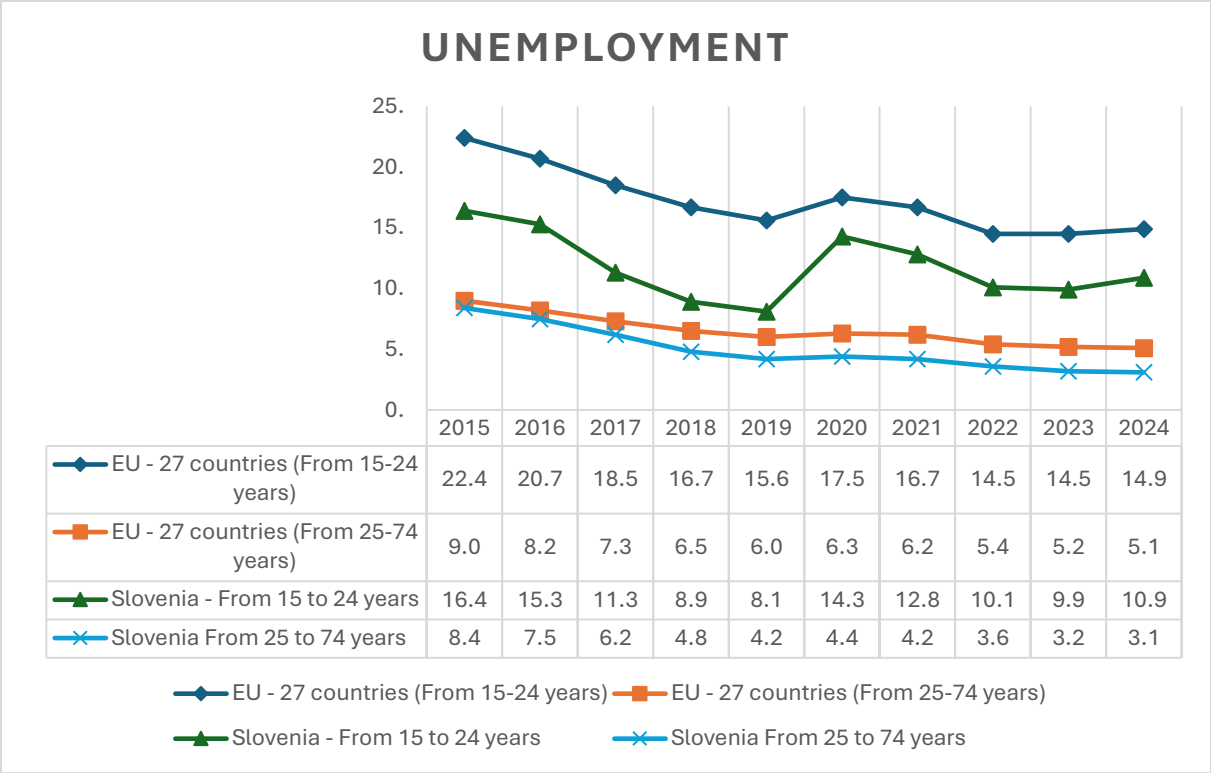
The Slovenian educational landscape has undergone notable shifts in recent years, shaped by long-standing policy goals and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a modest decline in tertiary enrolment, overall participation remains high, with the proportion of young people attaining tertiary qualifications surpassing the EU-27 average—reflecting the impact of effective national policies and tuition-free higher education. Between 2018 and 2023, tertiary enrolment increased while participation in secondary and vocational education declined, suggesting a strategic turn toward higher education during uncertain times. Aspirations remain high but have shifted toward more practical and intermediate qualifications, indicating growing sensitivity to costs, time investment, and labour market relevance. Although the system is perceived as academically undemanding, students report considerable stress, with pandemic-related instability disproportionately affecting academic outcomes. Encouragingly, employment optimism has risen, with more young people already employed and fewer perceiving job access as highly difficult. These trends point to a resilient, adaptable system requiring continued support in well-being, skill development, and education–labour market alignment.

3.2 Employment

3.2.1 Unemployment

Youth unemployment persists as a significant challenge in Slovenia. According to Eurostat statistics (Figure 1), there was a slight increase in the percentage of unemployed youth in 2024, with 10.9% of registered unemployed individuals aged between 15 and 24 years compared to the previous year. Statistics further indicate that, in 2020, influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a spike in youth unemployment to 14.3% within this age group. In 2020, youth unemployment (15-24 years) in the EU also increased to 17.5%, decreasing to 14.9% in 2024 (*Eurostat*, 2025b). Employment opportunities in 2020 were severely limited and further constrained by the increasing job market instability exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (European Union, 2025). Since 2020, the unemployment rate for individuals aged 25–74 in Slovenia has decreased to 3.1% by 2024 (European Union, 2025). The rise in youth unemployment in Slovenia in 2024 likely stems from economic-, structural-, and policy-related factors. While overall unemployment in the country is decreasing, young individuals continue to face challenges due to the temporary nature of their jobs, lack of experience, and evolving labour market demands. Addressing these issues necessitates targeted policies such as enhanced vocational training, incentives for youth employment, and more robust support for job placement programs. Contributing factors include misalignment between educational outcomes and labour market requirements, limited entry-level employment opportunities, and economic fluctuations (Svetin, 2023). The government has implemented various initiatives to address this issue, including vocational training programs and incentives for employers to recruit young workers (European Union, 2025). Despite these efforts, youth unemployment remains a concern, with numerous young Slovenians experiencing difficulties transitioning from education to stable employment. This situation has broader socioeconomic implications, potentially resulting in delayed independence, reduced consumer spending, and long-term career impacts on affected individuals. The prevalence of non-traditional employment contracts among young individuals is particularly notable. These include student work, copyright and enterprise agreements, and independent entrepreneurship, which frequently substitute full-time jobs and often replace standard employment contracts (Bojnec, 2021). The work activities of young people (15–24 years old) who are inactive are mainly due to their high involvement in education. In contrast, the apprenticeship system combines education with work activity and is modestly developed (Ferk Bratuž et al., 2024).

Figure 3.1: Unemployment rate by age group in EU 27 and Slovenia within years 2015 - 2024



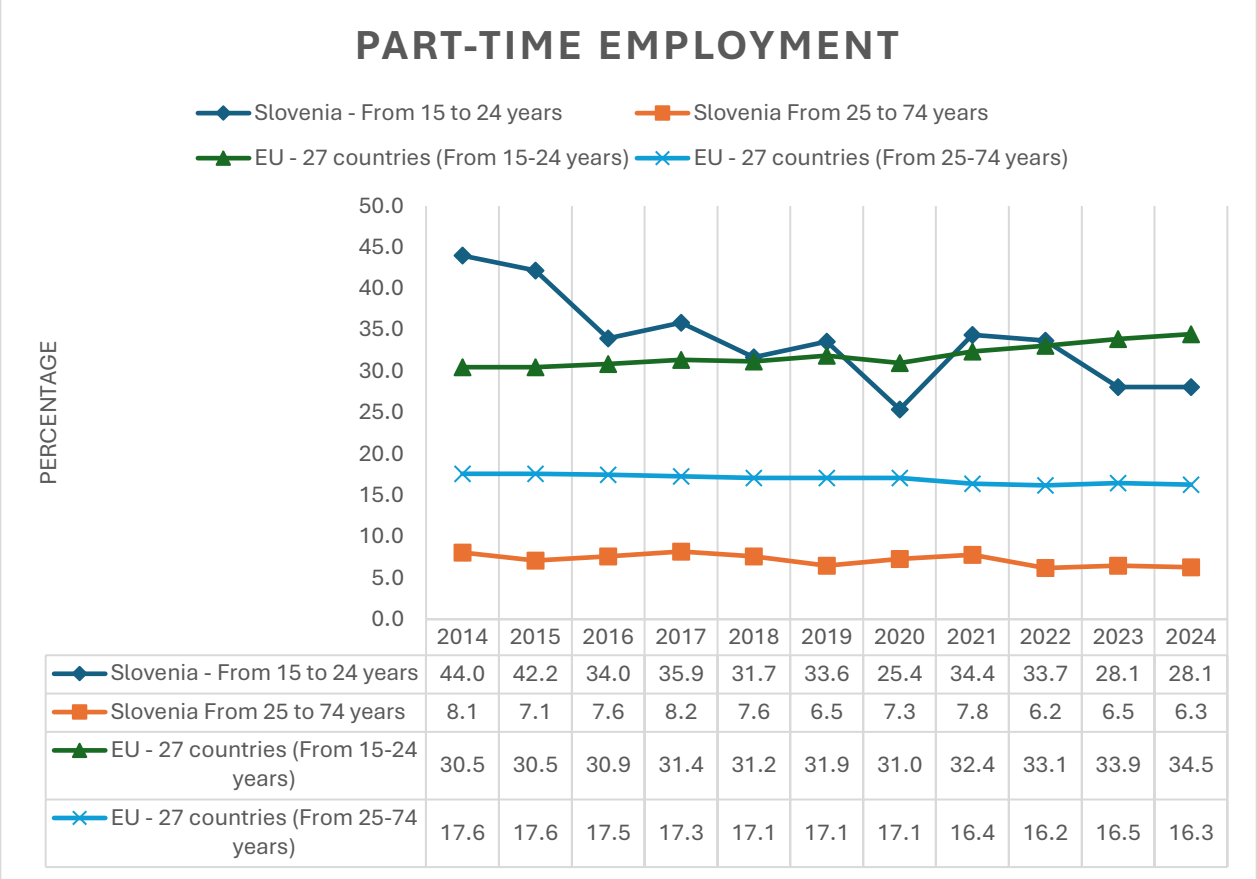
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27 countries (From 15-24 years)	22.4	20.7	18.5	16.7	15.6	17.5	16.7	14.5	14.5	14.9
EU - 27 countries (From 25-74 years)	9.0	8.2	7.3	6.5	6.0	6.3	6.2	5.4	5.2	5.1
Slovenia - From 15 to 24 years	16.4	15.3	11.3	8.9	8.1	14.3	12.8	10.1	9.9	10.9
Slovenia From 25 to 74 years	8.4	7.5	6.2	4.8	4.2	4.4	4.2	3.6	3.2	3.1

Source: Population and social conditions/Employment and unemployment - Eurostat (2025b)

3.2.2 Part-time employment

In Slovenia, young individuals typically enter the labour market after completing their education. Consequently, most young people commence their job search after reaching 20, particularly in the latter half of their twenties. Over the past decade, part-time employment among young people in Slovenia has exhibited significant trends (Pavlovaite, 2024). In 2014 (Figure 2), 44% of individuals aged 15–24 were engaged in part-time work, declining to 28.1% by 2024. This reduction contrasts with the EU-27 average of 34.5% in 2024(*Eurostat*, 2025a). The prevalence of part-time employment in Slovenia is substantially influenced by student work, a prevalent form of flexible employment among youth. Despite the overall lower incidence of part-time employment in Slovenia than the EU average, part-time work remains widespread among Slovenian youth. However, involuntary part-time employment affects fewer young people in Slovenia than the EU average (Pavlovaite, 2024).

Figure 3.2: Part-time employment by age group in EU 27 and Slovenia between the years 2014 and 2024



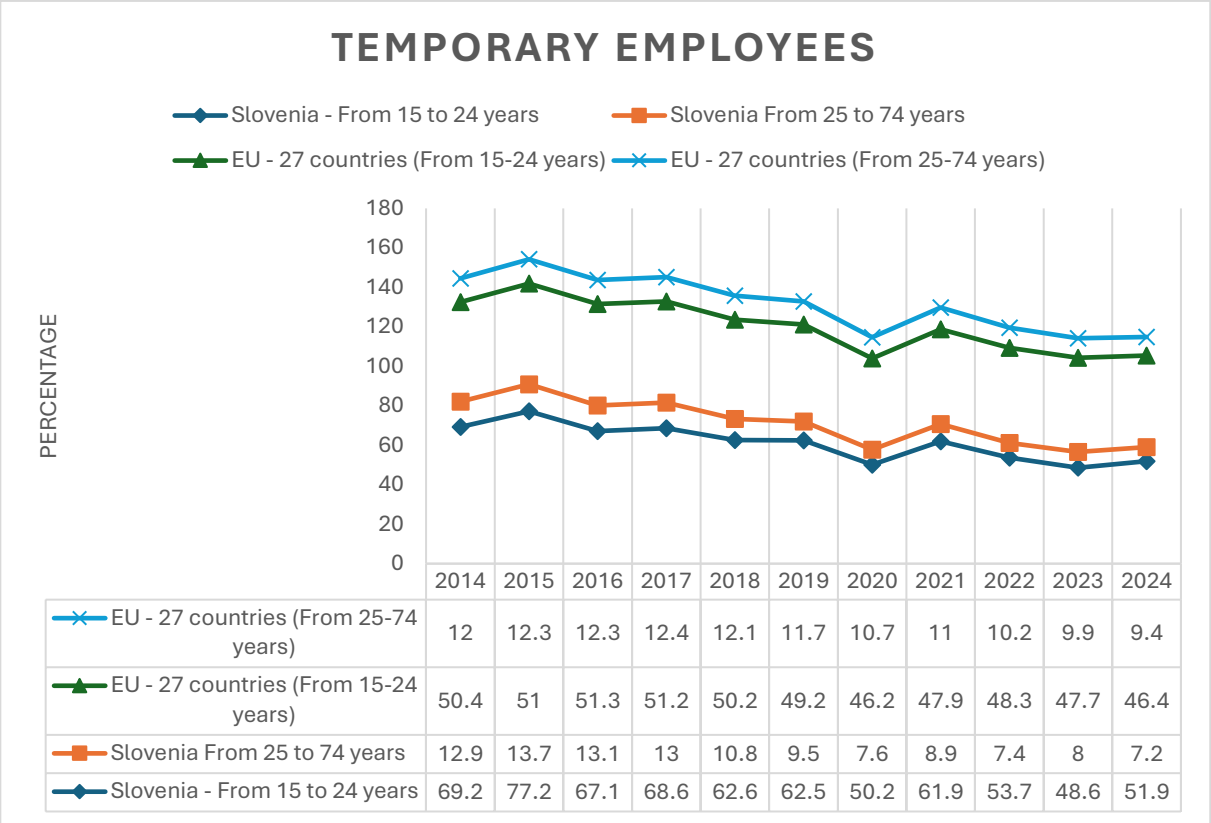
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Slovenia - From 15 to 24 years	44.0	42.2	34.0	35.9	31.7	33.6	25.4	34.4	33.7	28.1	28.1
Slovenia From 25 to 74 years	8.1	7.1	7.6	8.2	7.6	6.5	7.3	7.8	6.2	6.5	6.3
EU - 27 countries (From 15-24 years)	30.5	30.5	30.9	31.4	31.2	31.9	31.0	32.4	33.1	33.9	34.5
EU - 27 countries (From 25-74 years)	17.6	17.6	17.5	17.3	17.1	17.1	17.1	16.4	16.2	16.5	16.3

Source: Population and social conditions/Employment and unemployment - Eurostat (2025b)

3.2.3 Temporary employment

Notably, Slovenia has a higher proportion of young individuals engaged in temporary employment. Over the past decade, temporary employment among the Slovenian youth has fluctuated significantly. In 2014 (Figure 3), 69.2% of Slovenian individuals aged 15–24 were involved in temporary employment, which increased sharply to 77.2% by 2015, notably higher than the EU-27 average of 51%. By 2024, this percentage had decreased to 51.9%, aligning more closely with the EU-27 average of 46.4%(*Eurostat*, 2025a; European Union, 2025). These trends suggest that temporary employment is prevalent among Slovenian youth, reflecting both the flexibility and challenges associated with transitioning from education to stable employment.

Figure 3.3: Temporary workers in Slovenia and EU -27 countries between the years 2014 and 2024



	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
EU - 27 countries (From 25-74 years)	12	12.3	12.3	12.4	12.1	11.7	10.7	11	10.2	9.9	9.4
EU - 27 countries (From 15-24 years)	50.4	51	51.3	51.2	50.2	49.2	46.2	47.9	48.3	47.7	46.4
Slovenia From 25 to 74 years	12.9	13.7	13.1	13	10.8	9.5	7.6	8.9	7.4	8	7.2
Slovenia - From 15 to 24 years	69.2	77.2	67.1	68.6	62.6	62.5	50.2	61.9	53.7	48.6	51.9

Source: Population and social conditions/Employment and unemployment - Eurostat (2025a)

3.2.4 Working shifts, Sundays, atypical hours

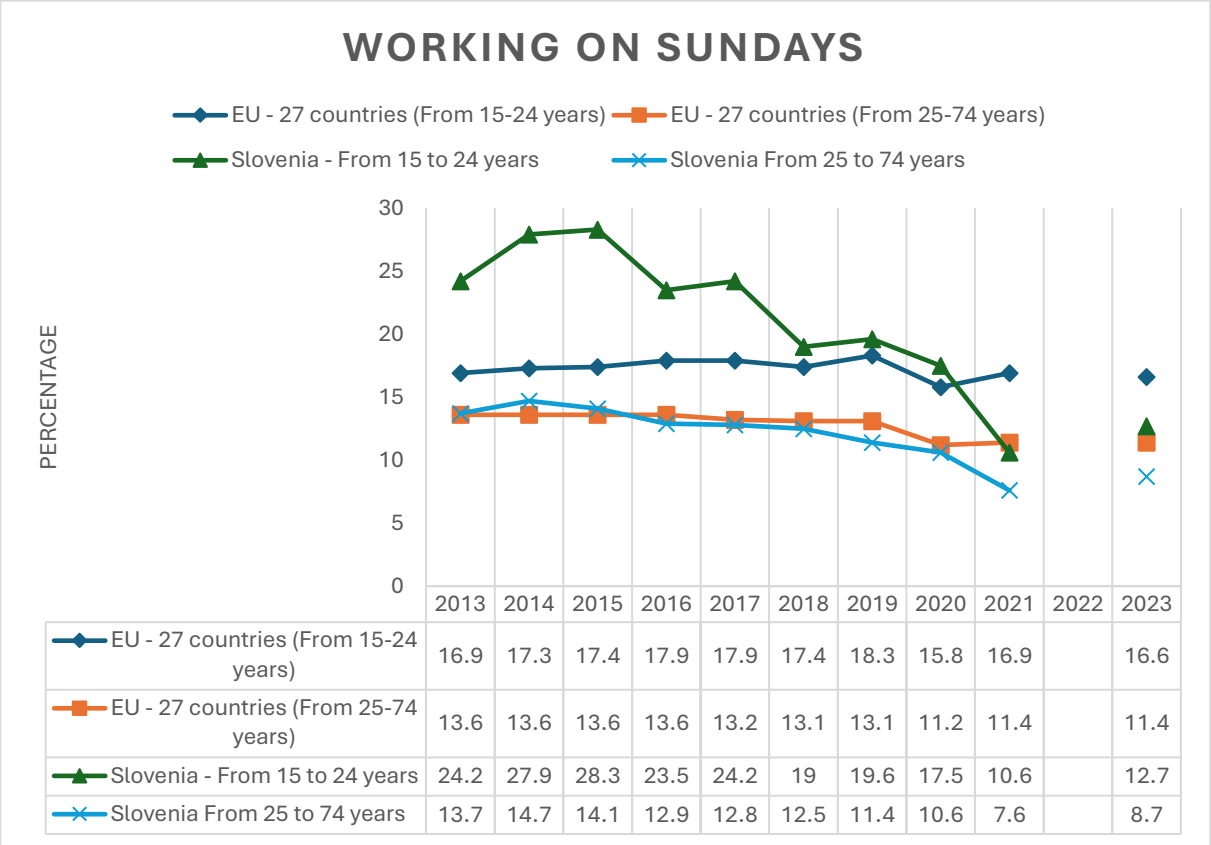
Many young employees work non-traditional hours in Slovenia, such as weekends and shifts. This pattern is associated with a high incidence of temporary and part-time jobs among the youth. Young individuals remain more adaptable in their employment choices than the Slovenian workforce. They are more inclined to take short-term positions or roles that may not align with their career aspirations.

The high incidence of temporary employment among Slovenian youth often necessitates working on weekends and irregular hours. In 2020, the Slovenian National Assembly passed amendments to the Trade Act (ZT-1C), requiring that most shops remain closed on Sundays and public holidays, except certain stores, such as small shops at gas stations, hospitals, railway and bus stations, and

airports, are allowed to remain open. The law became particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the importance of employee rest days. This change is also seen in the data

(Figure 4), where working on Sundays has dropped from 24,2% in 20214 to 12,7% in 2023 for youth aged 15-24.

Figure 3.4: Working Sundays in Slovenia and EU -27 countries within years 2014 and 2024



	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
EU - 27 countries (From 15-24 years)	16.9	17.3	17.4	17.9	17.9	17.4	18.3	15.8	16.9		16.6
EU - 27 countries (From 25-74 years)	13.6	13.6	13.6	13.6	13.2	13.1	13.1	11.2	11.4		11.4
Slovenia - From 15 to 24 years	24.2	27.9	28.3	23.5	24.2	19	19.6	17.5	10.6		12.7
Slovenia From 25 to 74 years	13.7	14.7	14.1	12.9	12.8	12.5	11.4	10.6	7.6		8.7

Source: Population and social conditions/Employment and unemployment - Eurostat (2025a)

These non-standard work schedules can affect young workers' social inclusion and well-being as they may limit opportunities for social engagement and contribute to feelings of isolation.

These trends highlight the significant role of flexible employment forms in the Slovenian youth labour market, particularly student work. While part-time employment offers flexibility, the high incidence of temporary contracts suggests a degree of labour market precariousness among young people in Slovenia.

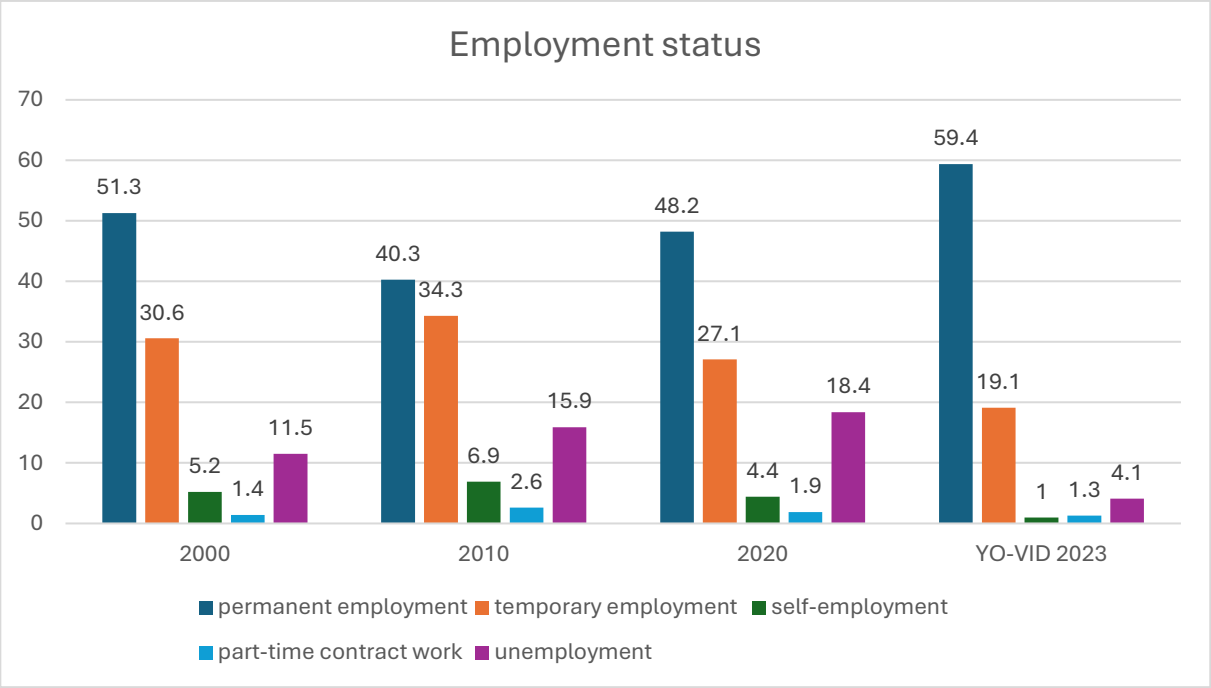
According to the Eurostudent VII study (2018-2021) (Gril et al., 2021), student labour is the most common form of flexible youth employment. In the survey YO-VID 2023, the data show that 43,8% of students still work during breaks and for temporary employment, and 22.8% are almost full-time working. Of these, 16,1% were employed full-time and studied part-time, and 17.3% were not working while studying.

Young people who do work (full-time or part-time) report an average weekly workload of 41.25 hours per week (YO-VID 2023), which is close to that of full-time employment (40 hours per week). Those who worked occasionally reported that, on average, they work 31,6 hours a week. This shows that 'student work' is still 'abused,' as the hourly workload of this group is getting close to full-time work.

As a follow-up to the 2013 labour market reform, several measures were adopted to address the tendency to use other forms of work (author contract; the establishment of sole proprietors) when employment is terminated, such as the policy regulating student work that entered into force in 2015 with the Act of Fiscal Verification of Invoice (*ZDavPR*, 2015), which introduced significant changes to student work taxation and employment regulations.

Employment trends (Figure 5) from 2000 to 2023 indicate a shift toward greater job stability. Permanent employment declined from 51.3% in 2000 to 40.3% in 2010 but rebounded to 59.4% in 2023, while temporary employment peaked at 34.3% in 2010 before declining to 19.1% in 2023. Self-employment and part-time contract work have gradually declined, reflecting a preference for formal employment. Unemployment rose to 18.4% in 2020 due to COVID-19 and dropped significantly to 4.1% by 2023, signifying economic recovery. The labour market has transitioned from flexible short-term contracts to more stable employment.

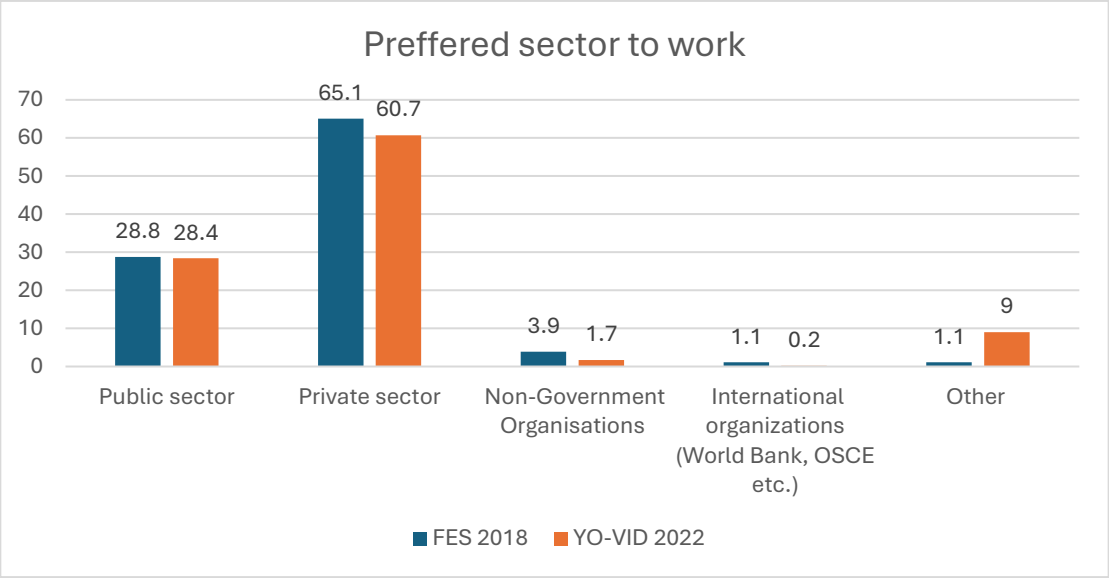
Figure 3.5: Employment status for age group 15-29 within years 2000 and 2022



Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID 2022

In comparing attitudes and preferences toward work between 2018 and 2023 (Figure 6), an observable trend indicates an increased preference for employment in the private sector alongside a decline in the attractiveness of public sector employment.

Figure 3.6: Preferred sector to work in years 2018 and 2022 for age group 15-29



Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID 2022

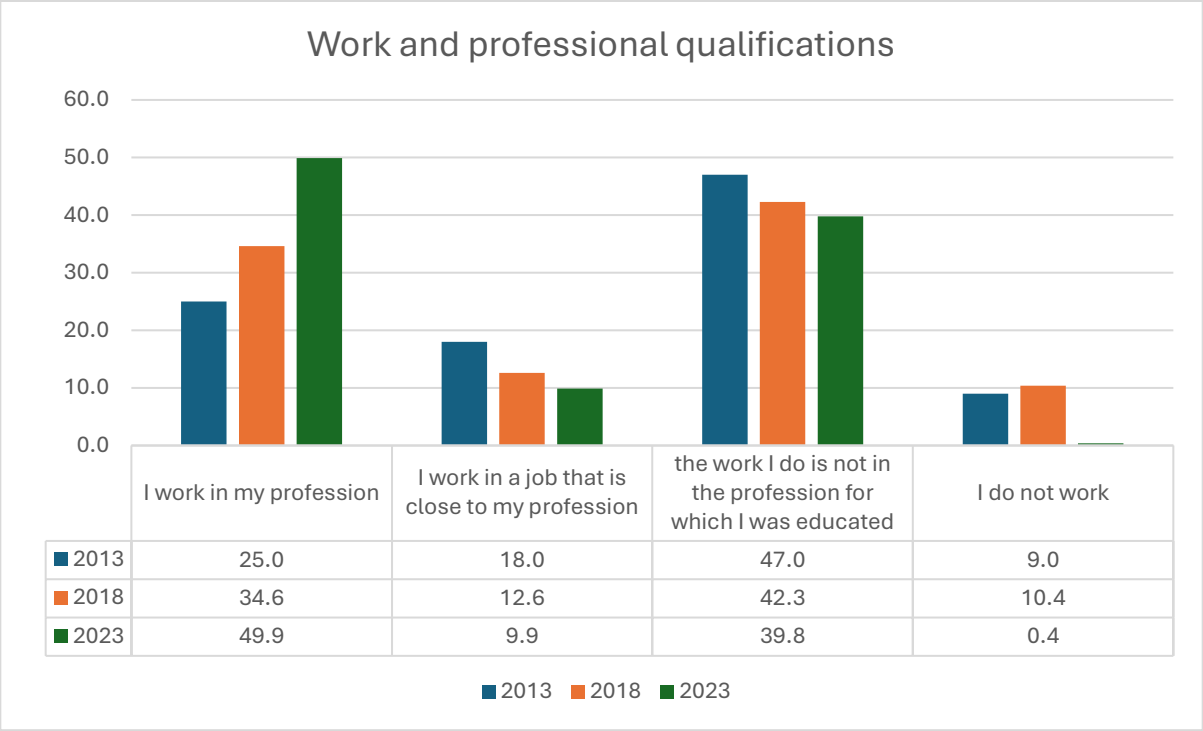
3.2.5 Professional qualification and education level mismatch

The data reflects a significant improvement in the alignment between education and employment from 2013 to 2023. The percentage of individuals working directly in their profession increased from 25.0% in 2013 to 49.9% in 2023, suggesting better job matching, improved career guidance, and labour market policies that support specialised employment. In contrast, those working in jobs only somewhat related to their profession declined from 18.0% to 9.9%, indicating that more individuals are securing roles directly aligned with their qualifications.

Similarly, the proportion of individuals working outside their trained profession has decreased from 47.0% in 2013 to 39.8% in 2023, reflecting a reduced professional mismatch. A significant change was observed in the non-working population, which fell drastically from 9.0% in 2013 to just 0.4% in 2023, suggesting a strong labour market with increased job opportunities and possibly more effective employment policies.

These trends indicate a shift toward excellent job stability, improved professional integration, and reduced employment mismatches, demonstrating a more efficient transition from education to the labour market.

Figure 3.7: Work and professional qualifications



	I work in my profession	I work in a job that is close to my profession	the work I do is not in the profession for which I was educated	I do not work
2013	25.0	18.0	47.0	9.0
2018	34.6	12.6	42.3	10.4
2023	49.9	9.9	39.8	0.4

Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID 2022

Despite improvements since 2013, it remains relatively common for individuals to work outside their expertise. Notably, skill mismatch diminishes once young individuals have completed their education. Specifically, the proportion of those reporting employment outside their profession decreased from 51% to 39% when considering only those not engaged in education or training. Contrary to popular belief, the most pronounced skills mismatch was observed among individuals enrolled in primary, secondary, or vocational education, with 51.2% working outside their profession. Additionally, 43.5% of those not enrolled in any educational program worked within their profession. On the contrary, the highest % of individuals working within their profession were those with education beyond a bachelor's degree (43.5 %).

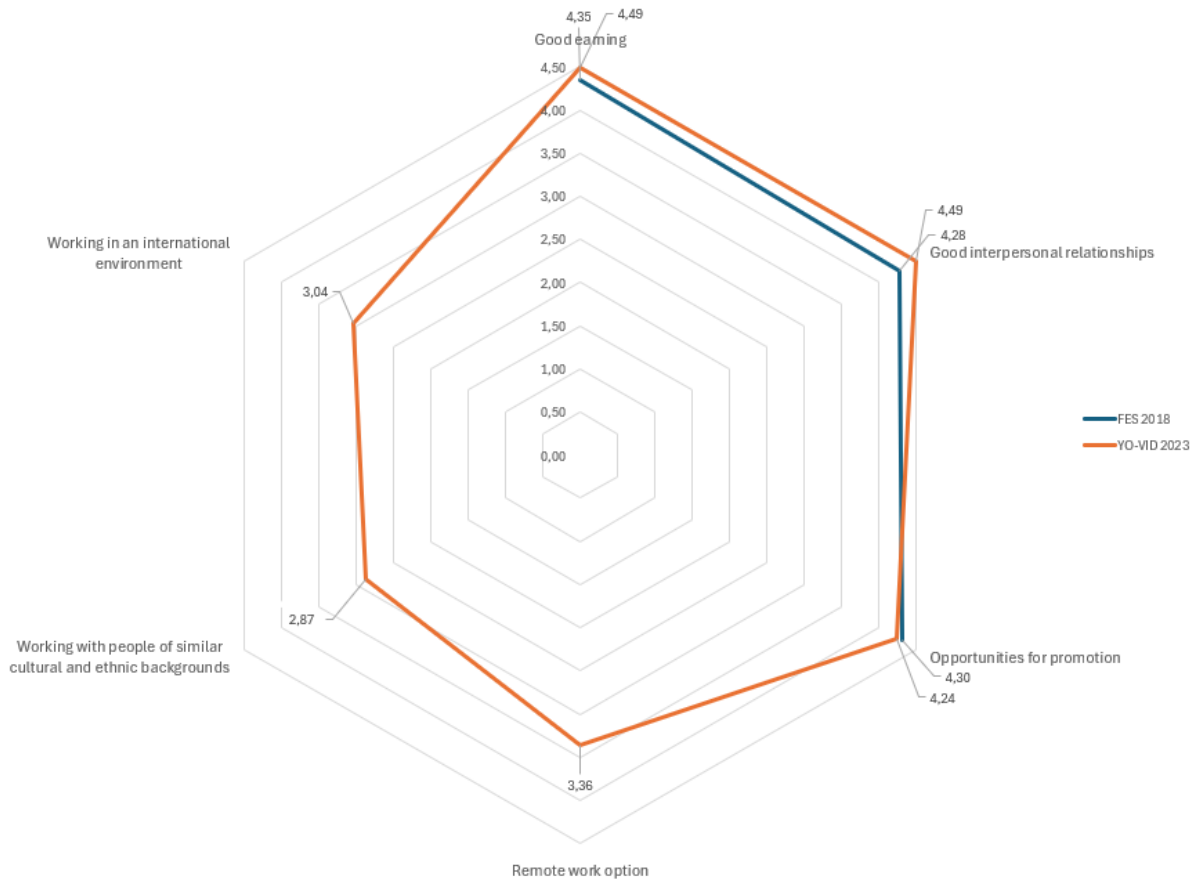
Subsequently, although findings showed that the job often demands a lower level of formal education, 32.3% reported that the job required less formal education, while only 8.2% indicated a need for higher formal education; this is likely because many students are employed in casual roles (student work), which typically do not necessitate high levels of formal education. No other significant mismatches were observed among those still pursuing education, except undergraduate students; 48.7% held jobs requiring less education. This is further corroborated by the fact that those aligned with their level of formal education include 56.4% of primary/secondary school students, 53.3% of postgraduate students, and 66.7% of individuals engaged in some form of education or training.

Aspirations for career development

Each axis in Figure 8 represents a distinct job attribute, with higher values indicating greater importance, as students perceive. The most valued aspects across both datasets are "Good earning" and "Good interpersonal relationships," with values close to or above 4.4. This suggests that financial compensation and a positive social environment at work remain the top priorities for students. Similarly, "Opportunities for promotion was rated highly in both years (4.30 in FES 2018 and 4.24 in YO-VID 2022), reflecting students' aspirations for career advancement. On the other hand, attributes such as "Working with people of similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds" (2.87 in YO-VID 2022) and "Working in an international environment" (3.04 in YO-VID 2022) are rated significantly lower, indicating that students may prioritise inclusive environments and are less concerned with cultural similarity or international context.

The "Remote work option" became especially relevant during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and holds moderate importance (3.36 in YO-VID 2022), suggesting some value is placed on flexibility, but not as highly as interpersonal and financial factors.

Figure 3.8: The importance of specific characteristics of work among young people in 2018 and 2023



Source: Youth Study Slovenia – FES 2018/2019 (Naterer et al., 2019) and YO-VID 2022

The results indicate that statistically significant gender differences exist in two key areas: a sense of achievement and pleasant interpersonal relationships. Specifically, women (M = 4.32, SD = 0.837) rated the importance of doing meaningful and valuable work significantly higher than men (M = 4.22, SD = 0.870), as confirmed by the t-test (p = .005). Similarly, the importance of pleasant interpersonal relationships was rated higher by women (M = 4.48, SD = 0.761) than by men (M = 4.33, SD = 0.814), with the difference being highly significant (p < .001). These findings suggest that female respondents value intrinsic motivators, such as personal fulfilment and social connection, in the context of employment decisions.

In contrast, other factors, such as salary (M = 4.44 men, M = 4.43 women), remote work options, cultural similarity in the workplace, and international work environments, did not exhibit significant gender differences. The mean values for these items were relatively close between male and female respondents, and the corresponding t-tests yielded non-significant p-values (all above .05). This implies a shared valuation of practical aspects of employment, such as compensation and flexibility, across genders.

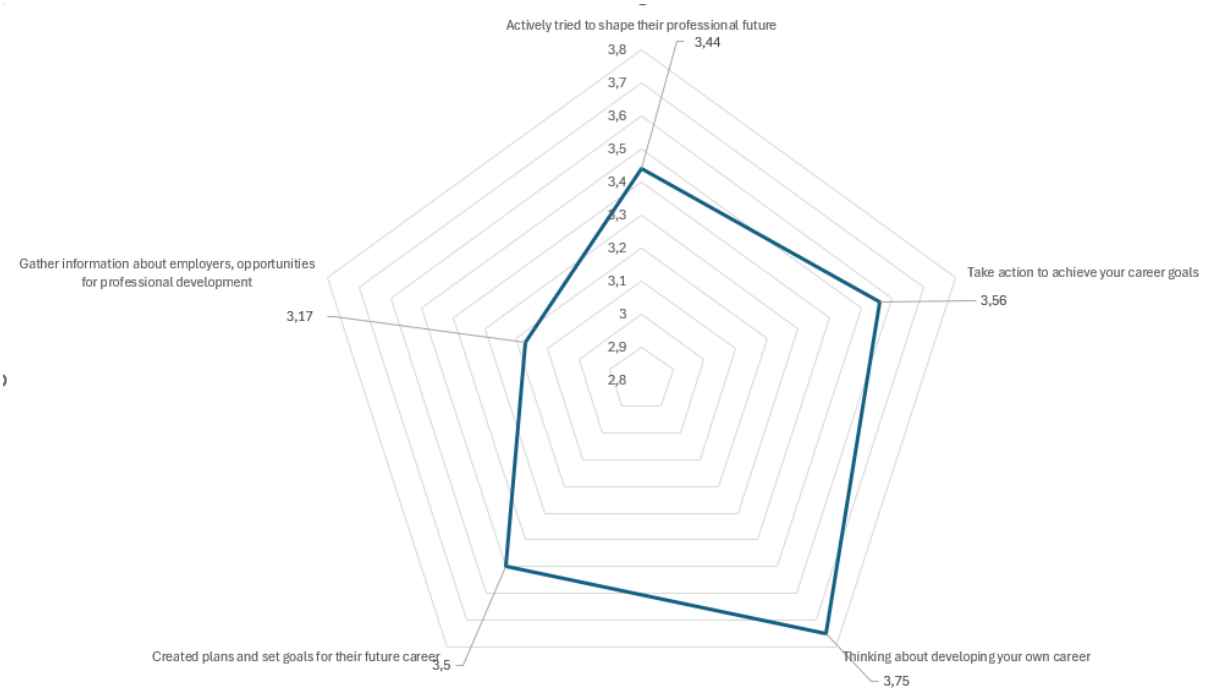
In summary, while both men and women value external factors such as salary and remote work similarly, women emphasise more relational and meaningful aspects of employment. These insights are crucial for employers aiming to create inclusive and motivating work environments, mainly when tailoring engagement and retention strategies that resonate across gender lines.

The results demonstrate a statistically significant negative correlation between the impact of the pandemic on individuals' work situations and the importance attributed to pleasant interpersonal relationships at work (Pearson's r = -0.063; p = 0.023). This finding suggests that individuals who experienced a greater influence of the pandemic tend to slightly reduce their importance on interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Conversely, a statistically significant positive correlation was identified between the impact of the pandemic and the perceived importance of remote working opportunities, such as online work, work from home, or digital nomadism (Pearson's r = 0.082; p = 0.003). This indicates that individuals more affected by the pandemic assign increased importance to the possibility of remote work when considering employment. Although both correlations are statistically significant, their relatively low magnitude implies modest relationships, suggesting subtle yet meaningful shifts in job-related priorities resulting from the pandemic experience.

The radar/spider chart (Figure 9) illustrates the extent to which individuals engage in various career development activities based on a Likert scale. Among the five measured dimensions, "Thinking about developing your own career" received the highest mean score (3.75), suggesting a strong level of self-reflection and consideration of future career paths among the participants. This was followed by "Take action to achieve your career goals" (3.56) and "Created plans and set goals for their future career" (3.5), indicating that a significant proportion of individuals are not only contemplating their careers but are also actively engaging in goal setting and pursuing relevant actions. "Actively tried to shape their professional future" scored slightly lower (3.44), which may reflect a gap between planning and taking sustained, intentional action toward shaping one’s professional trajectory. The lowest score was observed in the category "Gather information

about employers, opportunities for professional development" (3.17), suggesting a potential area for improvement. This finding implies that while individuals may be motivated and goal-oriented, they may lack sufficient engagement in external research and exploring professional opportunities, critical components of effective career planning. These insights underscore the importance of providing support and resources to enhance individuals' access to labour market information and professional development opportunities.

Figure 3. 9: Dimensions of career development activities



Conclusion

The employment landscape for young people in Slovenia has evolved significantly in recent years, shaped by economic fluctuations, global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and changes in labour market dynamics. Although the pandemic caused a notable disruption in youth employment, recent trends suggest a gradual recovery and stabilisation. Young people continue to face challenges, particularly in accessing stable, long-term employment, often due to limited experience and the prevalence of temporary or flexible job arrangements.

Although their prevalence has decreased, part-time and temporary employment remain common among youth. Student work plays a central role in youth employment, offering flexible

opportunities that fit around academic responsibilities. However, this form of work often involves irregular hours and can contribute to work overload, as many students engage in near full-time employment while studying.

Over time, there has been a visible shift toward greater job security among young workers, with more individuals securing permanent positions and fewer experiencing unemployment. This suggests that the Slovenian labour market has become more accommodating to young workers, possibly due to policy changes or economic improvements.

Preferences regarding employment sectors have also shifted, with a growing inclination toward private sector roles and declining interest in public-sector employment. Furthermore, the alignment between education and employment has improved, as more young people now work in jobs related to their field of study, reflecting better integration between the education system and labour market needs.

Regarding career values, young people place the highest importance on financial stability and maintaining good interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Gender differences are evident, particularly in the prioritisation of meaningful work and social connection, which tend to be more strongly valued by young women. Although there is a strong focus on career planning among youth, there appears to be less initiative in seeking information about employment opportunities and professional development. This highlights a potential area for improvement in career support services and guidance programs.

Overall, these trends indicate a gradual improvement in the employment environment for young people in Slovenia. However, challenges related to job quality, career preparation, and access to information remain areas that merit attention.

3.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from the 2018–2023 period highlight important shifts in the educational and employment trajectories of young people in Slovenia. Participation in formal education, particularly tertiary education, remains high by EU standards, and aspirations for academic attainment continue to be strong—especially among women. While ambitions for advanced degrees such as master's or PhDs have slightly declined, the desire to achieve university-level education remains a defining feature of youth identity and strategy for economic mobility.

At the same time, the pandemic had a measurable and though nuanced impact on educational outcomes and subjective experiences. Although overall academic achievement improved, COVID-19 disruptions were negatively correlated with individual performance and contributed to heightened school-related stress, especially among young men. Nevertheless, many young people used higher education as a form of stability during the uncertainty of the pandemic, suggesting the education system served as a buffer against labour market shocks.

On the employment front, the Slovenian labour market has shown signs of recovery and improvement since the pandemic's peak, particularly in reduced unemployment and increased permanent contracts. However, youth continue to face considerable instability, characterized by high rates of temporary employment, student work, and part-time jobs. While these flexible work arrangements support student life, they also pose risks of precarity, long hours, and delayed transitions to full-time, stable employment.

Importantly, the alignment between education and employment has improved significantly over the past decade, with nearly half of working youth employed in their trained profession by 2023. Yet, skill mismatches persist—especially among those still in or recently completing their education. Furthermore, career values have remained consistent, with financial stability and interpersonal relationships rated highest. Gender differences remain pronounced: young women place greater emphasis on meaningful work and social connection, while valuing salary and flexibility similarly to men.

Youth have become more proactive in career planning, though many still lack engagement in external research on employment opportunities and professional development, pointing to gaps in labour market literacy. The pandemic appears to have influenced these preferences, increasing the importance placed on remote work while slightly reducing the value of social workplace dynamics—likely a reflection of isolation and digitalisation during the crisis.

To support the continued development and well-being of young people in Slovenia, a set of integrated education and labour market policies is needed, particularly in response to lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the transition from education to employment must be further strengthened. This includes expanding and modernising vocational education and training (VET) pathways, supporting dual education models that integrate work and study, and ensuring that career guidance is introduced early and systematically across education levels. Such strategies will help reduce skill mismatches and prepare youth for evolving labour market demands.

Second, investment in student support services should be scaled up—especially those addressing mental health and academic stress. The pandemic highlighted the emotional burden placed on young people; targeted psychological counselling, peer support networks, and stress-reduction programs should be embedded within educational institutions.

Third, policy should address the precarity of youth employment. While student work provides flexibility, its overuse as a substitute for stable jobs should be reconsidered. Strengthening labour regulations, enforcing fair wages, and encouraging employers to offer standard contracts to young workers can reduce economic insecurity and improve long-term career outcomes.

Fourth, youth career readiness programs must be expanded to bridge the gap between aspiration and execution. While many young people actively plan their careers, fewer engage in researching employment opportunities or professional development. Improved access to labour market information, internships, job shadowing, and digital platforms for career exploration is essential.

Fifth, more support should be given to young entrepreneurs and self-employed youth, particularly in navigating taxation, accessing mentorship, and securing startup financing. Given the increase in entrepreneurial and gig-based work during the pandemic, this group should not be overlooked in labour policy frameworks.

Sixth, work-life quality for young people needs to be addressed by promoting decent working conditions, especially for those in atypical jobs or shift work. Employers should be encouraged to offer flexible yet stable employment that respects rest time, supports social well-being, and limits burnout—especially in sectors that remained open and heavily relied upon during the pandemic.

Seventh, gender-sensitive employment strategies must be implemented. Women's stronger valuation of meaningful and socially supportive work should inform inclusive HR policies and targeted leadership programs. Ensuring equity in advancement opportunities and pay transparency can support retention and job satisfaction.

Eighth, remote work and digital flexibility, now more highly valued post-pandemic, should be integrated into employment policy. Support for remote working infrastructure, digital upskilling, and flexible working arrangements can increase labour market participation and align with youth expectations shaped by the pandemic experience.

Lastly, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of education and labour market integration should be institutionalised through longitudinal research and youth-inclusive policymaking. This would enable timely responses to emerging challenges and ensure that policy remains aligned with youth realities in a rapidly changing world.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect the need for resilient, youth-centered policy design that responds not only to structural labour market demands but also to the lived experiences and aspirations of young people—particularly in the context of uncertainty, as evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis. By investing in well-being, decent work, and education-to-employment pathways, Slovenia can continue to support youth as active, empowered contributors to society and the economy.

3.4 References

Bojnec, Š. (2021). Policy and practical lessons learned regarding youth and NEETs in Slovenia. *Calitatea Vieţii*, *32*(4), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.46841/RCV.2021.04.03

Council of Europe. (2024). Education strategy Council of Europe 2024–2030: Learners first – Education for today's and tomorrow's democratic societies.

Cupar, T. & Lahe, D. (2019). Izobraževanje. In A. Naterer et al. (Eds.). Slovenska mladina 2018/2019. Zagreb: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. 43-48.

Deželan, T., & Lavrič, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Youth 2020*. https://press.um.si/index.php/ump/catalog/book/616

Employment and activity—LFS adjusted series. (2025a). Eurostat - EU. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/explore/all/popul?lang=en&subtheme=labour.employ&display=list&sort=category

Employment and unemployment (Labour force survey). (2025b). Eurostat - EU. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/explore/all/popul?lang=en&subtheme=labour.employ&display=list&sort=category

European Union. (2025). *Employment & Entrepreneurship: Slovenia*. Youth Wiki. https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/slovenia/31-general-context

Europe 2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. (2010). Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET EN BARROSO 007 - Europe 2020 - EN version.pdf.

Ferk Bratuž, B., Brodar, U., Čede, U., Golob Šušteršič, T., Korošec, V., & Wostner, P. (2024). *Poročilo o razvoju 2024* (p. 233). UMAR - Urad RS za makroekonomske analize in razvoj. file:///C:/Users/Uporabnik/Downloads/POR_2024_01.pdf

Flere, S., & Tavčar Krajnc, M. (2011). Izobraževanje in usposabljanje. In M. Lavrič (Ed.), Mladina 2010: Družbeni profil mladih v Sloveniji (pp. 93–124). Ljubljana; Maribor: Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, Urad RS za mladino; Aristej.

Gril, A., Bijuklič, I., Autor, S., & Prem, I. (2021). *EVROŠTUDENT VII - Socialni in ekonomski pogoji življenja študentov v Evropi 2018-2021—Nacionalno poročilo* (p. 104). Pedagoški inštitut. file:///C:/Users/Uporabnik/Downloads/evrostudentVII.pdf

Naterer, A., Lavrič, M., Klanjšek, R., Flere, S., Rutar, T., Lahe, D., Kuhar, M., Hlebec, V., Cupar, T., & Kobše, Ž. (2019). *Youth Study Slovenia 2018/2019—FES*. FES - Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15278.pdf

OECD (2024). Enrolment rate by age. https://data-explorer.oecd.org/.

Pavlovaite, I. (2024). *Youth Employment Trends & Policies After the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Confederation Syndicat European Trade Union. https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2024-07/Key%20youth%20employment%20trends%20and%20policies_Slovenia_V1.pdf

Svetin, I. (2023). *International Youth Day*. SURS - Statistični Urad Republike Slovenije. https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/News/Index/11262

SURS (2024). Data collection. SI-STAT. http://www.stat.si/pxweb/Database.

Tavčar Krajnc, M., Flere, S., & Lavrič, M. (2014). Education. In S. Flere & R. Klanjšek (Eds.), Slovenian Youth 2013. Living in times of disillusionment, risk and precarity (pp. 83–90). Maribor; Zagreb: CEPYUS; FES.

Zakon o davčnem potrjevanju računov (ZDavPR). (2015). Uradni list RS 57/15. https://pisrs.si/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO7195

4. Family and partnership

Danijela Lahe & Andrej Naterer

In April 2020, job losses were widespread, and the unemployment rate climbed to 14.7%, reducing the income of many families (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The lockdown changed family life, as social distancing measures and quarantining protocols shifted work, schooling, and childcare responsibilities into the home. These rapid transitions have restructured daily routines and family dynamics.

Moreover, parent experiences of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic have been shown to influence parenting behaviors and activities (Brown et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021). This indicates important effects of pandemic-related social and economic impacts on children's family and home environments, particularly during lockdown periods.

In order for adolescents to become healthy and productive members of society, they need support from their families and caring adults, consistent access to resources to meet their basic needs, and opportunities to access quality education and employment (Furlong, 2009). Support and resources are provided to young people by their immediate support networks, most commonly their families, friends, peers, and partners. Additionally, the socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional structures that surround youth transitions also play a significant role in shaping individual trajectories.

Since most coping strategies and social support sources were less available during the pandemic, unique challenges emerged for family support. It had the potential to expose existing domestic abuse (Zhang, 2022), increase the risk for interpersonal violence (Humphreys et al., 2020) and increase family conflict during lockdowns. At the same time, it provided opportunities for greater family solidarity and increased the role of family as the main social support structure. In short, the well-being of children and families was impacted during the pandemic in both positive and negative ways (Prime et al., 2020). Due to its mplications for family functioning and interpersonal dynamics, some researchers referred to the pandemic as "a family affair " (Luttik et al., 2020).

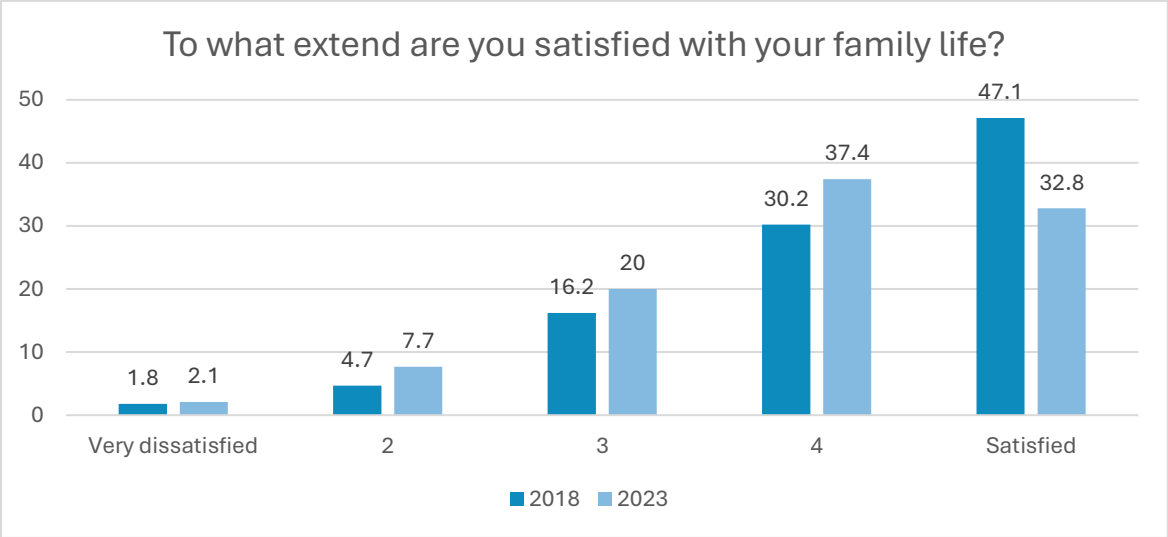
4.1 Satisfaction with family life

In general, family life satisfaction experienced a decline following the pandemic, decreasing from 4.16 in 2018 to 3.91 in 2023. Specifically, in 2023, the percentage of those who are satisfied and very satisfied with their family life decreased to 70.2% (2018: 77.3%) and the percentage of those who are dissatisfied and very dissatisfied with their family life increased to 9.8% (2018: 6.5%). This trend supports the conclusion that the pandemic had a meaningful negative impact on individual's satisfaction with their family life.

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between the perceived impact of the pandemic on family relationships and satisfaction with family life (Spearman's $\rho = -0.205$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater perceived harm to family relationships due to the pandemic was associated with lower levels of family life satisfaction.

Several factors may account for the observed decline in satisfaction with family life during the pandemic period. First, increased family tensions likely emerged as a result of prolonged lockdowns and the necessity of remote living, which may have intensified stress within confined household environments. Second, the blurring of boundaries between work, study, and personal life due to remote work and online schooling contributed to a disruption in family harmony and routine. Third, economic pressures, such as job loss or financial insecurity, may have exacerbated interpersonal conflicts and heightened overall household stress. Finally, reduced social contact and support from extended family due to physical distancing measures could have diminished individuals' perceptions of emotional support and connectedness, thereby negatively affecting overall family satisfaction.

Figure 4.1: Comparison regarding satisfaction with family life, 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

4.2 Satisfaction with friendships

The decline in satisfaction with friendships among young people since the pandemic is a concerning trend that extends beyond family relationships. Data show that satisfaction among friends has declined since the pandemic from 4.27 in 2018 to 3.91 in 2023. This shift is further emphasized by the substantial decrease in the percentage of individuals who report being satisfied or very satisfied with their friendships, falling from 82.9% in 2018 to 68.9% in 2023. Simultaneously, there has been a notable increase in those expressing dissatisfaction, rising from 3.1% in 2018 to 10.7% in 2023. Statistical analysis reveals significant differences in friendship satisfaction based on gender ($p < 0.05$) and age ($p < 0.05$). Men report higher levels of satisfaction with their circle of friends ($M=3.98$, $SD=1.02$) compared to women ($M=3.84$, $SD=1.05$) and younger respondents tend to express greater satisfaction with their friendships. The study also found a correlation between the perceived negative impact of the pandemic on friendships and overall satisfaction levels ($rho=-0.218$, $p<0.01$), suggesting that those who felt their relationships were more severely affected by the pandemic reported lower satisfaction with their circle of

friends. These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing friendship satisfaction and underscore the need for targeted interventions to support social connections in the post-pandemic era.

4.3 Relationships within family

Understanding or communication with parents is closely related to interpersonal relationships, so poorer understanding can increase conflictive relationships between young people and their parents.

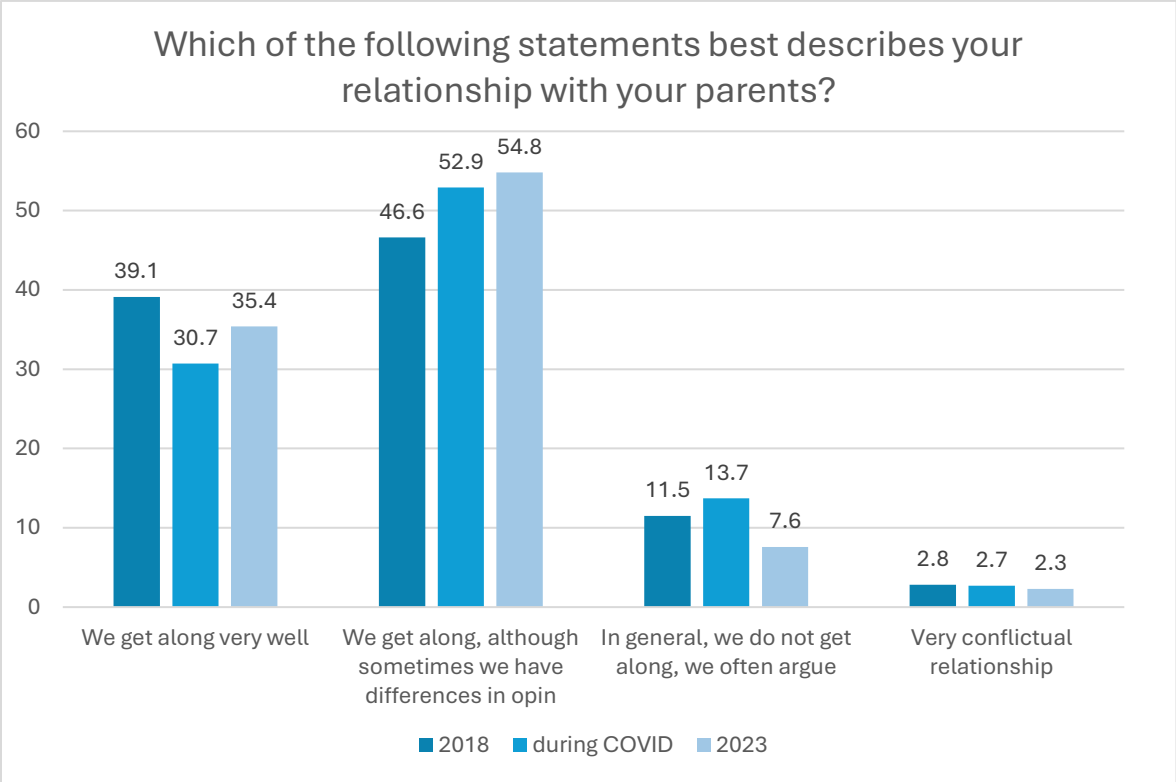
In general, **young people in Slovenia get along well with their parents**, while girls get slightly better understanding with their parents (M=1.81; SD=0.71; 1=get along very well….4=very conflictual relationship) than boys (M=1.72; SD=0.65). Compared to 2018, there were no major changes in the average responses.

Compared to 2018, understanding with parents has improved significantly. The share of those who get along well or very well with their parents increased from 85.7% to 90.2% in 2023, while the share of those who do not get along or have very conflictual relationship with their parents decreased from 14.3% to 9.9% in 2023 (Figure 4.2). However, it is important to highlight the situation during the pandemic.

Pandemic-related restrictions significantly disrupted everyday life, as individuals and families were forced to withdraw from key societal institutions such as school and work (Zhang et al., 2020). Adolescents, in particular, were affected, as this developmental period is typically marked by increasing behavioral autonomy, a growing desire for privacy, and greater time spent with peers and individuals outside the family (Cassinat et al., 2021). However, the conditions of social distancing and quarantine limited opportunities for adolescents to fulfill these developmental needs, potentially changing family dynamics.

The family dynamics or understanding between young people and their parents during the pandemic are shown in Figure 4.2. The relationship with parents was the worst during the pandemic compared to that in 2018 and 2023. Specifically, the smallest proportion of young people (83.6%) got along well or very well with their parents during the pandemic compared to the proportions in 2018 (85.7%) and 2023 (90.2%), while the largest proportion of young people (16.4%) did not get along well or had a conflictual relationship during the covid compared to 2018 (14.3%) and 2023 (9.9%).There are statistical differences by gender and age. Girls (M=1.95) also got along better with their parents than boys (M=1.82) during the COVID pandemic. Younger young people got on worst with their parents during the pandemic (rho=-0.111, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 4.2: Relationship with parents (%), 2018 and 2023



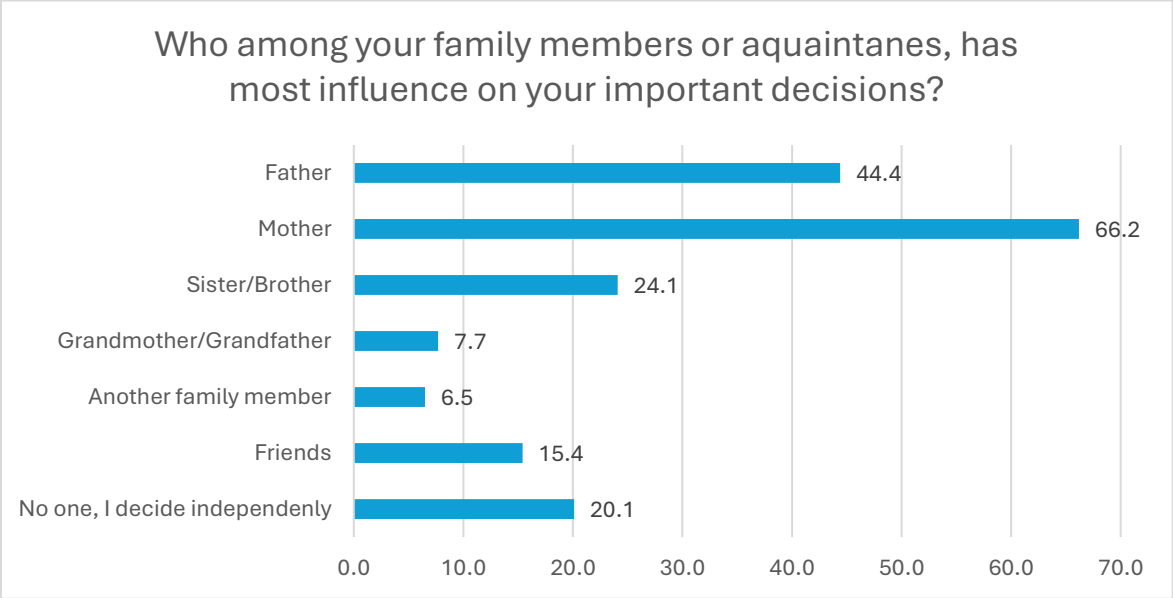
Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

The influence of parents and family on the significant decisions made by young individuals is substantial, as evidenced by survey results. Respondents were queried regarding which family members or acquaintances exert the most influence on their important decisions, with multiple response options available.

Figure 4.3 illustrates frequencies from a multiple response question, allowing respondents to select more than one source of influence. Consequently, the percentage of cases may exceed 100% since each respondent could choose multiple answers.

The mother emerged as the most frequently reported influence (66.2%). Other members of the immediate family also played a large role in decision-making, with 44.4% of young people choosing the father and 24.1% of young people choosing a sibling. Nearly one in five young individuals asserted independence in decision-making. The least selected influences were friends (15.4%), grandparents (7.7%) and other family members (6.5%).

Figure 4.3: The relative power of influence of individual family member or aquaintane on the important decision (%), 2018 and 2023.

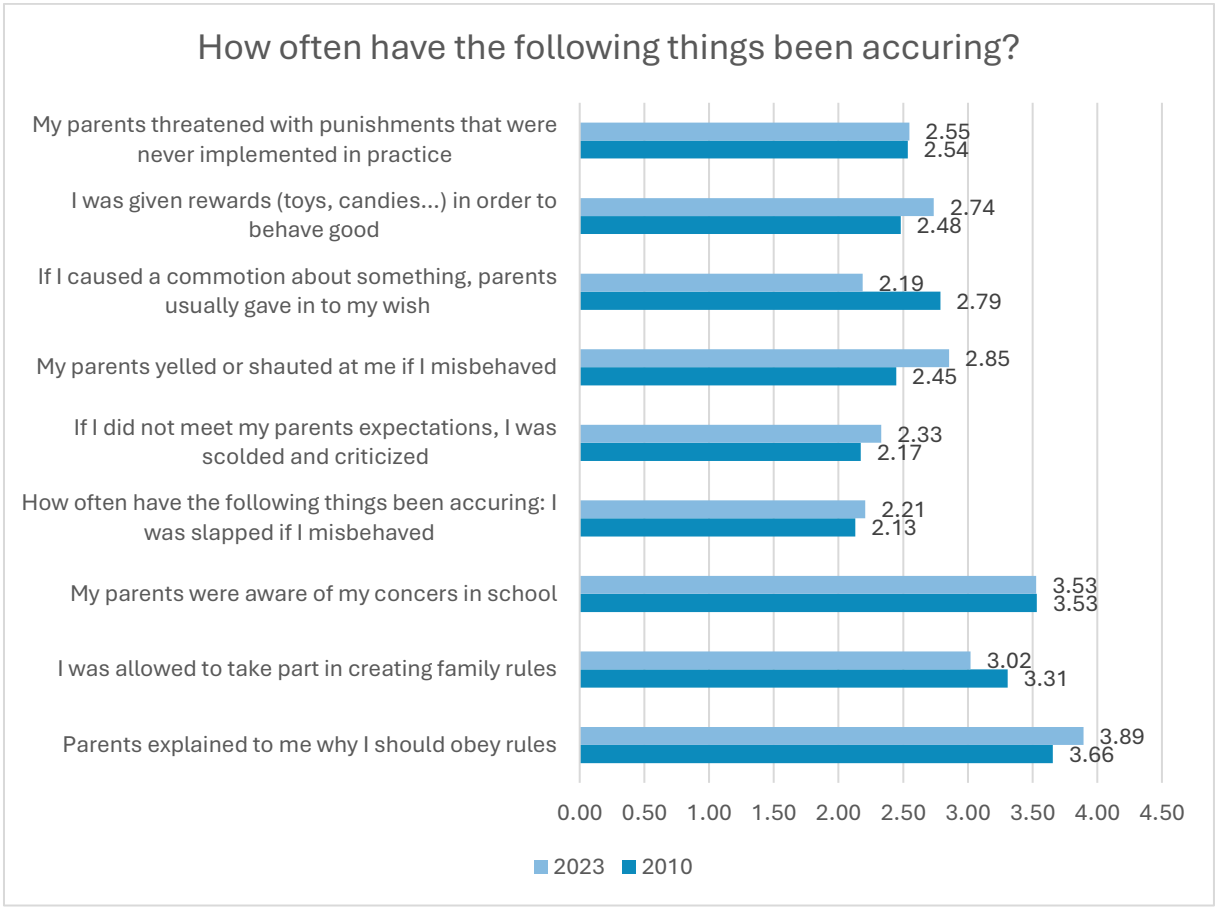


Source: Data files YOVID 2023.

4.4 Parenting styles

Parenting styles represent one of the crucial components both of family relationships and of youth well-being. Analysis of different parenting styles among Slovenian youth yielded several interesting insights:

Figure 4.5: Parenting styles (%), 2010 and 2023.



Source: Data files Youth 2010, data files YOVID 2023.

The chart above compares how often certain parenting behaviors occurred, based on responses from 2010 and 2023. Overall, the data reveals some subtle but important shifts in parenting practices over time. In both years, a high level of parental involvement is evident. Parents' awareness of their children's concerns in school remained consistent, with an identical average score of 3.53 in both 2010 and 2023. Similarly, explaining the reasons behind rules was reported as common in both years, with a slight increase in 2023 (3.89) compared to 2010 (3.66). This suggests that open communication and support have remained key features of parenting across the years, and may have even strengthened.

However, the degree to which children are involved in rule-making appears to have decreased. In 2010, respondents reported a higher average (3.31) for being allowed to participate in creating

family rules than in 2023 (3.02), suggesting a slight move away from more participatory or democratic parenting practices. The use of rewards such as toys or candy to encourage good behavior was more frequent in 2023 (2.74) than in 2010 (2.48), possibly indicating a growing preference for positive reinforcement.

On the other hand, parents in 2010 were more likely to give in to a child's demands after a commotion (2.79), compared to a much lower score in 2023 (2.19). This might reflect a shift toward more structured or consistent parenting in recent years.

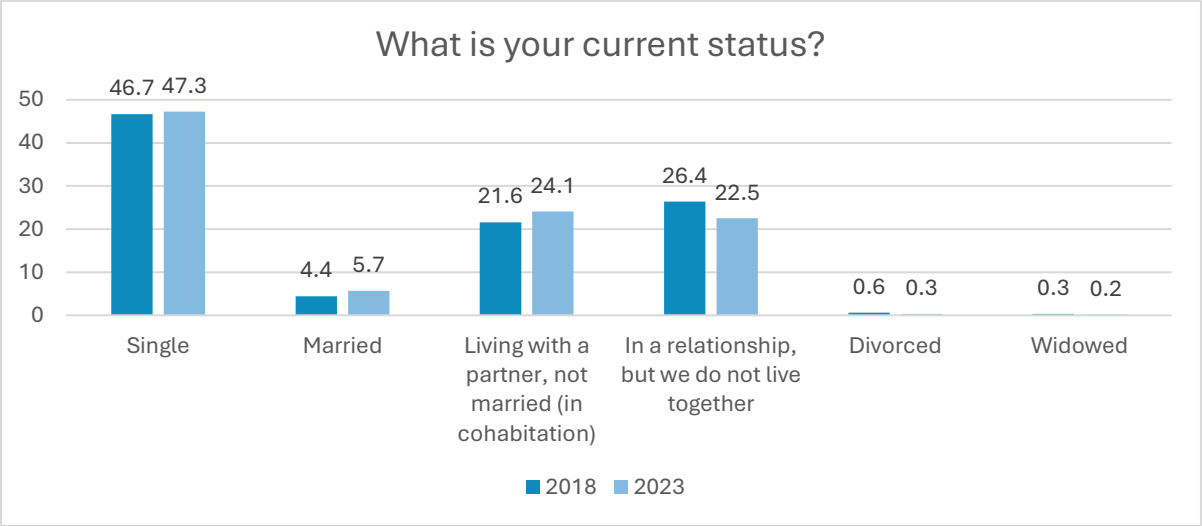
When it comes to disciplinary practices, there were mixed trends. Yelling or shouting in response to misbehavior was reported more often in 2023 (2.85) than in 2010 (2.45), suggesting a possible increase in reactive parenting. Meanwhile, being slapped as punishment occurred at similarly low levels in both years, with only a slight increase in 2023 (2.21) compared to 2010 (2.13). Finally, scolding and criticism when parental expectations weren't met were also somewhat more frequent in 2023 (2.33) than in 2010 (2.17).

In summary, the data suggests that while parental involvement and communication have remained strong or even improved over time, there are signs of slightly less collaborative rule-setting and a mild increase in verbal forms of discipline. At the same time, reward-based strategies appear more common, and the use of physical punishment remains infrequent in both years.

4.4 Youth partnership and family formation

In the last step we focused our analysis on the youth partnership and family formation, with first step being the analysis of current marital and partnership status of Slovenian youth:

Figure 4.6: Current marital/partnership status (%), 2018 and 2023.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

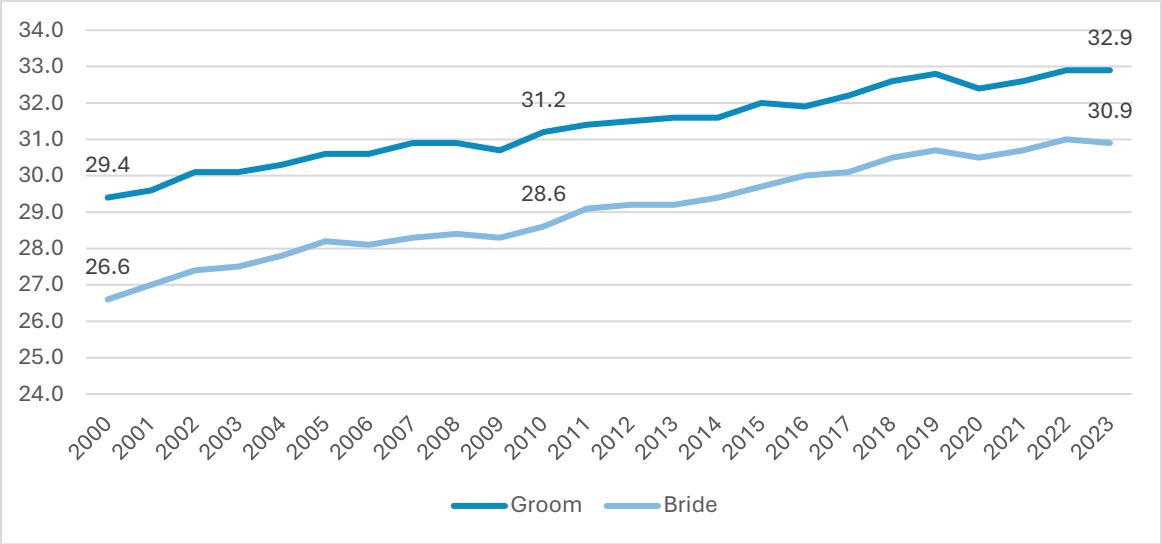
Over the past five years, there have been **notable shifts in the living arrangements and relationship patterns of young people. The share of young people who decide to live with their partners has slightly increased** from 21.6% in 2018 to 24,1% in 2023. The most common category, those who identify as single, has remained substantial, with a minor increase from 46.7% in 2018 to 47.3% in 2023. Marriage rates have experienced a modest rise, from 4.4% to

5.7%; however, marriage remains a less prevalent choice. The proportion of individuals in a relationship, but don't live together has decrease from 26.4% to 22.5%.

Statistically significant differences were observed based on gender and age. The decision to cohabit with a partner is more prevalent among women than men and increases with age. The majority of young people living in a partnership are those above 25 years old (65.4%), followed by a third of 20-24 years old (32.7%), while this is very rare decision for those under 19 years old (1.9%). Among singles, there is a higher proportion of men, and as anticipated, younger respondents are more prevalent.

In line with the late formation of their own household with their partners, also the decision for marriage is being delayed to a later age. In the last 20 years, the average age at first marriage has risen among men by about three years to 32.9, and among women by four years to about 30.9 years old (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: Average age at first marriage, 2000–2023.



Source: SURS, 2025a.

Statistical data also show that in the last two decades the decision to get married has become less common among young people (SURS, 2025b). Although the decline in marriage rates and at the same time the rise of cohabitations is a general trend also in the general population, it is especially evident among young people. For example, marriage rates in last two decades declined in all age groups by almost half, with the exception of 25-29-year-old women, where the decline is only 7%. This can be explained mainly by more drastic changes in lower age groups and postponement of marriage to later years. It is also important to note that the most evident decline in all age groups was in 2020, largely because of the pandemic and subsequent shutdowns.

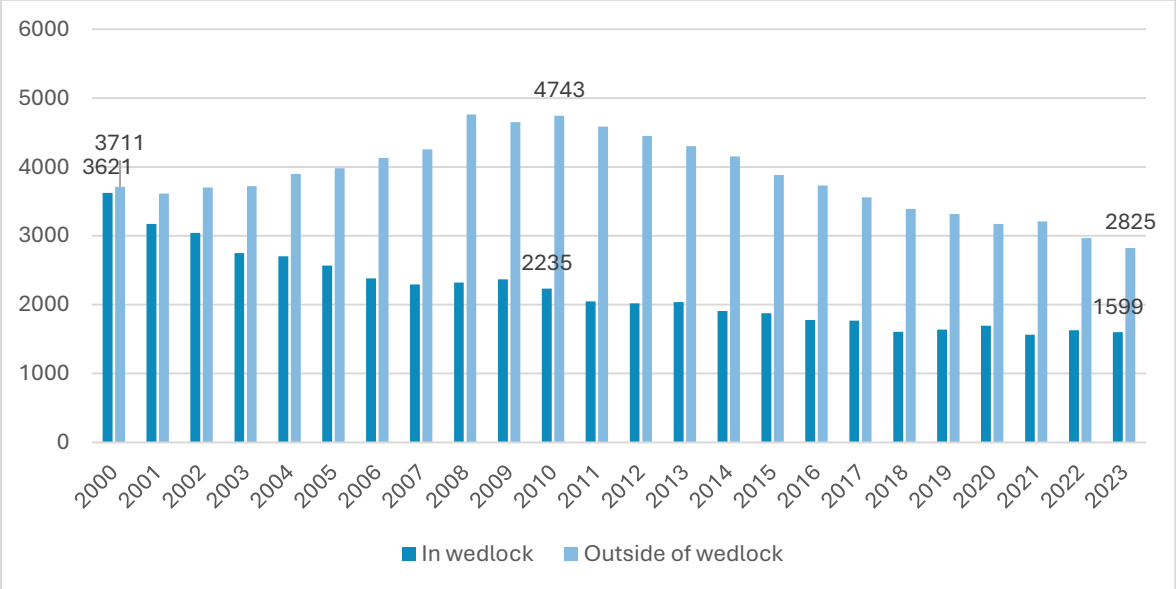
This trend indicates that more young individuals are choosing to remain single or cohabit rather than enter into marriage. These changes in living arrangements and relationship patterns among young people reflect broader societal shifts. They indicate a move towards more diverse and flexible approaches to relationships and living situations. Factors such as changing social norms,

economic conditions, educational pursuits, career aspirations, and personal preferences among the younger generation all play a role in shaping these trends.

In recent decades, developed western countries have been characterized by a trend of delayed parenthood (Eurostat, 2025), which is related to various circumstances, such as massive enrolment to tertiary education, prolonged education, and consequently a later entry to the labour market. As in the European Union in general, also in Slovenia the average age at first childbirth is gradually increasing – from 23.9 in 1990 to 29.7 in 2023 (SURS, 2025c) although compared to the 1990s this growth has been slightly slower in the last 20 years.

In line with the declining trend of marriage rates among young people, it is also not surprising that the number of unmarried families with children is on the rise (Figure 4.8). While in 2000 the number of children born outside of marriage was only 2.5% higher than the number of those born in a marriage, by 2019 the number of births outside of marriage had almost doubled (43.5%) to that of births in a marriage.

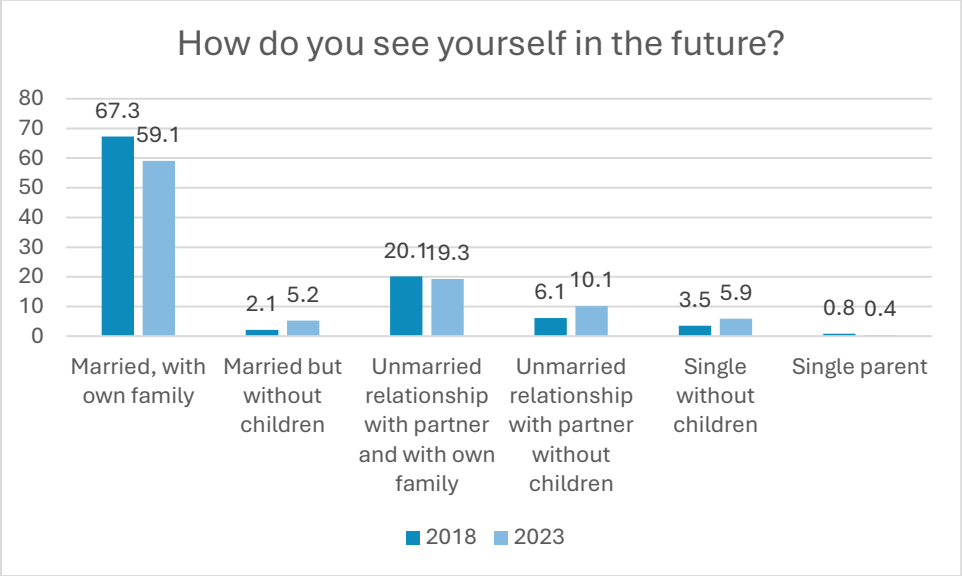
Figure 4.8: Number of children born to young mothers (15-29 years old) by marital status (first child), 2000–2023.



Source: SURS, 2025d.

And how do young people perceive their future? In the present study, we asked young people how they see themselves in the future in terms of their relationship status.

Figure 4.9: Vision of future partnership (%), 2018 and 2023.



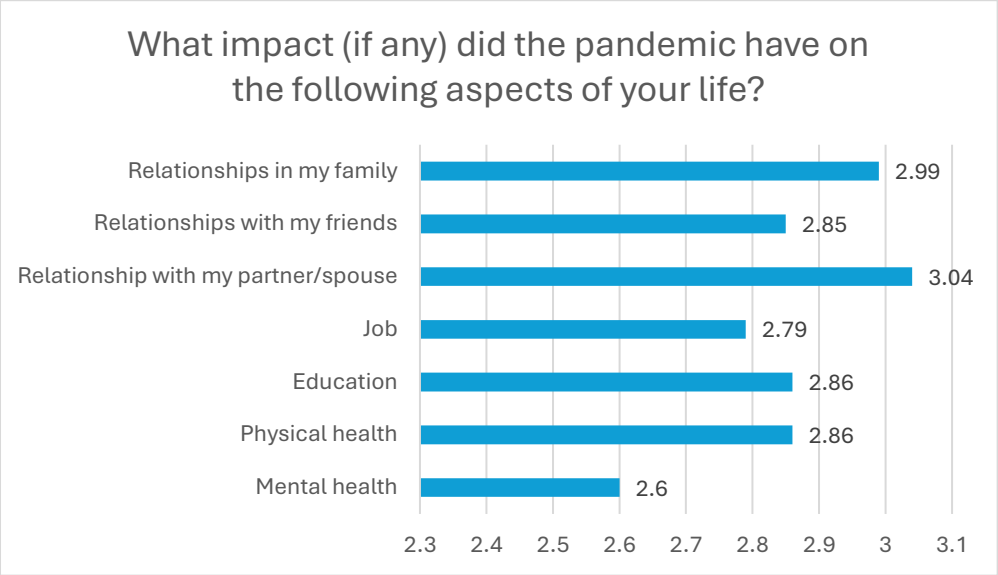
Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Figure 4.9 presents data on young people perceptions of their future family and relationship statuses in 2018 and 2023, highlighting changes in family formation and relationship dynamics among young people. The most common category, married individuals with their own families, has decreased from 67.3% in 2018 to 59.1% in 2023. In contrast, the proportion of married individuals without children has increased from 2.1% in 2018 to 5.2% in 2023. The category of unmarried individuals in a relationship with a partner and their own family experienced a slight decline from 20.1% in 2018 to 19.3% in 2023, indicating that cohabiting families remains a relatively stable choice. Unmarried relationships with a partner without children increased from 6.1% in 2018 to 10.1% in 2023, as well as the proportion of individuals who see them single without children rose from 3.5% in 2018 to 5.9% in 2023, reflecting an increasing tendency towards single living.

However, in 2023, approximately 80% of young individuals in Slovenia express an aspiration to establish a family with children, whether married or in a partnership. Statistically significant differences are observed across gender, age groups, maternal education, and paternal education. Among the young people, more women expressed a desire to start a family. This aspiration tends to increase with age ($C=0.316$, $p<0.05$) and is positively associated with the higher educational attainment of both the mother ($C=0.227$, $p<0.05$) and the father ($C=0.235$, $p<0.05$).

These trends suggest a shift towards delayed family formation and greater emphasis on individual autonomy among young adults. The rise in unmarried partnerships and single living arrangements may be attributed to changing societal norms, economic factors, or personal preferences.

Figure 4.10: Pandemic impact on some aspects of life 2023



Source: Data files YOVID 2023.

Participants were asked about the pandemic's impact on various aspects of their lives. Using a five-point scale[3], the majority of responses clustered between 2 (slight negative impact) and 3 (had no impact). The most significant negative impact was reported in mental health (M=2.60, SD=1.03) and employment (M=2.79, SD=0.95), while no impact were observed in relationships with partners or spouses (M=3.04, SD=0.92) and family relationships (M=2.99, SD=0.92). This means that young people report that the pandemic has had no impact on their partner and family life and a slight negative impact on their mental health and employment.

Statistical differences were evident based on age; older respondents reported a higher impact on relationships with partners (0.085, $p<0.01$) and younger respondents indicated a higher impact on relationships with friends (-0.086, $p<0.01$).

[3] *1*=Strong negative impact, 2=Slight negative impact, 3=Had no impact, 4=Slight positive impact, 5=Strong positive impact

Although young people report that, in their view, the pandemic did not significantly affect family life, satisfaction with family relationships and the quality of communication with parents has, as noted in the preceding section, declined over the past five years. This suggests a broader downward trend in family dynamics that may not be directly attributed to the pandemic itself. A much more concerning aspect is the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health.

4.4 Key findings

Key findings regarding Family and partnership include:

1.) Family life satisfaction experienced has declined following the pandemic,
2.) The decline in satisfaction with friendships among young people since the pandemic is a concerning trend that extends beyond family relationships,
3.) In general, young people in Slovenia get along well with their parents, with understanding with parents has improved significantly since 2018,
4.) The influence of parents and family on the significant decisions made by young individuals is substantial,
5.) There is a notable shifts in the living arrangements and relationship patterns of young people with the share of young people living with their partners slightly increasing,
6.) In 2023, approximately 80% of young individuals express an aspiration to establish a family with children, whether married or in a partnership,
7.) Mental health and employment emerge as the most pandemic-impacted areas of life among youth.

Based on these findings, a comprehensive and youth-centered policy approach is needed to support the evolving landscape of family, partnership, and interpersonal well-being, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic:

First, policymakers should prioritize mental health and relationship support services tailored to young people. The decline in satisfaction with both family and friendship relationships indicates the need for accessible counseling, peer support programs, and mental health resources within schools, universities, and community centers. Such services can help youth manage interpersonal stress and re-establish meaningful social connections.

Second, support for families should be expanded through family resilience initiatives. Programs that help parents manage stress, improve communication, and navigate conflict, especially during crises, can enhance family functioning. Parenting workshops, family mediation services, and

psychoeducational resources should be made widely available, particularly targeting households with adolescents.

Third, the role of schools and youth centers in fostering social development and peer relationships should be strengthened. Rebuilding friendship networks and creating inclusive spaces for youth to reconnect after pandemic-induced isolation is vital. This could include youth clubs, extracurricular activities, and community-based peer mentoring initiatives.

Fourth, promote participatory and modern parenting practices. The slight decline in youth participation in household rule-making suggests a need to encourage more democratic family dynamics. Public campaigns, educational materials, and school-based programs can promote collaborative parenting styles and support positive discipline approaches.

Fifth, relationship and life planning education should be incorporated into school curricula. As youth delay marriage and explore varied forms of partnership, there is a need for educational programs that address healthy relationships, emotional intelligence, family planning, and communication skills, especially in light of shifting social norms.

Sixth, support for young families and diverse household structures must be expanded. With rising cohabitation and childbirth outside marriage, social policies must move beyond traditional family models. Access to childcare, housing support, and parental leave benefits should be available to all young parents, regardless of marital status.

Seventh, given the enduring influence of parents on youth decision-making, intergenerational education programs can foster mutual understanding. These programs could engage both youth and their parents in shared discussions about autonomy, values, future aspirations, and changing life course expectations.

Eighth, continued research and monitoring of youth family life should be institutionalized. Post-pandemic changes in partnership, household formation, and parenting practices warrant regular data collection to guide evidence-based policy. Longitudinal surveys, youth panels, and collaborative studies with families should be encouraged.

Finally, these interventions must be designed with equity and inclusion in mind. Gender differences in friendship satisfaction, parenting experiences, and family aspirations signal a need for tailored support, particularly for women and vulnerable youth populations navigating relationship and family life in the current era.

To conclude, these recommendations underscore the importance of fostering emotional well-being, strengthening social bonds, and recognizing the diverse paths young people take toward family and partnership. The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a stress test and a catalyst for change—revealing vulnerabilities but also new opportunities for support. Future policy must embrace this complexity to build stronger, healthier family and relationship systems for Slovenia's youth.

4.5 References

Brown, S. M., Doom, J. R., Lechuga-Peña, S., Watamura, S. E., & Koppels, T. (2020). Stress and parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Child Abuse & Neglect, 110, 104699.

Cassinat, J. R., Whiteman, S. D., Serang, S., Dotterer, A. M., Mustillo, S. A., Maggs, J. L., & Kelly, B. C. (2021). Changes in family chaos and family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic: Evidence from a longitudinal study. Developmental psychology, 57(10), 1597–1610.

Eurostatat (2025). Fertility rate. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Fertility_statistics

Furlong, A. (2009) Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood: New Perspectives and Agendas. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. [Web.] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://lccn.loc.gov/2008035735.

Humphreys, K. L., Myint, M. T., & Zeanah, C. H. (2020). Increased Risk for Family Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Pediatrics, 146(1), e20200982. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-0982

Lee, S. J., Ward, K. P., Chang, O. D., & Downing, K. M. (2021). Parenting activities and the transition to home-based education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and Youth Services Review, 122, 105585.

Luttik, M. L., Garcia-Vivar, C., Konradsen, H., Mahrer-Imhof, R., Imhof, L., Brodsgaard, A., Ostergaard, B., Dieperink, K., & Kolbrun-Svavarsdottir, E. (2020). The COVID-19 Pandemic: a Family Affair. Journal of Family Nursing, 26(2), 87-89.

SURS. (2025a). Povprečna starost ženina in neveste ob prvi sklenitvi zakonske zveze. https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/-/05M1002S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

SURS. (2025b). Starostnospecifične stopnje poročnosti. https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/-/05M1004S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

SURS (2025c). Povprečna starost matere, prvo rojstvo. https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/-/05J1002S.px/table/tableViewLayout2/

SURS (2025d). Živorojeni po vrstnem redu rojstva in povprečni starosti matere ob rojstvu otroka po vrstnem redu rojstva https://pxweb.stat.si/SiStatData/pxweb/sl/Data/Data/05J1014S.px/

Zhang, S. X., Wang, Y., Rauch, A., & Wei, F. (2020). Unprecedented disruption of lives and work: Health, distress and life satisfaction of working adults in China one month into the COVID-19 outbreak. Psychiatry research, 288, 112958.

Zhang, H. (2022). The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China. Journal of Family Violence, 37, 733-743. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00196-8

5. Social support and support services

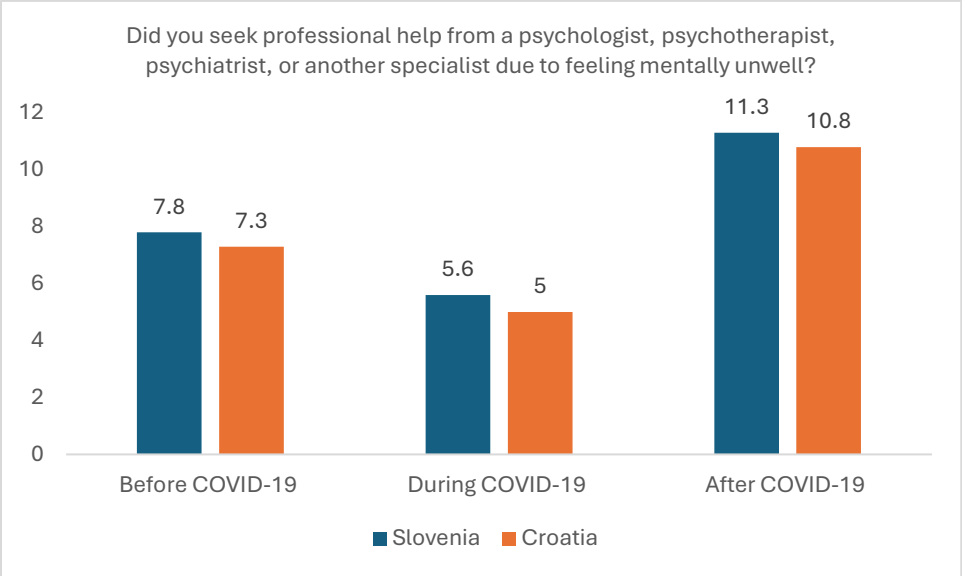
Minea Rutar

Social support plays a crucial role in the psychological development and well-being of young people. Defined as the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and part of a supportive network (Wills, 1991), social support has been consistently linked to better mental health outcomes, higher resilience in the face of stress, and improved coping abilities among youth (Rueger et al., 2016; Taylor, 2011; Thoits, 2011). In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social support becomes particularly vital, not only for protecting mental health but also for helping individuals navigate complex life challenges and access necessary services (Loades et al., 2020).

5.1 Seeking professional psychological support

Our findings indicate that youth in Slovenia reported slightly higher levels of seeking professional help for mental distress across all three time periods (before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic) compared to their Croatian peers. However, the differences in mean scores are not statistically significant. Overall, the fewest young people sought professional help during the pandemic itself. Notably, the proportion of youth who sought help after the pandemic was approximately double that of those who did so during the pandemic. This pattern is likely influenced by the limited availability of services and restrictions on in-person contact during the pandemic, which significantly constrained access to mental health support (Hoyer et al., 2021). Significantly more young people sought professional help after the pandemic than before it, a finding consistent with existing literature (Yonemoto & Kawashima, 2023a). This may reflect an actual increase in mental health challenges following the pandemic period (Crawley et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2021), or alternatively, a growing openness among youth to seek support (Upton et al., 2023; Yonemoto & Kawashima, 2023). The latter may be attributed to increased public awareness and destigmatization of mental health issues, driven in part by widespread mental health campaigns and the growing influence of social media platforms in normalizing psychological help-seeking (Naslund et al., 2020).

Figure 5.1: Help-seeking for mental distress among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2023, percentages.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

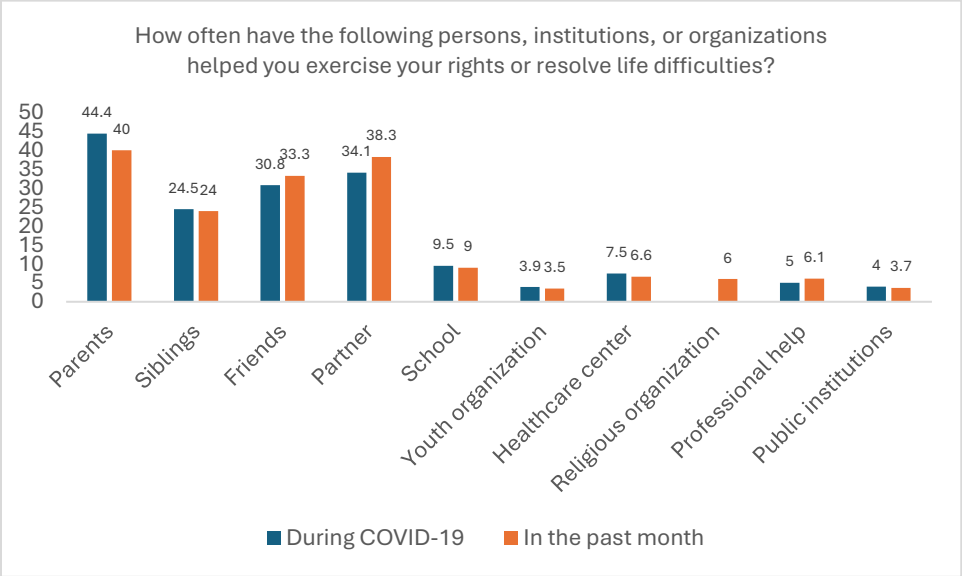
Note. Values indicate the share of respondents who answered "yes".

5.2 Perceived support in exercising rights and resolving life difficulties

When asked how often they sought help with life challenges, Slovenian youth most frequently reported turning to their parents, with higher levels of reliance during the COVID-19 pandemic than in the past month. The second most common source of support was partners, where help-seeking was slightly more common in the past month than during the pandemic, followed by friends, from whom support was sought at similar or slightly higher levels in the more recent period. Siblings followed with lower overall rates of reported support seeking. Across all these main domains (parents, partner, friends, siblings) Slovenian youth were generally less likely than Croatian youth to seek help, suggesting a somewhat more restrained or individualistic approach to navigating life challenges in Slovenia. The most striking exception to this pattern is in the domain of religious institutions: only about 6% of Slovenian youth reported seeking help from a religious organization, compared to 12.7% of Croatian youth. This reflects broader cultural and institutional differences, with religion playing a more prominent social role in Croatia than in Slovenia, where secularism is more deeply entrenched (Zrinščak, 2004). These findings further reinforce the notion that cultural context and societal norms significantly shape not only

expectations of intergenerational support but also actual help-seeking behavior among youth. In both Slovenia and Croatia, very few people often sought help in school or university, healthcare centers, public institutions (such as social services or unemployment offices), professional settings (psychologists, therapists, school counsellors) or youth organizations.

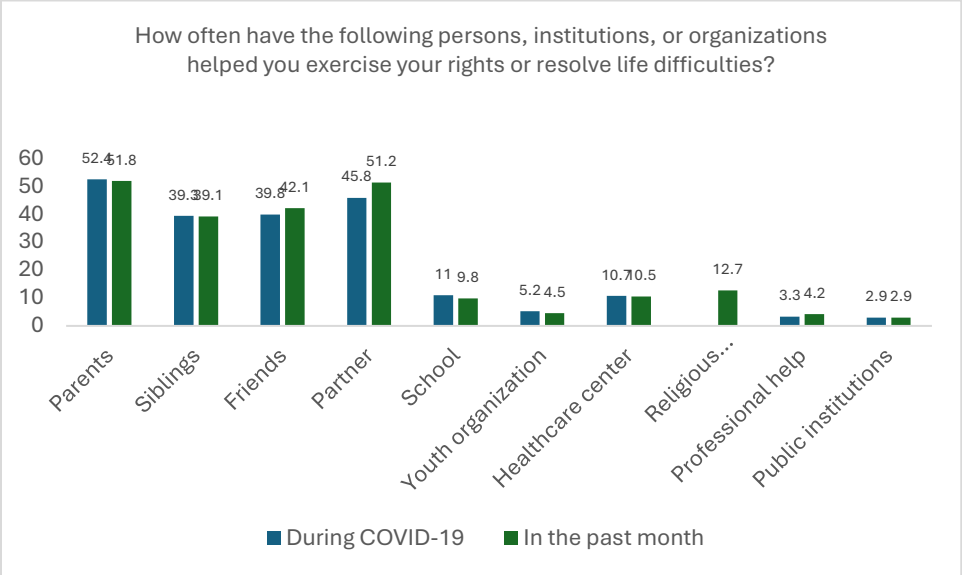
Figure 5.2: Help-seeking for life difficulties among youth in Slovenia, 2023, percentages.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Note. Values indicate the share of respondents who answered "very often" or "often".

Figure 5.3: Help-seeking for life difficulties among youth in Croatia, 2023, percentages.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Note. Values indicate the share of respondents who answered "very often" or "often".

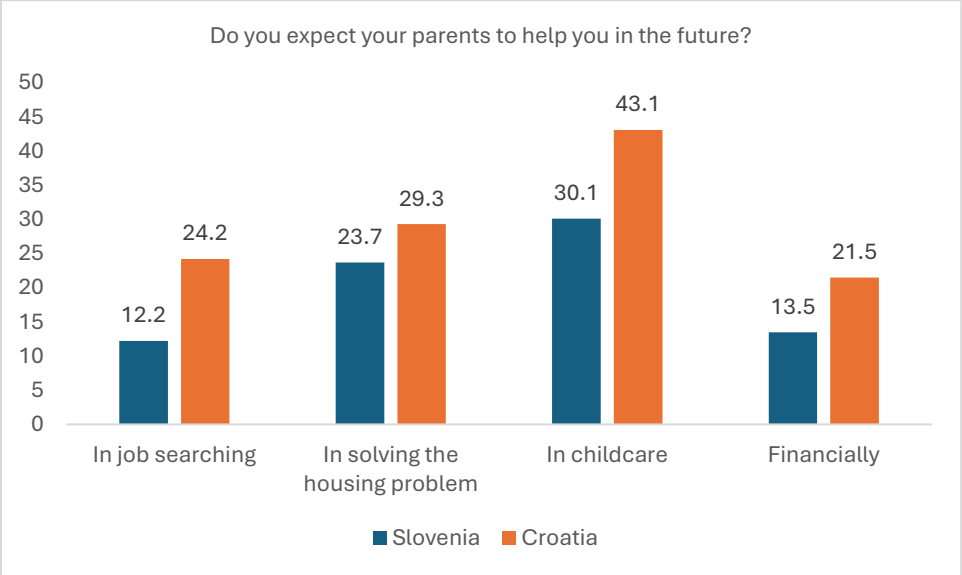
5.3 Intergenerational support

Drawing on existing literature on intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991) and the concept of "linked lives" in life course theory (Bengtson et al., 2012; Elder, 1994), the findings of our survey offer valuable insights into the current dynamics of youth support systems and the evolving nature of reciprocal family support. These frameworks emphasize the interconnectedness of family members' lives across generations and the expectation that support—both emotional and instrumental—flows between them as they navigate key life transitions.

Above all, our data reveal very large cross-national differences in how young people in Slovenia and Croatia perceive future parental support. Slovenian youth consistently report lower expectations of receiving help from their parents across a range of important life domains, compared to their Croatian peers. For example, when it comes to job searching, twice as many Croatian respondents (24%) expect substantial parental assistance than Slovenian respondents. A similar pattern emerges in the realm of financial support: over one-fifth of Croatian youth

anticipate significant financial help from their parents, while only 13% of Slovenian youth share that expectation. These national differences are also pronounced in expectations surrounding family-related responsibilities. Over 40% of Croatian youth expect considerable help with childcare, compared to less than one-third of Slovenian youth. Likewise, when facing housing-related challenges, a major source of stress and instability for young adults, almost a third of Croatian youth foresee strong parental support, while fewer than a quarter of Slovenes do the same. These disparities likely stem from varying strengths of family ties, which themselves are shaped by broader cultural norms, economic conditions, and structural factors specific to each country (Höllinger & Haller, 1990). In Croatia, stronger norms of familial interdependence and a more pronounced tradition of kin-based support may foster higher expectations of parental involvement in early adulthood (Reher, 2004; Tomassini et al., 2004). In contrast, Slovenian youth may internalize more individualistic norms or perceive greater institutional or state-based support, which has been shown to lead to reduced expectations of familial assistance (Mönkediek & Bras, 2014). The findings suggest not only variation in intergenerational solidarity across national contexts, but also possible shifts in how youth conceptualize autonomy, responsibility, and mutual support in different welfare and cultural regimes.

Figure 5.4: Expectations about parental help among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2023, percentages.

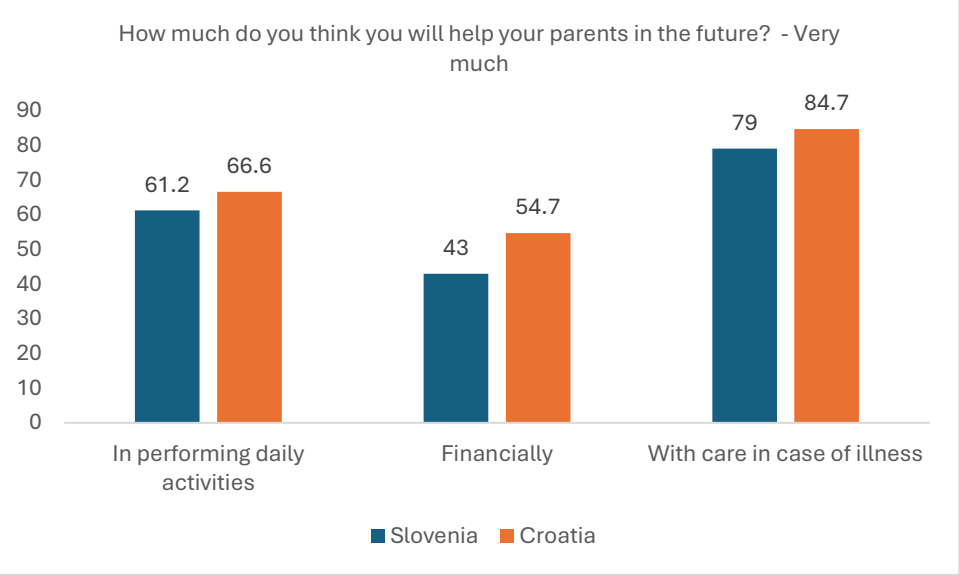


Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Note. Values indicate the share of respondents who answered "very much" or "to a large extent".

These cross-national differences in expected parental support are also reflected in how much youth in Slovenia and Croatia anticipate providing help to their parents in the future. Croatian youth consistently report higher expectations of offering assistance across several domains, including financial support, help with daily activities, and caregiving in the event of illness or frailty. While the differences are not as pronounced as those observed in expectations of receiving support, they still point to a stronger sense of familial obligation among Croatian youth. This aligns with the broader pattern of tighter intergenerational bonds and more reciprocal family relations in Southern and Eastern European contexts, where norms of mutual aid and close-knit kinship structures are more prevalent (Reher, 2004). In contrast, Slovenian youth appear to express a more moderate sense of future responsibility toward their parents, which may reflect shifting attitudes toward individual autonomy and the role of public institutions in elder care. These findings suggest that while intergenerational support in both directions remains important in both countries, cultural expectations regarding reciprocity and obligation vary subtly but meaningfully.

Figure 5.5: Expectations about helping parents in Slovenia and Croatia, 2023, percentages.



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

5.4 Conclusion and implications

Key findings

The findings from this study shed light on important cross-national differences in how youth in Slovenia and Croatia navigate support systems and perceive intergenerational assistance. While Slovenian youth reported slightly higher rates of seeking professional help for mental distress across all time periods, the overall rates were low, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic—likely due to limited service accessibility. A notable increase in help-seeking behavior after the pandemic may reflect both heightened mental health needs and growing openness to professional support. When facing life challenges, Slovenian youth relied most on their parents, followed by partners and friends, but they consistently reported lower levels of help-seeking from all sources compared to Croatian youth, with the exception of religious institutions, which play a less significant role in Slovenia. Furthermore, expectations of future parental support were markedly lower among Slovenian youth, especially regarding job searching, financial help, housing, and childcare. These differences highlight the influence of broader cultural, institutional, and economic contexts on patterns of support. The findings reflect a stronger familial interdependence and tradition of kin support in Croatia, contrasted with a more individualistic orientation and greater institutional reliance in Slovenia. Collectively, the results point to the nuanced and evolving nature of intergenerational solidarity and help-seeking behaviors among youth in different sociocultural settings.

Given these findings, policy efforts should prioritize improving youth access to professional mental health services, especially during crisis periods when access may be disrupted. Investments in youth-centered, stigma-free mental health resources, including school- and university-based support services, are essential to ensure that help-seeking is both normalized and accessible. The low rates of help-seeking from institutions such as schools, healthcare centers, and public services in both countries suggest a critical need for increased outreach, awareness, and integration of support services into everyday youth environments. In addition, in light of the strong reliance on family support—particularly in Croatia—social policies should acknowledge and complement informal support systems by providing structured support for families, such as affordable childcare, housing subsidies, and employment services. In Slovenia, where youth appear to expect less family assistance, strengthening public safety nets and ensuring youth are aware of available resources may help mitigate vulnerability during life transitions. Finally, cross-national collaborations and knowledge exchange between countries with different support

cultures may help inform more inclusive, context-sensitive youth support policies that bridge formal and informal support networks.

5.5 References

Bengtson, V. L., Elder Jr, G. H., & Putney, N. M. (2012). The life course perspective on ageing: Linked lives, timing, and history. *Adult Lives: A Life Course Perspective*, 9–17.

Bengtson, V. L., & Roberts, R. E. (1991). Intergenerational solidarity in aging families: An example of formal theory construction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 856–870.

Crawley, E., Loades, M., Feder, G., Logan, S., Redwood, S., & Macleod, J. (2020). Wider collateral damage to children in the UK because of the social distancing measures designed to reduce the impact of COVID-19 in adults. *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, *4*(1), e000701.

Elder Jr, G. H. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 4–15.

Höllinger, F., & Haller, M. (1990). Kinship and social networks in modern societies: A cross-cultural comparison among seven nations. *European Sociological Review*, *6*(2), 103–124.

Hoyer, C., Ebert, A., Szabo, K., Platten, M., Meyer-Lindenberg, A., & Kranaster, L. (2021). Decreased utilization of mental health emergency service during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, *271*, 377–379.

Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., Linney, C., McManus, M. N., Borwick, C., & Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *59*(11), 1218-1239. e3.

Mönkediek, B., & Bras, H. (2014). Strong and weak family ties revisited: Reconsidering European family structures from a network perspective. *The History of the Family*, *19*(2), 235–259.

Naslund, J. A., Bondre, A., Torous, J., & Aschbrenner, K. A. (2020). Social media and mental health: Benefits, risks, and opportunities for research and practice. *Journal of Technology in Behavioral Science*, *5*(3), 245–257.

Racine, N., McArthur, B. A., Cooke, J. E., Eirich, R., Zhu, J., & Madigan, S. (2021). Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, *175*(11), 1142–1150.

Reher, D. S. (2004). Family ties in Western Europe: Persistent contrasts. In *Strong Family and Low Fertility: A Paradox? New Perspectives in Interpreting Contemporary Family and Reproductive Behaviour* (pp. 45–76). Springer.

Rueger, S. Y., Malecki, C. K., Pyun, Y., Aycock, C., & Coyle, S. (2016). A meta-analytic review of the association between perceived social support and depression in childhood and adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *142*(10), 1017.

Taylor, S. E. (2011). Social support: A review. *The Oxford Handbook of Health Psychology*, *1*, 189–214.

Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *52*(2), 145–161.

Tomassini, C., Kalogirou, S., Grundy, E., Fokkema, T., Martikainen, P., Broese van Groenou, M., & Karisto, A. (2004). Contacts between elderly parents and their children in four European countries: Current patterns and future prospects. *European Journal of Ageing*, *1*, 54–63.

Upton, E., Clare, P. J., Aiken, A., Boland, V. C., De Torres, C., Bruno, R., Hutchinson, D., Kypri, K., Mattick, R., & McBride, N. (2023). Changes in mental health and help-seeking among young Australian adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: A prospective cohort study. *Psychological Medicine*, *53*(3), 687–695.

Wills, T. A. (1991). *Social support and interpersonal relationships.*

Yonemoto, N., & Kawashima, Y. (2023a). Help-seeking behaviors for mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *323*, 85–100.

Yonemoto, N., & Kawashima, Y. (2023b). Help-seeking behaviors for mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *323*, 85–100.

Zrinščak, S. (2004). Generations and atheism: Patterns of response to communist rule among different generations and countries. *Social Compass*, *51*(2), 221–234.

6. Civic and political participation

Andrej Naterer

Political and civic participation are fundamental indicators of a society's democratic health and engagement. This report examines shifts in political interest, participation, and perceptions of democracy in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023. By analyzing survey data from both years, we explore key trends in political self-identification, satisfaction with democracy, trust in political institutions, and engagement in civic activities.

The period between 2018 and 2023 was marked by significant global and national events, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound social, economic, and political implications. The pandemic disrupted daily life, altered political discourse, and reshaped the ways in which people engage with politics. Strict public health measures, lockdowns, and economic downturns influenced political trust, civic participation, and perceptions of democracy. Governments worldwide, including in Slovenia, faced scrutiny over their handling of the crisis, leading to shifts in public confidence in political institutions and democratic governance.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly played a crucial role in shaping political attitudes and behaviors in Slovenia. Emergency measures, restrictions on public gatherings, and the expansion of executive powers led to debates about democratic backsliding and the role of government in crisis management. The crisis also fueled new forms of political activism, with increased digital engagement and online political discourse, while traditional forms of participation, such as demonstrations, faced limitations due to social distancing measures. Thus, COVID-19 and its consequences deeply affected political discourse worldwide. In Slovenia, government responses to the crisis included strict lockdowns, curfews, and limitations on public gatherings. These policies led to heated debates about the balance between public safety and civil liberties. According to research conducted by the OECD (2024), Slovenia experienced one of the sharpest declines in political trust during the pandemic. The stringent measures, coupled with concerns about transparency in government decision-making, contributed to increased dissatisfaction with political leadership.

Another aspect of the pandemic's influence was the increased polarization of political opinions. Numerous authors (e.g. Flores, Cole, Dickert & Van Boven, 2021; Schmid, Treib & Eckardt, 2022) found that COVID-19 deepened divisions between those who supported strict health measures and those who opposed them, either for economic or ideological reasons. The rise of digital

activism and online misinformation further fueled these divisions, leading to increased political fragmentation.

During the early months of the pandemic, there was a surge in civic engagement, particularly in the form of community-based aid, volunteering, and digital activism. Young people, in particular, turned to social media platforms to learn about, engage with, and share information on political and social issues. For example, a study by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2024: n.p.) provided found that "Young people are turning to social media to both consume and produce political content more than ever" and "Over 60% of youth said that creating social media content helped them feel more informed, represented, and heard, although differences in these benefits exist across gender and race/ethnicity." Data from the World Values Survey (2023) suggests that while online political engagement (e.g., petitions and social media activism) increased, traditional civic participation such as demonstrations and volunteering saw a decline. However in Slovenia, pandemics appeared as a particular context, as reported by Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI, 2024: 4):

> "The period through the end of 2021 was still strongly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Janša's government continued to rule through decrees rather than parliamentary acts, despite the warnings of the Constitutional Court not to resort to the use of decrees, particularly on decisions that would restrict citizens' rights. Demonstrations continued to be a standard routine of political life throughout the year. Besides anti-government "Friday protests," a new wave of occasionally violent protests by anti-vaccination activists and COVID-19 deniers occurred.«

Another important consequence of the pandemic was its impact on economic perceptions. As governments implemented fiscal measures to mitigate the crisis, public opinion on economic stability fluctuated. In 2021, Slovenia's economy swiftly recovered, largely due to significant government measures that ensured the financial stability of its citizens. Nonetheless, the government's actions in response to the pandemic led to a notable increase in public debt (BTI 2024). The post-pandemic economic recovery, inflation, and concerns about job security have contributed to a more negative assessment of Slovenia's economic situation in 2023 compared to 2018. These economic anxieties, in turn, have influenced political attitudes, with a slight shift toward right-leaning political self-identification and increased support for strong leadership.

Recent study of Slovenian youth shows a strong support to these findings. In his report title "Politics is Back: Explaining the Recent Political Re-engagement and Rightward Drift among Slovene Youth" Rutar (2024) reveals a marked increase in political engagement among Slovene youth, coupled with a significant ideological shift toward the right. While overall interest in politics remains moderate, both political interest and perceived political knowledge have increased across nearly all youth demographics. Notably, these trends are most pronounced among those identifying with the far right, whereas politically unaffiliated youth remain the least engaged. One of the most important developments identified in the study is a clear realignment on the political spectrum. Rutar shows that in 2018, a large proportion of young people (43%) could not place themselves ideologically. By 2024, this figure had dropped to 19%, reflecting greater political self-awareness. The average political orientation has also shifted from slightly left-of-center (mean 4.8 on a 1–10 scale) to slightly right-of-center, indicating a rightward drift among the youth population.

The study (Rutar, 2024) also highlights a growing gender divide in political orientation. While both young men and women have moved slightly to the right, the shift has been significantly more pronounced among young men, who now tend to identify more with right-wing positions and express higher levels of chauvinism and lower tolerance, particularly toward minority groups. In contrast, young women have remained more centrist or left-leaning, maintaining comparatively liberal attitudes. This emerging gender gap mirrors broader European trends and suggests increasing polarization along gender lines.

Despite the increase in political awareness and rightward shift, traditional predictors of ideological orientation—such as views on nationalism, economic egalitarianism, and climate change—remain relevant. Right-leaning youth are more likely to exhibit nationalist and authoritarian attitudes, while left-leaning youth tend to emphasize tolerance, equality, and environmental concern. Interestingly, trust in institutions was found to correlate more strongly with right-wing identification than with left-wing alignment.

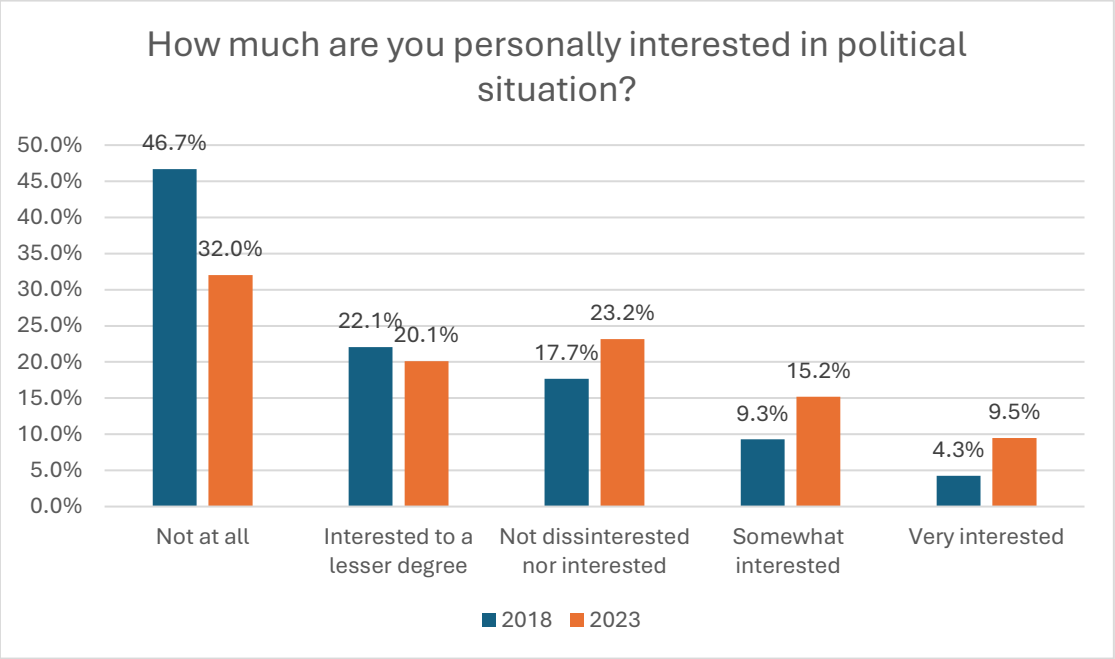
Rutar (2024) concludes that while political engagement among Slovenian youth is rising, it is accompanied by increasing polarization and a notable rightward shift, particularly among young men. He recommends that policymakers respond to these developments by addressing key concerns—such as housing and healthcare—and by considering the potential for backlash when promoting progressive policies, especially if they neglect the concerns of historically dominant groups.

By understanding these results within the context of 21st century, particularly landmark events like COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and Israel–Hamas conflict we can gain insight, how these contributed to a heightened awareness of political issues. Specifically, the period between 2018 and 2023 was marked by significant global and national events, for Slovenian youth most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound social, economic, and political implications. The pandemic disrupted daily life, altered political discourse, and reshaped the ways in which people engage with politics. Strict public health measures, lockdowns, and economic downturns influenced political trust, civic participation, and perceptions of democracy. Governments worldwide, including in Slovenia, faced scrutiny over their handling of the crisis, leading to shifts in public confidence in political institutions and democratic governance. Results presented in this chapter reflect these broader changes. Over the five-year period, political interest has increased, with fewer people expressing complete disengagement. However, at the same time, dissatisfaction with democracy and political representation—particularly among young people—has also grown. The pandemic and its aftermath played a critical role in shaping these attitudes. Emergency measures, restrictions on public gatherings, and the expansion of executive powers led to debates about democratic backsliding and the role of government in crisis management. The crisis also fueled new forms of political activism, with increased digital engagement and online political discourse, while traditional forms of participation, such as demonstrations, faced limitations due to social distancing measures.

6.1 Personal interest and representation of youth in politics

Results regarding **personal interest in political between 2018 and 2023** show a clear and statistically significant ($t(2046.83) = -8.740$, $p < 0.001$) **increase** over time:

Figure 6.1: Interest in political situation in Slovenia (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

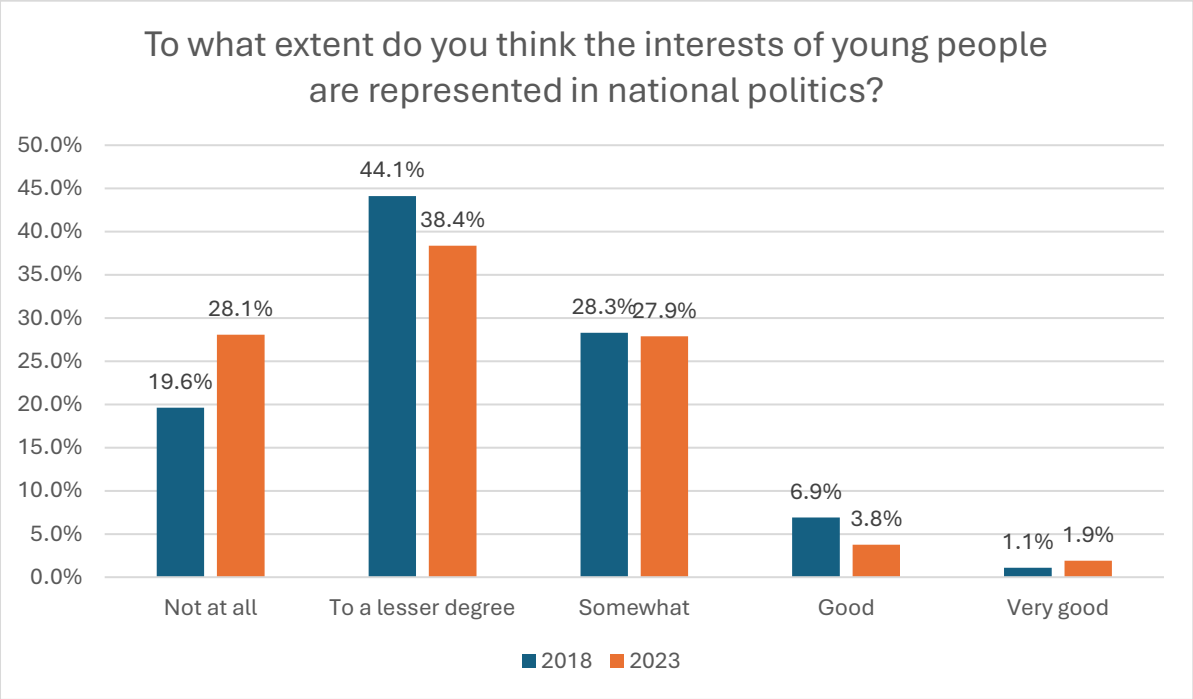
Comparison of political interest between 2018 and 2023 datasets reveals a notable shift in engagement over time. In 2018, nearly half of the respondents (46.7%) reported having no interest in politics, whereas by 2023, this figure had dropped significantly to 32.0%. This suggests a decline in political apathy, indicating that fewer people are entirely disengaged from political matters. At the same time, the proportion of those who **are interested or highly interested in politics has almost doubled, increasing from13.6% in 2018 to 24.7% in 2023.** Additionally, the middle categories, representing moderate interest levels, also saw an upward trend. The percentage of individuals with neutral political interest increased from 17.7% to 23.2%, while those who described themselves as somewhat interested rose from 9.3% to 15.2%.

Overall, the data suggests a positive shift in political engagement between 2018 and 2023. While a significant portion of the population still expresses low interest in political matters, there is clear movement away from complete disinterest toward at least moderate engagement. This trend could indicate changing social or political dynamics, greater accessibility of political discourse, or increased public awareness over time.

The comparison of **perceived youth representation in national politics between the 2018 and 2023 datasets reveals a notable decline over time,** however, it is important to note that the correlation is not statistically significant. This trend indicates a growing perception of political exclusion or a decrease in trust in political institutions among young people, which could be attributed to various social and political factors, such as disillusionment with political leadership, lack of youth-oriented policies, or broader dissatisfaction with political institutions. It might also reflect a shift in political engagement, with younger generations turning to alternative forms of activism rather than traditional political participation.

At the same time the comparison of the 2018 and 2023 datasets reveals **a growing perception that the interests of young people are not adequately represented in national politics** ($t(1930) = 2936$, $p < 0.001$):

Figure 6.2: Representation of youth in politics in Slovenia (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

In 2018, 19.6% of respondents believed that young people's interests were "not at all" represented. By 2023, this figure had risen to 28.1%, reflecting an 8.5 percentage point increase

in dissatisfaction. This suggests that more individuals now feel that young voices are being largely ignored in political decision-making.

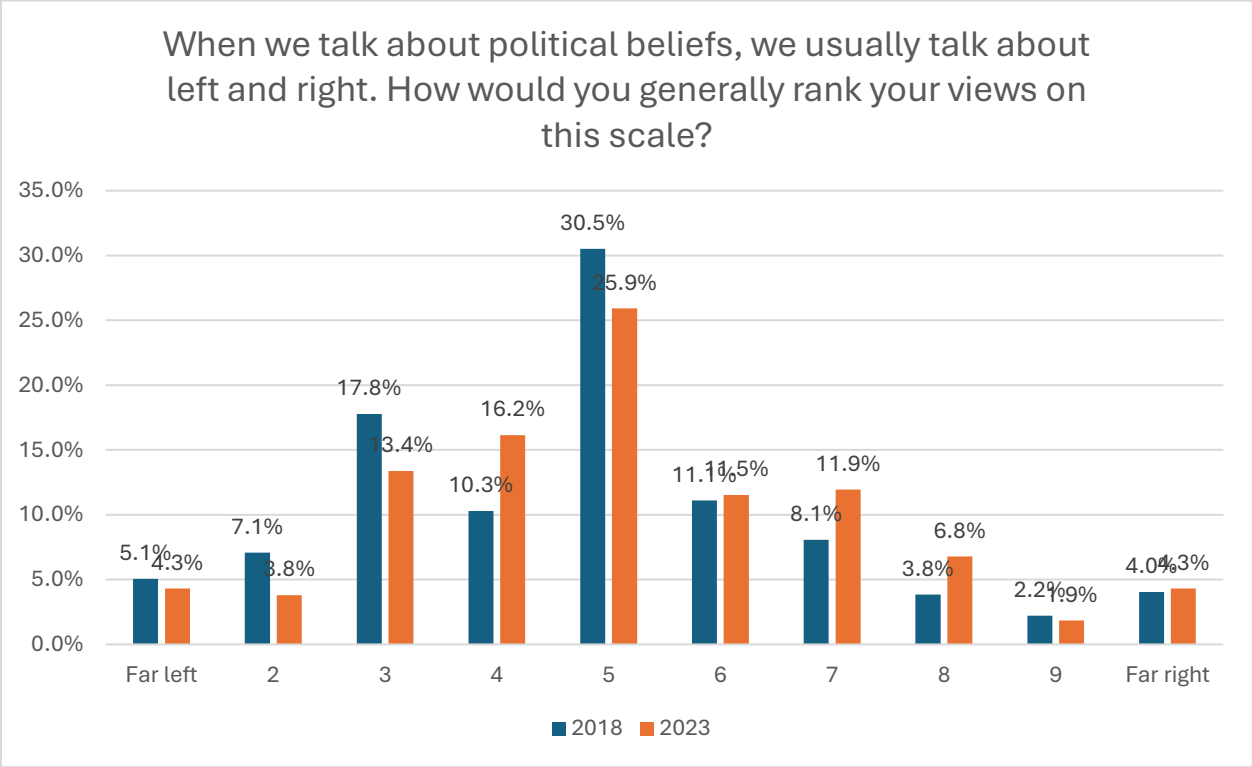
At the same time, the proportion of those who selected category 2 declined from 44.1% in 2018 to 38.4% in 2023, reinforcing the trend of increasing disillusionment. The middle category, which represents a neutral stance, remained relatively stable, decreasing only slightly from 28.3% to 27.9%. Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents who rated youth representation as fairly good dropped from 6.9% to 3.8%, while those who considered it "very good" slightly increased from 1.1% to 1.9%. These small fluctuations suggest that while a very small minority perceives an improvement, the overall sentiment points toward a decline in perceived political representation.

Results highlight a growing dissatisfaction with how young people's interests are represented in national politics. The increase in negative perceptions suggests that youth may feel increasingly marginalized or unheard within political institutions. This trend could have important implications for youth political engagement, voter turnout, and activism, as disillusionment often leads to decreased participation in traditional political processes. Addressing these concerns by improving youth inclusion in decision-making and fostering policies that reflect their interests may be crucial for reversing this trend.

6.2 Self-identification of political views and satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia

The comparison of political self-identification between the 2018 and 2023 datasets reveals a **noticeable rightward shift in political orientation over time** ($t(1465)= 2.936$, $p < 0.001$)**.** The mean political position in 2023 is higher than in 2018, indicating that young people in 2023 identify as slightly more right-leaning compared to their counterparts in 2018.

Figure 6.3: Self-positioning of Slovenian youth according to their political beliefs (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

Figure 3 shows detailed comparison of political self-placement between the 2018 and 2023. One of the most noticeable changes is a **decrease in strong left identification**. In 2018, 5.1% of respondents positioned themselves at the far left, while in 2023, this percentage dropped to 4.3%. Similarly, the proportion of respondents placing themselves in category 2 decreased from 7.1% to 3.8%, indicating a decline in those who lean more toward leftist ideologies.

The centrist positions, which include the majority of respondents, also show some shifts. In 2018, the largest group (30.5%) positioned themselves in category 5, suggesting a moderate or neutral stance. In 2023, this percentage decreased to 25.9%, which may indicate a slight polarization of political views. However, category 4 saw an increase from

10.3% to 16.2%, suggesting that some individuals previously identifying as moderate might now lean slightly left or right.

When looking at the right-leaning positions (categories 7-10), a slight increase in self-identification with right-wing views is evident. In 2018, 4.0% of respondents identified as far right ("10 – Far right"), while in 2023, this increased slightly to 4.3%. More notably, category 7 increased from 8.1% to 11.9%, and category 8 from 3.8% to 6.8%, suggesting a gradual rightward shift in political orientation.

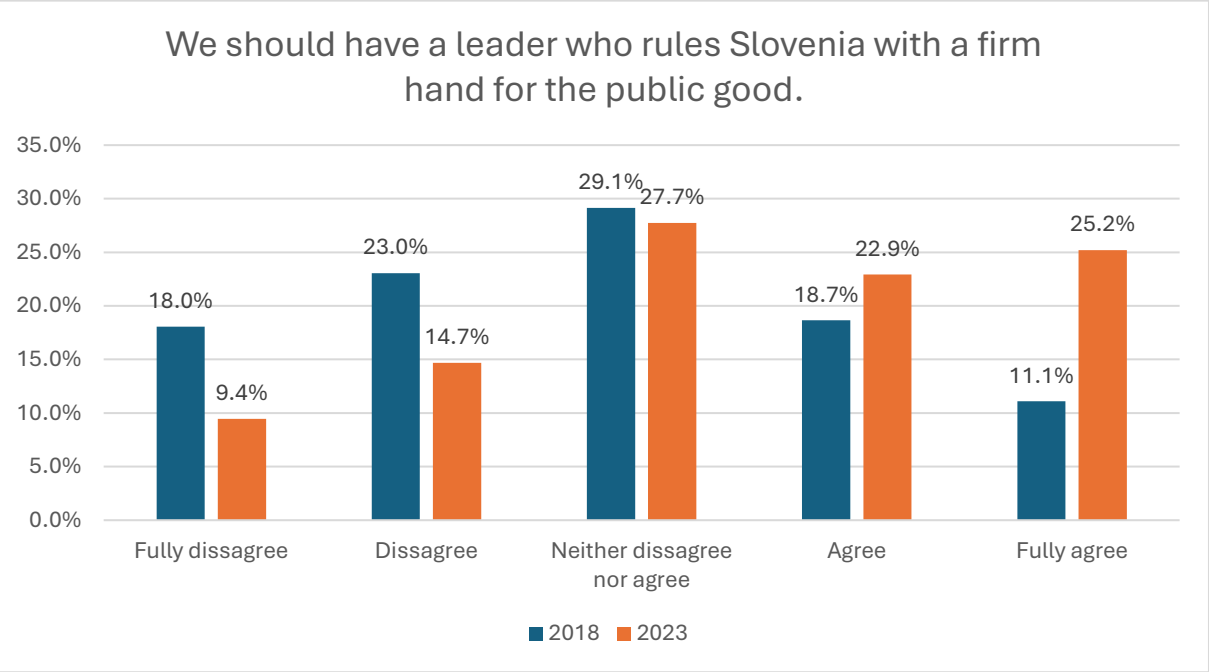
In sum, results suggest a slight decrease in left-wing identification and a gradual increase in right-leaning self-placement between 2018 and 2023. While the majority of respondents still identify around the center, there is some indication of polarization, with fewer people identifying as strongly leftist and a small but notable increase in right-leaning identification. These changes could reflect broader societal trends, shifts in political discourse, or evolving generational attitudes toward political ideologies.

6.3 Perceptions of democracy in Slovenia

Although a direct comparison of satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023 showed no statistical significance, results indicate **a decline in overall satisfaction with democracy** over time**.** Respondents in 2018 reported a higher average level of satisfaction compared to those in 2023, suggesting that confidence in the state of democracy has weakened. The data suggests a growing disillusionment with democracy in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023. The increase in dissatisfaction and the decline in those who view democracy positively point to a potential crisis of confidence in political institutions, governance, or democratic processes. These findings could have implications for political engagement, trust in institutions, and voter participation, making it crucial to investigate the underlying causes of this dissatisfaction. Similarly, no statistically significant correlations were found regarding the comparison of perceptions of democracy between 2018 and 2023. Nevertheless, it is important to note that youth maintain **an overall positive view of democracy** (p=0,085).

On the other hand, the comparison of attitudes toward having a strong leader who rules Slovenia between 2018 and 2023 shows a **significant shift toward greater support for strong leadership** (t(2005) = -10.148, p < .001):

Figure 6.5: Perceptions of a strong leadership in Slovenia (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

In 2018, 18.0% of respondents fully disagreed with having a strong leader who rules Slovenia, while in 2023, this percentage dropped to 9.4%. Similarly, category 2 (mild disagreement) decreased from 23.0% in 2018 to 14.7% in 2023. This indicates that fewer people are outright rejecting the idea of strong leadership.

At the same time, support for a strong leader has increased. In 2018, 11.1% of respondents fully agreed, whereas in 2023, this percentage more than doubled to 25.2%. Similarly, moderate agreement rose from 18.7% in 2018 to 22.9% in 2023. This suggests that more people now believe a strong leader may be beneficial for Slovenia. The neutral category remains relatively stable, with 29.1% in 2018 and 27.7% in 2023. This indicates that some respondents continue to hold a balanced or undecided position on this issue.

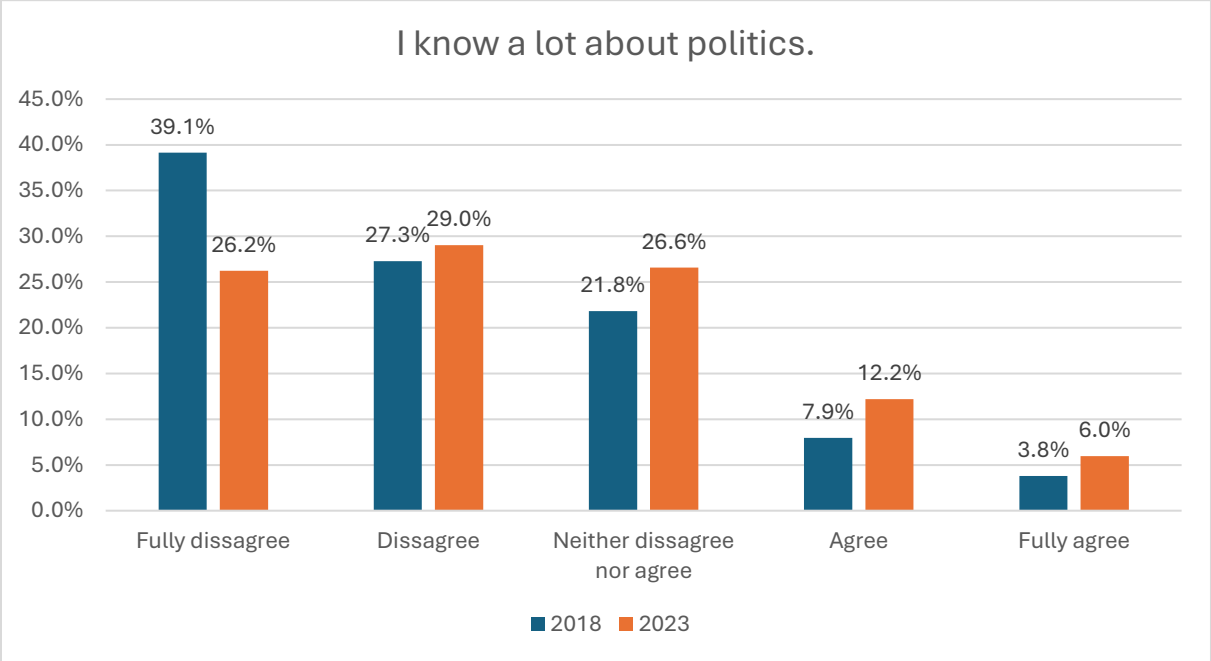
The data reveals a clear shift toward stronger support for authoritative leadership between 2018 and 2023. Fewer people strongly oppose the idea, while significantly more fully agree that Slovenia should have a strong leader. This trend could be influenced by political dissatisfaction, economic instability, or a perceived inefficiency in democratic processes. It suggests a growing preference for decisive leadership, possibly as a response to contemporary political challenges, stemming from pandemic period. However, this shift also raises important questions about democratic values and institutional trust, highlighting the need for further analysis of public sentiment toward governance.

Results regarding perceptions of opportunities for political participation and perceptions whether politicians care about the opinions of young people between 2018 and 2023 show no statistically significant correlation. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that 1.) the comparison of attitudes toward whether **young people should have more influence** show a consistent strong level of agreement, and 2.) the **comparison of opinions regarding whether politicians care about the people shows a consistent level of skepticism**, with only minor fluctuations over time.

6.4 Political knowledge

The comparison of **self-perceived political knowledge** between 2018 and 2023 **reveals a shift toward greater confidence in political knowledge among respondents in 2023** ($t(1857.553) = -6.377$, $p < .001$):

Figure 6.6: Perceptions of a strong leadership in Slovenia (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

One of the most notable changes is the decline in strong disagreement with the statement "I know a lot about politics." In 2018, 39.1% of respondents fully disagreed, while in 2023, this figure dropped to 26.2%. This significant decrease suggests that fewer people feel completely uninformed about politics in 2023. At the same time, mild disagreement increased slightly, from 27.3% in 2018 to 29.0% in 2023. This indicates that while fewer people feel completely uninformed, some may still feel they have limited political knowledge rather than outright ignorance. The neutral category saw an increase from 21.8% in 2018 to 26.6% in 2023, suggesting that more people now consider themselves to have a moderate understanding of politics.

Support for the statement that one knows a lot about politics also increased in categories 4 and 5. Percentage of those who agree rose from 7.9% in 2018 to 12.2% in 2023, indicating a growing number of people who feel at least moderately knowledgeable. Strong agreement also increased from 3.8% to 6.0%, showing that more people in 2023 confidently claim to know a lot about politics.

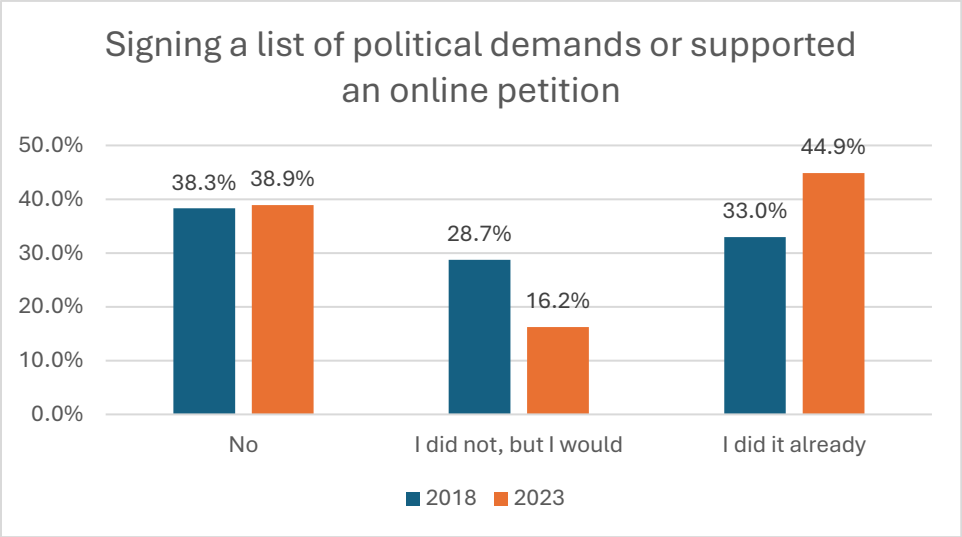
The data suggests a positive trend in political self-confidence, with fewer respondents feeling completely uninformed and more people considering themselves moderately or highly knowledgeable about politics. This could be influenced by increased access to political information, greater youth engagement in political discussions, or a more politically aware generation. However, a large portion of respondents still feel uncertain or somewhat lacking in knowledge, highlighting the need for continued civic education and political engagement initiatives.

6.5 Political and civic participation

Further interesting insights were found through examination of various aspects of political and civic participations. Firstly, the comparison of **political petition signing between 2018 and 2023 shows a notable increase in active political participation over time** (t(1818.793) = -2.845, p = .004), a statistically significant result, indicating a real difference in the likelihood or willingness to engage in this form of political action between the two groups.

One of the most significant changes is the rise in the number of people who have already signed a political petition:

Figure 6.7: Conventional political participation – petition (%), 2018 and 2023



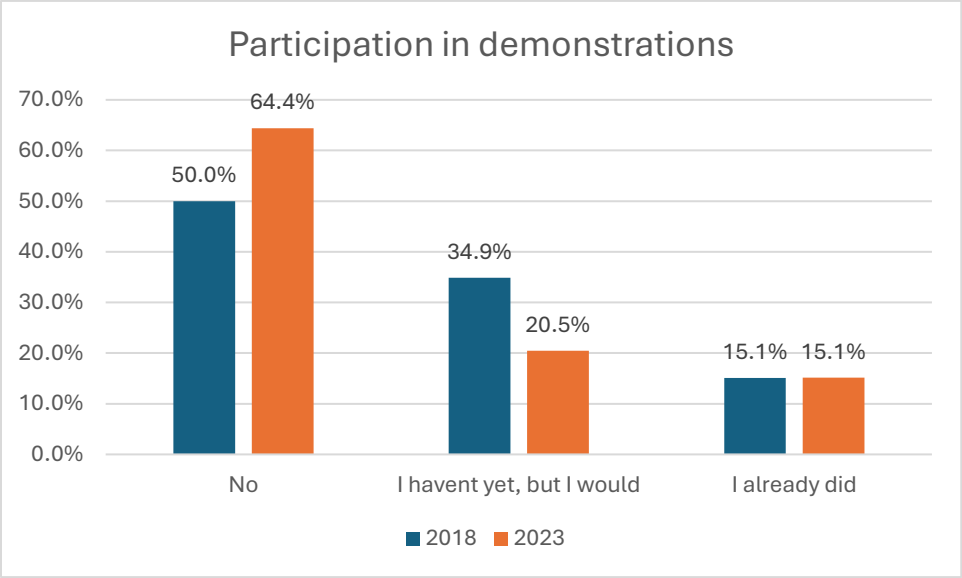
Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

In 2018, 33% of respondents reported that they had signed a petition, whereas by 2023, this figure increased to 44.9%. This suggests that political engagement through petition signing has grown substantially over the years. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had not signed a petition but were willing to do so decreased from 28.7% in 2018 to 16.2% in 2023. This decline suggests that many individuals who were previously open to participation but had not yet acted may have transitioned into active engagement. Meanwhile, the proportion of people who have never signed a petition and do not intend to remained relatively stable (38.3% in 2018 and 38.9% in 2023). This indicates that while political activism has increased, there is still a consistent segment of the population that remains disengaged.

These data highlights a positive shift toward increased political activism, with more respondents in 2023 actively signing petitions compared to 2018. This change may reflect greater political awareness, pressing social and political issues, or increased accessibility to petitions, particularly through digital platforms. However, the stability in the proportion of those who remain disengaged suggests that while activism is rising, a segment of the population continues to refrain from participation in political petitions.

At the same time, the comparison of political participation **between 2018 and 2023 shows a decline in willingness to participate in demonstrations over time** ($t(2008) = 4.295$, $p < .001$):

Figure 6.8: Participation in demonstrations (%), 2018 and 2023



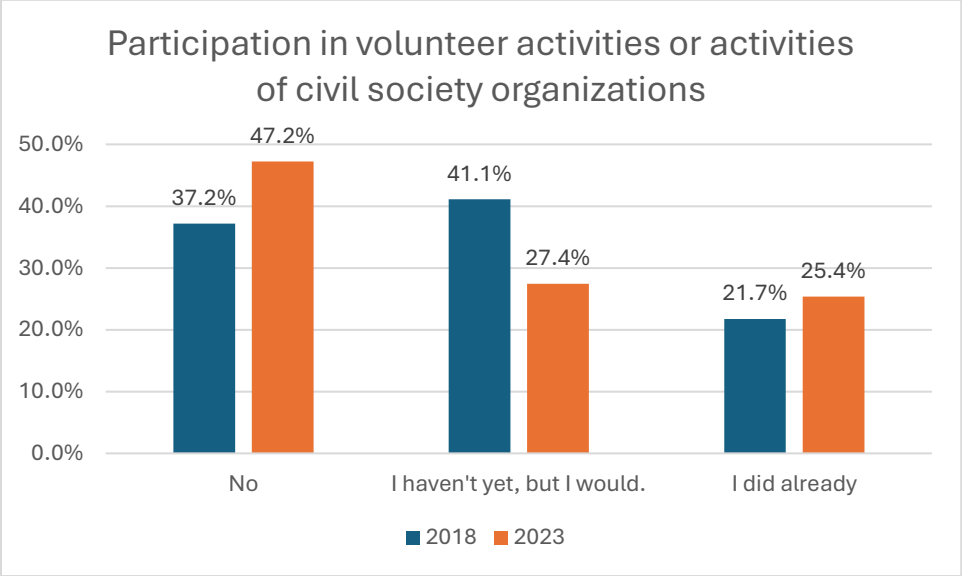
Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

One of the most significant changes is the increase in non-participation. In 2018, 50% of respondents stated that they do not participate in political activities, but by 2023, this figure rose to 64.4%. This suggests that a growing proportion of individuals have become disengaged from political involvement. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had not participated but were willing to dropped from 34.9% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2023. This indicates that fewer people express interest in becoming politically active, signaling a potential decline in political motivation or opportunities for engagement.

However, the percentage of those who had already participated remained stable at 15.1% in both years. This suggests that while the most engaged individuals continue to participate, the pool of potential future participants has shrunk, as more people move toward disengagement rather than activism. While these results indicate a decline in preparedness for demonstrative political engagement, the stability in those who are already active suggests that a core group remains politically engaged and broader participation weakening. This shift could be influenced by political dissatisfaction, lack of trust in institutions, or a feeling that individual participation has little impact.

We furthered our research by focusing on participation in volunteer activities or activities of civil society organizations. Although lacking a statistical significance ($t(1847.218) = 1.787$, $p = .074$), results showing a decline **in willingness to volunteer between 2018 and 2023** (alongside a slight increase in actual participation), remain noteworthy:

Figure 6.9: Participation in demonstrations (%), 2018 and 2023



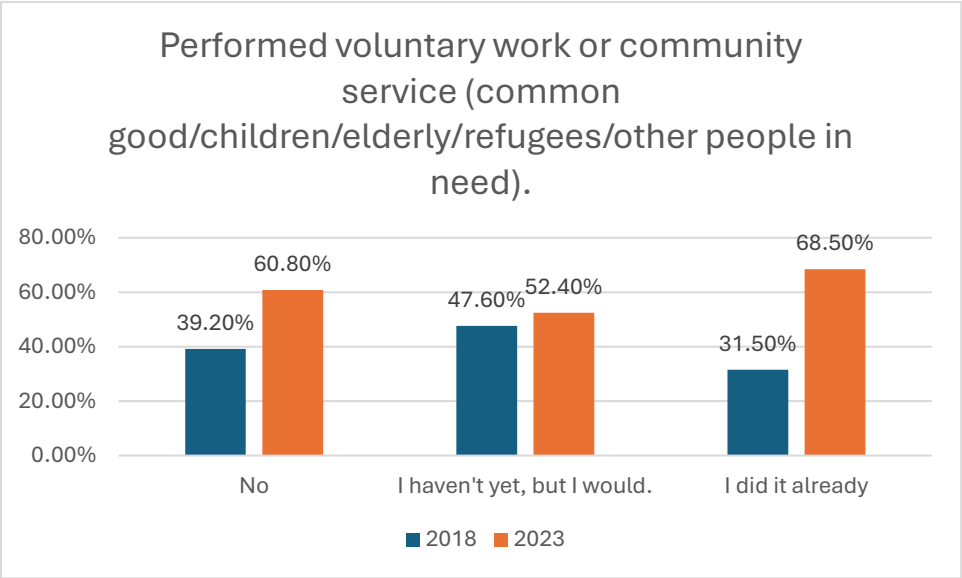
Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

One of the most notable changes is the increase in non-participation. In 2018, 37.2% of respondents reported that they had not participated in volunteer activities, whereas in 2023, this figure rose to 47.2%. This suggests that a growing proportion of individuals are not engaging in volunteer work. At the same time, the percentage of respondents who had not volunteered but were willing to do so dropped significantly from 41.1% in 2018 to 27.4% in 2023. This decline suggests that fewer people are open to volunteering in the future, reflecting a possible shift in priorities or a decrease in motivation for civic engagement. However, actual volunteer participation has increased slightly. The percentage of those who have already volunteered rose from 21.7% in 2018 to 25.4% in 2023. This indicates that while overall willingness to volunteer has decreased, those who are actively engaged in volunteering have remained committed or increased their participation.

Results suggest a general decline in overall interest in volunteering, with more people choosing not to participate and fewer expressing willingness to engage. Despite this trend, there is a small increase in those who have already volunteered, indicating that a core group of engaged individuals remains active. This shift may be influenced by changing social priorities, economic conditions, or declining opportunities for volunteering.

Interestingly, support towards volunteer work or community service remains strong. The **comparison of 2018 and 2023 regarding volunteer work participation reveals a shift in engagement trends over time** (t(1860.110) = -2.436, p = .015).

Figure 6.10: Participation in demonstrations (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

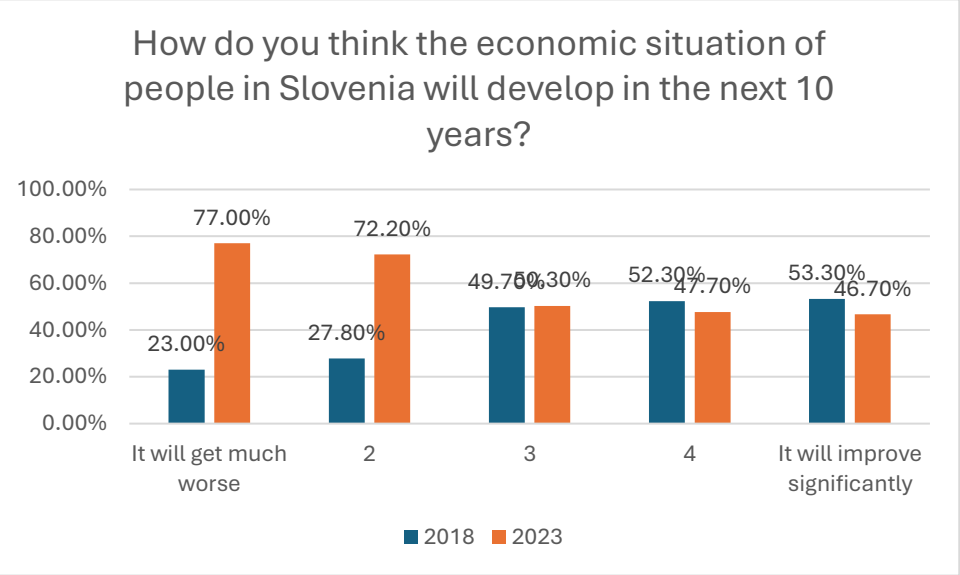
The comparison of survey results from 2018 and 2023 reveals a significant shift in public engagement with voluntary or community service activities, such as helping children, the elderly, refugees, or others in need. In 2018, 31.5% of young respondents reported that they had already participated in such activities. By 2023, this figure more than doubled, rising to 68.5%, suggesting a notable increase in civic participation and social responsibility over the five-year period. At the same time, the percentage of youngsters who stated they had not participated in any such activities also increased, from 39.2% in 2018 to 60.8% in 2023. This apparent contradiction may be due to changes in how the question was interpreted or how the options were presented, and it warrants further clarification. Meanwhile, the proportion of people who had not yet engaged in voluntary work but expressed willingness to do so remained relatively stable, increasing slightly from 47.6% in 2018 to 52.4% in 2023. This consistency indicates a continued openness among the population to participate in socially beneficial activities, even among those who have not yet taken action.

Overall, the data suggests a growing awareness and willingness to engage in community service, with a significant portion of the population actively participating by 2023. This trend reflects positively on the development of civic culture and social solidarity within the community.

6.6 Perceptions of the future economic situation in Slovenia

The final step of this report focuses on the perception of youth and the economic situation in Slovenia, as connected to political situation. The comparison of **perceptions regarding the economic situation between 2018 and 2023 reveals a significant shift toward a more negative outlook over time** ($t(1753.780) = 10.825$, $p < .001$):

Figure 6.11: Participation in demonstrations (%), 2018 and 2023



Source: Data files YSEE 2018, data files YOVID 2023.

The results show a noticeable shift toward pessimism in 2023. Among those who believed the economic situation would get significantly worse, 77% were from the 2023 survey, while only 23% were from 2018. A similar trend is observed in responses rated as somewhat worse (2), with 72.2% coming from 2023 and 27.8% from 2018. This suggests a growing sense of concern or dissatisfaction with the anticipated economic trajectory. In contrast, responses reflecting more

optimism have declined. For example, among those who believed the economic situation would significantly improve, 53.3% of responses came from 2018 and only 46.7% from 2023. Likewise, slightly more optimistic views also saw a higher share in 2018 (52.3%) than in 2023 (47.7%). Interestingly, views in the middle of the scale (3) remained nearly evenly split between the two years, indicating that overall uncertainty has not changed much.

In summary, while some optimism and neutrality persist, the data indicates that youth expectations about the economic future in Slovenia have become significantly more negative in 2023 compared to 2018.

6.7 Conclusions and recommendations

Key findings regarding civic and political participation include:

1.) There is a positive shift in political interest between 2018 and 2023, almost doubling those who are interested in politics.
2.) Results highlight a growing dissatisfaction with how young people's interests are represented in national politics.
3.) Regarding self-identification of political views results suggest a slight decrease in left-wing identification and a gradual increase in right-leaning self-placement between 2018 and 2023.
4.) There is a growing disillusionment with democracy in Slovenia between 2018 and 2023, with increasing dissatisfaction and the decline satisfaction with democracy in Slovenia.
5.) Belief in democracy among youth in Slovenia remains high, but there is a shift toward moderate support rather than full confidence.
6.) Regarding the perceptions of a strong national leader results reveal a clear shift toward stronger support for authoritative leadership between 2018 and 2023.
7.) Findings regarding political self- assessed political knowledge suggests a positive trend in political self-confidence, with fewer respondents feeling completely uninformed and more people considering themselves moderately or highly knowledgeable about politics.
8.) The data highlights a positive shift toward increased political activism, with more respondents in 2023 actively signing petitions compared to 2018.
9.) Results indicate a decline in preparedness for demonstrative political engagement.

10.) With regards to volunteering, our results suggests a decline in overall interest in volunteering, with more people choosing not to participate and fewer expressing willingness to engage.
11.) The data suggests a polarization in volunteer engagement. More people have actively participated in volunteering, yet fewer individuals seem open to doing so in the future.
12.) Results suggest a clear shift toward a more negative assessment of the economic situation between 2018 and 2023.

To protect democratic health and foster a resilient, engaged youth citizenry, Slovenia must pair increased political interest with **concrete inclusion efforts**. Recognizing the nuanced shifts toward right-wing ideologies, dissatisfaction with representation, and a growing desire for strong leadership, it is critical that policymakers act to **strengthen democratic participation, build trust, and offer responsive, youth-oriented solutions**. Failing to address these concerns risks deepening polarization and disengagement in the coming years. In light of our findings from the 2018–2023 comparison, a number of policy interventions should be considered to strengthen civic and political participation among youth in Slovenia—especially as societies recover from the profound disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

First and foremost, improving youth representation in political processes is essential. Establishing institutional mechanisms such as youth advisory councils, participatory budgeting initiatives, and quotas for young people within political party structures could ensure that their voices are not only heard but also acted upon. These efforts are especially relevant in the post-pandemic period, where many young people felt politically sidelined during the implementation of emergency measures and lockdowns. Restoring trust requires institutional openness and active youth inclusion.

To build on the encouraging trend of increased political interest and self-reported political knowledge—fueled in part by greater access to digital platforms during the pandemic—renewed investment in civic education is crucial. This education should extend beyond formal schooling and include interactive, community-based programs that enhance political literacy, critical thinking, and democratic values. In a time where restrictions on civil liberties during COVID-19 led to debates on authoritarianism versus democratic resilience, such programs can offer context and tools for evaluating political developments more critically.

Given the observed polarization and shift toward right-leaning ideologies—especially among young men—it is important to create safe and inclusive spaces for political dialogue. The pandemic magnified ideological divides, particularly around health measures, government authority, and misinformation. Supporting youth-led, non-partisan platforms where diverse views can be expressed and debated may help bridge ideological gaps and foster democratic tolerance in an increasingly fragmented landscape.

At the same time, the growing centrality of digital participation during the pandemic suggests the need for investment in secure, accessible tools for online civic engagement. Governments and civil society should develop inclusive platforms for e-petitions, consultations, and youth-led campaigns. These tools became essential during COVID-19 lockdowns and remain relevant as digital spaces continue to reshape political participation.

To revitalize civic participation beyond politics—particularly volunteering—targeted programs and incentives are needed. The early months of the pandemic saw an inspiring wave of youth volunteering and community solidarity. Building on this momentum, governments and NGOs can offer academic credits, scholarships, and stipends for civic engagement, particularly for those facing economic barriers. Flexible and short-term volunteering formats—such as micro-volunteering or hybrid models—can also accommodate changing lifestyles and work-study patterns that became more pronounced during the pandemic.

Transparency and participatory governance must also be prioritized to rebuild institutional trust. The use of decrees and emergency powers during COVID-19 created perceptions of democratic backsliding in Slovenia and elsewhere. Clear communication, public accountability, and youth inclusion in crisis response planning can restore faith in democratic governance and avoid alienating younger generations.

In response to the increased spread of disinformation and radicalization during the pandemic, media literacy programs must be strengthened. These should be integrated into education systems and supported by national campaigns, helping youth navigate the complex information ecosystems that became especially influential during lockdowns.

Addressing youth economic insecurity is another key area. The pandemic exacerbated financial instability for many young people—through job losses, precarious gig work, and rising living costs—making housing and economic independence more difficult to achieve. Policies that

support youth employment, affordable housing, and social protection are critical for reducing these pressures and sustaining long-term civic and political engagement.

Lastly, the emerging gender divide in political self-identification underscores the need for gender-sensitive political engagement strategies. During the pandemic, women—especially young women—faced disproportionate burdens in caregiving, mental health, and job precarity. Supporting female leadership, mentoring programs, and gender-inclusive civic education can help ensure democratic participation remains equitable and responsive.

In sum, these recommendations call for a holistic, cross-sectoral approach to youth engagement that acknowledges the lasting effects of COVID-19 on political behavior, institutional trust, and civic motivation. By investing in inclusive, responsive, and future-oriented policies, Slovenia can strengthen its democratic institutions and empower the next generation to participate meaningfully in shaping the society they live in.

6.8 References

Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report — Slovenia. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024. Available at: https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2024_SVN.pdf (accessed 20.3.2025).

Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2024): Young People Turn to Online Political Engagement During COVID-19. Available at: https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/young-people-turn-online-political-engagement-during-covid-19 (20.3.2025).

Flores, A., Cole, J. C., Dickert, S., Eom, K., Jiga-Boy, G. M., Kogut, T., ... & Van Boven, L. (2022). Politicians polarize and experts depolarize public support for COVID-19 management policies across countries. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *119*(3), e2117543119.

OECD (2024), Lessons from the 2023 OECD Trust Survey in Slovenia, Building Trust in Public Institutions, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/261ac7b2-en.OECD.

Rutar Tibor (2024): Politics is Back: Explaining the Recent Political Re-engagement and Rightward Drift among Slovene Youth. Youth Study Slovenia, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: Berlin. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381639630_Politics_is_Back_Explaining_the_Recent_Political_Re-engagement_and_Rightward_Drift_among_Slovene_Youth (12.3.2025).

Schmid, F., Treib, O., & Eckardt, F. (2022). The virus of polarization: online debates about Covid-19 in Germany. *Political Research Exchange*, *5*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2022.2150087

7. (Self)-expectations

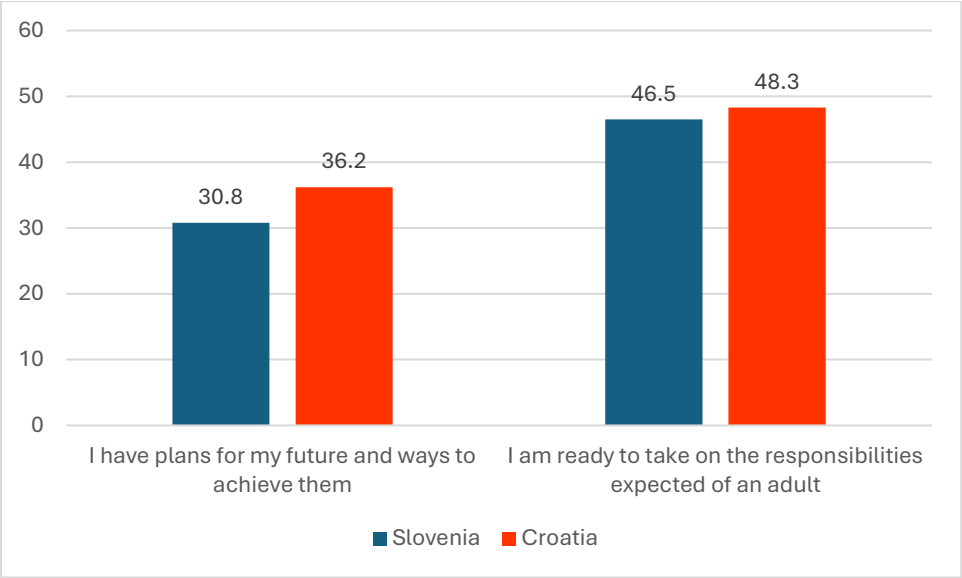
Minea Rutar & Danijela Lahe

Youth self-expectations encompass the goals and milestones young people set for themselves as they transition to adulthood, shaped both by personal aspirations and perceived societal standards. These expectations span critical life domains – from career ambitions and education plans to family life and civic engagement. Over the past decades, the journey to adulthood has evolved: traditional markers (finishing school, leaving home, full-time work, marriage, parenthood) are often delayed, and youth priorities have shifted in response to social change (Beal et al, 2017).

7.1 Responsibilities and independence

One foundational expectation of youth is the readiness to take on adult responsibilities, often signified by financial independence and living on one's own. In many countries, young people now reach these milestones later than previous generations, reflecting long-term economic and social shifts. Across the EU, the average age of leaving the parental home is about 26, but much higher in some countries (Eurostat, 2023). In Slovenia, 60% of people 18–34 still live with their parents, with youths leaving home at an average age of 29– one of the latest in Europe, second only to Croatia at almost 32 (The Slovenia Times, 2024). Despite these hurdles, many young people still expect (or aspire) to establish themselves independently, even if on a longer timeline. Sociological research shows adolescents typically have an internal "timetable" for adult milestones and adjust their expectations based on context (Beal et al., 2016). In other words, the path that youth take to adulthood adapts to the social realities of each era (Settersten Jr & Ray, 2010). However, not all youth expect or desire an expedited transition to adulthood. Many today purposefully delay milestones to pursue higher education or personal development, a trend encapsulated in the concept of emerging adulthood, now a normative period of self-exploration. In line with this, we find less than half (46.5%) of respondents reported completely agreeing that they are ready to take on responsibilities related to adulthood, and an even smaller percentage (30.8% report generally having plans for their future and ways to achieve them. In comparison, slightly more Croatian youth reports having plans and being ready to take on responsibilities of adulthood.

Figure 7.1: Self and societal expectations, by Country, percentage that agrees completely



7.2 SUCCESS-RELATED EXPECTATIONS

Expectations around higher education and career success are central to modern youth identities. Globally, younger generations have become more ambitious regarding education and work, often driven by the belief that advanced qualifications are necessary for success (Baird et al., 2008; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2006; Schoon, 2010). These ambitions often come with increased uncertainty and a prolonged transition into stable careers (Walther, 2006). Many young people now explore career options for longer, often well into their late 20s, aligning with the notion that career choice takes place at a later age for this generation (Heinz, 2009). In line with this observation, we found the societal expectation to perform well at one's job is the highest ranking among youth in the present study, with a majority of Slovenes (55%) completely believing this to be true. Self-expectation is somewhat lover (48.3%), whereas in Croatia this is reversed, with more people believing they will perform well at their job (51.4%) than thinking society expects them to (45.5%). Similarly, the majority (54.1%) of Slovenes believe they will obtain a higher education degree, but they think society expects them to do so to a much lower degree (37.1%), while in Croatia this gap is much smaller. Most young people in Slovenia (53.7%) report society expects them to earn enough to support themselves and their families, and slightly less agree they believe they will be able to follow up on that expectation (47.9%), with the reverse being true in Croatia. Lastly, both the self and the societal expectation to succeed in everything one undertakes is less strongly held then other expectations, with less than a third of young people

completely believing this. Especially the belief one will succeed is much lower in Slovenia (22.8%) than Croatia (31.9%). In summary self-expectations regarding job performance and obtaining a degree differ notably from societal expectations, but not necessarily in the same direction in Slovenia than in Croatia.

Figure 7.2: Self and societal expectations, Slovenia, percentage that agrees completely

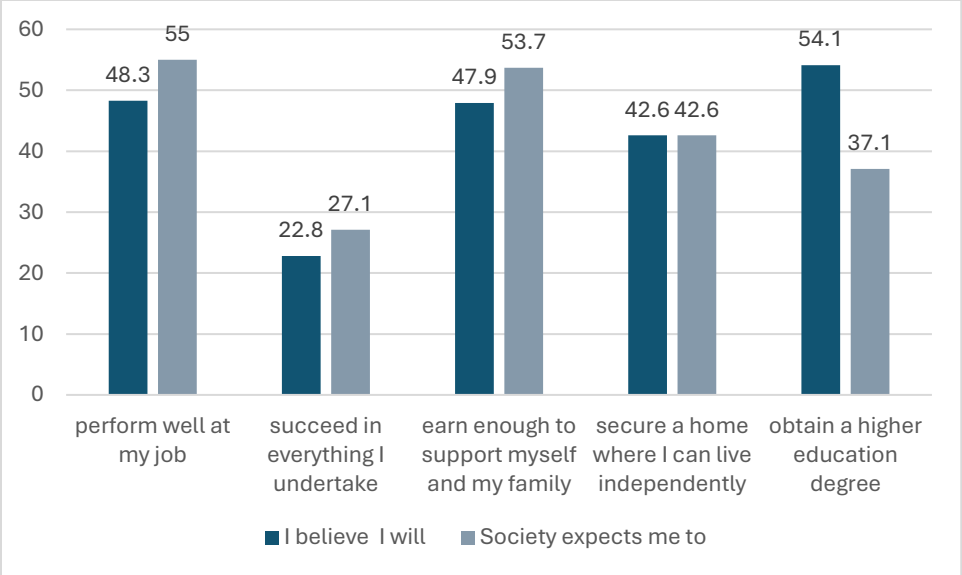
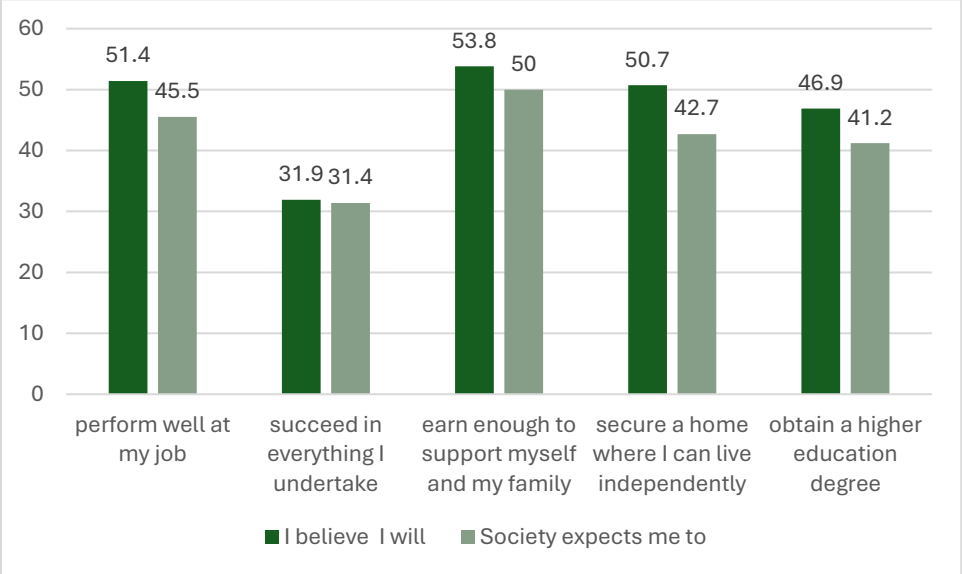


Figure 7.3: Self and societal expectations, Croatia, percentage that agrees completely



Expectations regarding becoming a parent are relatively high in both Slovenia and Croatia. However, marriage expectations are notably lower in Slovenia, with less than a third believing they will marry (and more than half reporting so in Croatia). The expectation of contributing to the community, both societal and from self, is among the less widely accepted ones among youth compared to career and parenthood, especially in Slovenia.

Figure 7.4: Self and societal expectations, Slovenia, percentage that agrees completely

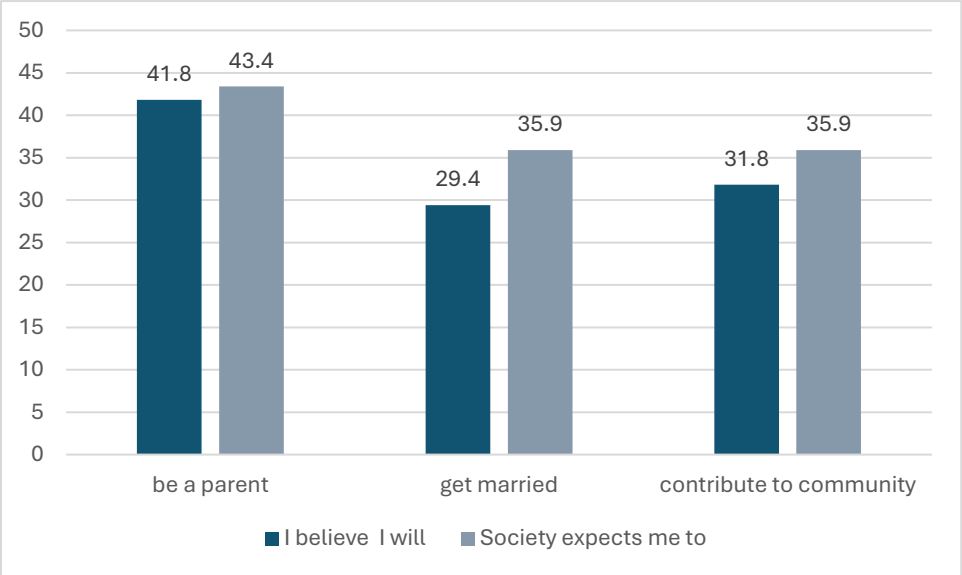
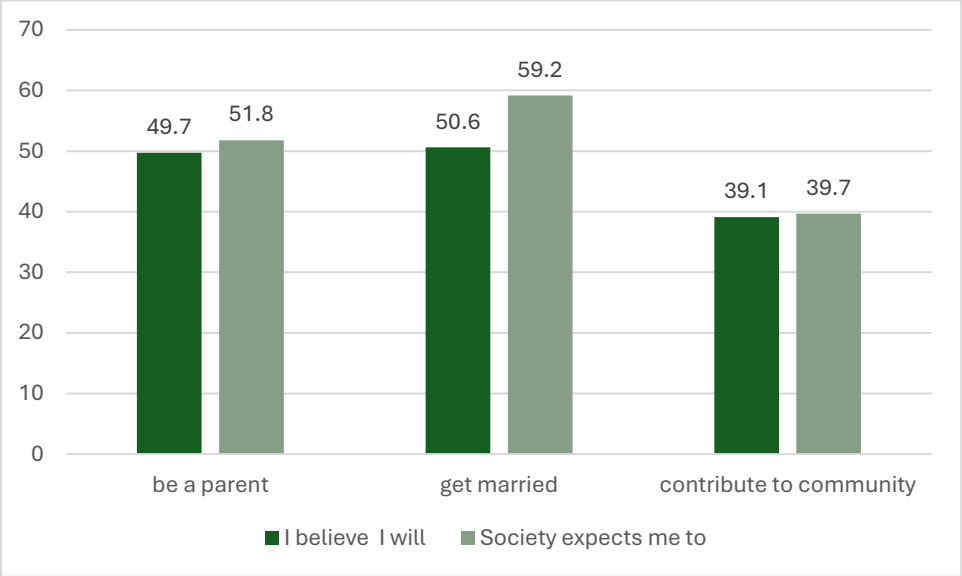


Figure 7.5: Self and societal expectations, Croatia, percentage that agrees completely



7.4 Well-Being related expectations

Roughly a third of young people in Slovenia completely agree with the belief society expects them to lead a happy life, and the same percentage expects themselves to actually be happy. There is a bit lower societal expectation in Croatia.

Figure 7.6: Self and societal expectations, Slovenia, percentage that agrees completely

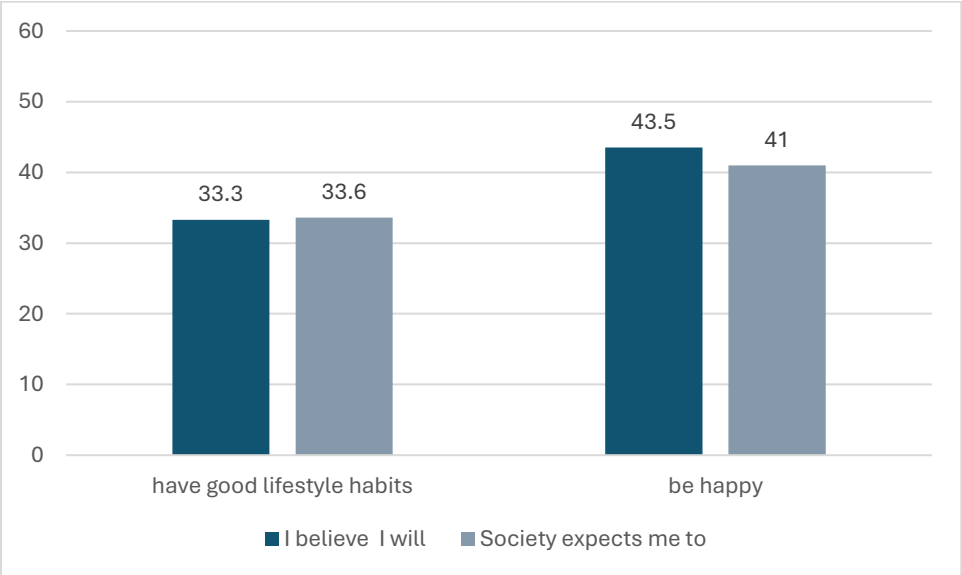
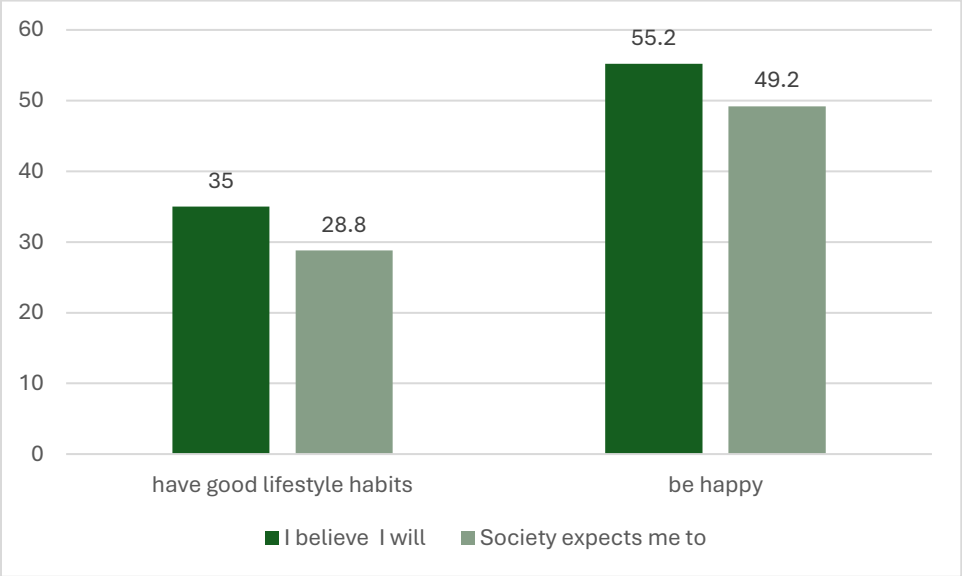


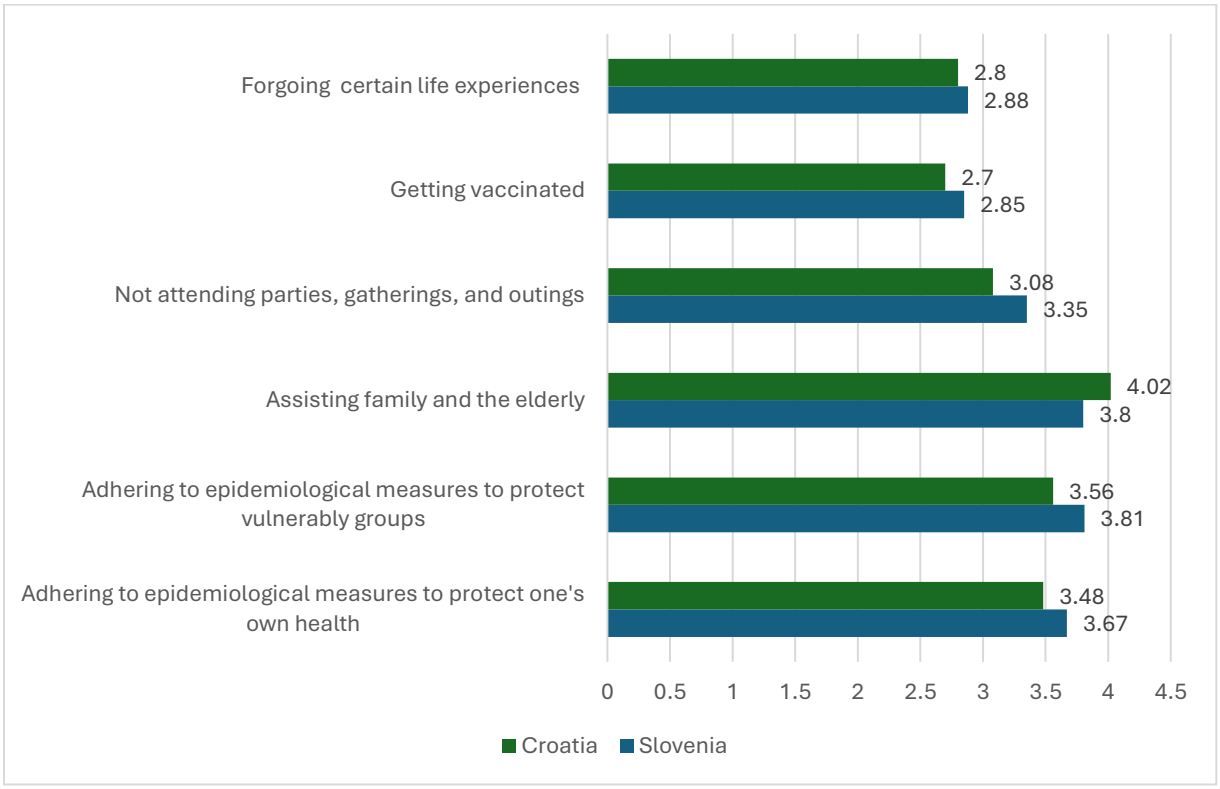
Figure 7.7: Self and societal expectations, Croatia, percentage that agrees completely



7.5 Pandemic-related expectations

We also asked participants a series of questions to assess how justified they felt various pandemic-related measures were. Using a five-point scale, most responses clustered between 3 (neither justified nor unjustified) and 4 (mostly justified). The highest levels of justification were reported for societal expectations to follow epidemiological guidelines protecting the elderly and other vulnerable groups ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.19$), as well as to help family members and older individuals with errands ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.10$). By contrast, the measures participants found least justified were the societal expectation to get vaccinated ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.44$) and to forgo significant life events such as school trips, graduation ceremonies, and weddings ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.32$). Overall, men and women did not differ significantly in their average responses, with two notable exceptions. Women were significantly more likely than men to consider epidemiological measures aimed at protecting the elderly and other vulnerable groups as justified ($p < 0.01$). They also expressed greater justification for measures to protect one's own health ($p < 0.001$). In comparison, Croatian youth reported lower mean levels of justification for all pandemic-related measures except for assisting family and the elderly in obtaining supplies and running errands, where they scored significantly higher than Slovene youth ($p < 0.01$) and forgoing life experiences where there was no significant difference ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 7.7: Mean level of justification of pandemic-related measures, by Country



7.6 Conclusions & Recommendations

The primary theme emerging from our results is the discrepancy between young people's personal aspirations and the roles and responsibilities they perceive society expects of them, with these differences varying notably across different domains. One of the most pronounced gaps is seen in job performance: a significantly higher number of young people believe that society expects them to excel compared to those who are confident in their own abilities. A similar pattern is evident in the realm of financial independence, where a larger proportion of youth perceive societal pressure to earn enough to support themselves and their families than those who believe they will actually achieve this goal. In contrast, the trend is reversed when it comes to higher education attainment: a much higher percentage of young people are confident that they will earn a degree than those who feel that this is an expectation imposed by society. These findings suggest that societal pressures may contribute to feelings of inadequacy in certain domains, particularly regarding financial stability and professional success. The gap in job performance and earning expectations may indicate that young people feel external pressure to meet high economic standards but lack confidence in their ability to do so, potentially reflecting broader concerns about job market insecurity or personal competence. Conversely, the higher self-belief in educational attainment suggests that young people may view education as a more accessible and controllable goal compared to economic success, or that societal messaging about the necessity of higher education has been internalized to a greater degree.

Understanding these discrepancies is crucial for shaping effective youth policy and support programs. Policymakers should enhance career counseling and mentorship programs across schools, colleges, and community centers, ensuring that guidance is both accessible and tailored to individual career paths. This approach would help build realistic self-assessment and professional confidence. Additionally, implementing targeted financial literacy education can equip youth with practical skills in budgeting, saving, and investing, which in turn eases the pressure to meet high economic standards. Public messaging campaigns also play a key role; by highlighting diverse and realistic career paths and success stories, these campaigns can counteract the narrow narratives that contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Integrating education more closely with labor market demands through internships, apprenticeships, and vocational training programs can further bridge the gap between academic achievements and real-world job readiness. Finally, expanding mental health services in educational settings will help young people manage societal pressures, develop a balanced self-perception, and ultimately achieve a closer alignment between what they believe they should accomplish and what they feel capable of achieving.

7.7 References

Baird, C. L., Burge, S. W., & Reynolds, J. R. (2008). Absurdly ambitious? Teenagers' expectations for the future and the realities of social structure. *Sociology Compass*, *2*(3), 944–962.

Beal, S. J., Crockett, L. J., & Peugh, J. (2016). Adolescents' changing future expectations predict the timing of adult role transitions. *Developmental Psychology*, *52*(10), 1606.

Doepke, M., & Zilibotti, F. (2019). Love, money, and parenting: How economics explains the way we raise our kids. In *Love, money, and parenting*. Princeton University Press.

Eurostat. (2023). *When do young Europeans leave their parental home?* https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230904-1#:~:text=articles%20ec,average%20varied%20among%20EU%20countries

Heinz, W. R. (2009). Youth transitions in an age of uncertainty. In *Handbook of youth and young adulthood* (pp. 19–29). Routledge.

Reynolds, J., Stewart, M., MacDonald, R., & Sischo, L. (2006). Have adolescents become too ambitious? High school seniors' educational and occupational plans, 1976 to 2000. *Social Problems*, *53*(2), 186–206.

Schoon, I. (2010). Planning for the future: Changing education expectations in three British cohorts. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 99–119.

Settersten Jr, R. A., & Ray, B. (2010). What's going on with young people today? The long and twisting path to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 19–41.

Walther, A. (2006). Regimes of youth transitions: Choice, flexibility and security in young people's experiences across different European contexts. *Young*, *14*(2), 119–139.

8. Youth in broader socio-cultural context

Miran Lavrič and Vesna Godina Vuk

Slovenian youth navigate a dynamic socio-cultural environment in which social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes play pivotal roles. Such beliefs and orientations are particularly influential during adolescence and early adulthood, when identities are formed and mental health vulnerabilities can emerge (Simpson, 2007). Social trust—encompassing both generalized trust in society and interpersonal trust within close networks—has been linked to more robust well-being, largely because it fosters cooperative relationships, social support, and a sense of security (Hardin, 2002). Similarly, religiosity, when personally meaningful, can provide a coping framework and sense of purpose that may mitigate stress and uncertainty (Koenig, 2023). Meanwhile, pro-social attitudes such as egalitarianism and altruism promote community cohesion and collective efficacy, both of which are vital for young people facing social or economic disruptions (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Putnam, 2000). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, these constructs have grown even more significant, as prolonged isolation, disrupted educational pathways, and broader societal changes introduce additional challenges to youth mental health (Kye & Hwang, 2020). By examining social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes in tandem, this chapter aims to illuminate how these factors intersect during a pivotal developmental stage and how they may either buffer or exacerbate the effects of crises on youth well-being.

8.1 Social trust

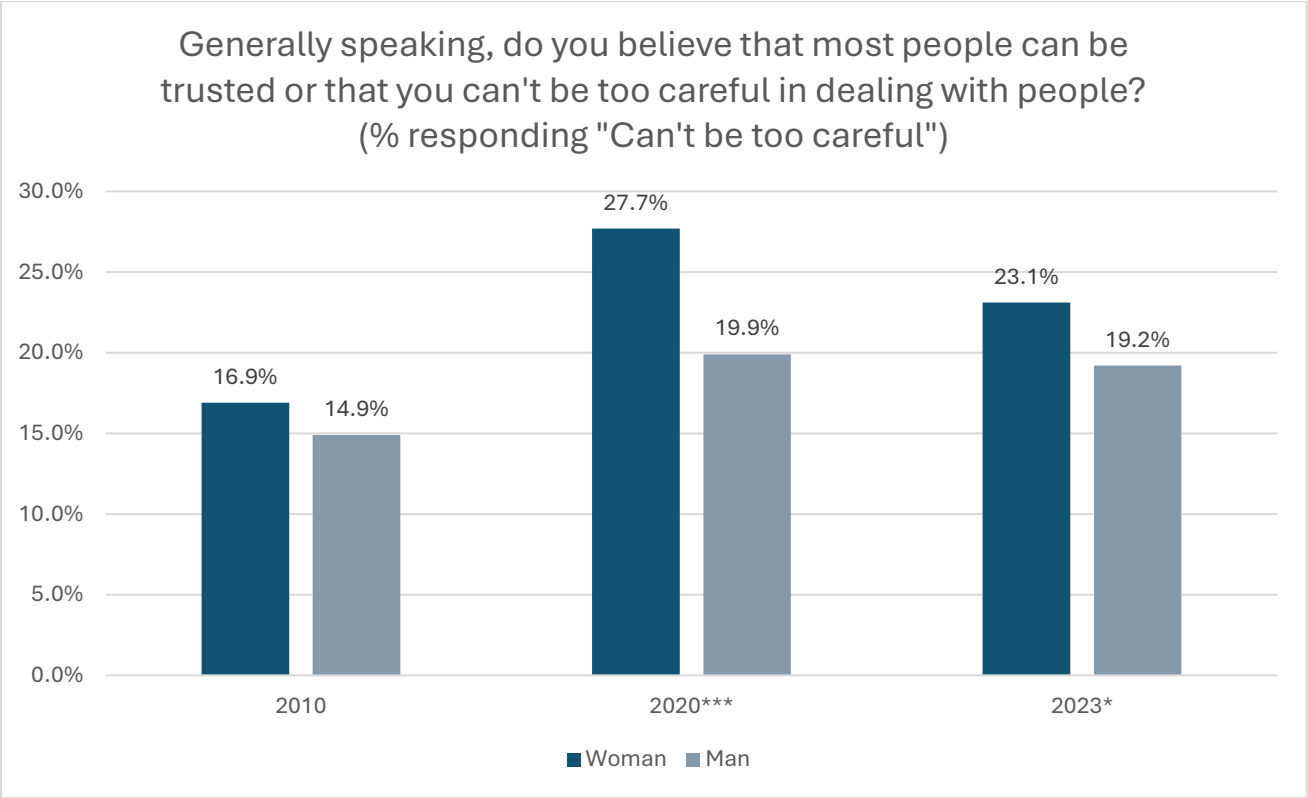
Social trust is defined as the belief in the reliability, truthfulness, or competence of an individual or group to perform a promised or expected action (Hardin, 2002). It is crucial for fostering both interpersonal relationships and subjective well-being (Simpson, 2007). A considerable volume of research has examined the impact of trust on various dimensions of subjective well-being and mental health, identifying numerous moderators and mediators that influence this relationship. Trust is also widely acknowledged as a beneficial factor specifically for the well-being of young people, with familial trust being especially strongly correlated with their well-being, psychosocial functioning, and mental health (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022).

8.1.1 Generalized social trust

Our initial analysis focuses on generalized social trust, which reflects an individual's belief that most people are trustworthy. This type of trust is typically assessed using the survey question: "Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?". Generalized trust is notable for its stability and independence from specific individual or group traits, making it abstract and rooted in broader societal norms and institutions rather than personal experiences. Associations between generalized trust and positive outcomes such as happiness, life satisfaction, subjective health have been established (e.g. Adedeji et al., 2023; Helliwell & Wang, 2010). Research focusing on young people has found that general trust is positively associated with psychosocial adjustment (Betts et al., 2017; Rotenberg et al., 2021), and overall mental well-being (Haugstvedt, 2023).

For our measures of generalized social trust, we utilized data from the Slovenian national studies Youth 2010 (Lavrič et al., 2011) and Youth 2020 (Lavrič and Deželan, 2021), where the same question was posed to similar samples of Slovenian youth. Analysis of mean values on a scale from 1 to 10 shows a significant decrease in trust from 2010 ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 2.17$) to 2020 ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 2.22$). The 2020 survey, conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of school closures, likely influenced this drop in trust. By 2023, however, the level of generalized trust had not only rebounded but exceeded the 2010 levels ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 2.41$). Further analysis revealed a widening gender gap in generalized trust during the pandemic, with women reporting significantly lower levels of trust. The difference between men and women, not statistically significant in 2010 ($t(1152) = 0.58$, $p > 0.05$), became large and significant in 2020 ($t(1158)=4.31$, $p < 0.001$) and remained significant in 2023 ($t(1282) = 2.40$, $p < 0.05$).

Graph 8.1: Extreme generalized social distrust across time.



*Note: *** p < 0.001; * p < 0.05 (statistical significance was established by t-tests).*

Notably (Graph 8.1), the proportion of young women reporting the absolute lowest level of trust (a score of 1 on a 1 to 10 scale) increased dramatically in 2020. Extreme distrust among young women rose from 17% in 2010 to 28% in 2020, while the increase was more modest among young men (from 15% to 20%). Though distrust levels have decreased post-pandemic, they remain worse than in 2010, both in terms of levels of distrust and gender differences.

Generalized social trust among Slovenian youth declined significantly during the period between 2010 and 2020, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, although it rebounded by 2023 to a level slightly higher than in 2010. Notably, this downturn in trust was sharper for women than men, widening the gender gap and highlighting the disproportionate impact the pandemic had on women's social trust and, by extension, their psychological well-being.

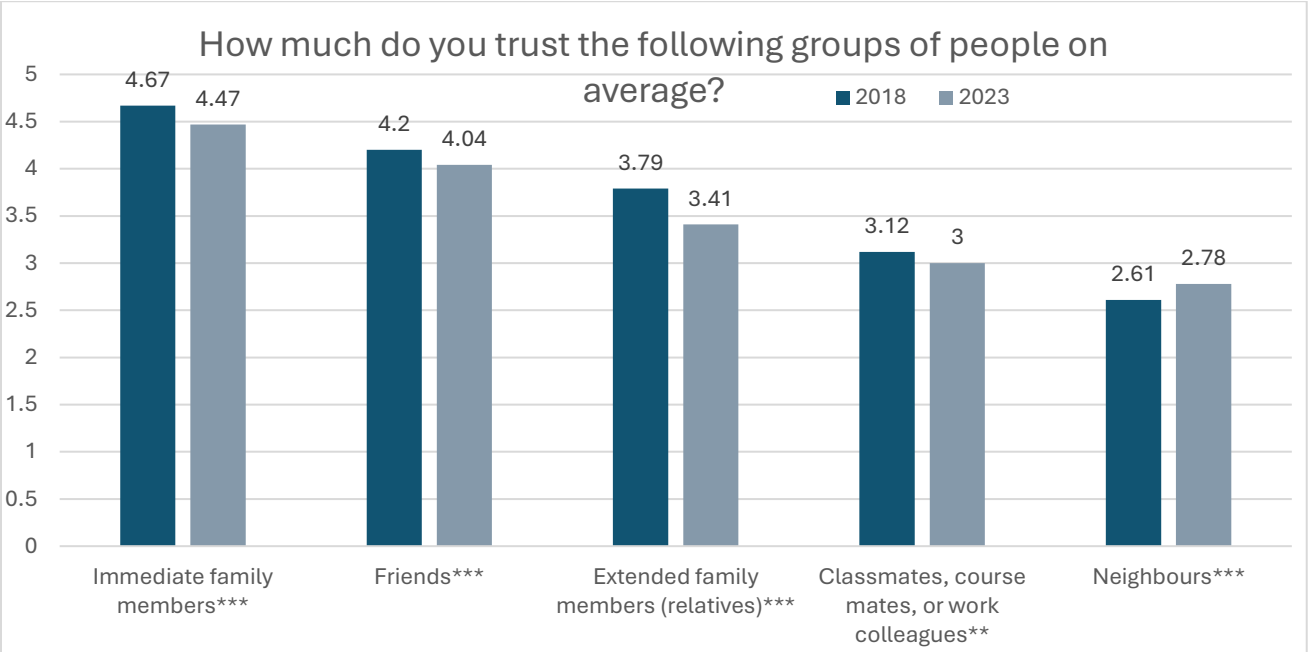
The observed decline in generalized social trust during the COVID-19 pandemic aligns with broader evidence showing that heightened uncertainty, restricted social interaction, and the strain of public health measures can erode trust in others (Kye & Hwang, 2020). Such declines are especially consequential given the established link between social trust and psychological well-being (Helliwell & Wang, 2010). When trust levels fall, individuals may experience increased stress, lower perceived social support, and a heightened sense of vulnerability—factors that can negatively influence mental health (Han et al., 2021).

The data also reveal a widening gender gap in trust, with women reporting notably lower levels of trust during and following the pandemic. This finding is consistent with research showing that the pandemic placed disproportionate caregiving, educational, and emotional burdens on women (Power, 2020). Because social trust is closely tied to mental health, these compounded pressures likely contributed to higher distress among women, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions that acknowledge and address the distinct challenges they face.

8.1.2 Particularized interpersonal trust

Next, we analyzed trends in terms of trust in different social groups or institutions that are important to young people and their well-being. In contrast to the generalized social trust, we are thus focusing on particularized trust, which pertains to relationships with individuals in a young person's immediate environment, such as family members or peers with whom one shares a direct personal connection. Research indicates that low interpersonal trust during adolescence is associated with lower peer acceptance and greater aggression, social nonengagement, peer rejection, loneliness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (e.g. Betts et al., 2017). The presence of trusted relationships, on the other hand, can even serve as a protective factor against the onset of mental illness (Grzegorzewska & Farnicka, 2016). For young individuals, particularly trust in family members is crucial for fostering healthy attachments, essential for their psychosocial functioning and subjective well-being (Fett et al., 2016; Grzegorzewska & Farnicka, 2016).

Graph 8.2: Young people's particularized trust in different social groups.



*Note: *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01 (statistical significance was established by t-tests).*

As shown in Graph 8.2, interpersonal trust has declined significantly across most dimensions of our survey between 2018 and 2023. Specifically, young people report lower levels of trust in their immediate and extended family members, as well as in their friends, classmates, and/or work colleagues. The only slight increase observed pertains to trust in neighbors.

Between 2018 and 2023, interpersonal trust among young people declined significantly, especially among women. Interestingly, trust in neighbors slightly increased, likely due to a renewed sense of local solidarity during stay-at-home orders.

It is worth noting that we also compared trust in the national parliament as an example of a state institution. The results show a similar trend to that of interpersonal trust, with trust in parliament declining significantly between 2018 (M = 2.17) and 2023 (M = 1.88).

These findings fit into the broader pattern of pandemic-induced disruptions to social cohesion among young people. Although generalized social trust in Slovenia eventually rebounded after 2020, the more granular data show that the COVID-19 crisis, coupled with extended school closures, eroded day-to-day bonds with close contacts—family members, friends, and classmates/colleagues. Social distancing and remote learning reduced face-to-face interaction and strained relationships in these tighter circles, leaving many young people feeling more isolated

and less trusting. Interestingly, the one dimension of interpersonal trust that did rise—trust in neighbors—likely reflects a renewed sense of local solidarity forged by stay-at-home orders and the practical need to rely on immediate surroundings.

Additional analyses further show that the decline in trust in both immediate and extended family members was sharper for women than men, mirroring the widening gender gap observed in generalized social trust. These results underscore the pandemic's disproportionate toll on women's social trust and psychological well-being. Together, the findings suggest that although generalized trust may have rebounded by 2023, the lingering impact of pandemic restrictions continues to affect the closest relationships among young people.

8.2 Religiosity

Religiosity has consistently been associated with better psychological well-being, as illustrated by a range of comprehensive reviews (e.g. Lucchetti et al., 2021) and meta-analyses (e.g. Hoogeveen et al., 2023). In particular, established patterns of religious coping have been shown to mitigate distress during the transition to adulthood (Eliassen et al., 2005).

In many respects, religiosity mirrors social trust by shaping the social support processes that occur within close relationships (Merino, 2014). Studies indicate that religious participation enhances access to social support, thus fostering greater well-being. It also promotes community activities, the practice of forgiveness, and the formation of social capital beneficial to both individuals and broader communities (Koenig, 2023). It is therefore not very surprising that a recent study (Rutar et al., 2025) reports that higher religiosity can buffer the negative psychological impact of low social trust, suggesting that faith may serve as an emotional substitute when social trust is lacking.

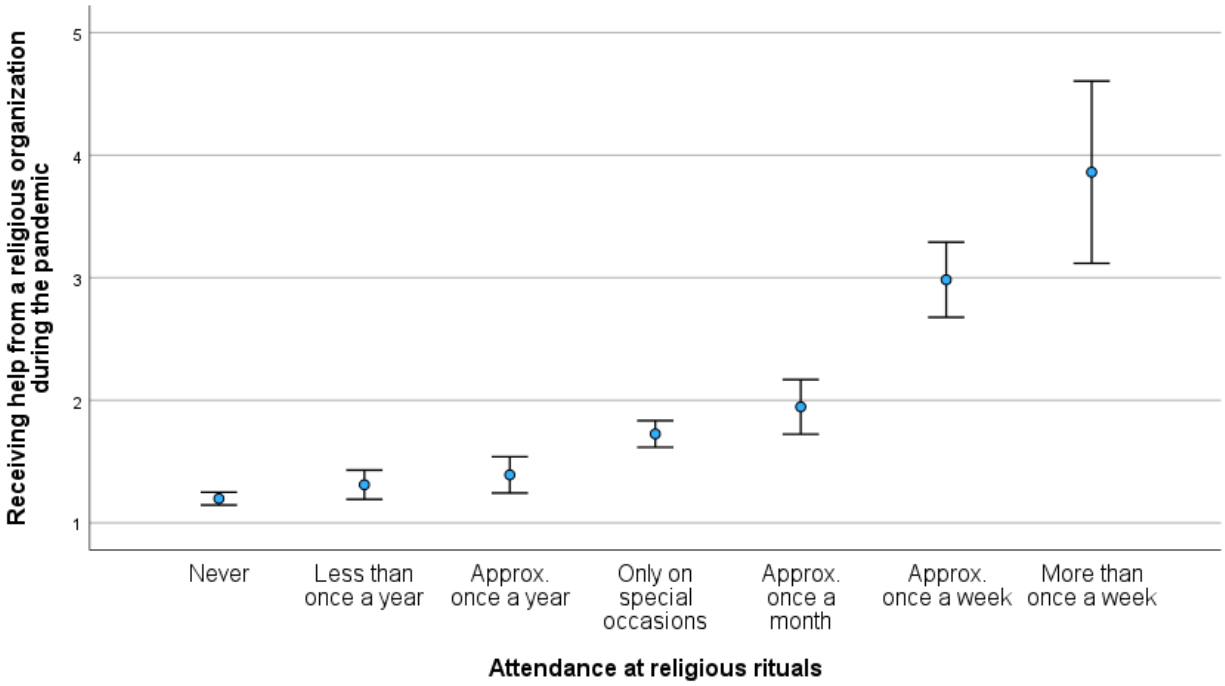
Turning to Slovenian youth, empirical evidence shows that religion is relatively unimportant in their lives compared to other countries in the region (Flere and Klanjšek, 2007; Toš, 1999; Lavrič, 2013). Research by Lavrič and Boroja (2014) further highlights a long-term trend of declining religiosity among young people in Slovenia. A more recent study (Lavrič, 2019) points to the ongoing privatization of religion, with youth rapidly disengaging from institutional faith—particularly Roman Catholicism—yet simultaneously reporting a slight rise in the importance of God in one's life between 2013 and 2018.

In the present study, we compared two indicators of religiosity between 2018 and 2023 and found no significant changes in either measure. Mean values for both the reported importance of God in

everyday life and reported church attendance remained roughly the same over this five-year period.

The fact that religiosity remained relatively low overall does not imply that it had no influence on how young people coped with the COVID-19 pandemic and related social circumstances. In our survey, we also examined whether participants received help from a religious organization during this period. They responded to the question, "*During the pandemic, how much did a religious organization help you in asserting your rights or solving life problems?*" using a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Graph xy illustrates the strong relationship between respondents' level of religiosity and the extent of help received from a religious organization during the pandemic.

Graph 8.3: The relationship between attendance at religious services and receiving help from a religious organization during the pandemic.



While the correlation ($r = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$) between religious service attendance and receiving help from a religious organization is noteworthy, the key question is whether any measure of religiosity predicts youth psychological well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To explore this, we ran a multiple linear regression using a single-item measure of negative psychological affect as the outcome variable ("During the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear, and anger"). The three religious variables were used as predictors, and we controlled for gender, age, type of settlement, mother's education, and household financial situation. Results showed that the importance of God in a young person's life had a small but significant negative association with negative affect ($\beta = -0.082$, $p < 0.05$), whereas the other two religiosity variables did not demonstrate a significant effect.

Longitudinal data show that religiosity among Slovenian youth has stayed at relatively low levels, with no significant shifts in either reported church attendance or the importance of God between 2018 and 2023. Although religiosity is generally associated with psychological well-being, our analysis found that only the personal importance of God offered a modest

protective effect during the pandemic, while the other indicators had no significant impact.

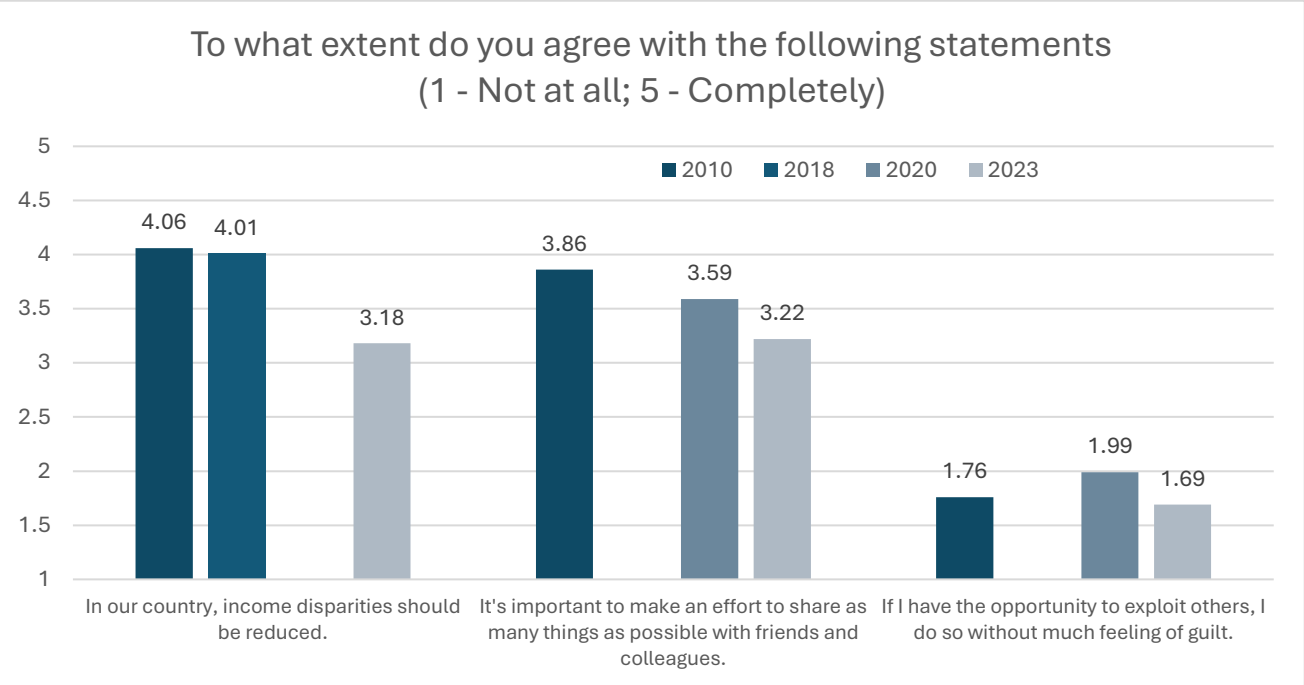
These findings suggest that, among Slovenian youth, the personal importance of God can serve as a modest protective factor against negative emotional experiences during major social disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the regression results indicate that a stronger sense of God's importance in one's life is associated with reduced levels of reported distress ($\beta = -0.082$, $p < .05$), even when controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors. Notably, neither church attendance nor receiving help from a religious organization significantly predicted lower negative affect. This pattern implies that the subjective, internalized and privatized aspect of religiosity—rather than formal religious participation or institutional support—may be most relevant for emotional well-being.

However, the small effect size underscores that religiosity is only one of many factors influencing psychological responses to crises, warranting further investigation into how varying dimensions of spirituality and religious practice intersect with other social and personal resources.

8.3 Broader attitudes on social issues

Young people's attitudes toward social issues are a key element of how they position themselves within the social sphere and can have significant implications for their psychological well-being. In our survey, we measured three such attitudes: egalitarianism, altruism, and egoism.

Graph 8.4: Average agreement with selected pro-social attitudes in longitudinal perspective.



As shown in Graph 8.4, there is a pronounced decline in pro-social attitudes—specifically agreement with the statements "*It's important to make an effort to share as many things as possible with friends and colleagues*" and "*In our country, income disparities should be reduced.*" This decline was especially strong between 2020 and 2023, the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, agreement with the egoistic statement ("*If I have the opportunity to exploit others, I do so without much feeling of guilt*") slightly decreased during the same period, returning to approximately the level observed in 2010.

Between 2020 and 2023, Slovenian youth showed a sharp decline in pro-social attitudes such as egalitarianism and altruism, possibly due to the

pandemic's aftermath. Because altruism and egalitarianism play a critical role in fostering social support and community cohesion, their decline may have significant implications for young people's psychological well-being.

The observed trends in social attitudes among Slovenian youth—namely the decline in egalitarian and altruistic orientations following the COVID-19 pandemic—can have important implications for their psychological well-being. Altruism and egalitarianism are widely understood to foster social support networks, bolster feelings of belonging, and mitigate stress by promoting pro-social behavior (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Consequently, a reduction in these orientations may be associated with weakened peer relationships, an erosion of collective cohesion, and thus lower resilience to life stressors (Thoits, 1995; Taylor, 2011; Putnam, 2000).

8.4 Towards policy measures: Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with experts

The YOVID research in Slovenia included semi-structured interviews with experts, where data were collected on how young people coped with the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant changes in social circumstances. These interviews also explored the connections between the pandemic, altered social conditions, and the social and psychological well-being of young people. Furthermore, experts provided recommendations for developing and implementing productive and effective youth policies in Slovenian society.

There is a general consensus among the experts that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated changes in social circumstances had a negative impact on the social and psychological well-being of children and adolescents. However, the experts emphasized that this relationship should not be seen as causal—that is, the COVID-19 pandemic should not be viewed as the direct cause of psychological issues, suffering, and disorders among children and adolescents. Instead, the prevailing view among the experts is that social and psychological problems, suffering, and disorders existed prior to the pandemic. The changes brought about by COVID-19 in the social environments of young people merely triggered these pre-existing issues. Therefore, COVID-19 was not the root cause of the social and psychological problems experienced during the pandemic; rather, it acted as a catalyst that exposed already existing issues. One expert from a public institution said:

> "*And the problems were not triggered by just one thing; I find it easier to think about the intertwining of changing values and attitudes, the possibilities of accessing basic resources (how to get money, how to get housing, how to get a reputation - and in what order), new technologies, etc. …Covid caused small excess that upset the balance*."

Another expert from another public institution describes her understanding of the role COVID-19 pandemic played in psychological distress of children and young people as follows:

> "*Before Covid, there were people who had some problems, and these problems increased. Then you have a group of people who are actually more vulnerable, because they have high risk factors…: such as poverty, such as cultural difference, such as cultural exclusion, such as parents with mental health problems, with severe special needs. Well, you can somehow*

manage that, if you're involved in school, you can be away from everything…But when you're at home, the risk for some problems that wouldn't have arisen otherwise increased…In general, the most vulnerable … were those who already had mental health problems or any special needs, because now they didn't have help. There were also … those who were unable to adapt to online schooling. These were second-language speakers, these were very poor, these were children who had dysfunctional families …, there were those where in family already was violence."

An expert, a specialist for mental health, talked about "everything that was already present before Covid". More precisely, he spoke about:

> *"… a negative trend in anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, in the younger population there exist pervasive disorders, autistic disorders. This has been present for a long time... In a publication published in 2018, we already reported on this trend…Certain data shows that there are more and more mental disorders and distress…We in Slovenia are in the trend of increasing mental health problems, this is a serious problem that we have in society. Covid itself happened, but this trend is not related to Covid… Covid-19 appeared when problems among young people were already on the rise.*"

In his opinion, COVID-19 pandemia:

> *"… certainly caused additional hardship, but most of these hardships were short-lived and did not have a long-term effect on the mental health of young people. During Covid-19, we were (at least that's how we imagined it) locked between four walls, and such a radical change in lifestyle (along with the threat of a dangerous virus) logically leads to various mental hardships... Covid accelerated hardships, many hardships increased, but then quickly declined. The impact of Covid was therefore short-lived. It would be difficult to argue that Covid left a longer-term mark that could be recognized in present. After the end of the epidemic, most things returned to normal.*"

Experts agree that changed social circumstances during COVID-19 pandemia were related to social isolation and that social isolation had negative effects on social and psychological well-being of children and young people. As one expert from a public institution stressed, young people *"… need socializing, but that wasn't possible. The fact that training sessions and extracurricular activities were still open at that time seems perfectly fine to me. But not everyone went there.*"

Such understanding of the role COVID-19 pandemic played in life of children and young people is also connected with experts' proposals for constructive and effective youth politics in Slovenia.

Most of their proposals suggest politics which result in strong(er) social networks in more intensive social relations.

The first group of proposals suggests **reinforcement of pro-social attitudes and activities**, especially in the form of peer-support opportunities that foster cooperation and empathy.

An expert from the non-government sector said that "we have to work on a healthy relationship, on how important socializing, informally above all, is". In her opinion, children and young people in such informal socializing should not be under a pressure "that now I must achieve something and do something". She stressed also necessary changes in family life for reinforcement of pro-social attitudes and activities: "And family life should start to normalize, relationships in the family should be more important than all 100.000 extracurricular activities and I don't know what else. Which only makes children anxious." In productive social relations children and young people should have the opportunity to talk openly about their individual problems. In her opinion, adults should ask children and adolescents questions like: "Hey, today I think you are not the best. Is everything okay? Do you want something? Do you have a crisis? Do you want to talk about it? ...I see that you are not well, would you like to talk about it?"

To develop this type of social relations, policymakers should invest in **social support networks** and **social support services, which are not part of formal mental health institutions** which are frequently connected with negative stigmatization. As an expert from a public institution said:

> "*When we think about support services, I would highlight peer support and "soft" forms of support, i.e.' low threshold' services, which offer a wide range of services and are located in environments where young people are not exposed to peer negative evaluation. These are services that do not revolve around the problem but offer things that are helpful. So, we are not talking about psychological counseling, but about career counseling, for example. This counseling is not burdened with negative stereotypes but can have a very similar effect: young people can talk to a professional about their problems that affect their career. A good solution is workshops where young people spend time together, they are creative, they connect, their free time is well spent. These things help young people who are in need for help. These activities are protective activities and they do not have a mental health connotation. This is crucial. These contents are available in the afternoons. Another group of activities are activities that enable young people to function normally, for example, activities for organized transportation. This is guaranteed to young people in Ljubljana, but not in Goričko. These services should be generally accessible to youth*."

When I asked this expert to list some other services which should be organized for young people in this way as a part of productive and effective youth politics, he answered:

> *"What are the key problems that should be solved in this way, young people themselves should say. This list should be created by them. They should say it. We don't know this. They live differently than we did at their age. Now the Internet can offer them some things that we got in personal contact. Therefore, they can see the problems in a completely different way than we do. These measures should be adapted to their needs and their vision of how to solve them… We need qualitative research here. "*

Experts also stressed the need to **establish local youth centres for skill-building and mutual support.** A network of such centres in contemporary Slovene society does not exist. This is true especially for second school pupils. As one expert from the public sector said:

> *»It bothers me that we don't have anything for teenagers. For younger kids, we have workshops, Zvezo prijateljev mladine [The Friends of Youth Association], and a bunch of other stuff. What do we have for teenagers? Where can teenagers go?... They go to a bar. And to the gym. It's a new religion for some. Of course, we have a whole bunch of people who say - I mean young people - that they are ashamed to go there because they must go, for example, they have an injury and they must go to the gym, but they don't want to go there because it's a terrible scene there. Others live for it. Gyms have replaced some other places…There should be some kind of cultural and sports centers for young people. So that they are not in a pub, that they are not in front of screens all the time. Because if they are not skaters, those who have other interests, they have nowhere to go. Unless they are intensively involved in some sport or some music or something. Most young people drop out of some afternoon activities that would be protective for them"*

Another expert stressed importance to establish a network of:

> *»… different youth groups, which…must be intimate. From 5 to 8, maximum 10 members... Such small groups, so that we can talk. These should be completely informal groups… Just that there is some open space, where they can talk about one topic, so that they can see that they are not alone, that many people deal with same problems. Because I see also adults, not only young people, who need this experience: "Ou, so I am not the only one!"*

The same expert also stressed the importance of healthy sports activities: "*As informal as possible. And as less competitive as possible*." Another expert from a public institution describes activities in such centers as follows: "*You can come just to hang out and talk, but you can also come for sports, table tennis, you can have, I don't know, karate classes, you can have something artistic, you can have theater, you can have karaoke, whatever - just so you don't have to be in front of the screen all day*."

That means that youth clubs or youth centers should offer **structured activities to young people.** A productive and effective youth politics in Slovenia should invest in establishing of such clubs/centers.

On the other hand, experts also emphasized that an important part of productive and effective youth politics in Slovenia should be **accessible psychological support for children and young people.** In their opinion, policymakers should invest in accessible mental health resources, especially because during COVID-19 pandemia some psychological distresses increased dramatically. An expert from a public institution reported: »*Yes, self-harm, and depression. Anxiety and depression were the ones that I think increased the most, for approximately 20, 30 percents.*" *Another expert describes this situation as follows: "I would like to highlight the increase of distress, which was reflected primarily in higher levels of experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety*."

The same expert stresses that also the fact that **the increase of distress during COVID-19 pandemia was connected with material well-being of the family:**

> "*During the pandemic, we detected worrying differences among children and adolescents, which appeared in depressive symptoms and the presence of suicidal thoughts, according to their self-estimation of the material well-being of their families…This was essentially an analysis we did on data collected during the Covid period. This is a study that has been conducted for over 20 years, and during the Covid period we conducted a cross-sectional study with a special focus on the material well-being of their own family, as assessed by young people themselves. These were 11-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 15-year-olds and 17-year-olds. The trend of worsening mental health in relation to the material well-being of the family was already present before. However, this study showed that the presence of depressive disorders increases for the factor 2 and the same applies to suicidal thoughts in relation to the material well-being of the family. Young people assessed their families as "well-off", "average" and "below average". The results of the study showed that children and young people who rated their families as "average" had the presence of depressive disorder and suicidal thoughts for the factor 2 higher compared to children and young people who rated their families as "above*

average". The same applies to children and young people who rated their families as "below average" – the presence of depressive disorder and suicidal thoughts was for the factor 2 higher than in children and young people from "average" families."

Based on negative experienced during COVID-19 pandemia experts propose several activities for improvement of mental health and mental well-being among children and young people.

The first proposal is **to offer basic, well-organized information about mental health to children and young people.** An expert from the public sector stresses: »For young people in need, there should be information on how they can access certain information, not online - because you know what this information online is. Maybe not more information. Maybe some more targeted information."

The second proposal suggests **more centres for mental health of children and adolescents.** Experts stress the need for more "counselling centres so that young people can find spaces where they can share their inner psychological distress". In their opinion such centres are necessary because waiting lists for psychological help for children and young people also today, many years after COVID-19 pandemia, "are bizarre" (an expert from the non-government).

After COVID-19 pandemia, there has been some positive changes concerning centres for mental health of children and young people. An expert from a public institution reports:

> "*They have done quite a bit in healthcare. They have created some centers for the mental health of children and adolescents. I know many of them have been opened around the country now. And they have employed a lot of new psychologists who are not yet qualified for this work. This will get better over time, but right now it is a transitional period... But such centers are good, because not everyone has a disorder.*"

However, the same expert points out that in such centers **qualified stuff is needed**, what today in Slovenia is a problem:

> "... if unqualified staff work, I don't know if we have done much. We can even do harm with this. Now I don't know how many young psychologists have been employed in some services and in fact they call us because they don't know how to go around and what they should actually do."

Experts also insist that **more could be done for mental health and psychological well-being of children and youth in schools.** An expert from the public sector said: "*It seems to me that school consulting services could play a bigger role, a different role.*"

According to him, already during COVID-19 pandemia, some extra employment in schools had been realized:

> "*During the pandemic, additional employment took place. This was a government measure. First temporarily, then permanently. And everything that crawls and goes has been employed additionally…. The staff increased for I don't know how many percent during the Corona, because every school got another one or a half employed in consulting services… And now there are many school workers who have no idea what to do…They don't know what to do. Our institution informs them that they can come to us, that we have this and that. No, they are not capable. And the management abuses them for some administrative matters … They don't actually know what to do with these children. Especially those: half pedagogics, half I don't know what… Well, and now we in our institution have a plan, if the project is accepted, we will start training counselors in the fall, they will be able to work in schools with those children who are easier cases...That is, equip the counseling service to provide psychological first aid, to provide some valid programs… More on prevention. And some curative work. Now they don't do prevention, because they are overwhelmed with other paperwork - because if two kids fight, you have at least 4 hours of paper administrative work... Yes, once again: a lot of things have been done, a lot of people have been employed, a lot of well-intentioned, also a lot of good things, but it is not always very effective*."

In experts' opinion what is missing in contemporary school consulting services is the appropriate knowledge of how to work for benefit of children's and youth's mental health.

This is the reason why experts stress that an important part of productive and effective youth politics in Slovenia should be also **education and training for teachers and youth workers**. This education should equip teachers and youth workers for early detection of psychological distress and for basic help in milder forms of psychological distresses.

According to experts, today Slovene schools delegate children with extreme and major psychological problems in the specialized institutions, but there exists no help for those with milder problems: "*Those who have, I would say, extreme or major problems, they somehow end up somewhere, while for those who have milder problems there exist no help!*" (an expert from the public sector). The same expert stresses an urgent need **to educate specialists employed in school consulting services**:

> "*What I miss the most, and I've been working now for 30 years, is the education and training, a systematic, additional specialist knowledge for those who work in school consulting services. Many people are employed in these services, and they are actually left to their own.*

There are some institutions like the institutes and the ministry, which offer some extra education for them – but have you ever gone into the content of those trainings? Better not, because you also have charlatans there…We have that too…Very suspicious practices…That's why I emphasized "evidence-based" practices so much… But if someone in school advises you as a parent that you must tap child's head with something, or I don't know, that you must practice some suspicious diets, and then the disorder will disappear, then…"

Another expert from the non-government sector proposes also some extra **education for primary and secondary school teachers**:

"So maybe the teaching staff in primary and secondary schools could somehow be trained in regulation - some exercises for regulation or for synchronizing the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Which is also very good for concentration… I once had a group of teachers, a small one, and they asked me, for example: "What to do when they don't want to listen?" I said: "Do some exercises - some exercises for the left, some exercises for the right hemispheres of the brain - a minute, two… Do it at the start of class, and kids' concentration will be just fine. Plus, they'll learn what they need and what works for them…"

If teachers and specialists in school consulting services were educated to help children and adolescents with milder psychological problems, this would have important effects for the whole pyramid established for mental care of children and adolescents:

"If we look at this pyramid, at the top we have narrowly specialized institutions, lower there are those little more general, and then you have what we do in schools, at the very bottom is prevention. Today in schools we cover perhaps half of them, only some of them with whom we could work…"

Today also children and adolescents with milder psychological problems are automatically send into very specialized institutions, what is contra-productive social practice: "Now psychiatrists do things that they shouldn't. They are overwhelmed with work because of that…" (an expert from the public sector). One important result of this unproductive practice are already mentioned long waiting lists for specialized psychological and psychiatric help for children and adolescents with serious psychological problems. The same experts stresses that what we need in Slovenia is that

"…more of the existing staff should be trained in more specialized skills… They would be trained to solve some specialized or special problems that occur in children, which are not yet, for example, disorders or dysfunctions… So that as soon as this occurs, we would have someone to help the child… There should be more such programs. That would make sense. So,

those in school would cover 50 children per year, and then only 3 or 4 would be sent out. Now they send 40 of them out..."

And waiting lists for specialized psychological and psychiatric help would automatically become shorter.

The same specialist reports that **experiences with such programs for employed in schools, which already exist, are not very optimistic**, because specialists in school consultation services and teachers are not interested in serious work which is needed in such education:

"*Let's say, if they go through the program and we offer basic knowledge from DKP and have a program of I don't know how many hours, they will obtain licenses, they will have to work under supervision. The program is very structured, with a workbook and they will have to do this. Do you think they will apply in masse? No, not because they must work seriously. But if you do it in this way, you do it good. This is 10 weeks program. You must do exactly what is obligatory for 10 to 12 weeks*."

Another expert from the non-government sector stresses the need **to educate all youth workers** not only in the field of mental health, but broader **for the work with children and youth in general**:

"*We have a lot of formal and informal youth workers. Here I also include educators, trainers, all of that. But it's true that not everyone is qualified - which I think is a deficiency...Because you see, you can't do your job well if you don't acquire certain professional skills. This is where I think the biggest shortcoming lies...I think we need to structure this a little more, to have more structured training.... Maybe we in the non-government sphere are ones who, out of the needs we have - because we have young people and children in afternoon activities or in this free time -, we see this need*."

When I asked this expert who today offers to youth workers the knowledge they need, she answered: "*Well, it seemed to me that various associations and societies offer it in practice. But the state still doesn't*."

Not only this expert but also other experts stress the need that **university should introduce new study programs** which will offer practical knowledge for work with children and adolescents in general and in mental health care in particular. An expert from the non-government sector stresses this need as follows: "At university perhaps the entire curriculum for studies should change, for example for pedagogics." Another expert from the public sector stresses the necessity for such changes, too:

> "*In the field of health, you have a clinical specialization. If you are employed as a psychologist, we have specializations here. But not within the field of education and pedagogics - here you are left with knowledge from study, which is not always appropriate…That is, we need professional specialization for school counseling services…Here is the role of the faculty to create, for example, a specialization for school consulting services. That is practically necessary*."

Another problem stressed by experts is **a lack of modern specialistic knowledge and modern specialized methods** for the work with children and adolescents. An expert from the non-government sectors reports:

> "*Even those of us adults who work with young people daily now need different skills than we used to. I've been in this youth sector for 15 years, and things have changed so much. For example, I had to go to America to get this knowledge. Here you can get 8 hours of education, 16 hours of education, but nothing more… I've also started my education now in EDMR, I've already finished the first level, I've finished therapeutic methods specifically for trauma, for post-traumatic stress disorder. Because these are coming. This lady who taught us is a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. And she said that in Italy they have a completely different system than we have in Slovenia. EMDR therapy is obligatory there. When there is a fire, a strike, a shooting, anything - there is an immediate activation at the state level of all EMDR psychotherapists, partly from the health sector, they go into the field and are paid for it, if they cannot work in their practice at that time. The state takes care of it, to restore the psychosocial stability of the population…But we in Slovenia have only volunteers. I know two who go to these areas where there were floods and talk to people, they provide basic psychosocial assistance. The state does not have this. You go to volunteer work, you go, drive there, take your time - well, it takes a lot of time, for one such family you can sit with them for at least 80 hours for sure… In our country, this is not regulated by the state*."

That means that in Slovenia we must **introduce state care program for psychological stability of population.** And a **state care program for psychological stability of children and young people** must be a crucial part of this project.

Experts also mention some other open problems which for a productive and effective youth politics in Slovenia should be resolved. First, the importance of **active role of young people in creation of such politics** was stressed. An expert from the public sector says, that what we need in Slovenia are

> *"…policies that are co-created with young people. I think the way policies are prepared is more important than the content. I think it is important to co-shape policies with young people to a much greater extent… We need to focus on needs that young people express themselves. I prefer to see fewer policies and more implementation… I think the main problem with many policies is that documents are signed and then they are not implemented or are only partially implemented. So, the problem is implementation. And one way to increase implementation is to create policies together with the implementers*."

When I asked him who should co-shape polities with young people, he answered: "Those who have the money to pay for such policies…Yes, the ministries."

The same expert also stressed **the importance of implementation of youth policies on local level:** "… as many policies as possible should be implemented at the regional or local level, adapted to local needs." When asked who should implement youth policies on these local levels - Schools? Social centers? NGOs? Mental health centres? Parents? Teachers? Social workers? Etc.– the respondent answered: "*I think it is difficult to say in general. It depends on the concrete case. But it is very important that an agreement on the implementation of these policies should be reached already in the creation of them*."

Generally, interviewed experts are not satisfied with the role that government and different ministries play in creation and realization of youth politics. They insist that the **role of government and ministries in youth politics should be more productive.** An expert from the non-government sector reports that cooperation with the state and ministries includes only temporary visits to their center:

> "*They came for some visits. Because we had a trainee from abroad who did an internship with us as a youth worker... And they arrange internships for them here. And they came here to visit their students. And they came. And we showed them the entire center, the system of work - but this usually is the end*."

In her opinion, the state and the **Ministry of Education do not play the role they should play in the education of youth workers**:

> "*So, here is something wrong - at least I have not noticed, and now correct me if I am wrong - but I do not have the feeling that the state, that is, the Ministry of Education or the Institute of Education, have noticed this need and launch some more organized form of acquiring modern knowledge… I think they haven't responded to that, even if they have recognized the*

need, they certainly haven't responded to it. Or they are preparing things, but nothing is known about it yet."

Another expert from the public sector reports about a **lack of cooperation between different ministries,** especially between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health:

"*I think that there should be more of this inter-department cooperation - that is, between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Social Affairs - this is also something that is not possible. It happened in the one case, "The Child's House". You can google it. This is one project: children who are victims of abuse should have the opportunity to speak out safely. Here, these three departments have connected and done something good. But this is not enough. For many other things, they should connect. In concrete cases, it's not just school, which is a problem, but there's also health connected with concrete problem, and sometimes also different social issues.*"

As a concrete example, where such connection failed, she reports that "the Ministry of Education did not want to finance the school refusal program".

The third expert reports about **problems** his institution had at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic **with the Ministry of health**:

"*… we initiated the initiative with the government, the Ministry of Health, but there was no response. We responded to the situation immediately, they were dealing with other issues, the Ministry of Health was bursting at the seams – they were not prepared for the situation, which is a consequence of the Ministry of Health's limited resources. It was not a lack of listening, but they lacked resources. But this was quickly corrected, and cooperation was fine for most of the pandemic.*"

More permanent are their **negative experiences with the Ministry of education:**

"*… As for dialogue with other departments, I would first say that I come from the position of expert in the field of mental health and that other colleagues in my institution may have had much better experiences. My experience was that, especially in the field of education, they were very reluctant to make changes to the way they work (e.g., changes in the conditions for advancing to a new year of education, additional exam deadlines, changes in the amount of assessed material, etc.), even though their demands on pupils, secondary school pupils, and students were often a greater burden for them than all the other measures to restrict movement, etc. Why was that? Education has a long tradition, they don't like to hear someone else (e.g., us from healthcare) explain to them what and why they should do what. There are*

certainly many other reasons - and not all experiences were so bad... but let's say that this would be my answer to this question."

All experts agree that for productive youth politics in Slovenia **more cooperation between different ministries, between ministries and institutions in the public sector and between ministries and institutions in the non-government sector** is needed.

An expert from the non-government sector stressed also that for productive youth politics in Slovenia "this **bizarre war between the government and the non-government sectors** on the topic of psychotherapy and this" **must end**. She adds: "It seems to me that everyone still wants their own little garden, and the common social good is basically not important."

As the last proposal given by experts for productive youth politics in Slovenia I would like to stress the **importance of permanent evaluation.** An expert from the public sector describes this importance as follows:

»*... It is primarily important that policies are set up in a way that their success can be evaluated and that, in accordance with the information from the evaluation processes, these policies are changed and improved. Here, I can give you an example: today we had an expert lecture from Norway here in Athens; they decided to increase awareness of suicide, they used classic marketing techniques, they designed measures, recorded how people reacted to them, where problems arose. They found that despite the measures implemented, attitudes towards seeking help in the event of suicide had not changed. They knew the problems, asked themselves what could be improved and introduced improvements: they simplified the campaign slogan - they switched from two slogans to one, they advertised more on social networks, not only in classic media, etc. This is how things should be done: whatever we do, we know what we want to achieve, we monitor changes, if there are no changes, we react, we change measures, implementation. Measures are designed with a certain logic, it is understood why they are there, what should change, if change does not appear, we take action.*"

When asked if such a logic is practiced in Slovenia, the respondent answered: "*Practically not.*"

8.5 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of shifting levels of social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes among Slovenian youth, illustrating how these changes may influence their psychological well-being and broader social cohesion. The main findings are as follows:

- **Generalized social trust among Slovenian youth declined significantly** between 2010 and 2020, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but rebounded by 2023 to a level slightly higher than in 2010. These findings are consistent with experts' observations, whereby experts emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic acted more as a catalyst rather than a direct cause of psychological and social issues. Notably, the downturn was sharper for women than for men, widening the gender gap and underscoring the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women's social trust—and, by extension, their psychological well-being.

- **Interpersonal trust also declined significantly** between 2018 and 2023, especially among women. Interestingly, trust in neighbors rose slightly, likely reflecting a renewed sense of local solidarity during stay-at-home orders.

- **Religiosity among Slovenian youth has remained relatively low**, with no significant changes in reported church attendance or the importance of God between 2018 and 2023. Although religiosity is generally associated with psychological well-being, only the personal importance of God showed a modest protective effect during the pandemic, while the other indicators had no significant impact. Experts also indicated that personal spirituality provided some resilience during the pandemic.

- **Pro-social attitudes (e.g., egalitarianism and altruism) experienced a sharp decline** between 2020 and 2023, possibly as a result of pandemic-related disruptions. Given that these attitudes underpin social support and community cohesion, their decline could have considerable consequences for young people's psychological well-being. Experts suggest that the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, leading to a decline in these attitudes.

To address these findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Gender-Specific Interventions**: Policies should focus on providing targeted support for women, acknowledging the disproportionate impact of social changes on their trust and
- well-being. Initiatives could include community-based programs and mental health resources tailored for women.
- **Strengthening Pro-social Behavior**: In light of declining pro-social attitudes, fostering these through structured community engagement is crucial. Schools and local governments could facilitate activities that promote empathy, cooperation, and civic engagement among youth.
- **Mental Health Services**: Expand access to mental health services within non-religious settings to cater to the diverse needs of young people. This could include integrating these services in schools and community centers to provide accessible support without the stigma often associated with formal mental health care.
- **Peer Support and Informal Networks**: Encourage the development of peer support structures and informal social networks that can provide emotional and social support. This approach aligns with expert recommendations for enhancing youth resilience and community integration.
- **Holistic Approach to Youth Policies**: Effective youth politics should integrate the insights from various sectors including education, health, and social services. A multidisciplinary approach will ensure that policies are comprehensive and address the multifaceted needs of young people.
- **Continuous Evaluation and Adaptation of Policies**: There should be a mechanism for ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of youth policies. This would allow for timely modifications based on empirical evidence and feedback from the community, ensuring that the policies remain relevant and effective in addressing the needs of the youth.

8.6 References

Adedeji, A., Olawa, B. D., Hanft-Robert, S., Olonisakin, T. T., Akintunde, T. Y., Buchcik, J., & Boehnke, K. (2023). Examining the Pathways from General Trust through Social Connectedness to subjective wellbeing. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, *18*(5), 2619–2638.

Betts, L. R., Houston, J. E., Steer, O. L., & Gardner, S. E. (2017). Adolescents' experiences of victimization: The role of attribution style and generalized trust. *Journal of School Violence*, *16*(1), 25–48.

Dunn, E. W., Aknin, L. B., & Norton, M. I. (2008). Spending money on others promotes happiness. Science, 319(5870), 1687–1688. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1150952

Eliassen, A. H., Taylor, J., & Lloyd, D. A. (2005). Subjective religiosity and depression in the transition to adulthood. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *44*(2), 187–199.

Fett, A.-K., Shergill, S. S., Korver-Nieberg, N., Yakub, F., Gromann, P. M., & Krabbendam, L. (2016). Learning to trust: Trust and attachment in early psychosis. *Psychological Medicine*, *46*(7), 1437–1447.

Flere, S., & Klanjšek, R. (2007): Ali je votlost značilnost vernosti na Slovenskem? *Družboslovne razprave*, 56, 7-20.

Grzegorzewska, I., & Farnicka, M. (2016). Attachment and the risk of mental health disorders during adolescence. *Health Psychology Report*, *4*(1), 8–15.

Han, Q., Zheng, B., Cristea, M., Agostini, M., Belginyan, A., & Ong, H. H. (2021). Trust in government regarding COVID-19 and its associations with preventive health behaviour and prosocial behaviour during the pandemic. Social Science & Medicine, 286, 114681. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114681

Hardin, R. (2002). *Trust and trustworthiness.* Russell Sage Foundation.

Haugstvedt, H. (2023). 'With a little social support…': Assessing the moderating effect of social support on risk factors and mental well-being among youth. *European Journal of Social Work*, *26*(6), 1018–1030.

Helliwell, J. F., & Wang, S. (2010). Trust and well-being. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 1(1), 42–78.

Hoogeveen, S., Sarafoglou, A., Aczel, B., Aditya, Y., Alayan, A. J., Allen, P. J., Altay, S., Alzahawi, S., Amir, Y., & Anthony, F.-V. (2023). A many-analysts approach to the relation between religiosity and well-being. *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, *13*(3), 237–283.

Kawachi, I., & Berkman, L. F. (2001). Social ties and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health*, 78(3), 458–467. https://doi.org/10.1093/jurban/78.3.458

Koenig, H. G. (2023). Religion, spirituality, and health: A review and update. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(1), 478. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010478

Kye, B., & Hwang, S. J. (2020). Social trust in the midst of pandemic: Implications from COVID-19 of South Korea. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 68, 100523. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2020.100523

Lavrič, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Youth 2010: The social profile of young people in Slovenia*. Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and sports, Office for youth. Maribor: Aristej.

Lavrič, M. (2013). Religious Change and the Impact of Religiosity upon Emancipative Values in Post-Yugoslav Countries. In: Flere, S. (2013). 20 years later: Problems and prospects of countries of former Yugoslavia. Maribor: Faculty of arts, Center for the Study of Post-Yugoslavia Societ

Lavrič, M. and Boroja, T. (2014). Trust and belonging. In: Flere, Sergej (Eds.), et al. *Slovenian youth 2013: living in times of disillusionment, risk and precarity*. Maribor: Centre for the Study of Post-Yugoslav Societies (CEPYUS), University of Maribor; Zagreb: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), 2014, pp. 197–209.

Lavrič, M. (2019). Vrednote, religija in zaupanje. In: Naterer et al. *Slovenska mladina 2018/2019*. Zagreb: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Lavrič, M. and Deželan, T. (2021). *Mladina 2020: položaj mladih v Sloveniji*. Maribor: Univerza v Mariboru, Univerzitetna založba ; Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani. Accessible via: https://press.um.si/index.php/ump/catalog/book/575.

Lucchetti, G., Góes, L. G., Amaral, S. G., Ganadjian, G. T., Andrade, I., Almeida, P. O. de A., do Carmo, V. M., & Manso, M. E. G. (2021). Spirituality, religiosity and the mental health consequences of social isolation during Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *67*(6), 672–679.

Merino, S. M. (2014). Social support and the religious dimensions of close ties. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *53*(3), 595–612.

Power, K. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(5), 788–793. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12495

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.

Rotenberg, K. J., Manley, E., & Walker, K. M. (2021). The relation between young adults' trust beliefs in others and interpersonal hostility. *Aggressive Behavior*, *47*(5), 544–556.

Rutar, M., Naterer, A., & Lavrič, M. (2025). Mental health and social trust: Age and religiosity as moderators among young people in Croatia and Slovenia. *Journal of Trust Research*, 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2025.2456270

Simpson, J. A. (2007). Psychological foundations of trust. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16(5), 264–268. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2007.00517.x

Taylor, S. E. (2011). Social support: A review. In M. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The handbook of health psychology* (pp. 189–214). Oxford University Press.

Thoits, P. A. (1995). Stress, coping, and social support processes: Where are we? What next? *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 53–79 (Extra Issue).

Toš N. (1999). (Ne)religioznost Slovencev v primerjavi z drugimi srednje-in vzhodnoevropskimi narodi. In: *Podobe o cerkvi in religiji (na Slovenskem v 90-ih)*, pp. 11-80. Ljubljana: FDV - IDV.

Tuominen, M., & Haanpää, L. (2022). Young people's well-being and the association with social capital, i.e. Social Networks, Trust and Reciprocity. *Social Indicators Research*, *159*(2), 617–645.