



The YO-VID22 Pandemic Study

Final conference

Book of abstracts

Faculty of Arts

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About the project

Fill title: YO-VID22: Wellbeing of young people and support structures before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Conference organisation and editorial board

Andrej Naterer

(University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts)

Dunja Potočnik

(Institute for Social Research in Zagreb)

We are pleased to welcome you to the YO-VID22 one-day conference dedicated to exploring the well-being of youth and the support structures that guided them before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Join leading experts, practitioners, and young professionals from Slovenia, Croatia, and beyond as we share insights, best practices, and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening youth resilience in the face of future crises.

Conference Objectives

Comparative analysis of youth well-being data from before (2018), during, and after COVID-19.

Assessment of the importance of social support systems (family, peers, institutions) in youth social inclusion.

Sharing best practices and innovative solutions to improve well-being during crises.

Development and presentation of policy recommendations for youth support at national and European levels.

Target Audience

Academic community

Educators, counsellors, and psychologists

Healthcare professionals and epidemiologists

Representatives of civil society organisations, youth centres, and public institutions

Young people and students.

Thematic Tracks

1. Educational Challenges and Digital Learning Environments
 - Well-being and mental health challenges related to hybrid and online learning
 - Accessibility of digital tools and platforms
2. Youth Mental Health
 - Prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress during the pandemic
 - Strategies for providing support and resilience-building
3. Social Connectedness and Community
 - Family, partnership and peer circles
 - Civic engagement and activism under social restrictions
4. Transition to the Labour Market
 - Labour market insecurities and well-being
 - Entrepreneurship and innovation as crisis responses
5. Policy and Cultural Perspectives
 - Crisis management employed by civil society organisations
 - National strategies for youth support and crisis management.

Conference programme

09:00-09:30	Opening Words	Andrej Naterer, University of Maribor, Department of Sociology Dunja Potočnik, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
09:30-11:00	Keynote Session	Helena Jeriček Klanšček, National Institute for Public Health Sonja Mitter Škulj, SALTO South-East Europe
11:00-11:15	Coffee break	
11:15-11:30	Housing and living conditions	Rudi Klanjšek, University of Maribor, Department of Sociology
11:30-11:45	Well-being and mental health	Darja Maslić Seršić, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Department of Psychology
11:45-12:00	Educational experiences before, during and after COVID-19.	Iva Odak, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
12:00-12:15	Family and partnership	Danijela Lahe, University of Maribor, Department of Sociology
12:15-12:30	Social support and support service	Dunja Potočnik, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
12:30-12:45	Civic and political participation	Anja Gvozdanović, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
12:45-13:00	(Self)-expectation	Sandra Antulić Majcen, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
13:00-13:15	Youth in a broader socio- cultural context	Miran Lavrič, University of Maribor, Department of Sociology
13:15-13:30	Policy recommendations	Dunja Potočnik, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb
13:30-15:00	Lunch	Restaurant "Piano", University of Maribor
15:00-15:30	Panel discussion	Moderator and conference participants
15:30-16:00	Closing Remarks	Andrej Naterer, University of Maribor, Department of Sociology Dunja Potočnik, Institute for Social Research in Zagreb

Housing and living conditions

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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. This presentation explores the housing and living conditions of youth in Slovenia and Croatia, highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural challenges. Namely, the pandemic intensified housing insecurity through job losses, campus closures, and forced returns to parental homes, increasing stress, anxiety, and family strain. Specifically, while the abrupt displacement frequently resulted in financial burden and logistical difficulties, particularly for international students or those from remote locations, the economic downturn 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 youths to maintain their housing arrangements, thus many relocated to parental or guardian residences, potentially straining familial relationships. All this happened in the context where youth in both countries leave home considerably later than the EU average, with financial constraints representing the main barrier to independent living. Croatia faces particularly high overcrowding rates, while in both national contexts, housing deprivation is strongly linked to poorer mental health and lower life satisfaction. Moreover, a severe affordability crisis, driven by rapidly rising housing prices and insufficient public housing, has further delayed transitions to autonomy. These trends reflect broader issues of labour market precarity, deregulated housing markets, and limited social investment. Taken together, results highlight the urgent need for expanded social housing, rent subsidies, anti-speculation measures, and integrated youth-oriented strategies linking housing, employment, and mental health in order to ensure sustainable pathways toward independence and well-being of youth in Croatia and Slovenia.

Well-being and mental health

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The mental health and well-being of young people have become increasingly urgent public health concerns, both globally and within Europe. This presentation explores the psychological well-being of youth in Croatia and Slovenia, highlighting high levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, stress, and burnout. Findings reveal that over 25% of young people in both countries report serious depressive symptoms, around 20% experience anxiety, and approximately 30% report high levels of stress. These trends align with global data from the WHO, which confirms that mental health disorders are a leading cause of illness and disability among adolescents. Specifically, burnout symptoms, which are more prevalent among students than employed youth, emerge as a key indicator of contextual psychological strain. Burnout reflects a reactive form of distress, rooted in misalignment between environmental demands and personal coping resources. This positions educational and workplace settings as critical intervention points, emphasising the responsibility of institutions and stakeholders beyond mental health professionals in shaping supportive environments. The presentation also identifies gender and age disparities, with younger females consistently reporting the highest levels of psychological distress. Socio-economic status further influences outcomes, as lower self-rated SES is associated with poorer mental health. Pandemic-related data indicate a significant decline in subjective well-being, particularly among girls and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, post-pandemic improvements in subjective well-being and social connectedness offer cautious optimism. In conclusion, the findings imply the need for holistic, context-sensitive, and interdisciplinary approaches that address both individual vulnerabilities and structural risk factors in supporting youth mental health.

Educational experiences before, during and after COVID-19

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This presentation examines changes in educational trajectories and student well-being in Croatia and Slovenia across three critical time points, namely the pre-pandemic period (2018), the height of the COVID-19 crisis, and the post-pandemic context (2023). Participation in formal education has remained comparatively high in both countries, with Slovenia showing particularly strong retention and a pronounced gendered pattern, as female students are more frequently enrolled in graduate-level programmes. Yet, persistent inequalities are evident. Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds faced disproportionate barriers to advancing within the education system, with these disparities especially visible in Croatia at the primary and secondary levels, where structural disadvantage most acutely restricts opportunities for progression. The pandemic had marked negative consequences for students' subjective well-being, with girls and those in lower levels of education reporting the most severe declines. Elevated stress emerged as a consistent challenge across both countries, though its intensity and expression varied by national and educational context. These stressors were closely associated with reduced psychological well-being and compromised academic performance, indicating the deep interconnections between mental health and educational outcomes. Educational institutions played a pivotal role during the crisis, offering stability, social connection, and psychosocial support that helped to partially offset the most damaging effects of disruption. Nevertheless, such support proved insufficient to prevent the persistence of inequalities, many of which remained visible in the aftermath of the pandemic. Despite these challenges, educational aspirations among youth remained relatively high, though differentiated along lines of gender and socioeconomic status. This suggests a dual reality, namely resilience in the face of adversity, but also the reproduction of entrenched inequities in youth educational pathways. The findings point to the need for policy interventions that address structural disparities at early stages of education, expand access to mental health and well-being services within schools, and strengthen equity measures in higher education to ensure that aspirations can translate into actual opportunities for all students.

Family and partnership

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This presentation investigates the various ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic transformed family relations, intimate partnerships, and youth well-being in Croatia and Slovenia. The findings indicate that familial ties operated ambivalently, functioning both as a protective buffer and as a source of tensions. In Slovenia, significant reductions were observed in young people's satisfaction with family life and parent to child relationships with issues attributable to lockdown measures, increased economic precarity, and the growing individualistic orientations. By contrast, Croatian youth exhibited comparatively stable family dynamics, with patterns reflecting enduring normative commitments to familial solidarity and resilience reinforcement.

Peer relations and friendships, weakened in both national contexts, with the decline marked most evidently in Slovenia. Intimate partnerships, however, demonstrated relative stability with Croatian youth, exhibiting accelerated processes of cohabitation. Across both settings, mothers and extended kinship networks continued to exert primary influence on the major life choices of young people, underscoring the persistence of strong intergenerational linkages.

Nevertheless, mental health remains most adversely affected, with negative impact cutting across familial, peer, and intimate relational spheres. The results thus underscores critical policy imperatives, namely the necessity of targeted family support interventions, the expansion of accessible and youth-sensitive mental health services, and the implementation of programmes designed to restore peer connections while simultaneously engaging with evolving aspirations regarding family formation and relational life in the post-pandemic period.

Social support and support service

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This presentation examines the role of formal and informal support structures in shaping the well-being and resilience of youth in Croatia and Slovenia. In both countries, families remain the most important support source, particularly mothers, who are consistently identified as central figures in providing emotional and practical assistance. While peers also play a crucial role, the pandemic disrupted these relationships and reduced opportunities for in-person interaction. Institutional support, such as educational and employment services, remains important but is often perceived as inaccessible or poorly adapted to the actual needs of youth. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of tailored approaches contribute to a sense of disillusionment among young people navigating these systems. At the same time, a low level of trust in political institutions and the welfare system was observed, particularly in Croatia, which reinforces reliance on familial networks. Perceptions of corruption, limited youth participation in decision-making, and inconsistent policy implementation further deepen this distrust. Digital platforms increasingly serve as alternatives for connection and advice, although they cannot replace interpersonal support. Nonetheless, they offer valuable spaces for peer exchange and identity exploration. Policy implications stress the need to expand accessible, youth-centred services, including mental health care, career guidance, and community-based initiatives. Strengthening institutional trust and investing in participatory frameworks would help diversify support beyond families and foster more resilient pathways for young people's social integration and life transitions. Moreover, enhancing youth engagement in shaping policies and service provision is essential to ensure that institutional responses are both contextually relevant and future-oriented.

Civic and political participation

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This presentation examines patterns of civic and political participation among youth in Croatia and Slovenia, with particular attention to developments before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on both survey data and qualitative evidence, the analysis highlights the persistence of low levels of institutional political engagement, most notably in Croatia, where trust in political institutions ranks among the lowest within the European Union. Slovenian youth report somewhat higher levels of electoral participation, yet in both national contexts generational disillusionment with conventional politics remains a defining feature. Young people in both Croatia and Slovenia are increasingly active in protests, online campaigns, and issue-specific mobilisations, particularly around environmental protection, social justice, and anti-corruption agendas. The pandemic further accelerated the uptake of digital tools for political expression, broadening access to political debate and lowering entry barriers to activism. Nevertheless, digital engagement only rarely translated into sustained or coordinated offline participation, raising questions about the depth and durability of such forms of mobilisation. Structural constraints also continue to reduce active participation. Many young people expressed a sense of political inefficacy and marginalisation, reinforcing disengagement from formal channels of representation. Crucial policy implications include strengthening investment in comprehensive civic education, institutionalisation of mechanisms that integrate youth perspectives into decision-making, and the development of innovative platforms that connect digital and offline participation are essential to revitalising democratic trust and empowering young citizens as meaningful political actors in post-pandemic Europe.

(Self)-expectations

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The COVID-19 pandemic, as a non-normative crisis event, has impacted various aspects of young people's lives, including education, employment, family relationships, friendships, romantic relationships, etc. During the pandemic, young people who were facing important life transitions, from adolescence to early adulthood, were particularly vulnerable. The aim of this paper is to explore youths' expectations regarding important life events, taking on different life roles, and their educational and professional aspirations from their personal perspective, compared with society's expectations in the post-pandemic period. The results indicate statistically significant differences in youths' personal aspirations relative to social norms expectations, especially in the aspects of education, starting a family, parenting, and becoming independent adults. Among Slovenian youth, both in terms of personal aspirations and societal expectations, educational aspirations dominate, whereas Croatian youth tend to focus more on traditional milestones regarding future family roles. Among youth in Croatia, a trend of internalising social expectations with age was observed, while in Slovenia, gender inequalities were more pronounced with higher social and family expectations for young women. In both samples, significant differences in expectations related to socioeconomic status were confirmed. Despite facing various challenges and internalising social norms that may or may not be congruent with their personal expectations, young people generally maintain high self-confidence and optimism about their future. These findings confirm the need for systematic and structural support for young people in achieving important life goals, especially for the most vulnerable ones.

Youth in a broader socio-cultural context

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This paper analyses shifts in social trust, religiosity, and pro-social attitudes among youth in Croatia and Slovenia, and their implications for well-being and social cohesion. Generalised trust remains modest, with Slovenia seeing a decline during COVID-19, followed by a partial recovery by 2023. Interpersonal trust in family and friends remains high, yet between 2018 and 2023, declines occurred in both countries, particularly in Croatia, where trust in neighbours, classmates, and extended family dropped. Furthermore, both countries show declining altruism and support for redistribution, signalling erosion of solidaristic norms. The patterns of religiosity among Croatian and Slovenian youth differ notably. Slovenian youth maintained low and stable levels of religious belief and practice, while Croatian youth showed increasing polarisation with the rising shares of both firm believers and secular non-believers. Religiosity offered only a small or negligible protective effect on psychological well-being during the pandemic. Policy implications include strengthening peer networks, gender-responsive support, civic education, and measures to reduce inequality and rebuild social cohesion.

Policy recommendations

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This presentation emphasises the vital role of immediate social environments, public institutions, and civil society in supporting youth well-being and their transitions to adulthood. The recommendations are multifaceted, targeting young people, youth workers and civil society organisations, public institutions, educators, health providers, funding bodies, media, and researchers. Key proposals include improving mental health services, fostering youth participation in decision-making, ensuring long-term funding stability, and enhancing collaboration across sectors. Moreover, the recommendations advocate for co-creation principles, promoting inclusive dialogue and shared ownership among stakeholders in order to ensure policies and practices that are responsive to diverse youth needs. The strategic foundation for short-, medium-, and long-term priorities is also presented, aiming at building resilient support systems that facilitate youth development and wellbeing in a post-pandemic context. These recommendations represent a vital resource for policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the complex challenges faced by young people today, and underline the necessity for sustained, evidence-based policy interventions. Additionally, the presentation highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches and the active involvement of marginalised youth groups, whose voices are often underrepresented. Effective implementation requires not only political will but also ongoing evaluation, transparency, and accountability to ensure that interventions remain relevant and equitable over time.