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Briefing 3: Review of research on the impact of COVID-19 on young people and their access to services

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1. What is the aim of this briefing?

The EU- Council of Europe youth partnership continues to host and update the [Knowledge HUB: COVID-19 impact on the youth sector](#) containing the data and information sources on research related to COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on young people. In 2021, the monitoring and analytical work of the youth partnership aims to enrich the findings, identify gaps and draw relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice. Fourteen months after the first COVID-19 cases appeared in Europe, the third briefing presents a selection of main research findings gathered until May 2021. Evidence from different studies suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic had a crucial impact on **young people's access to education, employment, (mental) health and social services** during the last year. This briefing reflects on the situation of young people in Europe, with focus on these thematic areas, and provides national and comparative perspectives, where possible.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on education and social inclusion of young people

2.1. Key findings from research on education and social inclusion of young people

OECD report 'The State of School Education. One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic' from April 2021 presents the preliminary findings from the survey, providing a snapshot of the situation one year into the COVID-19 crisis. The results of the analysis reveal that in 2020, 1.5 billion students in 188 countries/economies were not in school regularly, with frequent school closures, causing massive disruptions to their learning. With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging, many education systems are struggling, and the situation is constantly evolving. The OECD – in collaboration with UNESCO, UNICEF and The World Bank – has been monitoring the situation across countries and collecting data on how each system is responding to the crisis, from school closures and remote learning, to teacher vaccination and gradual returns to in-class instruction.

According to the same report, primary and secondary schools are fully open in less than 40% of the 33 countries with comparable data (OECD, 2021). The higher the level of education, the greater the share of schools that in February 2021 were either closed or operated with small groups of students only (OECD, 2021, p. 7). In many countries, there are adjustments to the school calendar (duration of school year), changes in examinations and curriculum. For example, in Sweden, the special COVID-19 regulation offers the possibility to deviate from the teaching periods, i.e. the regular number of school days and the length of school days. In Spain, the Royal Decree-Law passed on 29 September 2020 adopted urgent measures in the field of non- university education to deal with the pandemic (OECD, 2021).

The school closures did not impact only on young people, but also on families. Data from spring 2021 reveals that most parents struggle and face fatigue and frustration with online

schooling. While in mid-2020, 29% of parents said they were satisfied with online schooling, their satisfaction has now decreased to 26%. By spring 2021, only 16% of parents say that they would like to have more online schooling in the future for their children – this compares with nearly a quarter (23%) in the middle of 2020 (Eurofound, 2021a)¹.

Besides the impact of the pandemic on young people in general, the OECD report provides evidence that young people from disadvantaged groups (migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, high risk families, etc.) are most vulnerable during school closures, due to a variety of vulnerabilities, including a lack of necessary devices for online schooling (OECD, 2021).

Over half of the surveyed countries (out of 33) reported efforts in at least one level of education to improve access to infrastructure for learners in remote areas (67%), support learners with disabilities (e.g. sign language in online learning programmes) (59%), establish agreements with mobile communications operators/Internet firms to remove accessibility barriers (56%), improve access to infrastructure for learners in urban high-density areas (56%), or provide additional support to lower-income households, including economic support (i.e. take-home rations, cash based transfers) (52%). At the same time, very few countries reported undertaking special efforts to make online learning more accessible to migrant and displaced children, including those in camps (44%) and designing learning materials for speakers of minority languages (26%) (OECD, 2021).

Many countries applied a number of additional measures to support young people in need, for example, financial incentives such as cash, food and transport. In some countries (Latvia, Czech Republic) schools for children and youth with disability remained open even during the pandemic period or children with specific cognitive disabilities or other specific disorders were not obliged to wear face masks. In others, schools reopened in early 2021 for children from high risk families and vulnerable home environments to ensure appropriate access to education (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2021).

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups further widened existing inequalities across Europe, which in turn had a negative impact on social capital, reflected in a fall in trust levels for all institutions. Trust in the EU remained higher than trust in national governments (Eurofound, 2021).

2.2. Main gaps from research on education and social inclusion of young people

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused shorter or longer term closure of schools, colleges and universities in the majority of the countries. Teaching and even testing has been moved online at an unprecedented scale. The closure of educational institutions has interrupted

¹ The Living, Working and COVID-19 e-survey is open to anyone aged 18 and over with access to the internet and to date almost 190,000 responses have been collected. For the EU27, the sample consists of 138,629 cleaned responses: 67,685 from round 1, 24,144 from round 2 and 46,800 from round 3.

not only learning, but also the social life of young people. These interruptions in the educational process will have long-term consequences for the affected cohorts and are likely to increase inequality among young people.

Existing inequalities are widening because of the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable groups that are already in a precarious situation. Research on social inclusion indicates that disadvantages are rising for young people outside the education, training and labour market. Young people from socially vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are more severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than other groups (Eurofound, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic impact assessment on education and social inclusion of young people should be therefore comprehensive and based on the data disaggregated by age, gender, educational attainment, place of residence, etc. This will allow policymakers to build policies directly targeted to the most vulnerable youth groups.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on youth employment and financial security of young people

3.1. Key findings from research on youth employment and financial security of young people

The effects of the pandemic and the lockdown measures on the economy are translated to youth unemployment, as was the case during the previous economic crisis of 2008-2013.

This was mainly because the sectors that have been most affected by COVID-19 lockdowns – hospitality, retail and leisure – are sectors that employ higher numbers of younger people, and they offer precarious and unstable working arrangements (Eurofound, 2021).

European Youth Forum report (2021) states that according to Eurostat data, since the onset of the pandemic *youth unemployment* rate in the EU has risen from 14.9% to 17.1%. It is evident that young people in marginalised situations were more than twice as likely to have stopped working: 15.4% reported themselves as having stopped working, compared to 7.4% for non marginalised young people. Young women were also more severely affected: 12.9% of young women reported having stopped working, compared to 9.8% of young men.

Just under two-thirds (63.4%) of the youth that were not in education employment or training (NEET) indicated they had left work for reasons beyond their control e.g. business closing and temporary jobs ending. Worryingly, nearly half (49.0%) of young Europeans not in education, employment or training were not aware of the support services offered by the government to help them find a job. Less than one in four (22.7%) of these young persons reported receiving income support such as unemployment payments or cash transfers (European Youth Forum, 2021).

The European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) (2021) analysis shows that young people – especially young women – lost disproportionately more jobs during the first COVID-19 wave than men. In the pandemic situation, especially vulnerable low-educated and migrant women were left out of the labour market. The most negatively affected economic sector in terms of employment was the HORECA (hotel, restaurant and catering sector).

Job loss during the pandemic shows no sign of recovery. A year after the first businesses closed due to the outbreak of COVID-19, 10% of respondents who had been employed before the pandemic were unemployed, an increase of 2% points from the situation in the summer of 2020 (8%) and double the figures of spring 2020 (5%) (Eurofound, 2021).

Alongside those young people who have experienced job losses, there has also been *loss of income* for those still in work. More than one in four (28.0%) young workers indicated their income had decreased or decreased substantially since the onset of the pandemic. This figure was higher amongst young people in marginalised situations (31.6%) but comparable between young men (28.0%) and young women (28.1%) (European Youth Forum, 2021).

However, job and income loss were not experienced by everyone. Young people working in areas of agriculture, manual labour and healthcare highlighted that their experience was the opposite of statistical data since they had been 'busier than ever' and had not suffered loss of work (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Nevertheless, COVID-19 led to a rise in *financial inequality*. While overall there has been little change since the start of the pandemic in levels of financial fragility, this varies considerably according to people's socio-economic position. There are considerable differences between employees with a permanent and temporary contract, even if the gap between the two groups is now narrower. Further socio demographic comparisons show that the proportion of respondents in a financially fragile situation decreased between summer 2020 and spring 2021 amongst those aged 18–34 (from 52% to 48%) (EIGE 2021).

The European Commission survey (2021) collected new information about financial challenges that young people are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic by assessing consumer needs. The survey reveals that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one third of the young persons indicated that their income had decreased, and their financial situation is worsening. In this respect, youth are more frequently facing financial challenges than other age groups.

Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch (2021b) collates information on the responses of government and social partners to the crisis, and gathers examples of company practices aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts. Although there were approximately 1000 different measures proposed by May 2021 (e.g. income support, direct subsidies, active labour market measures, working conditions protection, etc.), young people are not always covered by the measures that are aimed at prime age workers and other groups as

well due to eligibility criteria. However, some countries are implementing specific measures. For example, France applies a measure supporting student employment, while Sweden proposes to reduce employers' social security contributions (payroll tax) for people aged 19 to 23 from January 2021 to March 2023.

3.2. Main gaps from research on youth employment and financial security of young people

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economic activity and, as a result, the labour market. It had a negative impact on youth employment, working conditions and also affected young people's job search, making them again a more vulnerable group in the labour market. This is evident from various studies carried out by international organisations, such as Eurofound (2021), OECD (2021) and also European Commission, through the Eurostat survey (2021). Unfortunately, only a part of the studies targeted young people, and research does not always provide data on impact by age, gender, education, or other relevant indicators.

Whilst the EU Youth Guarantee has shown some important gaps in terms of quality and outreach over the years, the updated Recommendation is a chance to address these at a particularly critical time for youth. Despite its adoption in 2020, however, it is still unclear to what extent EU Member States have taken concrete steps to adopt new Implementation Plans that would reflect the reinforcement and increase the impact of the Youth Guarantee (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Besides, whilst young people are identified as a key priority under recovery funds such as Next Generation EU and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, there has been a serious lack of involvement of young people and youth organisations in consultation on how the funds will be invested at national level. This may affect the actual level of investment into youth-specific measures and their effectiveness (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Severe lack of data on the impact of COVID-19 in Southeast and Eastern Europe and Caucasus will lead to increasing inequalities of opportunity for young people in those regions compared to the countries part of the EU.

4. The impact of COVID-19 on young people's mental health and wellbeing

4.1. Key findings from research on young people's mental health and wellbeing

The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's social and economic rights contributes a growing range of issues in young people's mental health and psychological wellbeing, affecting nearly two-thirds of the youth population. Factors affecting mental health are: high levels of uncertainty about work or school, unhappiness with changes in

work, education or living circumstances, being and feeling isolated, and/or general anxiousness relating to the pandemic. Furthermore, young people appear to experience high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety, and lower levels of life satisfaction, whereas some evidence suggests that young people's relationships with parents are also affected. These combined impacts may affect young people's lives well beyond the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are likely to worsen their employment and educational prospects in the future (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Recent findings reveal a fall in mental wellbeing identified across all social groups in spring 2021, including a decline in mental wellbeing in the EU as a whole and an overall increase in negative feelings, such as tension/anxiety, loneliness, and feeling downhearted and depressed (Eurofound, 2021).

Mental wellbeing has also reached its lowest level across all age groups since the onset of the pandemic over a year ago. This is especially prominent among youth and those who have lost their job. Almost two-thirds of people (64%) in the youngest age group (18–34 years) are at risk of depression, and their average mental wellbeing is worse compared to people aged 50 years or over. An increase in depressive feelings was recorded particularly among younger groups. On a positive side, young people (18-34) are less sceptical about vaccines (26%) than older age groups, while the least vaccine averse are students (13%) (Eurofound, 2021).

Young women's mental health and wellbeing was notably worse than young men's. Across age and gender groups, the lowest mental wellbeing in spring 2021 is registered among women aged 18–24 and women aged 35–44 though the largest drop in mental wellbeing occurred among men aged 18–24 (Eurofound, 2021).

Apart from statistics, the qualitative data confirmed that mental health and wellbeing was still a significant concern for young people, who described feeling lack of freedom, lack of inner peace, feeling out of control, and a general change of mentality as the pandemic progressed. A key issue affecting several young people was unhappiness with being forced to move back to the family home because of a decline in economic circumstances that was often linked with a loss of independence. This was particularly problematic for LGBTQIA+ youth (European Youth Forum, 2021).

Another effects of the COVID-19 outbreak was reflected in the increased need for support, coupled with delays and unmet needs of the students (32%), due to disrupted provisions of public services, such as essential healthcare, and mental healthcare (Eurofound, 2021).

Apart from the negative consequences, some evidence emphasized positive outcomes for adolescent mental health, arising from the situation of the pandemic (e.g., lockdown). Specifically, a study examining the narratives of a large sample of Italian adolescents found

that some positive themes emerged in the adolescents' narratives such as *discovering oneself, discovering family relationships, and sharing life at a distance* (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020).

4.2. Main gaps from research on young people's mental health and wellbeing

The COVID-19 counter-measures affected young people more than the virus itself. As a result, young people became a new vulnerable group with possible long-term developmental, health and mental health consequences. Studies on long-term impact studies are needed, as well as better insight into (in)effectiveness of the proposed measures, particularly aiming to tackle mental health and wellbeing of (vulnerable) young people in Europe.

Research indicates that there is no substantial Europe-wide pandemic response, but rather limited responses from national policymakers on young people's mental health. Some examples that are identifiable are not targeted at young people, and in many cases are only partially relevant to them. For instance, while national mental health phone helplines are offered to provide support to citizens dealing with isolation and the mental health problems in Cyprus and Portugal; additional mental health support for frontline caregivers is offered in Belgium and Ireland. Focus on strengthening mental health in remote medical services and campaigning against domestic violence was run in Iceland (European Youth Forum, 2021).

To reduce the long-term consequences for young people of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that policymakers increase access to mental health and wellbeing support for young people. The policy measures need to go beyond an approach to mental health and wellbeing focused solely on medical intervention, and include support aimed at addressing the socio-economic determinants of mental health and underlying stress factors. This should be delivered through a range of settings such as schools, non-formal education providers, youth organisations and online (European Youth Forum, 2021).

5. Conclusion

By May 2021, most young Europeans had experienced a full year of restrictions on economic activity, mobility and social interactions, with several countries going through a series of full lockdowns that heightened existing economic and social inequalities among the different generations and vulnerable groups and worsened the situation of young people across Europe.

Data reveals that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is substantial for young people and their social and economic inclusion due to schools and university closures, restricted access to indoor and outdoor activities, employment, income and health and social services. As a result, many young people face financial challenges and lack of necessary resources and are in precarious working and living situations.

The pandemic also magnified pre-existing social inequalities in resources, resulting in an unequal impact on youth from different social strata (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020). The crisis has particularly affected young people from disadvantaged and vulnerable social groups, including unemployed youth, those with migrant background, youth with mental and physical disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth and young people in remote rural areas. Most concerning is the way the pandemic and its impact on young people's social and economic rights have contributed to widespread issues in young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Although the scale of the impact is not fully predictable, the three-way relationship between education, employment and mental health is crucial to emphasise. Work instability and educational uncertainty are a source of stress and wellbeing issues for young people in Europe. In the long term, youth unemployment, poor educational outcomes and poor mental health may feed into one another and produce negative consequences even beyond the pandemic (European Youth Forum, 2021). It is therefore essential to monitor more precisely the situation of young people and create pandemic and post pandemic sustainable recovery plans that are consulted with young people.

Social inclusion, youth mental health, and unemployment, in particular, need to be further addressed through comprehensive and sustainable measures that could diminish the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people. Without such measures, it is clear that the pandemic will have lasting effects on young people's inclusion and youth rights. Youth public policy should therefore be particularly aiming at decreasing inequalities in access to resources among youth from different socioeconomic strata. This could be achieved by e.g. allocating more funding to the development and distribution of programmes that decrease resource inequalities or by increasing access to services for mainstream and vulnerable youth. (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, 2020).

Early responses by governments across Europe were similar, with strict measures introduced straight away, followed by a divergence of measures that depended on health and economic data, rarely targeting the youth population as such. While the European Commission and the EU Member States have launched recovery funds and implemented several important initiatives to alleviate the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, data highlights the need for a holistic approach to support all the groups hit hard by the crisis in order to prevent them from falling further behind. There is insufficient data on the impact nor on initiatives to counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures on young people in Eastern Europe and Caucasus or in Southeast Europe. Given this critical lack of data, involvement of young people is especially critical in the development of all and any recovery measures for their benefit.

These are necessary steps that would have a significant positive role in addressing the impacts of the pandemic on young people across Europe. Understanding and addressing young people's needs in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis will be essential to restore their trust in governments and mitigate the long-term impact of the pandemic on various aspects of their life.

Research questions that still need answering include:

- What is the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and the labour market (employment, social and financial security) across Europe?
- How can sustainable youth access to services in the pandemic and post-pandemic period be assured in the EU and in Eastern and Southeast Europe Council of Europe member states?
- What is the mid and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and wellbeing on youth from different socio-economic strata?

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