

# Youth Partnership

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Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



EUROPEAN UNION

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## Meta-analysis of research on the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector

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December 2021

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union-Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

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## **1. What is the aim of this paper?**

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership continues to host and update the [Knowledge HUB: Covid-19 impact on the youth sector](#) containing data and information sources on research related to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on young people. In 2021, the monitoring and analytical work of the youth partnership aimed to enrich findings, identify gaps and draw relevant conclusions for European and national initiatives on adapting youth policy and youth work practice. Almost two years after the first Covid-19 cases appeared in Europe, this second meta-analysis summarises the main research findings on impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the young people's access to education, employment, mental health, social and youth services, participation, youth work and youth organisations, gathered up to December 2021. It provides insights into related policy responses from the global, European and national perspectives, where applicable. The concept of a "Covid-19/lockdown generation" has emerged to describe how young people may be scarred for decades to come, in terms of labour market and mental health outcomes (ILO 2021), implying the need to have a specific focus on this generation of young people in developing strategies and policy responses to address the consequences of the pandemic.

## **2. Impact of Covid-19 on education, social inclusion and access to services**

The evidence from different studies and analytical reports (OECD 2021, UNESCO 2021, UNICEF 2021) suggests that, in terms of access to services, education and social exclusion, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected young people, particularly those who have been exposed to multiple disadvantages and are more vulnerable than their peers.

When it comes to education, research (OECD 2021, UNESCO 2021, UNICEF 2021) shows that the situation in the educational sector has constantly evolved across countries, from school closures and remote learning, adjustments to the school calendar (duration of the school year) and changes in examinations and curricula, to teacher vaccination and gradual returns to in-class instruction.

The impact of school closures on young people was also dependent on students' socio-economic background and a range of other demographic factors, such as age, school type or language of instruction.

A 2021 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. Besides increased inequality, the impact of Covid-19 on education also brought other challenges, such as lack of skills or lack of necessary

equipment for teachers to meet students' individual needs (Mägi 2021, Kvieskiene et al. 2021).

Research on young people not in employment, education and training (NEET) has indicated that this group is more exposed to inequalities and social exclusion (Braziene 2021). For example, poverty rates for young people in NEET situations are much higher than for non-NEET youth. Compared to youth in urban areas, young people in NEET situations living in rural areas face significant disadvantages in terms of access to second chances, apprenticeships and mentoring programmes. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the share of young people not in employment, education or training (the NEET rate) has risen in many countries and has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels in most cases (ILO 2021, OECD 2021, Braziene2021).

## **2.1. Policy responses to the impact of Covid-19 on education, social inclusion and access to services**

To respond to education challenges, states introduced a variety of measures to support learners and young people. For example, Malta provided information and funding for online learning resources for all students. The Belgian Government provided support for teachers (primary, secondary and technical and vocational education (TVE)) by developing online training resources, and the Flemish Ministry of Education created a portal with dedicated resources for online teaching. The Government of Armenia also provided online training to TVE teachers via its National Centre for Educational Technology Development. The course aimed to introduce teachers to learning technologies and acquaint them with the experience of e-learning. Some 158 TVE teachers received online training in e-learning.

In some countries (Latvia, the Czech Republic, etc.), schools for children and young people with disabilities remained open even during the lockdown periods and 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 their access to education (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour 2021).

In 2021, the European Commission announced the Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve (ALMA) programme, with the aim of helping young people not in employment, education or training to find their way to the labour market by combining support for: education, vocational training or employment in their home country and work placement in another EU country. This new initiative, under the European Pillar of Social Rights, aims to tackle inequalities and create equal opportunities by offering active support to employment, especially for disadvantaged young people. This programme will target young people who have difficulties finding a job, are in long-term unemployment, have insufficient school performance or

vocational skills, have a migration background or live with disabilities. The objective of this programme is to improve young people's skills, knowledge and experience and give them an opportunity to create new connections across Europe.

### **3. Impact of Covid-19 on youth employment and the financial security of young people**

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on youth employment, working conditions, job searches and employability, making young people a more vulnerable group in the labour market. As young workers are mostly employed in non-essential sectors, which were forced to close, or in occupations not compatible with remote working, such as the service industry, they faced greater challenges during the crisis (Eurofound 2021a).

Analysis of labour market statistics and surveys indicated a significantly larger rate of job loss among young people than among people aged 30 or over (Eurofound 2021a). Youth joblessness has been a recurring consequence of recessions, as young people have lower levels of job security and are at greater risk of job loss. Sectoral job vacancy rates for 2020 and 2021 suggest a general, cross-sectoral drop in activity compared with 2019 (Eurostat 2021). The major losses are in sectors that employ a large proportion of young people with insecure contracts, such as those in the service industry (Eurofound 2021a).

A European Institute for Gender Equality analysis (2021) showed that young women lost disproportionately more jobs during the first Covid-19 wave than did men. This was mainly the case for vulnerable, less educated and migrant women. The most negatively affected economic sector in terms of employment was the service sector (hotel, restaurant and catering sector) where young women make up the majority of the workforce.

A European Commission survey (2021) about financial challenges that young people faced during the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that one third of the young people reported a decrease in their income and a worsening financial situation. In this respect, youth faced more financial challenges than other age groups.

Eurofound (2021), the OECD (2021), a Eurostat survey (2021), the European Parliament (2021) and the European Trade Union Institute (2021) have all highlighted the effect of job losses and financial insecurity on socially vulnerable groups (young people in rural areas, indigenous youth, youth with a migrant background, etc.), and young people in non-standard employment (platform workers, youth in "flexi-jobs", young people in dual learning programmes, traineeships or student contracts).

### **3.1. Policy responses to the impact of Covid-19 on youth employment and the financial security of young people**

Across Europe, states introduced new plans, strategies, commitments and special emergency schemes, such as income support for young people, hiring subsidies to employers recruiting young people, new apprenticeship schemes and decreased minimum contribution requirements for young people to get access to social protection benefits (OECD 2021).

Eurofound's Covid-19 EU PolicyWatch (2021) collated information on the responses of government and social partners to the crisis and gathered examples of company practices aimed at mitigating the social and economic impacts. Although there were approximately 1 000 different measures proposed by October 2021 (income support, direct subsidies, active labour market measures, working condition protection, etc.), young people were not always covered by the social protection measures aimed at prime age workers and other groups due to eligibility criteria (prior social insurance, duration of social insurance, etc.).

The Youth Guarantee scheme, under which EU member states provide an opportunity for all young people under 30 years of age to access employment, education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of either leaving education or becoming newly unemployed, was reinforced for better response during the pandemic. All “EU countries have committed themselves to the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee scheme”, which “steps up the comprehensive job support available to young people across the European Union, now reaching out to a broader target group of 15 to 29-year-olds” (European Commission 2020). Several EU countries are updating or developing new youth strategies to reflect the reinforced Youth Guarantee. For example, Estonia is currently developing an implementation plan for the reinforced Youth Guarantee, focusing on supporting vulnerable groups and promoting a smooth school-to-work transition. In Spain, the 2021-27 strategy for the reinforced Youth Guarantee was developed and negotiated with regions, trade unions, business organisations and youth stakeholders. In Luxembourg, the revised national implementation plan for the reinforced Youth Guarantee will include mapping of target groups and policies to increase outreach to vulnerable groups. The project to increase outreach to young NEETs in Latvia, Know and Do!, which was originally planned to end in 2020, has been extended through to 2022. In Italy, the national Youth Guarantee Plan remains the flagship youth employment strategy.

Short-time work policies (for example, job retention schemes) which offer shorter working hours per person and help to keep more people in employment have expanded over the course of the pandemic in several countries, including Belgium, France, Germany and Italy. For example, in Germany, 2.35 million employees (roughly 6 % of total employment) have been placed under *Kurzarbeit* arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic, that is twice more than during the height of the 2008 financial crisis (ILO 2021).

The majority of Covid-19 labour market and employment policy responses are targeted towards labour market issues in general, often without focusing on the specific challenges faced by young people. For example, job retention and furlough schemes can only benefit those who are already in a job. As young people are typically in search of their first job, such schemes tend to leave them out. Specific policies targeted towards young women, who were affected considerably more than young men, and young people in rural areas are still missing.

#### **4. Impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health and well-being**

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted young people's mental and emotional health, dramatically transforming their interpersonal relations, disrupting family and social ties and triggering feelings of serious concern and apprehension (European Commission 2021b).

Young people's (aged 15-24) mental health worsened significantly in 2020-21. The prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and depression has risen dramatically among young people and remains higher than pre-pandemic levels, even with the partial reopening of the economy and compared to other age groups. In some OECD countries, such as Belgium and France, young people were 30% and 80% more likely to report symptoms of depression or anxiety than adults. Higher levels of loneliness are also reported more frequently by young people. Adolescents in Iceland (aged 13-18) reported significantly more symptoms of mental ill health during the pandemic than did their peers before it. Girls were more likely to experience these symptoms than boys (OECD 2021d). A fall in mental well-being and an increase in depressive feelings was also recorded among younger Europeans in spring 2021, while almost two thirds (64%) of those aged 18-34 years were at risk of depression (Eurofound 2021a).

One in five young people aged 15-24 surveyed by UNICEF and Gallup in March 2021 said they often feel depressed or have little interest in doing things. Young people also reported a generation gap when talking to parents about mental health and associated stigma as one of the issues which blocks them from seeking help.

Gender differences in the prevalence of anxiety and depression, the two most common forms of mental health conditions, appear to have persisted or widened among young people in OECD countries. Self-reported measures reveal that both conditions are more prevalent among young women and that young men were more likely to report symptoms of depression in December 2020 (OECD 2021c). Young women's mental health and well-being in the EU were notably worse than those of young men. Across age and gender groups, the lowest mental well-being is registered among women aged 18-24, though the largest drop in mental well-being occurred among men aged 18-24 (Eurofound 2021a). Girls have reported concerns regarding body image and experiences of sexual harassment and domestic violence that were amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2021a).

Studies (Eurofound 2021a, UNICEF 2021a, OECD 2021c) confirm that the worsening of mental health can be attributed to disruptions in access to mental health services, the wide-ranging impacts of school closures, and a labour market crisis that is disproportionately affecting young people, as elaborated earlier. Particular attention should be paid to the impact of the crisis on young people with pre-existing mental health conditions or substance use disorders, individuals from lower income backgrounds and/or ethnic minority backgrounds, individuals who identify themselves as LGBT+ or gender diverse, in addition to young carers.

Data also reveal some positive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as it offers opportunities for constructive coping and resilience. Apart from increasing rates of mental ill health, other features, such as school closures reducing academic and social pressures and increased time with family, can boost the potential of the current generation of young people to pursue their dreams, reach their potential and contribute to the world (UNICEF 2021).

#### **4.1. Policy responses to the impact of Covid-19 on young people's mental health and well-being**

Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health was considered as a critical issue for children and adolescents – one that requires more research and evidence to better inform programmes, policies and practice (UNICEF 2021a).

Efficient prevention of the mid- and long-term negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's mental health and well-being requires a scaling-up of existing mental health support in education systems, workplaces and health systems and development of comprehensive policies to support young people to remain in education or to find and keep a job (European Commission 2021).

In 19 OECD countries, mental health services were expanded for young people specifically, or new funding was allocated to supporting young people's mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in France, the "psy-check" measure introduced in February 2021 provides all university students with access to up to three free sessions with mental health specialists. In Poland, in January 2021, a package of measures was announced to respond to the mental health impacts of the crisis on young people, including the launch of a 24-hour hotline, the expansion of service provision through recruitment of mental health specialists, and digital addiction treatment programmes (OECD 2021a). In Finland, the government allocated additional funding to the Onni project, which provides low-threshold psychological support and services in one-stop youth centres, including for the recruitment of new mental health specialists. Finally, in Austria, the government announced that the number of school-based psychologists would be increased by 20% in June 2021.

The EU Youth Strategy's tools and instruments also aim to address specific future challenges, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth education, employment and mental health, particularly for disadvantaged young people, and the increased need for digital youth work. The Joint Action on Mental Health (ImpleMENTAL) will implement a multilevel national suicide prevention programme and a system reform to strengthen community-based services, with a specific focus on services for children and young people. To support stakeholders' efforts, the European Commission set up a group on "Covid-19 mental health support" within its EU Health Policy Platform and hosted a high-level conference on the mental health impact of the pandemic in May 2021 (European Commission 2021).

Nevertheless, several flagship reports (UNICEF 2021a, OECD 2021c, Eurofound 2021a) have outlined that at the heart of our societies' failure to respond to the mental health needs of adolescents and young people is an absence of leadership and commitment to minimise risk and maximise protective factors. This particularly refers to financial and political commitment, from global, regional and national leaders and from a broad range of stakeholders.

Communication plays an important role in ending stigma, breaking the silence on mental health, and ensuring that young people, especially those with lived experience of mental health conditions, are heard. Without their active participation and engagement, development of relevant mental health programmes remains a challenge. Finally, the studies call for action to better support parents schools and social protection and health systems in addressing the needs of adolescents and youth in a variety of settings.

## **5. Impact of Covid-19 on youth participation**

The EU Youth Report from 2021 underlines that youth participation is on a positive trend, visible in young people's participation in elections, civil society organisations and social movements, non-institutionalised forms of participation such as the youth-led global climate movement Fridays for Future. Although young people's digital participation was on the rise in the EU prior to the pandemic, the Covid-19 clearly accelerated this trend (European Commission 2021b).

Young civic actors in Europe and Central Asia saw the digital realm as positively enabling their direct engagement, improving their outreach, helping gain public support for their causes and making cross-border connectivity easier. Some 70% of them agreed that, in 2020 and 2021, online activism gave higher visibility to issues important to young people, and 84% considered digital youth participation to be on the rise (UNDP 2021).

The Council of the European Union's conclusions on strengthening multilevel governance underline that, although significant progress has been made, young people still have fewer opportunities to participate, are underrepresented in decision-making processes and face

multiple challenges that have been accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Council of the European Union 2021). According to a survey launched on the European Commission's Youth Portal, over two thirds of the 8 500 respondents felt they have no or little influence on public policy and political decision making and expressed the need for more spaces for participation and citizenship education (European Commission 2021b).

A comparative study, including Estonia, Greece and the United Kingdom, highlights different approaches to online engagement. In Estonia, speaking out for the marginalised is seen as a matter of responsibility and the only way forward to a better society. In Greece, on the other hand, there is a mistrust in authorities that leads to mistrust in official information provided by the government and lower levels of public and political engagement of young people. In the UK, there is a higher level of youth participation and activism related to the awareness about widespread inequality and inequity (DigiGen project 2021).

Online civic groups of young people developed their local networks, anchoring their activism in local struggles and realities. "They also show a positively-associated process—reinforced by the Covid-19 pandemic—of increasing transversality, reflecting aspirations for global justice and the idea of an interdependency" between different issues, including climate change and other social, political and economic issues (Terren L and Soler-i-Martí R 2021).

The pandemic had aggravated the digital divide and exclusion of some youth groups. Digital activists feel particularly exposed to harassment, bullying and hate speech and 60% of women consider their gender to be an important factor in other's reactions towards their civic views, compared to 31% of men respondents (UNDP 2021).

Privacy and cybersecurity are also of concern to young activists: up to 57% of young activists believe that their data is not protected online and that the views they share could be used against them (UNDP 2021).

Disinformation is a significant challenge for participation and 85% of young people state that they encounter a lot of disinformation and fake news on social media, with 69% seeing the internet as a critical source of polarisation. Information pollution and polarisation were also reported as being exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Still, young people seem to trust more online sources of information compared to traditional media (UNDP 2021).

## **5.1. Policy responses to the impact of Covid-19 on youth participation**

Youth participation is considered key to the development and implementation of relevant youth policy, with chances to generate a positive impact on young people. However, the OECD analysis on what countries have done to support young people in the Covid-19 crisis identifies youth participation as a key component in only seven youth strategies, out of the 35 national youth strategies analysed, implying that this was not one of their priorities (OECD 2021).

Considering that the EU Youth Strategy includes a priority on engaging young people, the EU Council conclusions on strengthening the multilevel governance invite the Commission to organise peer learning activities and to build knowledge and capacity on youth participation in decision-making processes at multiple levels (Council of the European Union 2021). The new Erasmus+ programme includes youth participation activities that provide more possibilities for young people outside formal education and training to take an active role in civic and democratic processes at local, regional, national and European level (European Commission 2021b). This was relevant even before the Covid-19 pandemic, but it became even more relevant in the context of new forms of youth participation developing in Europe and new challenges related to the unequal access to participation channels.

Information is fundamental in supporting participation. Provision of information, especially about Covid-19, has been targeted to the entire population, not necessarily exclusively to young people. Government communication has mainly been seen as “one-way and directional” (Boskovic and O’Donovan 2021). Different European and national actors did not sufficiently co-ordinate with each other, generating issues related to the quality and clarity of official communications and mixed messaging, which may have contributed to decreasing trust in governments among young people (Boskovic and O’Donovan 2021).

On the other hand, in the efforts to correctly inform young people about the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, to encourage young people to participate in the “new normal” ways and to avoid misinformation, civil society played an active role to attempt to fill this gap, taking the initiative to complement the activities of public bodies, by disseminating information and providing support to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups (OECD 2020). “The NGO sector sought a more interactive and innovative approach in supporting young people”, ensuring the flow of information and “opening-up a dialogue using digital media were seen to be lacking” (Boskovic and O’Donovan 2021). The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership’s Policy Brief based on the cross-country survey (Boskovic and O’Donovan, 2021) also highlights a few cases of successful co-operation between governments and youth organisations to better inform young people in France, Denmark and Romania.

## **6. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth work and youth organisations**

According to a study on youth work in the EU, prior to Covid-19, the majority of youth workers in Europe reported two main needs, present across the EU with different intensity levels in different countries, depending on how strongly the countries had developed the “practice architecture”.<sup>1</sup> These two main needs were: “the need for more sustained and operational

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1. The “strong practice architecture” includes, according to the study: legal definitions of youth work, clear descriptions of competences, training and career pathways, quality assurance mechanisms in place, associations of youth workers.

funding as opposed to shorter term project-based funding; and the need to improve the recognition of youth work” (European Commission 2021a).<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, 82% of youth workers participating in a European Commission survey reported difficulty in conducting activities and 61% of youth workers have completely “rethought the way they do things”. The percentage is consistent in different countries and regions (with very small variations, from 60% in the Baltics and Eastern Europe to 63% in Western and Central Europe) (European Commission, 2021a).

While 43% have stopped some activities, 48% have extended digital activities, but there are important differences among countries on how youth workers adapted to the changes brought by Covid-19 (European Commission, 2021a). Some 38% of youth workers reported they were busier than ever, showing both the increasing needs of young people for different types of support, but also the challenges of answering these needs with new methods and in a new digital environment (McArdle and McConville 2021, YouthLink Scotland 2021, Marshall et al. 2021). Organisations offering targeted youth work, one-to-one provision, outreach and mobile provision were significantly more likely to report that they operated at an increased level (UK Youth 2021).

The need for better funding has remained a priority since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, with about two thirds of youth workers continuing to express the need for increased funding (the need for better funding was reported by 66% of youth workers before Covid-19 pandemic and 63% since the outbreak) (European Commission 2021a). The study underlines that, since Covid-19, “the need for further financial support is more critical for private youth work organisations which may not have core financial support from governments and for organisations in countries with practice architectures in need of development” and these findings are supported by other reports published in 2020 and 2021 (European Commission 2021a, O'Donovan and Zentner 2020, Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021, UK Youth 2021, National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

Youth organisations lost part of their community and private funding, they generally lost part of their training funding (because the training and workshops that might have supplied their financial sources were not possible during the pandemic period). In some cases, they also lost the possibility to access grants because these grants were put on hold. A 2021 study by UK Youth underlines the long-term financial pressure and difficulties of youth organisations in the context of diminishing support from traditional, private donors and an increasing demand for youth work services. Therefore, small organisations face the risk of closure in the near future. Studies show that small organisations have limited capacity to adapt their fundraising strategies and to access funds designed to support their recovery after Covid-19 (European Commission, 2021a; UK Youth, 2021; Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021).

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2. This included: developing ways to recognise non-formal education and learning acquired in youth work, to recognise youth work as a profession, and for society to recognise the value of youth work more generally.

When it comes to the recognition of youth work and its value, since 2014 there has been important progress in national policies. Yet, there are still significant differences among countries in this respect. In countries with practice architectures in need of development, there was a strong perception of a lack of support for employment conditions from national governments, professional organisations and trade unions. This is particularly needed by young workers providing services and activities to vulnerable and marginalised young people, in countries or areas where youth work was less present even before the pandemic and that have been hit particularly hard by Covid-19 (European Commission 2021, LVIV Team 2021). For example, rural areas may experience a slower economic recovery from Covid-19, and in these areas the capacity of youth services is the lowest. Even in countries with strong youth work practice architecture, like the UK and Ireland, there is little or no co-ordinated provision in many rural areas to tackle inequalities and put young people at the heart of Covid-recovery with the support of youth work and youth organisations (NYA 2021, National Youth Council of Ireland 2020).

This confirms the conclusions of the surveys conducted by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership: “

The impact of the pandemic and the lockdown also tended to highlight and reinforce a known dichotomy in the youth sector in Europe. In those countries where the youth sector, including youth work services and other support systems for young people and youth organisations are long-established, policy or legally based, publicly funded and where youth workers have job stability, the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown was less severe and the response more managed. In those countries that did not have these underpinning supports, the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown was more severe and less well managed (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020).

Moreover, since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak, youth workers articulated the need for flexibility and self-care strategies from their employing organisations, during this pandemic and in the future, in order to process the impact of this period personally and professionally (McArdle and McConville 2021, UK Youth 2021).

## **6.1. The responses from youth workers and youth organisations to the Covid-19 crisis and the needs of young people**

In most cases, youth workers and organisations report that, in the early stages of the pandemic, they went back to basics and based their decisions on how to reorganise their work on ethical standards of youth work and the core mission of safeguarding young people and protecting those most vulnerable. Peer learning, reflective practice and sharing of new skills among youth workers enabled them to quickly build capacity and re-design their programmes for the digital space (McArdle and McConville, 2021; UK Youth 2020; UK Youth 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

Several studies found that the continuous presence and actions of youth workers had a significant role in mitigating some effects of the pandemic, such as isolation, poverty and the potential mental health impact on young people. In different countries, youth organisations and youth workers offered practical support, such as food packages and support for digital connectivity, and they continued to connect with young people to maintain trusted relationships (Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021; McArdle and McConville, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021; Marshall et al., 2021; UK Youth 2020; UK Youth 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

However, there are differences between countries and between communities within the same country. The British Academy underlines that local communities have become more important than ever during the pandemic. Therefore, in the communities where charitable and voluntary youth organisations were active, they contributed greatly to the response to Covid-19. But there are inequalities among countries and communities due to infrastructure and youth work practice architecture development that need to be addressed (European Commission 2021a, British Academy 2021, NYA 2021).

### **6.1.1. Challenges for youth workers, addressing the needs of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic**

A combination of developmental and supportive activities has been implemented by youth workers and organisations. In some cases, youth workers also reported difficulties in maintaining a balance between delivering the programme established before March 2020 for which they were employed (generally developmental programmes for which funds were provided) and maintaining the care and welfare of individual young people in the context of new, emerging needs. In other words, some youth workers felt a tension between following a developmental programme planned before the pandemic and answering the new needs of young people. This became evident when the lockdown and physical distancing began to show their impact on young people's emotional well-being and mental health (McArdle and McConville 2021, Marshall et al. 2021).

A specific challenge was to understand engagement and dis-engagement of young people with online youth work activities. Structural issues outside the control of the youth worker, including poverty, housing, broadband infrastructure and digital access impacted young people's participation in youth work programmes (McArdle and McConville 2021, Marshall et al. 2021, UK Youth 2020). This may explain the increasing needs that youth workers report on connecting with stakeholders in different sectors, development of the digitalisation capacity and innovation (European Commission 2021a, McArdle and McConville 2021, YouthLink Scotland 2021).

However, there is anxiety among youth workers about how to transfer the engagement skills used in the physical space into the online world. Youth workers reflected on how informal cues, body language and group work are so instinctive in the physical space; but can be missed

and missing in the online space. They also reported that online spaces rarely provide the opportunity for informal/ad hoc conversations that allow youth workers to better understand the background of young people and that allow young people to connect with each other (McArdle and McConville 2021, Marshall et al. 2021).

Some studies underline the importance of ensuring a safe online space for young people to interact between each other and with youth workers. This is especially the need of the most vulnerable young people to cope with hate speech and harassment (LGBT Youth Scotland 2020, National Youth Council of Ireland 2020).

For youth workers or organisations providing services and activities to adolescents and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, the transition from face-to-face work to online youth work generated the need and opportunity to connect better with parents. This is also progress in the practice, when parents become partners of the youth worker and actively support the developmental and learning progress of the young person (McArdle and McConville, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021; Marshall et al., 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

A range of issues were highlighted by the studies on the short- and medium-term impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector, in particular youth work and youth organisations. Summarised, these challenges mainly include:

- barriers to young people's digital engagement, ranging from digital poverty and limited access to technology, to the fatigue of online connections, which is worsened by the extension of the crisis in most countries and prolongation of restrictions related to physical engagement;
- difficulty engaging with vulnerable young people, "at risk" or experiencing marginalisation;
- the limited capacity of youth workers and organisations to see and respond when a young person needs support, due to limited interactions, mainly organised online;
- the paradox of encouraging online engagement in lockdown compared to discouraging device dependence pre-Covid-19;
- a lack of structure and lack of support from parents as online engagement sometimes compounds pressure for families;
- online engagement making developmental work and experiential learning more difficult than face-to-face interactions;
- limitations associated with outreach work, due to limited interaction in public spaces;
- up-skilled outreach and digital youth workers being needed for young people on social media platforms and in spaces where young people meet and communicate.

However, new developments in youth work practice are not risk free when blending the face-to-face and digital approaches and their combination, within a wider ethical debate on the nature of youth work. Separating the professional and the personal involvement of the youth worker with young people was a difficult issue before the pandemic, but it is more of a challenge now that young people are even more emotionally vulnerable (as shown by the

studies on their emotional well-being and mental health) and the youth worker is entering the private spaces of young people when connecting with them online. Youth workers reported struggling to find solutions for online youth work activities when engaging with young people living in crowded homes and having younger siblings or parents interfering in the developmental or learning activities (McArdle and McConville, 2021; UK Youth 2020; UK Youth 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

### **6.1.2. Good practices of youth work addressing the needs of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic**

Different studies have underlined that, despite important difficulties, youth workers have developed their capacity and competences to face new challenges brought about by the pandemic. These could be considered as long-term gains for practitioners (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021,; National Youth Council of Ireland 2020, UK Youth 2021). Namely, "youth workers have built a bank of digital skills throughout this period while remaining faithful to the primacy of relationships and the human skills that permeate both the virtual world and the face-to-face world" (McArdle and McConville, 2021).

Within very little time, youth workers made changes to their programmes and methodologies, creating content to meet the needs of young people that suited the unique environment in which they were operating. Youth work provision has shifted towards digital or blended forms of support. A study of youth work organisations across Europe, for example, found that 17% of organisations had transferred all support to digital platforms, while 7% reported that they had not used digital at all and reduced the support available to young people. Many organisations across Europe had developed blended offers, complementing digital support with other, more traditional methods (RAY-COR 2020, Marshall et al. 2021).

Among good practices identified in the activities of youth organisations in 2020 and 2021 are:

- online campaigns and/or constant social media engagement to ensure a continuous flow of information for young people and fight fake news;
- virtual engagement using games, music, art, craft and design and food challenges to be completed offline, at home, and results to be uploaded online, etc.;
- reorganisation of some activities outdoors, including career counselling sessions for young people in the format of a Walk and Talk;
- production of education materials to support online learning and complementing the resources developed by education institutions and organisations;
- podcasts allowing young people, youth workers and leaders to share the experience and impact of the pandemic on young people with a larger community;
- reaching out to the community with material support and other activities focusing on intergenerational solidarity between volunteer young people and persons particularly vulnerable to the Covid-19 disease;

- activities targeting emotional well-being and mental health, using online group or individual sessions or face-to-face individual or small-group sessions, observing physical distancing;
- sessions on practical skills, from planning one's day during the pandemic to cooking, etc.;
- consultations and research activities on young people's experience to inform youth workers, organisations, policy and decision makers (McArdle and McConville 2021, YouthLink Scotland 2021, LGBT Youth Scotland 2020, National Youth Council of Ireland 2020, Boskovic and O'Donovan, 2021).

Aware that it was not possible nor desirable to spend the same amount of time face-to-face with young people in online applications, youth workers needed to adapt their programmes and methods. As a result, in England, 83% of young people said youth work had been important or very important to them during the first year of the pandemic (NYA, 2020). In Ireland, young people shared very positive experiences of youth work during this time and felt that youth organisations were responsive to their needs and provided vital interaction (National Youth Council of Ireland, 2020).

## **7. Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on digitalisation in the youth sector**

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been an unprecedented reorganisation of life based on digitalisation, via remote working, virtual socialising and home schooling, which have led to a process of accelerated change in people's day-to-day lives.

During 2020, studies focused mainly on how schools, universities and education in general were affected by a forced digitalisation (Lavizzari et al., 2020). In the first semester of 2021, research extended to other sectors beyond education, such as commerce and banking. The use of electronic platforms in online shopping, restaurant delivery and money transactions increased notably (Escamilla and Lonean 2021). In the last semester of 2021, it was observed that research began to delve into other sectors related to youth, such as the labour market or rural areas.

Starting with the labour market, studies show two fundamental trends: the shift from working in a physical space to a totally digital one and keeping training spaces open for acquiring those necessary skills and experiences to maintain or access a job. In relation to the first trend, López Peláez et al. (2021) stress that the pandemic caused an exponential growth in teleworking<sup>3</sup> in the EU. Before Covid-19, there were only 5% of teleworkers in the EU-28, a

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3. "Teleworking" is an inclusive term meaning partially or fully working outside a central workplace in a remote location (e.g. home, library, coffee) using information and communications technology and either during normal business hours or otherwise (O'Brien and Aliabadi 2020).

figure that increased to 40% in the EU-27 after the start of the pandemic. In this regard, empirical studies suggested paradoxical consequences for young people's work-life balance, job satisfaction, and well-being. On the one hand, telework arrangements are claimed to facilitate access to employment for youth and offering greater flexibility on where, when, and how to work. On the other hand, the constant use of digital technologies to work seems to cause unclear boundaries between work and personal life, increased work demands, and adverse effects on individual well-being.

Regarding the second trend, the European Parliament study Youth in Europe (2021) suggested that work-based learning, such as apprenticeships and internships, did not have the technological infrastructure to digitalise their activities and offer virtual job experiences. According to the ILO (2020), this lack of adequate technological infrastructure of apprenticeship and internship systems caused negative effects on young people who attended these programmes. The interruption of the work-based learning experience meant that young people did not acquire skills, that they were not ready for teleworking and that, as a consequence of the two previous points, their access to the labour market was delayed.

The Covid-19 pandemic showed that young people did not have enough digital skills to move to telework or to change to a job where digital skills were required, in particular for the most disadvantaged population groups. The EU's 2020 Education and Training Monitor reveals that, in 2019, a fifth of young people (aged 16-24) in the EU still lacked basic digital skills. At the same time, the European Parliament (2021) highlights that young people with low digital skills tend to be associated with lower resilience to the negative effects of the pandemic, including their access to or staying in the labour market. This deficit already existed before the pandemic, but its importance increased within the new digital context.

According to Neagu et al. (2021), this new digital context has also affected young NEET people in rural areas from Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. Their analyses suggest that the digital skill level of this group is very low compared to their urban peers because they have less access to information and communication technology (ICT) equipment and work-based learning spaces to acquire digital skills for their personal and professional development. These same results were found by the ILO (2020), where respondents from Finland, France, Spain and the United Kingdom reported differences in terms of access to the internet, technological infrastructure and digital skills between learners in rural and urban areas. Even those households equipped with internet and digital means had to navigate through overlapping timetables of children and parents studying or working remotely (Ştefan and Şerban 2020).

Finally, these studies also indicate that this digital vulnerability can lead to mental health issues, early school leaving and unemployment. This confirms the conclusions of the surveys conducted by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, where "two consequences appear to have resulted from this lack of access: deterioration in mental health and wellbeing among

young people and lack of capacity, training and skills in using digitalization” (Boskovic and O’Donovan, 2021).

### **7.1. Policy responses to the impact of Covid-19 on digitalisation in the youth sector**

According to the Global Youth Survey (Decent Jobs For Youth, 2020), during 2020, policy responses focused more on addressing the impacts of the crisis on youth unemployment (such as income support) than on the digitalisation of the youth sector (in general) and young people (in particular).

This changed during the first half of 2021, with an increase in responses linked to digitalisation as a cross-cutting element in all areas of life. The ERYICA compendium (2021) divides the examples into four categories: digital youth information work, emotional well-being and mental health support, media and information literacy, and peer-to-peer in youth information. Many of these responses, launched by public institutions at local and national level, focused on providing more useful content to their webpages, opening virtual communication channels for live consultations or launching campaigns on social networks.

Van der Graaf et al. (2021) identified that, in Malta, institutions developed Zoom meetings, collective engagement through chats, youth cafés and other types of live sessions, so youth workers maintained contact with and supported young people and their families. In Lithuania, a programme to provide non-formal education activities online for young refugees was launched. It also raised funds to provide digital devices to students and families in need.

The European Parliament study Youth in Europe (2021) identifies some examples of digitalisation in local and national governments’ responses to the Covid-19 crisis.

- The Covid-19 recovery plan in France includes the digital sector, developing new employment training pathways for young people, under 25, in NEET situations.
- The Greek government launched an e-training to address ICT needs and strengthen digital training opportunities for NEETs and vulnerable groups. It is expected to provide online certified training on digital skills to 3 000 unemployed young people.
- Portugal’s Young+ Digital Programme provides training opportunities to develop digital skills for unemployed young people between 18 and 35 with secondary or higher education. At the same time, in 2021, the Portuguese Government launched the Digital Guarantee to ensure that, by 2023, all unemployed people will have training opportunities in digital skills suitable for their level of qualification and skills profile.

In this regard, the ILO (2021) pointed out that it is essential to ensure young people have broad access to digital skills training opportunities throughout their working lives. If the above is achieved, these young people with digital skills will be better able to adapt to the transformations that digitalisation brings to all aspects of their lives. The inclusion of digital transformation as a priority in the new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027), in line with the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), is a commitment to practically supporting the digitalisation of the youth sector.

The programme aims to foster both basic and advanced digital skills and digital literacy, among youth organisations and young people (especially those with fewer opportunities, students, jobseekers and workers) to participate fully in European society (European Commission 2021). The challenge will be to ensure that the programme supports not only large organisations that have robust management structures, but that it also reaches small grassroots youth organisations and groups and supports their engagement in the digital transformation of the sector.

According to Pantea and Makharadze (2021), public authorities and the NGO sector must work together to close the digital divide and adequately prepare and equip young people and youth work practitioners with digital literacy programmes to cope with today's fast-evolving and uncertain environment. At the same time, it is essential that public authorities immediately address issues of connectivity and digital competences of the youth sector. Otherwise, young people with fewer opportunities will be completely left out and deprived of information and services, with a greater risk of social exclusion (Esteban-Navarro et al. 2020).

Finally, young people must be deliberately involved in the design of digital technologies and infrastructures that will affect them to avoid exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. This means that youth must be consulted and involved in decision-making processes, where their views, lived experiences, intersecting needs and aspirations are really taken into account so that digitalisation becomes an opportunity and not a disadvantage.

## **8. Conclusion**

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's livelihoods have been more severe than for older adults. Young people are less protected by job retention, income support, subsidised wages and other welfare schemes and they suffered the impact of school and university closures and restricted access to indoor and outdoor activities (OECD 2021,

Eurofound 2021, European Parliament 2021, European Youth Forum 2021, etc.). As a result, many young people face financial challenges and lack necessary resources and are in precarious working and living situations. The impact has been particularly severe on young people from socially vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The Covid-19 pandemic additionally resulted in social isolation and an increase in mental health issues among young people. The links between mental and physical health and well-being and the importance of mental health in shaping life outcomes for young people are increasingly being recognized. Although concerns about adolescents' mental health and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic are confirmed by the present studies, the true picture of young people's well-being is likely to be more complex than evidenced so far and only visible in the coming years. The risk is that the aftershocks of the pandemic will hang over the aspirations and lifetime earnings of a generation whose education has been disrupted, posing a risk to the foundations of their mental health in the future.

Strengthening the evidence base on mental health for children and young people is imperative to ensure that programming efforts and recommendations for policy and practice are effective. Future efforts need to address the pre-pandemic and pandemic-related rise in mental health problems in the adolescent population. It will be important to closely monitor indicators of risk and resilience, enabling timely efforts to mitigate the risk for the development of mental disorders during adolescence.

Overall, studies show youth participation is on a positive trend, visible in young people's participation in elections, civil society organisations and social movements. However, Covid-19 has affected some avenues of participation, such as protests, marches or participation in youth councils because of regulations on physical distancing. In this context, digital activism has developed greatly, including global, local and "glocal" initiatives. However, there are risks related to online youth participation, including greater polarisation, harassment, bullying and hate speech, disinformation and limited privacy.

Several studies were published in 2021 on young people and youth work in Europe, comparing the situation about one year after the outbreak of Covid-19 with the situation before the pandemic and confirming the initial findings. Following one year of experience in online and hybrid (combining online with face-to-face) youth work, youth workers and youth organisations were able to identify, in the second half of 2021, what works and what does not work in the new methods they have adopted.

Youth workers and youth organisations ran online bingo, scavenger hunts, thematic sessions, litter-picking and nature sessions, photography, digital quizzes, personal identity sessions, diversity sessions and social action projects, online events; art-based activities and local community engagement. They provided important information to young people. Engagement via social media kept young people updated with links to health advice, regulations, sharing

ideas and news about events. These studies find that youth work has a significant positive impact on young people participating in activities, supporting the mitigation of the negative effects of the pandemic, such as isolation and the mental health impact on young people.

While there is now a significant body of evidence on the impact of the pandemic on young people in Europe, some important gaps remain. First, much of the research has covered young people in the EU and OECD countries, while data on the impact of Covid-19 in South-East and eastern Europe and the Caucasus is still largely lacking. Second, the research has been following the policy measures applied during the pandemic, but we still lack a comprehensive analysis of their impact. Finally, there is a need to enhance systematic data collection, monitoring and measurement of policy impacts through a system of indicators to develop effective and sustainable policies for the future.

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