

THE DISCOURSE ON THE SITUATION OF YOUTH IN THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF POLICIES AND RESEARCH

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Abstract

The current global situation after Covid-19 presents the situation of youth in Europe as a synthesis for an international strategy of national youth policies instigated by the Council of Europe ‘Supporting Young People in Europe: Principles, Policy, Practice’. We look at youth policy as an initiative within other policy areas, which affect not only young people but all of society. The article presents the social and demographic situation of youth in the EU, and the state of play regarding welfare and poverty, education, employment, family issues, health and behaviour, and the future of youth in the EU.

KEYWORDS: youth, youth policy, employment, social participation, empowerment, solidarity.

Anotacija

Dabartinė padėtis pasaulyje po COVID-19 atskleidžia jaunimo situaciją Europoje, kaip tarptautinės nacionalinės jaunimo politikos strategijos „Parama jauniems žmonėms Europoje: principai, politika, praktika“, kuri koordinuojama Europos Tarybos, sintezę. Jaunimo politika straipsnio autorių traktuojama kaip iniciatyva ir kitose politikos srityse, kurios veikia ne tik jaunimą, bet ir visą visuomenę. Straipsnyje pristatoma socialinė-demografinė jaunimo ES situacija, įskaitant gerovę ir skurdą, švietimą, užimtumą, šeimos problemas, sveikatą, elgesį, be to, jaunimo ateities ES projekcija.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: jaunimas, jaunimo politika, užimtumas, socialinis dalyvavimas, įgalinimas, solidarumas.

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Introduction

According to the approach of the Council of Europe’s youth section, youth policy combines a multi-dimensional concern for ensuring young people’s well-being, providing them with relevant learning opportunities, increasing the probability of their successful integration into society and transition to independence, and enabling them to participate in decision-making and civil society. This multi-faceted focus on different aspects of young peoples’ lives is supported by a set of principles on which sound policy-making should be based (Guidelines). The synthesis report on international reviews of national youth policy commissioned by the Council of Europe ‘Supporting Young People in Europe: Principles, Policy, Practice’ emphasises the fact that the broad conceptions of ‘youth policy’ include not only policies which are directed specifically towards young people, but also policy initiatives

in other policy areas which in one way or another affect young people. This core insight suggests principles for the formulation of youth policy:

1. Youth policies are cross-sectoral, and cover domains such as access to education and the labour market, welfare and social and economic rights, culture and cultural production, lifelong learning and non-formal education, housing, citizenship, leisure time, criminal justice, health, sexuality, lifestyle and reproduction, mobility, military service and conscientious objection, and many more.

2. The vertical (age) and horizontal (socio-economic possibility and lifestyle) heterogeneity of young people implies that youth policies should be evidence-based. In the youth sector, this has been expressed as a ‘magic triangle’, linking research networks with the relevant public authorities and civil society actors representing young people and youth policy users and respondents.

3. Youth policy respects the agency of young people, while recognising the specific challenges and obstacles they face according to their position and possibilities (Williamson, 2002).

This is very much dependent on the country level, and how much time, effort and finance has been invested in the development of a proper youth policy in a country. While there are plenty of country-specific and also some EU-level youth programmes, youth still face more challenges and problems than ever in the history of mankind. Job and income uncertainty can keep young people from reaching other traditional markers of adulthood, leaving them discouraged and disillusioned. It can also have serious long-term effects on health, fertility and crime, and can eventually endanger social cohesion. The current situation shows that developments and implementations of youth policies and programmes are heavily challenged, both in terms of adequacy and efficiency. In the light of the principles which hold our societies together, such as confidence, trust, solidarity and equal opportunities and high expectations regarding healthy youth activism and civic engagement, it is important to define the biggest challenges in the field of youth facing our societies, and to understand what kind of relevant tools can and should be used to overcome these barriers.

Each country and institution defines youth differently, as well as the age range representing youth. For example, the International Labor Organization’s youth age range is 15 to 24 years, the UN Population Fund considers youth to be ten to 24 years old, while the EU Youth Guarantee in some countries included young people aged from 15 to well beyond 24. The current review focuses primarily on youth from 15 to 29 years old, to allow for the fact that young people remain in education for longer, and to include the beginning of the formation of family, and uses the World Bank definition of youth, which is the ‘period of transition to adulthood in

which children and adolescents gradually come to be recognised as adults' (World Development Report).

Aim of the research: based on sociological and statistical analysis, to reveal the situation of youth in the EU within the context of policies and research.

Object of the research: the situation of youth in the EU in the context of policies and research.

Methods of the research: an analysis of scientific literature, legal documents and statistics.

1. The socio-demographic profile of youth in the EU

The use of statistics and the development of different kinds of profiles quite often leads to labelling and stereotyping. According to G. McGregor, the popular tendency to label whole generations and define subgroups within them became current in the latter half of the 20th century. As young people attained a growing importance as consumers of goods and educational services, the attention of sociologists, psychologists, educators and advertisers intensified. For many people, the youth subcultures and movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s often symbolised troublesome and delinquent youth. Group identification, enshrined in dress, music and interests, was also commonly interpreted as signifying a shared ethos. Depending on when they were born, young people were broadly categorised as 'Baby Boomers' (1946–1964) or 'Generation X' (1965–1979), although there is no official timespan for these loosely constructed 'generations'. Lately, the so-called 'Generation Y' (1980–2000) is stereotyped as being overly pampered, 'tech-savvy', narcissistic and ambitious, but lacking commitment. Young people born since 2000 have been further stereotyped as 'Gen Z', the first generation to be born into a world of unprecedented communication technology (McGregor, 2013). Since these youth generations may have sociological traits by which they differ from others, they also have observable and statistically measurable parameters that are common to anybody.

Eurostat data show that in 2019 there were 86,531,328 young people aged 15 to 29 living in EU countries. If the total number of young people is calculated as the ratio of the whole population, then the ratio is 16.9%, and that number is declining over the years. The ratio of young people in the total population in the EU during the last ten years has decreased by 2%, from 18.9% in 2009, to 16.9% in 2019. The youth education level is increasing: in 2019, 83.9% of young people aged 20 to 24 had attained at least upper secondary educational level, compared to 78.8% in 2009; and 41.6% of the population aged 30 to 34 in 2019 have a tertiary educational attainment level, compared to 32.3% in 2009. There were 5,320,600 unem-

ployed young people aged 15 to 29 living in the EU in 2019, which comprised a youth unemployment level of 11.2%, and a 3.0% long-term youth unemployment rate (12 months or longer). The data show a very stable rate of young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET), at 3.9% in 2019 and 4.0% in 2009, with very small fluctuations over the ten-year period. A total of 7.7% of the age class 16 to 29 years in 2019 were severely materially deprived, which is 2% higher than that of the total population (5.7%). The suicide rate among young people remains high: 7.3% in the age class from 20 to 24, and 5.8% from 15 to 24 in 2016 (latest available Eurostat data).

Statistical data may show a more or less accurate profile of youth today, and depict the evolving trends. However, the academic expertise of a number of researchers in the field of youth studies suggests that while young people may be connected by the commonality of the decades in which they were born, they are differentiated by the same factors that shape the lives of their elders, such as race, socio-economic status, geo-location and gender. Young people often have to face exactly the same problems as adults, but because of their age they are routinely castigated as irresponsible, and deemed to be less able to respond to life's challenges.

2. The state of play

Well-being, welfare and poverty. As defined in the 'Global Youth Well-being Index' (2017), well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that includes a person's physical and mental health, educational status, economic position, physical safety, access to freedoms, and ability to participate in civic life. It is, in a sense, the abundance or scarcity of opportunities available to an individual. The definition of well-being and the indicators selected to create a picture of well-being draw on the body of work measuring quality of life and economic and social progress, as well as the discipline of positive youth development, which is a framework that builds on young people's assets, while still addressing their deficits.

The idea of young people's welfare is based on the *capability approach*, and the question is put forward whether young people have the skills and opportunities to cope in everyday life, to do things that they value, and to have a good life. The capability approach is a theoretical framework that entails two core normative claims: first, the claim that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance; and second, that freedom to achieve well-being is to be understood in terms of people's capabilities, that is, their real opportunities to do and be what they have reason to value. However, the report 'Society at a Glance 2016' (OECD, 2016) issued by the OECD, and with a focus on youth, reveals that while the long-term goal of public policies is to help young people on the path to self-sufficiency,

those on low incomes may not have the skills, opportunities or freedom to achieve well-being, and low-income youth may require support to avoid poverty.

Data derived from the ‘Youth Well-being Index 2017’ show that the well-being of young people is improving slowly. Using the same set of indicators as the 2014 Index, and updating available data, youth well-being improved by an average of 2%. Youth have the highest levels of well-being in the educational domain; however, not enough young people are getting the preparation they need to be successful in work and life. Across the EU member states included in the Index, youth are doing best in the educational domain, probably because of sustained government and donor investment in education over the last 30 years. At the same time, a paucity of data makes it very difficult to consistently and accurately measure the quality of education. The data also suggest that many young people are optimistic about the future, but too many of them lack the necessary skills to succeed in increasingly complex economies.

The data show that young people are now more likely to be poor than the elderly in most OECD countries, including EU countries. In 2018, the at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate for young people aged 16 to 29 years was 26.3% in the EU-28, corresponding to about 20.6 million young people. Additionally, safety nets tend to be weaker for young people. School-leavers and young people with patchy employment records often fail to qualify for insurance-based income support. Only around 30% of all unemployed young people receive unemployment benefit, while over 40% of all jobseekers aged 30 and over are covered. Consequently, social safety nets are less effective in fighting poverty among young people: 40% of young people who would have incomes below the poverty line are kept out of poverty by public payments, compared to 50% of adults aged 30 and over. Roughly every eighth young person lives in poverty, and youth poverty rates are higher than those of the elderly (OECD, 2016).

Young women aged 16 to 29 years have slightly higher at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rates than young men. The latest 2018 rates show a gender gap of 2.2 percentage points, with a rate of 27.4% for young women, and 25.2% for young men. In 2018, the EU member states with the highest levels of young people aged 16 to 29 at risk of poverty or social exclusion were Greece (40.2%), Denmark (37.3%) and Romania (35.3%), while the lowest rates were in Slovenia (14.7%), Malta (13.1%) and the Czech Republic (11.6%) (Young People – Social Inclusion. Eurostat, 2018).

Social exclusion, including poverty among youth, has the potential to have long-lasting consequences, for both individuals and society as a whole, as it affects all aspects of young people’s lives. Eurostat and EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) data suggest that the decision to move towards an in-

dependent life, leaving the parental household, increases the risk of poverty. For many young people, looking for a job and maintaining a household is far from easy. Indeed, young people often start with low-paid jobs and underemployment (temporary or part-time), which can lead to financial difficulties. However, this is not always the rule, as the risk of poverty for youth depends on numerous other factors, including the general financial situation and the social inclusion policies where they live (Young People – Social Inclusion. Eurostat, 2018).

Inequalities in well-being go well beyond income, however. The OECD report ‘How’s Life? 2015’ analyses intergenerational inequalities in well-being, which take many different forms. On average, people under 30 are more likely than those aged 50 or over to feel that they have friends or relatives that they can count on at difficult times. The younger generation of working-age adults are also much more likely than previous generations to have an upper secondary education. Yet these advantages are not necessarily coupled with better economic opportunities for younger people. In two-thirds of OECD countries, younger people aged 15 to 24 are more likely than prime-aged workers 25 to 54 years old to be unemployed for one year or more; and in the worst cases, the long-term unemployment rate is more than double among younger workers (OECD, 2015).

As is emphasised in the synthesis report ‘Supporting Young People in Europe: Principles, Policy, Practice’, the question of adequate social protection (through social security and welfare services) for young people is a contested one, notwithstanding the very different responses and provisions across Europe. The general policy position is that young people should be engaged in learning or work, or some other kind of ‘purposeful activity’, and not unemployed. At the same time, it is apparent that significant proportions of young people drop out of education, training and the labour market altogether, with no visible means of support, and many sink into a ‘tangle of pathologies’, including early pregnancy, crime, homelessness and drug abuse. In such cases, questions of social security and social protection are of critical importance, but the question of social protection and income support is not included in youth policy. It is assumed that if young people do not find employment, they will be purposefully engaged in education or training, and because more and more are engaged in the latter, they do not experience unemployment. But financial support is an important youth policy issue, if desirable pathways to adulthood are to be followed. The issue is not restricted to supporting those who become unemployed, but to consider what may be necessary to support some young people to remain in learning, when family circumstances do not provide it (Williamson, 2002).

Education and Training. The Council of the European Union in its ‘Resolution on further Developing the European Education Area to Support Future-

Oriented Education and Training Systems' underlines that Europe is facing an era in which globalisation, technological progress, sustainability challenges, persistent social inclusion challenges, political instability and demographic change are having a profound impact on European societies and citizens. These common challenges require common reflection and coordinated actions from member states.

The Council also recognises that the role of education and training in promoting citizenship and democracy, personal development, social inclusion, equal opportunities and empowerment, and in fostering well-being and supporting cohesive societies, are priorities for future cooperation in this area. The two main societal roles of education and training (their contribution to competitiveness, innovation and employability, and their contribution to active citizenship, social inclusion, cohesion and personal development) are closely intertwined and fully complementary in today's societies.

The Council also emphasises that education and training are key policy instruments for creating and maintaining sustainable growth and competitiveness, and fostering employment and labour market participation at a European level. Their potential in tackling broader societal challenges should be fully recognised when preparing the new growth strategy for the European Union. High-quality education and training give the EU a competitive edge in an increasingly digital and knowledge-based global economy, for in the future Europe will depend even more on creative, highly skilled and well-trained people. It will also be vital to steer the development and deployment of new technologies, and support the EU's transition into a circular and climate-neutral economy, by fostering the knowledge, skills and competences needed to drive forward these changes.

It is also acknowledged that European cooperation in the fields of education and training is an essential policy instrument for preparing innovative, future-oriented and responsive strategies to address these common challenges, while respecting the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, and the rich diversity of education and training systems within the EU (Council of the European Union, 2019).

The quality of education and the learning environment have a significant influence on the future prospects of youth in their lives. Research data urge us to improve significantly school curriculum and teachers' work, as well as the learning environment, including more active involvement and participation by parents. The main analytical report covering the fields of education and training in the EU is 'Education and Training Monitor', which gathers a wide range of evidence to indicate the evolution of national education and training systems across the European Union. The report measures countries' progress towards the targets of the 'Education and Training 2020' (ET 2020) strategic framework for European cooperation in these fields. It also provides insights into measures taken to address

education-related issues as part of the European Semester process, as well as offering suggestions for policy reforms that can make national education and training systems more responsive to societal and labour market needs. The latest 'Education and Training Monitor 2019' report (European Commission, 2019) reveals that of all the factors in the school environment, the teachers are considered to have the greatest impact on students' learning outcomes. At the same time, more than 60% of public expenditure in education in the EU is spent on teachers. Any policy effort seeking to improve educational outcomes, or the efficiency of education and training, has to take a close look at the role of teachers, and look for ways to help teachers excel in their demanding profession.

The report states that some member states are soon to experience a wave of retirements, or have an insufficient number of candidate teachers. To respond to this, Bulgaria, Ireland and Lithuania have recently started to create forecasting tools to better plan teacher supply and demand. Across Europe, teachers report a great need for training on 'ICT skills for teaching'. With EU support, Latvia is preparing teachers to use modern tools, including digital technologies. France recently launched a 'digital and informatics science' programme in upper-secondary schools, and created new qualifying training courses to support teachers delivering this programme. EU member states are also supporting teachers to respond to the increasing diversity in the student population. Teachers in Greece, for example, have received dedicated training to ease the integration of recently arrived migrants, and psychologists have been recruited to support the teachers. Slovenia, with EU support, has launched a project which helps teachers develop teaching methods to promote the benefits of diversity and multiculturalism.

According to the report, compared to 2009, EU countries have successfully expanded participation in education. The share of children enrolled in early childhood education has risen from 90.8% in 2009 to 95.4% in 2017, and the share of young people with a tertiary education diploma has climbed from 32.3% in 2009 to 40.7% in 2018. The challenge in these sectors now lies in ensuring the participation of disadvantaged groups, and increasing the quality of education for children and young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Early school leaving decreased from 14.2% in 2009 to 10.6% in 2018. Despite important progress in reducing the share of pupils leaving education prematurely, the positive upward trend slowed after 2016.

There are a number of key competences (or a combination of knowledge, skills and attitude) that can support an individual's life chances, easier transition to the labour market, and job prospects. For example, participation in entrepreneurship education increases the likelihood of engaging in entrepreneurial activities later in life by 35% on average. Of this 35%, a 7 percentage point increase is due to

improved self-perceptions by participants of their entrepreneurial skills. However, available data show that participation in entrepreneurship education in the EU is mostly optional, and only a handful of countries make it compulsory.

Furthermore, the potential of digital technologies in improving educational practices needs to successfully undergo digital transformation: schools need to support teachers' digital competence for pedagogical use, design innovative pedagogical approaches, and provide digital equipment and better connectivity.

However, while participation in education has been growing in Europe, one in five 15-year-old pupils still cannot solve simple reading, maths and science problems. Coupled with the stagnating rate of adult learning in Europe, this means that the main challenge in Europe is now to ensure a high level of basic skills for all. Public investment in education is broadly comparable to levels ten years ago. However, there has been significant investment in digital equipment and infrastructure in schools in the last decade. To successfully manage the digital transformation, European schools need to implement pedagogical, technological and organisational changes. There is also a need to better understand and monitor pupils' ability to create, sort and evaluate digital information (European Commission, 2019).

Employment and entrepreneurship. Levels of youth employment, unemployment and inactivity are largely influenced by the macro-economic situation, but they may also have important root causes in the structural characteristics of school-to-work transitions. These structural factors include unsatisfactory outcomes of education and training systems, the segmentation of labour markets affecting young people in particular, and the low capacity of public employment services to provide tailored services to young people and limited outreach to young people in the most vulnerable situations. This situation requires an exploration of other channels of employment, such as social entrepreneurship using youth social capital. While there seems to be little agreement regarding what social capital is, it has become evident that social capital provides many benefits for communities and individuals, including increasing health and community cohesion. In terms of young people, these benefits are centred on educational outcomes and the transition to work.

In the context of the conference organised by the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, exploring a range of issues and the challenges these may present for young people by 2020, Howard Williamson pointed out that it is impossible to consider the contemporary social conditions of young people in Europe without confronting, at its very epicentre, the level of youth unemployment. According to Williamson, the shocks of the 'one in five' that have routinely challenged policy-making around labour market insertion, vo-

cational training and youth support have been replaced with scenarios where half or even more young people are excluded from the labour market. There are, of course, some exceptions (Germany and Austria are still doing reasonably well in keeping their levels of youth unemployment under 10%), and Greece and Spain (both well over 50%) are extreme cases; but, as politicians are prone to say, there is no room for complacency (Perspectives on Youth).

Youth unemployment has been a major crisis over the last decade. One of the greatest policy challenges of the last decade for many European Union member states has been the youth unemployment crisis. In the EU, the youth unemployment rate peaked at 23.7% in 2013, but it reached much higher levels in several member states, such as Greece (58.3%), Spain (55.5%) and Croatia (50.0%). In Italy, the youth unemployment rate peaked a year later at 42.7%. At the same time, the number of youth who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) also increased rapidly. This challenge led to a range of policy actions in the EU, including the EU's Youth Guarantee (European Union, 2013), which was a commitment by all EU member states in the form of a Council Recommendation. It aims to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years old receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. Although in most member states youth unemployment has returned to pre-crisis levels (i.e. 2007), the youth unemployment challenge has not yet been fully resolved, as labour market participation rates for youth continue to decline, having fallen nearly 10 percentage points in the EU over the last decade (Eurostat, 2018).

Youth have high ambitions for entrepreneurship, but while nearly half of youth express an interest in entrepreneurship, only 4.7% of youth in the EU were actively trying to start a business between 2014 and 2018. Those who successfully start a business tend to be more growth-oriented than older entrepreneurs. About 11.1% of new youth entrepreneurs in the EU reported that they expected that their new business would create at least 19 jobs over the next five years, compared to 9.8% of new entrepreneurs overall. Yet business survival rates for youth entrepreneurs tend to be low and few create jobs for others. Policy makers could do more to help youth entrepreneurs create sustainable businesses by supporting innovative ideas, which will increase the chances of success (OECD, 2019).

Survey data often indicate that youth are very interested in becoming self-employed. Surveys show that almost half of youth would prefer to be self-employed rather than working as an employee (Halabisky, 2012). However, very few young people are self-employed. In 2018, only 6.5% of employed youths between 20 and 29 years old were self-employed in the EU. This was less than the overall self-employment rate for adults overall (15 to 64 years old), at 13.5%. The self-

employment rate for youth has remained fairly constant, despite a decline in the absolute number of self-employed youths from 2.7 million in 2009 to 2.5 million in 2018 (OECD, 2019).

As is stated in the OECD and European Union report on policies for inclusive entrepreneurship 'The Missing Entrepreneurs 2019', youth face a number of key barriers to business creation and self-employment, such as being slightly less likely than adults to feel that they have the knowledge and skills for entrepreneurship, and that young people view the fear of failure as a barrier to entrepreneurship. Public policy should address many of the market and institutional failures in youth entrepreneurship, by increasing awareness about the potential of entrepreneurship, embedding entrepreneurship teaching at all levels of education, offering training and coaching outside education, improving access to finance, and supporting the development of entrepreneurship networks for young people.

A number of structural changes affecting youth employment are also unfolding in the labour market. A growing number of workers have non-standard work arrangements, including part-time work and self-employment. Non-standard work has increased for all age groups, but affects youth disproportionately: in 1995, 23% of young employees 25 to 39 years old had non-standard contracts, and this increased to 36% in 2016. This was driven by increases in part-time employment and temporary employees, which were largely involuntary (European Commission, 2017).

The policy brief on recent developments in youth entrepreneurship issued by the OECD and the European Commission in 2020 points out that as youth unemployment in the European Union has fallen from its recent peak, youth entrepreneurship policy is currently increasingly emphasising the quality rather than the quantity of businesses created, as well as the pathways generated to better opportunities in the labour market. Public policy can address many of the market and institutional failures impeding youth entrepreneurship, by increasing awareness about the potential of entrepreneurship, embedding entrepreneurship teaching at all levels of education, offering training and coaching outside education, improving access to finance, and supporting the development of entrepreneurship networks for young people (OECD, 2020).

Family. Some 2.2 million marriages and almost one million divorces took place in the EU in 2016, according to the most recent data available for all EU member states. These figures may be expressed as 4.4 marriages for every 1,000 people (in other words, the crude marriage rate), and 1.9 divorces for every 1,000 people (in other words, the crude divorce rate). The figure for divorces in 2016 is an estimate based on 27 countries, since a figure for Ireland is not available. Since 1965, the crude marriage rate in the EU-28 has declined by close to 50% in relative terms (from 7.8 per 1,000 people in 1965, to 4.4 in 2016). At the same time, the

crude divorce rate has more than doubled, increasing from 0.8 per 1,000 people in 1965, to 1.9 in 2016. Part of this increase may be due to the fact that in several EU member states, divorce was legalised during the period (for example, in Italy, Spain, Ireland and Malta).

The proportion of live births outside marriage in the EU in 2016 was 42.6%. This is an estimate based on 27 countries, since figures for Malta were not available. This share has continued to increase, signalling new patterns of family formation, alongside the more traditional pattern, where children were born within marriage. Extramarital births occur in non-marital relationships, among cohabiting couples and to lone parents. In 2017, extramarital births outnumbered births within marriage in several EU member states: France (59.9%), Bulgaria (58.9%), Estonia (58.6%), Slovenia (57.5%), Portugal (54.9%), Sweden (54.5%), Denmark (54.2%) and the Netherlands (51.0%). Mediterranean countries, like Greece, Croatia and Cyprus, along with Poland and Lithuania, were generally at the other end of the scale, as more than 70% of births in each of these member states occurred within marriage. In Turkey, the share was as high as 97%. The mean age of women in the European Union on giving birth to their first child has gradually increased, from 28.8 years in 2013, to 29.3 years in 2018. The mean age has increased in all EU member states over this period, although to varying degrees. The largest change was in Estonia, where the mean age increased by 1.2 years, from 26.5 years in 2013, to 27.7 years in 2018; followed by Latvia and Lithuania (both 1.1 years). Over the same period, there was little change in Slovakia and Sweden (both 0.2 years), the Czech Republic and Slovenia (both 0.3 years). The member states with the highest mean ages of women at the birth of their first child in 2018 were Italy (31.2 years) and Spain (31.0). In contrast, in two member states, the mean ages at which women had their first child were below 27.0 years: Bulgaria (26.2) and Romania (26.7) (Marriage and Divorce Statistics, 2019).

Giving children a good start in life is important for well-being here and now, but it also improves a child's life chances later. The evidence reviewed in the report 'How's Life? 2015' shows that some children are getting a much better start than others. Income poverty affects one child in seven in the OECD area, and 10% of children live in jobless households. Around one in ten children aged 11, 13 and 15 report having been bullied at least twice in the past two months, with this share rising to more than 15% in some countries. Socio-economic background looms large in child well-being disparity. Greater family affluence is associated with better child health, as well as a happier school life. Conversely, children in less wealthy families feel more pressure at school, they say they like school less, find fewer of their classmates are kind and helpful, and are more likely to be bullied in school. Life satisfaction, reading and problem-solving skills, communication with parents,

and intention to vote are all lower among children from families from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. Countries that do better for children often do better for adults, but well-being outcomes for these two groups are not always well aligned. In most OECD countries, the poverty rate for children is higher than for the population in general. Meanwhile, some countries that perform comparatively well in adult well-being do less well in child well-being. This implies that these countries need to do better for their children if they are to maintain the levels of well-being enjoyed by today's adults over time (OECD, 2015).

These findings are confirmed by study results published by the European Commission in the report 'European Research on Youth - Supporting Young People to Participate Fully in Society'. On average, about half of the young people growing up in poor families remain in poverty. The cumulative effect of a discouraging family and a non-supportive school are the most likely factors leading individuals to stay in poverty and follow their parents' life course. The economic standing of a country is not a decisive factor: education, labour and welfare policies matter as well, pointing to the relevance of policy. While social policy is not perceived by young adults as a factor impacting on their life course, the survey data reveal that policies can contribute to the upward mobility of underprivileged young people (European Commission, 2009).

Marriage, as recognised by the law of each country, has long been considered to mark the formation of a family unit. However, the analysis of trends in family formation and dissolution based just on marriage and divorce data might not offer a full picture. Legal alternatives to marriage, like registered partnership, have become more widespread, and national legislation has changed to confer more rights on unmarried couples.

Health and risk behaviour. Health is one of the main components of a good life. In addition to having value in itself, good health also translates into a better chance of succeeding in education and in the labour market: ultimately contributing to enhance opportunities for people to improve their standing in life. At the same time, inequalities in income and educational attainment contribute to health inequality. Ensuring that everyone, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, has access to the health system can help make sure that economic prosperity is shared by the entire population (OECD, 2019). The latest report on the analysis of health issues 'Health for Everyone?: Social Inequalities in Health and Health Systems' reveals that no matter how it is measured, the least educated are more likely to be in bad health. Across all countries, people in the lowest education category are twice as likely to view their health as poor compared to those with a tertiary education (44% versus 23%). Similar results can be observed for other variables of health status, such as limitations in daily activity and the pre-

valence of multiple chronic conditions. The same report concludes that people on low incomes are less likely to see a doctor, while access to preventive services is systematically concentrated among the better-off, unmet needs for care are systematically concentrated among lower-income groups, and poor households face more difficulties affording care when they access the system. On average in Europe, 26% of people in the lowest income bracket did not avail themselves of the care they needed due to the cost, compared to 8% of people on the highest income level. Overall, unmet needs for financial reasons are concentrated among lower-income groups in all countries. When accessing the health system, nearly 17% of households in EU countries declare they have difficulties in affording care, but the proportion stands at 30% for those below the poverty line (OECD, 2019).

There is a strong correlation between poor health and unemployment. At the individual level, illness or disability is a strong predictor of becoming unemployed youth, especially among males. Physical or psychological problems often represent serious obstacles to finding employment and gaining work experience. The research proves that poor health is the single most widespread cause among males of becoming a NEET. Some youth with poor health may have to contend with practical difficulties, such as physical restrictions or a lack of flexible working arrangements or special workplace adjustments, as well as the inability to do certain types of job. Illness and disability may also make going to school or university more difficult, if they affect attendance and performance. Mental disorders are widespread among young people: about one in four 15 to 24-year-olds are affected (OECD, 2016). Mentally unwell young people are more prone to dropping out of school, as well as engaging in risk behaviour: intentional self-harm and suicide.

Suicidal behaviour is one of the main health concerns in many countries. Over the last few decades, while suicide rates have been reported as stable or falling in many developed countries, a rising trend in youth suicide has been observed. Studies show various possible explanations for these rising suicide trends, such as loss of social cohesion, growing economic instability and unemployment, the rising prevalence of depressive disorders, and the breakdown of the traditional family structure. The most important risk factors for suicidal behaviour are psychological and social in nature. Social factors may include discrimination (for example, bullying at school), social isolation, relationship problems with family and friends, unemployment, and poverty. Mental and psychological problems play a key role in the emergence of suicidal behaviour, with depression and despair being associated with nine out of ten cases of suicide. Drug and alcohol abuse are also determinants; indeed, almost a quarter of suicides involve alcohol abuse. Intentional self-harm may also be the consequence of severe painful and dissembling physical illness, in combination with social isolation. Note that suicide rates tend to increase during

periods of economic recession and unemployment (Health Statistics – Atlas on Mortality).

However, transport accidents are the leading cause of death among young people. The main risk factors for fatal transport accidents are speed, alcohol or drug abuse, exposing vulnerable road users to motorised traffic, poor visibility, and not using protective equipment (Health in the European Union).

Conclusions

The future: from youth-at-risk to risk-free youth. The data and research findings mentioned earlier suggest that almost every human being below the age of 30 living in the European Union is at risk: at risk of social exclusion and poverty, at risk of poor education and becoming a drop-out, at risk of unemployment or underemployment, at risk of being alone and lonely, and at risk of bad health and the inability to access proper health care. Numerous youth policy papers, programmes, agendas, initiatives and action plans have been developed, but it seems that few of them have actually worked.

In October 2008, at the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, in Kyiv, Ukraine, ministers responsible for youth from the 49 states adopted the declaration ‘The Future of the Council of Europe Youth Policy: Agenda 2020’. All the ministers agreed that the following issues should be regarded as priorities for Council of Europe youth policy and action:

1. Human rights and democracy, with a special emphasis on:
 - a. Ensuring young people’s full enjoyment of human rights and human dignity, and encouraging their commitment in this regard;
 - b. Promoting young people’s active participation in democratic processes and structures;
 - c. Promoting equal opportunities for the participation of all young people in all aspects of their everyday lives;
 - d. Implementing effectively gender equality and preventing all forms of gender-based violence;
 - e. Promoting awareness education and action among young people on the environment and sustainable development;
 - f. Facilitating access by all young people to information and counselling services.
2. Living together in diverse societies, with a special emphasis on:
 - a. Empowering young people to promote cultural diversity in their daily life, as well as intercultural dialogue and cooperation;

- b. Preventing and counteracting all forms of racism and discrimination on any grounds;
 - c. Supporting initiatives by young people and their organisations in conflict prevention and management, as well as post-conflict reconciliation, by means of intercultural dialogue, including the religious dimension;
 - d. Supporting youth work with young refugees, asylum-seekers and displaced persons;
 - e. Further encouraging the development of sub-regional youth cooperation in Europe and beyond;
 - f. Encouraging young people to promote global solidarity and cooperation.
3. The social inclusion of young people, with a special emphasis on:
- g. Supporting the integration of excluded young people;
 - h. Ensuring young people's access to education, training and a work life, particularly through the promotion and recognition of non-formal education/learning;
 - i. Supporting young people's transition from education to the labour market, for example by strengthening possibilities to reconcile private and work life;
 - j. Supporting young people's autonomy and well-being, as well as their access to decent living conditions;
 - k. Ensuring young people's equal access to cultural, sporting and creative activities;
 - l. Encouraging intergenerational dialogue and solidarity (Council of Europe and Youth, 2008).

In March 2017, the Joint Council on Youth (CMJ) looked back at the key highlights and achievements of 'Agenda 2020', with a view to drawing some conclusions and picking up some pointers for implementing a new youth strategy in the future. In working groups, the CMJ members focused on the three thematic priorities of: human rights and democracy; living together in diverse societies; and the social inclusion of young people; and reflected on the following questions:

- What challenges and difficulties had been faced when implementing 'Agenda 2020';
- What issues still needed to be addressed within the framework of 'Agenda 2020';
- What lessons had been learnt that should be taken into account when developing the future 'Youth Sector Strategy 2030'.

A summary report of the discussions on the implementation of 'Agenda 2020' (the results of the three working groups) (Council of Europe, 2017) reveals the following.

The working groups agreed that there are no common standards and approaches that can be used in all member states. Moreover, there is no consolidated approach to the youth programme, nor direction for a policy document with too many priorities, and this does not encourage the use of the results on a wider spectrum, notably politically. There is the challenge of the policy gap: it all looks fine on paper, but less so in practice. There has been no reporting from member states on the impact in member states, and it would be efficient if member states report every three years with an evaluation of the impact in each member state. Working groups also agreed that it is very important to have the document adopted by the Conference of Ministers as a basis and source of legitimation for programme and budget planning. As a final remark, the conclusion should be mentioned that the tools to reach out to young people need to be updated and more adequate, and youth policy requires an integrated/cross-sectoral approach, combining research for needs assessment, training/education, and policy-making.

It would appear that if these recommendations are taken into consideration, and youth policy moves away from a normative policy towards a value-based policy, tends away from integration to trust and participation, and evolves from inclusion to equality, then we can hope to live in a world of risk-free youth.

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