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The situation of young people in the European Union

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Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2021

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7. Health and wellbeing

Enjoying a good level of physical and mental health and well-being during childhood and adolescence is the foundation of good health in adult life ⁽¹⁾. Having a healthy and active lifestyle at a young age reduces not only non-communicable diseases, including cancer, at a later stage in life, but also shapes one's future capacity to cope with physical, mental and emotional challenges ⁽²⁾.

While, on average, young people are less affected by physical illness than the total population, the transition from childhood to adulthood makes them vulnerable to many sources of psychological distress ⁽³⁾.

Young people's mental and emotional well-being is affected by a variety of factors. On one hand, the natural physical and behavioural transformations that occur during the transition to adulthood (puberty, changing social roles, self-determination of lifestyle) play a crucial role. In parallel, the use of drugs, excessive alcohol consumption and risk-taking (e.g. dangerous driving) – often linked to adolescent experimentation – are among the unhealthy behaviours that can deeply affect youth well-being ⁽⁴⁾. Relational and social difficulties (such as peer pressure and bullying) can also have long-lasting consequences.

In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on young people's mental and emotional health. It is dramatically transforming their interpersonal relations and triggering feelings of serious concern and apprehension ⁽⁵⁾. Overall, the pandemic has further increased inequalities and negatively affected vulnerable young people. These include young people from lower socio-economic groups, young people with a migrant background and young people with disabilities.

Reduced personal interactions, physical distancing, restrictions on leisure activities (such as practising sport and attending cultural events) and the move from face-to-face to online learning have joined together to make young people feel more isolated ⁽⁶⁾. This is often aggravated by an increased sedentary lifestyle and an excessive use of online applications, which, in addition, increases the risk of being exposed to harmful content and interactions, misinformation, targeted advertising, including for harmful products and activities such as tobacco, alcohol, unhealthy food, and gambling ⁽⁷⁾.

In order to illustrate these aspects, the first section of this chapter addresses the levels of distress provoked by living for long periods in isolation and facing the health risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The second section explores the changes that have occurred in interpersonal relations, which greatly affect youth emotional well-being. The last section draws a comparison between the responses of young people and those of the general population to the pandemic. Information is drawn from the European Commission Standard Eurobarometer 93.1 – 'The EU and the coronavirus outbreak' (conducted between July and August 2020) ⁽⁸⁾

⁽¹⁾ Sawyer et al., 2012.

⁽²⁾ Ibid.

⁽³⁾ Eurostat, 2021o.

⁽⁴⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁵⁾ Ellis et al., 2020.

⁽⁶⁾ Ibid.

⁽⁷⁾ Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe (Youth Partnership), 2020.

⁽⁸⁾ European Commission, 2020f.

and from the European Parliament Eurobarometer *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19* (conducted in October 2020) (⁹).

7.1. Psychological distress

Psychological distress is a general term used to cover a variety of mental health conditions (¹⁰). This chapter uses the following definition of psychological distress: a ‘state of emotional suffering characterised by symptoms of depression and anxiety’ (¹¹).

As for any other segment of the population, the causes of psychological distress for young people are countless. For example, tensions in the family, the pressure to conform to peers and poor living conditions are powerful triggers (¹²).

Social media and online applications can also become sources of psychological distress. Research has illustrated that the more time spent on social media, the higher the incidence of depressive symptoms (¹³). Several causes have been identified. For example, young people may compare themselves with their peers and role models based on what they share online, which may not correspond to reality. In doing so, they run the risk of developing unrealistic social and physical expectations, which may affect their self-esteem (¹⁴). Others can experience loneliness, isolation and relational difficulties because of the excessive time spent online – a condition labelled ‘internet addiction’ (¹⁵). Another significant challenge that comes with online presence is the exposure to violence. This can refer to easy access or exposure to harmful content such as cyberbullying, online abuse and harassment. Young people aged 16 to 29 report experiencing cyber harassment more than older age groups (¹⁶).

These challenges have become even more serious during the social confinement imposed in many European countries to contain the spread of COVID-19. Young people have spent considerably more time online since the start of the pandemic than they did previously (¹⁷).

Data collected by a study carried out in the United Kingdom show that young people are one of the groups that have been most vulnerable to anxiety and depression during the pandemic (¹⁸). Twice as many young adults reported psychological distress than before the pandemic, and this is at least partly because of the emotional effects of social distancing and confinement (¹⁹). In addition, lockdowns hamper the ability of young people to access mental health services when in need (²⁰).

On average, in the EU-27, one in three young people have found it difficult to cope with the confinement measures imposed by national governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 (Figure 7.1). Important

(⁹) European Parliament, 2020b.

(¹⁰) Drapeau et al., 2012.

(¹¹) Ibid.

(¹²) WHO, 2020a.

(¹³) Radovic et al., 2017.

(¹⁴) Ibid.

(¹⁵) Błachnio et al., 2019.

(¹⁶) FRA, 2020.

(¹⁷) Ellis et al., 2020.

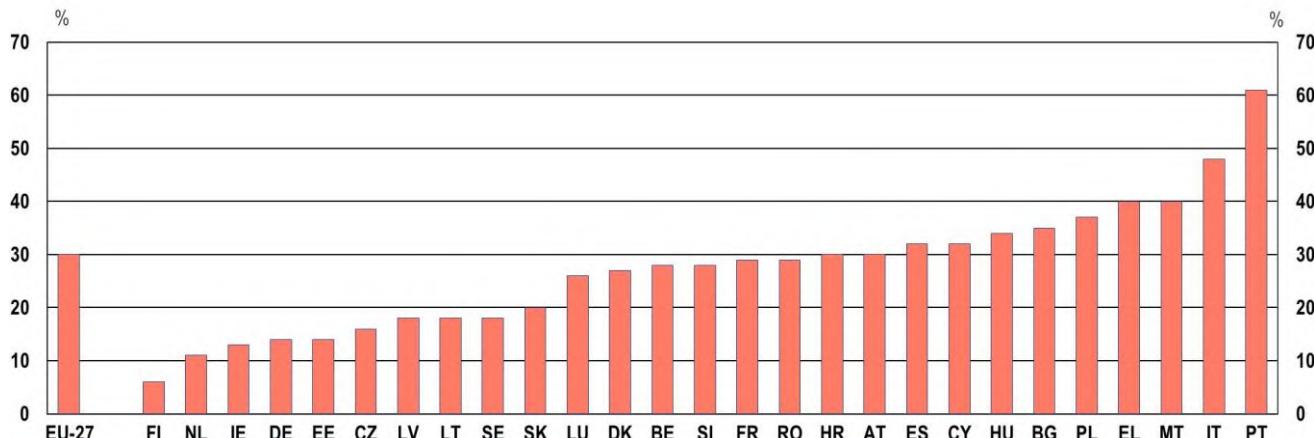
(¹⁸) Kwong et al., 2020. The other groups most at risk of anxiety and depression are women and individuals with pre-existing medical conditions.

(¹⁹) Ibid.

(²⁰) Ibid.

differences exist between countries. The lowest proportions are found in Finland (6 %), the Netherlands (11 %), Ireland (13 %), Germany and Estonia (both 14 %). Conversely, several southern countries (Portugal 61 %, Italy 48 %, Malta 40 % and Greece 40 %) report the highest proportions.

Figure 7.1: Share of young people (15-24) who found confinement measures difficult to cope with by country, 2020



Source: European Commission, 2020. Standard Eurobarometer 93.1 – The EU and the coronavirus outbreak.

QA30. Thinking about the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak, in particular the confinement measures, would you say that it was an experience easy or difficult to cope with?

Notes: Countries are ordered by ascending proportion of respondents finding it difficult to cope with confinement measures.

While no straightforward explanation exists for the differences between countries, possible factors are the duration of quarantine, whether the measures are recommended or compulsory, and the strictness of the rules imposed (²¹).

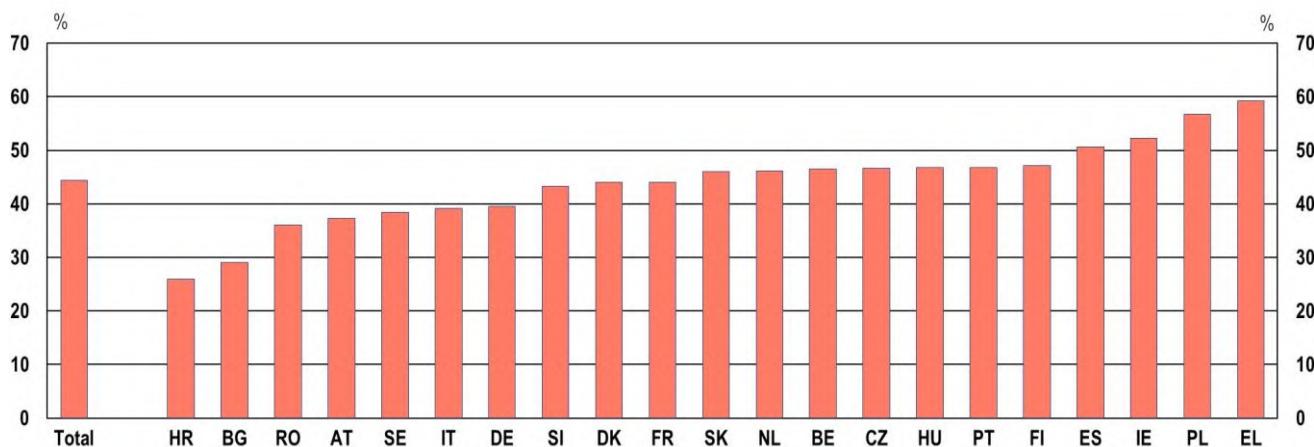
The Eurobarometer survey conducted by the European Parliament has shed light on the main feelings and attitudes about the COVID-19 pandemic among young Europeans (²²).

The survey found that ‘uncertainty’ is the most common feeling reported. Figure 7.2 shows that an average of 44 % of respondents experienced uncertainty. The highest levels of uncertainty were observed in Greece (59 %), Poland (57 %), Ireland (52 %) and Spain (50 %). In contrast, the lowest levels of uncertainty were experienced by young people in Croatia (25 %) and Bulgaria (29 %).

(²¹) Francisco et al., 2020.

(²²) European Parliament, 2020b.

Figure 7.2: Share of young people (16-24) experiencing uncertainty as their most common feeling about the pandemic by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020 *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19*.

Q11. What feelings best describes your current emotional status? – Uncertainty (Max 3 answers).

Notes: Countries are ordered by ascending share of respondents experiencing uncertainty. The term 'total' is used to indicate the average of respondents from the 21 countries participating in the survey. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta were not part of the data collection; therefore, results for the EU-27 average are not available.

Uncertainty has been shown to have a strong effect on the level of distress suffered by people during the COVID-19 pandemic⁽²³⁾. Part of the reason for this may reside in the economic crisis provoked by the lockdowns, which hit young Europeans very hard. As discussed in Chapter 8 ‘Social inclusion’, the sectors most affected by the economic downturn are those where young people tend to work (the wholesale, retail, accommodation and food sectors). An international survey conducted by the International Labour Organization found that young people who lost their jobs were almost twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression as those who remained employed⁽²⁴⁾.

The pandemic has not thrown young people just into a state of uncertainty. It has also generated strong concerns about the threats posed to physical health. The European Parliament Eurobarometer has provided insights into young people’s levels of apprehension about the impact of COVID-19 on their health and that of their relatives and friends. Data indicate that young Europeans are less concerned about the effects of COVID-19 on their own health than the effects on their families and friends (Figure 7.3).

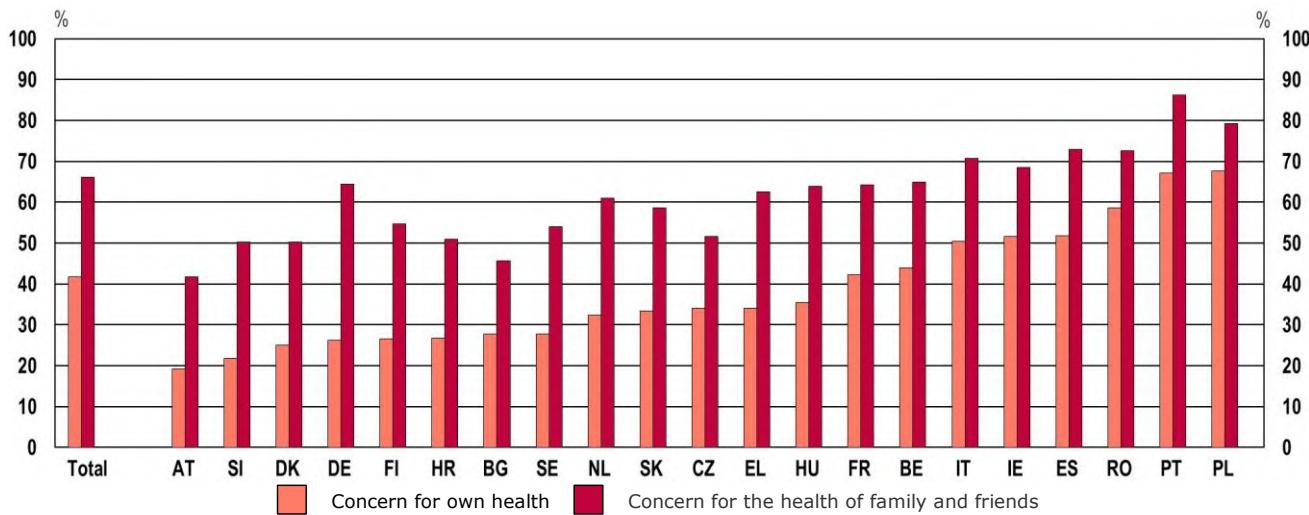
On average, 40 % of young people report fearing for their own health. The highest shares of respondents expressing this concern are found in Poland and Portugal (both 68 %), Romania (59 %), Ireland and Spain (both at 52 %). The lowest proportions of young people fearing for their own health are reported in Austria (19 %), Slovenia (22 %), Denmark (25 %), Germany, Croatia and Finland (all 26 %).

Compared with their own health, higher proportions of young people express concern about the health of their family and friends. On average, 66 % of young individuals report being worried about how the health of their loved ones may be affected. The countries where this concern is reported the most are Portugal (86 %), Poland (79 %), Romania (77 %) and Spain (73 %). These are also the countries with the highest proportions of respondents concerned about their own health.

⁽²³⁾ Rettie and Daniels, 2020.

⁽²⁴⁾ ILO, 2020b.

Figure 7.3: Share of young people (16-24) concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their health and that of their family and friends by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19.*

Q12. Still thinking about the coronavirus pandemic, how concerned are you about each of the following? – How this might affect my own health/How this might affect the health of family and friends.

Notes: Countries are ordered by ascending share of young people reporting concern about their health. The term 'total' is used to indicate the averages of respondents from the 21 countries participating in the survey. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta were not part of the data collection; therefore, EU-27 averages are not available.

The data seem to be consistent with the higher risk posed by the COVID-19 virus to older groups in the population than to young people (²⁵).

Young people's concern for the well-being of their relatives and friends is often exacerbated by being unable to offer care and support because of the quarantine measures imposed (²⁶). Indeed, the psychological distress suffered by young Europeans has been aggravated by the disruption to their social and emotional relations during the lockdowns. Against this background, the next section first discusses the impact of the pandemic on young people's relational well-being. It then looks at the patterns in how young people from different countries have coped with the distressing conditions described in this chapter.

7.2. Relational well-being

Positive interpersonal relations are an important source of psychological well-being (²⁷). In particular, close bonds and interactions with family and friends nurture feelings of happiness and meaningfulness. When these relations are weakened, individuals can experience anxiety, loneliness and emotional exclusion (²⁸).

Adolescents and young adults are badly affected by disruptions to family and social ties (²⁹). They live through a developmental stage of their lives, which profoundly shapes their personalities. Contacts with relatives, friends and members of their community are an essential protective factor at times of stress (³⁰). This is especially crucial in order to help them cope with feelings of stress and anxiety that have emerged during

(²⁵) WHO, 2020b.

(²⁶) Fioretti et al., 2020.

(²⁷) White, 2017.

(²⁸) Ibid.

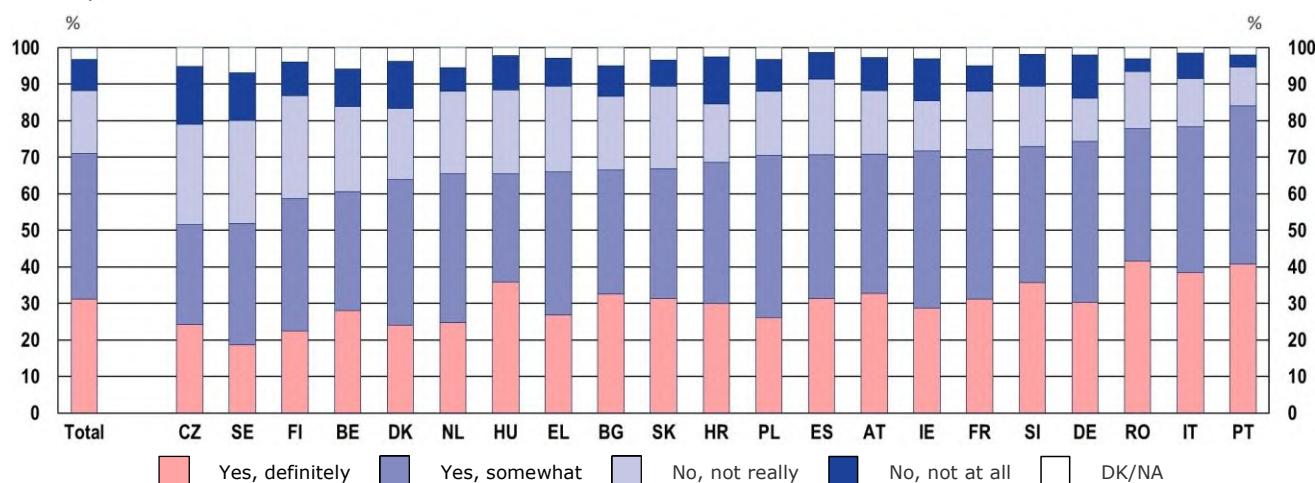
(²⁹) Council of Europe and European Commission, 2020.

(³⁰) Ibid.

the COVID-19 pandemic⁽³¹⁾. Indeed, a survey conducted in Italy shows that young people report rediscovering the importance of family as a positive consequence of the pandemic⁽³²⁾.

On average, 70 % of young people surveyed by the European Parliament Eurobarometer reported talking more often to people than before the outbreak of the pandemic (Figure 7.4). The situation varies between countries. The lowest proportions were reported in the Nordic countries: Sweden (52 %), Finland (59 %) and Denmark (64 %). Conversely, young people talked to family and friends more often than usual in Portugal (84 %), Italy (78 %) and Romania (78 %).

Figure 7.4: Share of young people (16-24) talking more often to people than before the pandemic by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19*.

Q14. For each of the following situations that can occur since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, please tell me if it applies to you? – I talk more often to people.

Notes: Countries are ordered by ascending share of young people answering 'yes, definitely'/'yes, somewhat'. The term 'total' is used to indicate the average of the respondents from the 21 countries participating in the survey. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta were not part of the data collection; therefore, the EU-27 average is not available.

In addition to communicating with people, exchanging mutual support to overcome adversity is another essential part of relational well-being⁽³³⁾. Moreover, perceived disparities in the level of mutual aid during the pandemic may cause discontent with the general level of solidarity in society⁽³⁴⁾.

Figure 7.5 indicates that, across the countries analysed, about one third of young individuals received help from people around them during the pandemic. Caution is required in the interpretation of the data as the survey question does not specify whether receiving help was a necessity for coping with the difficulties encountered. For example, the perception of not receiving help may have been linked to feeling resilient enough to cope with the adversities caused by the pandemic, to considering that the available support is inadequate or to not finding sufficient support.

Finland (52 %), Slovenia (49 %) and Hungary (47 %) – followed by Spain, Ireland and Belgium (with percentages of 44 %) – reported the highest shares of young people receiving help. Conversely, the lowest proportions were reported in Croatia (15 %), Denmark (16 %), Austria (21 %) and Czechia (23 %).

⁽³¹⁾ Ibid.

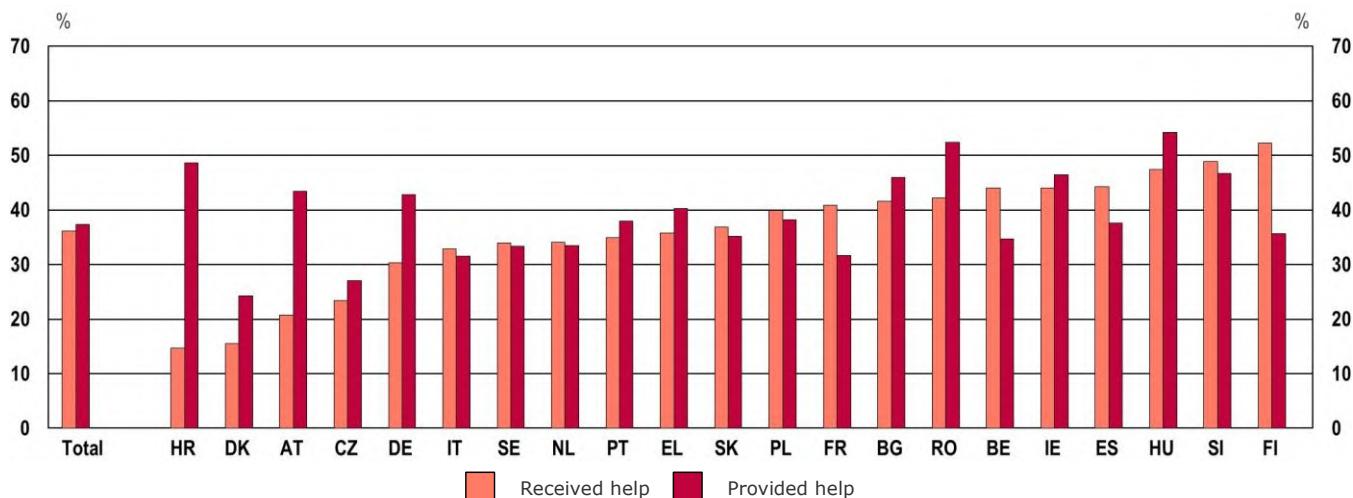
⁽³²⁾ Fioretti et al., 2020.

⁽³³⁾ White, 2017.

⁽³⁴⁾ OECD, 2020b.

Figure 7.5 also shows the proportions of young people providing help to people in need across the countries analysed, with more than one third of respondents doing so on average. The survey conducted by the International Labour Organization shows that, during the pandemic, the help that young people provided to family and friends mainly consisted of self-discipline in terms of respecting hygiene measures, caring for close friends and family members, taking personal responsibility by following the rules and protecting themselves, and extending emotional support to family and friends⁽³⁵⁾.

Figure 7.5: Share of young people (16-24) who received help from people and provided help to persons in need by country, 2020



Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19*.

Q14. For each of the following situations that can occur since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic, please tell me if it applies to you – I receive help from people/I am helping persons in need.

Notes: Countries are ordered by ascending level of young people receiving help. The term 'total' is used to indicate the average of respondents from the 21 countries participating in the survey. Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta were not part of the data collection; therefore, the EU-27 average is not available.

While, on average, the proportions of young people receiving help and those providing help are similar, there are differences between countries. In Croatia, Denmark, Austria and Germany, higher proportions of young people reported providing help than receiving help. These countries also registered the lowest percentages of respondents who feel supported.

From the discussion on the previous indicators, two patterns can be identified among the countries included in the surveys. Portugal, Poland, Romania, Italy, Greece and Ireland tend to report higher percentages of young people struggling to cope with the effects of the pandemic. In these countries, above average proportions of young people find it difficult to adapt to the confinements measures, perceive uncertainty as their prevalent emotion and are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their health and that of their families and friends. Perhaps as a coping measure, they also report talking to family and friends more often than usual.

In contrast, young people in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Austria and Croatia consistently report levels of concern and emotional strain below the average. At the same time, lower proportions of these young individuals report talking more often than usual with people around them. These results may suggest less of a need to compensate for the psychological and emotional suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

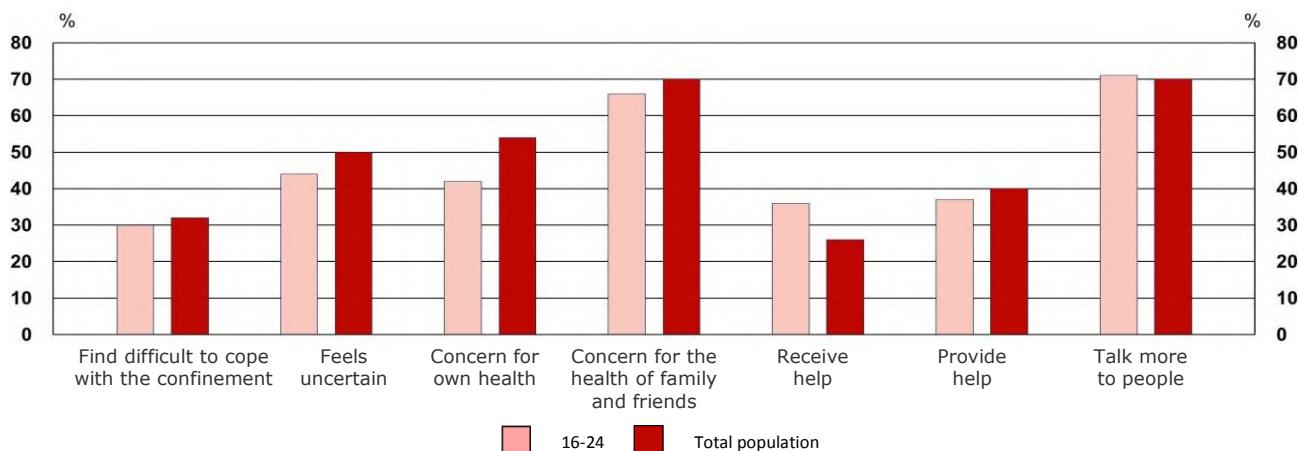
To contextualise the experiences of young Europeans, and detect potential specificities, the next section draws comparisons with data for the total population.

⁽³⁵⁾ ILO, 2020b.

7.3. Impact of COVID-19 on the psychological wellbeing of youth and the total population

Just as COVID-19 affects the physical health of different age cohorts differently, so it affects their psychological well-being differently⁽³⁶⁾. Figure 7.6 compares the perceptions of young people and those of the total population regarding the effects of the pandemic on their mental well-being.

Figure 7.6: Psychological distress factors among young people (15-24) and the total population, EU-27, 2020



Source: European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 93.1 – 2020. The EU and the coronavirus outbreak, and European Parliament Eurobarometer, 2020. *Uncertainty/EU/Hope – Public opinion in times of COVID-19*, 2020.

Notes: The youth age group used in the European Commission Standard Eurobarometer 93.1 is 15–24 years.

No considerable differences exist in the level of difficulty in coping with the confinement measures and in the frequency of conversations with people. Conversely, the feeling of uncertainty and the concern for one's own health are more widespread among the total population. This may be related to the higher risks posed by the COVID-19 virus to the health, professional stability and family responsibilities of older age groups in the population.

To lesser degrees, the total population also records a higher level of concern for the health of family and friends and a higher level of providing help to those in need.

Interestingly, receiving help is the only indicator for which the proportion of young people is bigger than that of the total population. To explain this result, a few hypotheses can be advanced.

First, it must be considered that the younger the cohort the more likely it is that those in the cohort live with family members (see Chapter 8 ‘Social inclusion’). Regardless of the pandemic, they are still supported in many respects by their parents and relatives. Furthermore, the closure of schools and the move to e-learning as a result of the pandemic has been likely to require additional support from family members to ensure learning continuity at home (for more details, see Chapter 6 ‘Education and learning’).

Second, young adults have been disproportionately hit by the contraction in labour demand caused by the pandemic. As mentioned in Section 7.1, the sectors most affected by the crisis are those where most young Europeans work. In these circumstances, support from families can be a necessity to overcome periods of unemployment.

⁽³⁶⁾ WHO, 2020b.

A third potential factor behind the comparatively higher proportion of young people receiving help may be their higher use of social media (³⁷). While excessive amounts of time spent online and lack of awareness of potential dangers pose risks (mentioned in Section 7.1 of this chapter and in Chapter 6), using social media can be helpful for maintaining interpersonal relations and finding support (³⁸). Young people can share their experiences with and receive advice from their peers. They can access information and insights on coping with difficulties. Moreover, when needed, they can obtain professional help to cope with their psychological and emotional distress (³⁹).

Conclusions

The chapter has investigated the mental health and psychological wellbeing of young Europeans, as a foundation of their good health in adult life. In this context, the focus has been placed on the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. By dramatically transforming their interpersonal relations and lifestyles, the pandemic poses serious challenges to the wellbeing of many young Europeans.

On average, one in three young people have found it difficult to cope with the confinement measures imposed by national governments to contain the spread of COVID-19, especially because of the feeling of uncertainty it has induced. The pandemic has also generated strong concerns about the threats posed to physical health. On average, 40 % of young people report fearing for their own health and 66 % for the health of their families and friends.

The psychological distress suffered by young Europeans has been aggravated by the disruption to their social and emotional relations during the lockdowns. To counteract this situation, young people report talking more often to people than before the outbreak of the pandemic and exchanging support with others. In this respect, young Europeans seem to show resilience to the stress provoked by the pandemic by nurturing family and social contacts.

(³⁷) Correa, 2016.

(³⁸) Frith, 2017.

(³⁹) Ibid.