RESEARCH REPORT

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Impact of COVID-19 on young people in the EU

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Eurofound

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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Research carried out prior to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union on 31 January 2020, and published subsequently, may include data relating to the 28 EU Member States. Following this date, research only takes into account the 27 EU Member States (EU28 minus the UK), unless specified otherwise.

In the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, on which the analysis in this report is largely based, respondents were asked to identify their gender (male/female/in another way); due to the scarcity of data from respondents who identified according to the latter category, the analysis focuses on the categories of male and female.

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Executive summary

Introduction

In recent decades, young people have been more vulnerable than other age groups to economic crises. During the 2007–2013 economic crisis, the youth unemployment rate and the rate of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased to historic levels; this crisis had a long-term negative impact on their prospects. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, it represented a different type of crisis for young people: 'artificial restrictions' on economic activity (the closure of shops and restaurants, for example) particularly affected sectors that employ a large proportion of young people with insecure contracts. Restrictions on social activities had effects on young people's social development and participation, while the closure of educational institutions hampered their opportunities to accumulate skills and human capital.

This report provides a comprehensive picture of the impact of the pandemic on young people in the European Union (EU), including a description of their situation in the labour market before the pandemic and shortly after. It presents an overview of the efforts of governments and EU-level policymakers to protect young people from the effects of the crisis and analyses the impact of the pandemic on this group in terms of job loss, living conditions and mental well-being.

Policy context

- The EU institutions adopted a range of support measures for Member States to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic and speed up recovery. The main recovery instrument is the NextGenerationEU package, worth €750 billion in loans and grants to Member States.
- In 2020, in the context of its Youth Strategy, the EU expanded its definition of 'young people' to include people aged 15–29 (previously it covered those aged 15–24), with the reinforced Youth Guarantee introduced in October 2020 to provide employment opportunities for this age group.
- The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan proposed by the European Commission in March 2021 set a target to reduce the NEET rate from 12.6% in 2019 to 9% by 2030 for those aged 15–29. Member States with a NEET rate above the average will need to spend at least 12.5% of any European Social Fund Plus funding that they receive on young people, particularly when implementing the Youth Guarantee.
- At national level, governments recognised the disproportionate impact that the crisis has had on young people and introduced measures aimed at keeping them in education, providing apprenticeships and increasing access to social protection.

Key findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on young people, on their employment participation, working and living conditions and mental well-being.
- In 2019, most young people worked in accommodation and food services (13%), followed by wholesale and retail (11%) and health and social work (11%). As the first two were among the sectors most affected by reduced activity during the pandemic, young people working in these sectors were at higher risk of job loss, as were young people on temporary (36%) and part-time (22%) contracts.
- In 2020, unemployment among 15- to 29-year-olds increased by 1.4 percentage points from the 2019 rate to 13.3%, and the NEET rate increased by 1.2 percentage points to 13.6%. These were larger increases than among older groups.
- Unemployed or inactive young people were most likely to experience housing insecurity (17% in spring 2021) and difficulty making ends meet (43%), as well as having no savings (39%). However, over half of them lived with their parents, which provided security for some vulnerable young people.
- Life satisfaction among young people increased between spring and summer 2020 as lockdowns eased, but it decreased to its lowest point in spring 2021 with the return of restrictions.
- Youth mental well-being was also lowest in spring 2021, with school closures having a strong negative impact on mental well-being. In contrast, workplace closures had a positive impact on young people's mental well-being. Young women had lower mental well-being than young men, and unemployment was associated with substantially lower well-being.

- Young people's trust in the EU was higher than their trust in government and higher than the trust that older people have in the EU. Trust in the EU improved in summer 2020 and declined in spring 2021, although it remained higher than spring 2020 levels. However, this was not linked to restrictions, suggesting that the EU's actions, such as the rescue package, may have influenced young people's views.
- National policy responses were focused on preventing unemployment and helping employers pay wages. Short-time working schemes played an important role, although most of these were not specifically aimed at young people.
- Efforts to keep young people in education included helping providers move education services online and improving the digital infrastructure. Some countries also helped young people to improve their digital skills, providing access to devices and expanding financial aid or loans for students.
- Several measures were launched to offer young people – young professionals, students or new graduates – easier access to and greater coverage by social protection during the pandemic.
- Increased need for mental health services was reported across Europe, but adaptation was difficult. Many interventions in this area concentrated on moving services online and introducing new internet services or phone helplines.

Policy pointers

- There is a generation of young people in Europe who are still suffering the effects of the previous crisis and have now been affected by a second, very different, crisis. There is a risk that inequality in opportunity will accumulate, resulting in feelings of unfairness and mistrust.
- Poor mental health among young people, already a concern in several Member States pre-pandemic, can be described as a crisis, and mental health services had difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable. Mental well-being may not recover as quickly as economic indicators, highlighting the need for greater policy attention and improved services.
- While many policy interventions concentrated on helping with the shift to digital service provision, many young people experienced difficulties with online-only services, particularly in education. Providers reported issues relating to inequality and demotivation. Not all services can be delivered digitally, highlighting the need to improve support systems in general apart from digital provision.
- Most policy responses identified were temporary measures, including additional support and the removal of barriers. To reduce the vulnerability of young people to crises, longer-term measures – such as permanent improvements to access to work and measures to increase job security – are needed. This could result in greater resilience to future crises.

Introduction

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Two days later, on 13 March, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, said that Europe had become the epicentre of the pandemic, with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined (WHO, 2020a). In a matter of days, all EU Member States started implementing restrictive measures, including lockdowns and social distancing requirements, in an attempt to control the spread of the pandemic. International travel, and often also local travel, became impossible and, within a few weeks, whole sectors of the European economy shut down and the lives of millions of citizens were severely disrupted.

On 4 April 2020, when the WHO reported that over 1 million cases had been confirmed worldwide, with a more than 10-fold increase in less than a month, early hopes of a quickly resolved health crisis disappeared. By 27 July, the first wave had resulted in the loss of 180,000 lives across Europe. After some respite during the summer months, a second wave – largely driven by a more infectious variant first detected in the United Kingdom (UK) in December – caused a further 350,000 deaths by June 2021.[1]

A modern-day Cerberus

With the continent severely hit by the pandemic and trying desperately to reduce the spread of the virus, the COVID-19 crisis, which had begun as a health crisis, quickly developed – as a result of protracted lockdowns – into a profound economic recession and a social crisis having a significant effect on the working and living conditions of all European citizens.

The COVID-19 crisis was like a modern-day Cerberus – the gigantic three-headed hound and guardian of Hades in Greek mythology. The health, economic and social faces of the crisis affected the various demographic groups in Europe's societies very differently.

In terms of the health crisis, by the beginning of 2021 a total of 20,507,518 years of life had been lost to COVID-19 in 81 countries, as a result of 1,279,866 deaths from the disease (Pifarré i Arolas et al, 2021). With 16 years of life lost per death on average, the age-related trend in COVID-19 deaths has been clear since the beginning of the pandemic. According to the journal *Nature*:

> *For people in their fifties and early sixties, about five will die – more men than women. The risk then climbs steeply as the years accrue. For every 1,000 people in their mid-seventies or older who are infected, around 116 will die.*
>
> (Nature, 2020a)

While these stark statistics confirm the acute danger that the virus poses to the lives of older cohorts, younger people were much more exposed than the older population to the economic and social consequences of the crisis that were generated by the non-pharmaceutical interventions put in place by national governments in their attempts to control the spread of the virus.

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young people

While the pandemic has affected everyone, this report focuses on its impact on young people. It aims to examine how young people, now defined by the European Commission as those aged 15–29, have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of employment, their economic situation, social exclusion, mental well-being and trust in institutions. It will also provide an overview of the main policies introduced by Member State governments to protect young people from the economic effects of the pandemic, with the aim of highlighting the main issues for young people in a post-pandemic world.

Labour market and economic implications

The 2007–2013 economic crisis revealed the greater vulnerability of young people to economic recession in comparison with older age groups. During that crisis, youth unemployment rates skyrocketed, reaching more than 40% in many EU countries, and the share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) peaked at a historical high of 16% of the entire population aged 15–29 in the EU. The economic loss caused by having such a large cohort of young people outside the labour market and education was estimated at more than €153 billion a year. Young people were often the first to lose their job, as they tended to have

1 Figure retrieved from the *Economist* web page *Tracking the coronavirus across Europe* (available at https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/tracking-coronavirus-across-europe) on 14 June 2021.

less secure contracts, less seniority and less control over decisions; often, they were among the people most recently recruited, and the 'last in, first out' principle was often used in making decisions on redundancy. Those who had recently graduated faced major setbacks in starting their careers and were often forced to take low-paid or unpaid internships, part-time jobs or jobs outside the career they sought and for which they were qualified. Several studies suggested that average incomes for the millennial generation (born between 1980 and 2000) had barely improved compared with those of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) at the same age (and, in countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain, had not improved at all), while millennials had significantly lower net wealth than their Generation X counterparts at the same age (see, for example, Rahman and Tomlinson, 2018). This can be attributed largely to the Great Recession. In addition, young people are at greater risk of severe financial impact arising from job loss, as they often lack permanent housing, and those who are homeowners have generally recently taken out a large mortgage. The Great Recession forced a lot of young people to move back in with their families, leading to a large increase in 18- to 29-year-olds living with their parents (Eurofound, 2019a). This, combined with difficulty in accessing the labour market, meant that the recession resulted in a slower path to adulthood for many.

After a long and asymmetric recovery, and with the youth labour market finally recovering from the scars of the Great Recession in almost all Member States, the COVID-19 pandemic struck European economies and led to the deepest recession since the Second World War.

The COVID-19 crisis is a different type of crisis from the Great Recession. Economies were not in a downward cycle; rather, the crisis was caused by artificial restrictions introduced by governments in an attempt to control the virus. While the artificial nature of the economic restrictions may imply that recovery will be quicker than it was after the Great Recession, nonetheless the crisis affected primarily sectors where many young people work, such as hospitality and retail, and those with the type of contracts, such as temporary and part-time contracts, that young people are more likely to have.

Hence, the question naturally arises: 'Is history repeating itself?' In other words, are young people to be the main victims of the COVID-19 crisis in terms of employment participation?

Parallel pandemic of mental health problems

The non-pharmaceutical interventions put in place in an attempt to control the pandemic have disrupted the social lives and personal relationships of all citizens. There is increasing evidence that – as a result of social distancing measures, travel restrictions and lockdowns – the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a parallel pandemic of mental health problems, with greater vulnerability among young people and alarming implications for their emotional and social functioning.

Pandemic-related distress may stem from fear of the illness, economic hardship or uncertainty about the real impact of the crisis. But it also results from social isolation and tensions among families in lockdown together – that is, from the non-pharmaceutical interventions that many governments have deployed to contain the pandemic. Large studies in Italy have shown that lockdown is associated with increases in post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, insomnia, depression and high levels of stress – with women and young people being the worst affected. Similar results were found for China, Iran and Japan, with the younger population suffering deeper detrimental effects. The feeling of being left behind in society may have made young people's views and expectations about the future more pessimistic, affecting their perspective in a profound way.

The consequences of the parallel pandemic of mental health problems may last longer than the COVID-19 health crisis. How have young people in Europe been affected by the crisis in terms of mental health? How has this changed during the crisis?

Disruption to social and formal human capital accumulation

The restrictions on social gatherings and cancellation of events have had detrimental effects on young people, their social lives and their social development. Prevented from going out, meeting their peers or participating in events and community life, young people have seen their opportunities to develop social networks and strengthen their social capital all but vanish.

Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic on education has also damaged young people's opportunities to accumulate formal human capital and skills. The decisions to close schools, training centres and universities in March had tremendous repercussions for the productivity and work–life balance of parents, as well as for students and their learning. The rapid move to online teaching – untested and on an unprecedented scale, with much trial and error – exposed the different levels of readiness across countries and schools.

Although it is difficult to estimate how and to what extent the disruptions to traditional education and training provision will affect the accumulation of human capital among the young, pre-pandemic scientific evidence found a positive correlation between school attendance and test scores. This suggests that the suspension of schooling for 12 weeks or more, as happened in many countries during 2020 and 2021, may have more than trivial effects in terms of skills

formation; it may have lowered the skills of an entire generation of the workforce, which could have lasting consequences for economic output.

Moreover, the closure of schools and the shift to online learning reinforced inequalities between the most privileged and the most vulnerable. The substantial disparities in knowledge and well-being across families affect the help that children and young people receive with learning. Young people with supportive families and access to the internet and computers at home will fare better than those without such resources. If Member States do envisage further school closures, the provision of stronger and more tangible support to young people and families to engage in online learning will be essential. All young people must have the same opportunities to learn if we are to avoid enlarging the disparities between the most privileged and the most vulnerable, which could have dire consequences for the future of the younger generation.

Given the above, how has the social capital of young people been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the consequences of the shift to online learning for the educational trajectories of young people during these years?

Need for a modern Hercules?

The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, and policymakers are faced with finding a balance between reducing contact and saving lives, on the one hand, and allowing people to work, maintaining the economy and minimising the social impact, on the other. While the need to save lives is indisputable, the imposition of strict lockdowns may have caused permanent damage to the employment prospects and the social and human capital of a generation that had already been dealt a severe blow by the 2007–2013 crisis – a generation that represents the future of Europe and its Member States in an increasingly complex geopolitical world.

In seeking to balance the health, economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis – that is, to fight our modern-day Cerberus, the three-faced crisis – policymakers have implemented a wide range of policies to support the general population and young people. A huge variety of policy interventions have been put in place by national governments with the aim of tackling all three faces of the crisis and defeating it as Hercules did Cerberus, the faithful companion of Hades; no facet of the crisis can be disregarded, as each is harming our society, and no one is greater than the other.

What instruments have been put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic to support young people? How effective have they been in helping young people?

Structure of the report

The aim of this report is to provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of COVID-19 on young people and of the policy measures put in place by the EU and its Member States to reduce the economic and social impact of the pandemic on them. The report is organised in three main chapters, with conclusions outlined in a fourth chapter.

The first chapter describes the situation of young people, and some particular groups such as NEETs, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, after the recovery from the Great Recession. This chapter looks in particular at the period 2007–2020. It describes the labour market participation of young people during those years and discusses the characteristics and diversity of NEETs.

The second chapter then focuses on young people during the pandemic in 2020–2021. Making use of the three rounds of Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, it investigates how youth employment was affected by the pandemic, as well as the financial situation of young people and the types of support that they received during the pandemic. It then looks at the living conditions and mental well-being of young people and, using the panel component of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, seeks to understand the effects of the non-pharmaceutical interventions on them. Finally, it discusses the levels of trust in government and the EU and social capital of young people during the pandemic.

The third chapter describes the actions that governments in Europe have taken to protect young people from the pandemic's effects on work, finances and mental health. It investigates the effect of the reinforced Youth Guarantee, and it discusses policy initiatives put in place to support young people, including direct support for employment, initiatives to encourage internships and apprenticeships, outreach measures, support for young people wishing to remain in or re-enter education and measures intended to alleviate the social and economic hardship caused by the crisis.

The fourth and final chapter sums up the findings and presents policy pointers for future action.

1 Situation of young people at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

Young people have significant potential advantages in the labour market compared with older workers. They often have stronger motivation and new ideas; they are more familiar with a digital environment, which has been an advantage since the expansion in the 1980s of the service industry, which relies heavily on information and communications technology (ICT) and employs a large proportion of young people; and the current generation of young people is the most highly educated in history. Yet they were struggling in the labour market well before the Great Recession. In addition to experiencing high rates of unemployment, young people often work in lower quality jobs, on temporary contracts and for low wages (Christopoulou, 2008, 2013; OECD, 2016).

In developed economies, youth unemployment has been a persistent issue since the late 20th century (Martin, 2009). One reason for higher unemployment among young people is that they have less experience, and the experience that they do have may be less specific. Companies often prefer to hire employees with at least some experience specific to their field. On the other hand, young people with tertiary education may be overqualified for some entry-level jobs, resulting in a skills mismatch (Handel, 2003).

Some companies also see young people as easier to let go than experienced workers whom they have invested in, and in some jobs they are cheaper to make redundant, as fewer protections apply to them and their severance pay is lower; however, they also tend to earn lower salaries, which can result in less job insecurity (Yeves et al, 2019). As young people are often unsure about their professional orientation during their years of transition to adulthood, they are also more likely to leave their job voluntarily, especially as they are less likely to need a job to support a family (O'Higgins, 2001).

Youth unemployment soared during the economic crisis that started in 2007, reaching a peak six years later. The proportion of young people who were long-term unemployed increased significantly, resulting in a disengagement from the labour market that posed a risk of lifelong consequences, including social exclusion and poverty (Eurofound, 2015). It took another five years for youth labour market participation to return to pre-crisis levels.

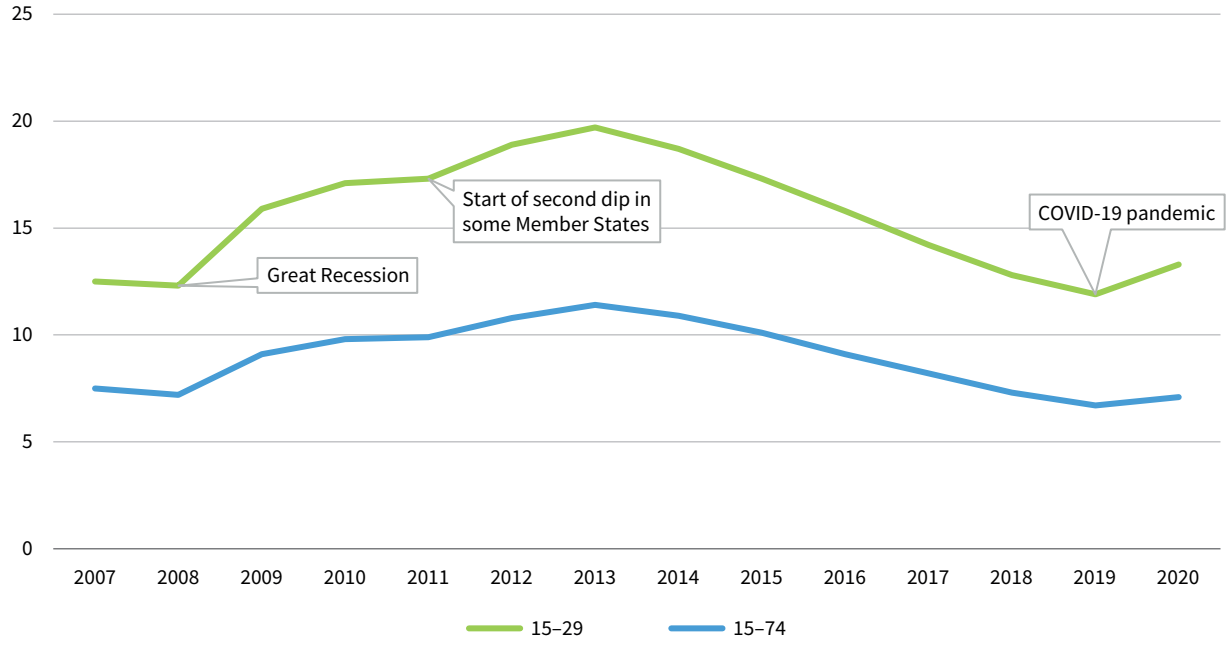
There were several positive economic and social developments for young people in Europe at the end of 2019, with an economic upturn and lower youth unemployment, although concerns remained, particularly around mental health, housing and the economic gap between current young people and previous generations at the same age. Data for 2016 showed that 14% of 18- to 24-year-olds were at risk of depression, and low mental well-being was a particular issue in the lowest income quartile and among young women (Eurofound, 2019b). European-level policy – as formulated in the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027) – concentrated on services for young people, emphasising partnership, cross-sectoral work and access to opportunities, as well as the importance of encouraging young people to take control of their own lives and participate in society.

As we now know, 2020, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, completely reversed the economic and social progress made in the preceding years. This chapter describes the situation of young people in the years before the pandemic and (where data are available) in 2020, with particular emphasis on employment and certain groups of young people considered most vulnerable to the economic effects of the pandemic, such as young people working in badly affected sectors and NEETs.

Youth employment and unemployment, 2007–2020

Economic status varies more among young people from the start of working age to age 29 than in other age segments of the population. While only one-third of young people aged 15–24 are working and most are still in full-time education, three-quarters of young people aged 25–29 are employed (Eurostat, 2019). The youth unemployment rate, one of the secondary indicators in the revised EU Social Scoreboard proposed by the European Commission as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021), has closely followed the economic cycle over the past 13 years. Following the Great Recession of 2007–2009, youth unemployment continued to rise before peaking at nearly 20% for the EU as a whole in 2013. It took another six years to return to 2008 levels (12%) in 2019, closing an eleven-year cycle. In 2020, with the outbreak of the pandemic, youth unemployment increased by 1.4 percentage points (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Unemployment rate, young people and total population, EU27, 2007–2020 (%)



Source: *Eurostat, Youth unemployment by sex, age and educational attainment level [yth_empl_090], Unemployment rates by sex, age and educational attainment level (%) [lfsa_urgan]*

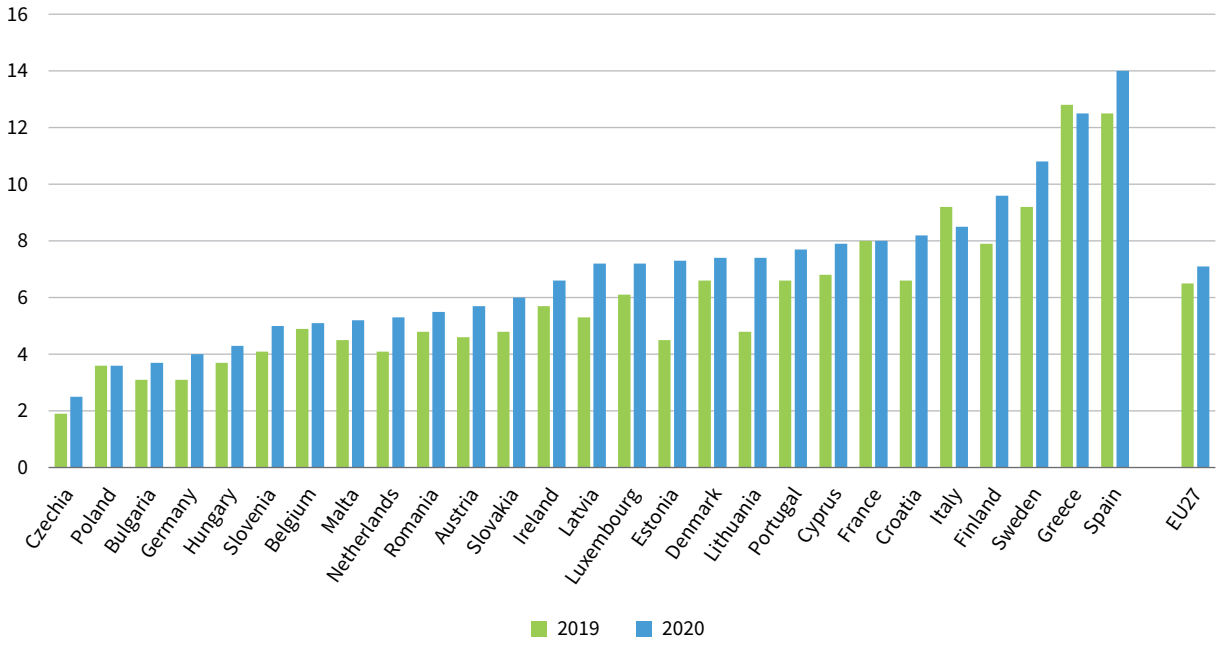
Since the youth unemployment rate excludes people outside the labour market (students and other inactive young people), it is not always as useful a measure as the same rate is for the total population, given that a large proportion of young people are inactive. Therefore, it is often analysed alongside the youth unemployment ratio (the number of unemployed young people as a proportion of the total population of that age group). This ratio followed a very similar pattern, although it did not increase to the same extent as the unemployment rate, rising from 7% in 2008 to 10.8% in 2013, decreasing to 6.5% by 2019 and measuring 7.1% in 2020 (Eurostat, 2021).

At country level, the patterns varied. The youth unemployment ratio was at its highest in 2013 in 11 Member States, but in others, such as the Baltic countries, it had already reached its peak in 2010, while in Italy and Croatia it continued to rise in 2014. However, it grew nearly everywhere between 2019 and 2020, with the exception of Poland, France, Italy and Greece (Figure 2).

It is worth noting that the 2020 data may represent an anomaly in the series. Job loss during the pandemic was not driven by economic principles such as supply and demand; instead, it was a result of business closures by governments that were specifically aimed at preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2. To counter this, governments across the EU introduced various types of wage support schemes. It is not yet known how this affected the usual measures of unemployment, such as the unemployment rate and ratio, but governments are aware of data challenges relating to 2020. For example, Ireland has introduced a supplementary COVID-19-adjusted measure of unemployment to include those who would be classified as unemployed if they were not receiving the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (Central Statistics Office, 2020).

In addition, it was hoped that most of these restrictions would be temporary. Although uncertainty and further lockdowns resulted in the permanent closure of a lot of businesses, quarterly data show a decrease in unemployment in early 2021.

Figure 2: Youth unemployment ratio by Member State, 2019 and 2020 (%)



Source: *Eurostat, Youth unemployment ratio by sex, age and NUTS 2 regions [yth_empl_140]*

Young people working in sectors affected by restrictions

Another important difference in the 2020 crisis from usual changes in employment and economic activity was that it affected different sectors of the economy in very different ways, with some experiencing complete closure and others (for example, sectors made up predominantly of essential businesses) proceeding almost as normal. In order to identify which young people were most at risk of redundancy or furlough, this section examines the sectors of the economy in which most young people were employed and those most affected by the pandemic.

A sectoral analysis of data from 2019 shows that the largest proportion of young people (13% of those in employment) worked in accommodation and food services (Table 1). As international travel was restricted, and local tourism and indoor dining and entertainment were either reduced or forbidden (depending on the country and time period), this was one of the sectors that was worst affected at EU level by the pandemic, to an extent likely to have resulted in job loss. The wholesale and retail sector also employed a high proportion of young people (11%). This sector was heavily affected by changes in activity, with some areas experiencing a large drop in activity (non-essential retail), while others saw a large increase due to additional demand (for example, essential retail and online shopping). Health and social work, which also employed a high proportion of young people (11%), was likely to have been less affected, while the fourth largest sector for youth employment, arts and entertainment, suffered from restrictions as countries tried to enforce social distancing measures.

Table 1: Proportions of workers aged 15–29 and aged 30+ employed by sector (NACE Rev. 2), 2019 (%)

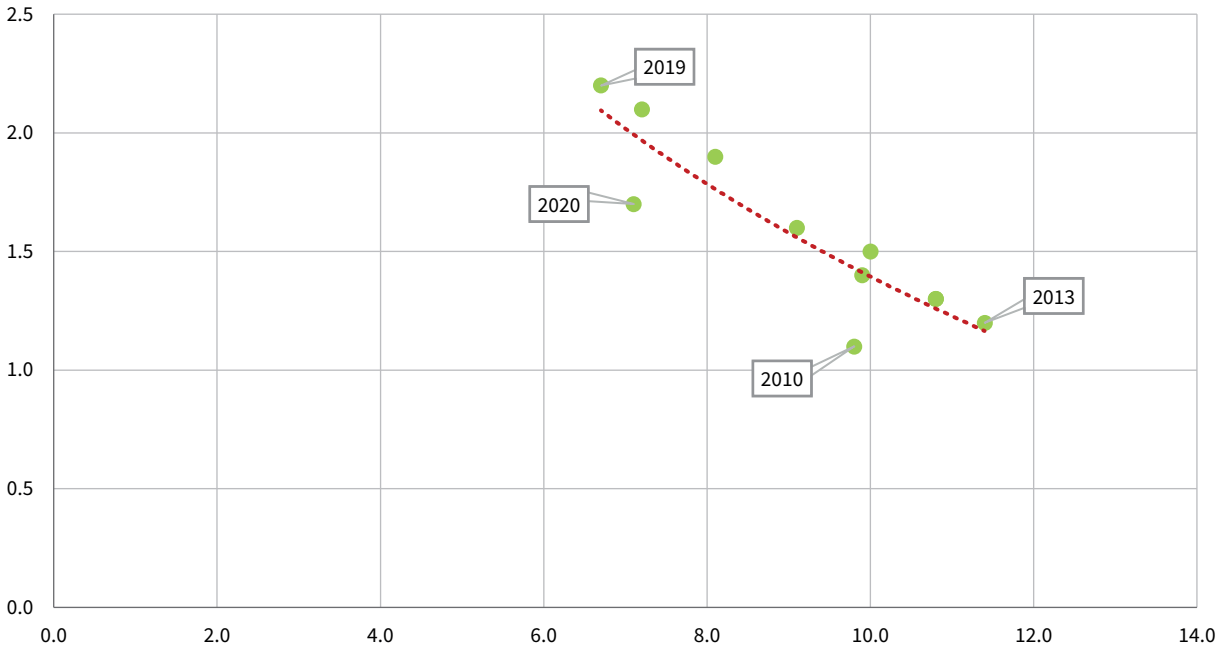
Sector	15–29	30+
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	9	13
Industry (except construction)	4	5
Construction	3	3
Wholesale and retail	11	9
Transport and storage	3	2
Accommodation and food service activities	13	5
Information and communication	4	3
Finance and insurance	1	1
Real estate	1	2
Professional, scientific and technical activities	5	8
Administrative and support services activities	8	8
Public administration	3	4
Education	9	11
Health and social work	11	12
Arts, entertainment and recreation	10	7
Other services	4	4
Other	1	2

Source: *Authors' own calculations based on European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) 2019 microdata*

Youth employment by sector differs considerably by sex: while 34% of young men worked in industry or construction in 2019, just 12% of young women did. The difference was particularly marked in the construction sector, which employed 11% of young men and just 1% of young women. On the other hand, young women were overrepresented in health and education (which together employed 26% of young women and just 7% of young men), two sectors less affected by job losses in 2020. While retail and food services employed a somewhat larger percentage of young women than young men (29% versus 24%), overall women were less likely to be employed in sectors affected by reduced activity during the pandemic.

One way of estimating the sectors most affected by job losses during the early stages of the pandemic at EU level is to analyse job vacancy statistics, which are published regularly by Eurostat at both EU and Member State levels. Job vacancy figures are often used to predict unemployment in economic cycles, as the level of vacancies is inversely proportional to the unemployment rate. This negative relationship is represented by a Beveridge curve.[2] During a recession, the vacancy rate decreases as companies advertise fewer jobs, tightening the market, which is associated with higher unemployment. The curve can also shift upwards when job vacancies increase but they are not filled by unemployed workers, for example because of skills mismatch or disengagement among people in long-term unemployment, representing low labour market efficiency (Consolo and Dias da Silva, 2019). Figure 3 shows the Beveridge curve for the EU27 between 2010 and 2020: the most favourable labour market conditions existed in 2019, the worst in 2013, and there was a large drop in vacancies and some growth in unemployment in 2020 (showing a similar distance from the curve to the data point for 2010).

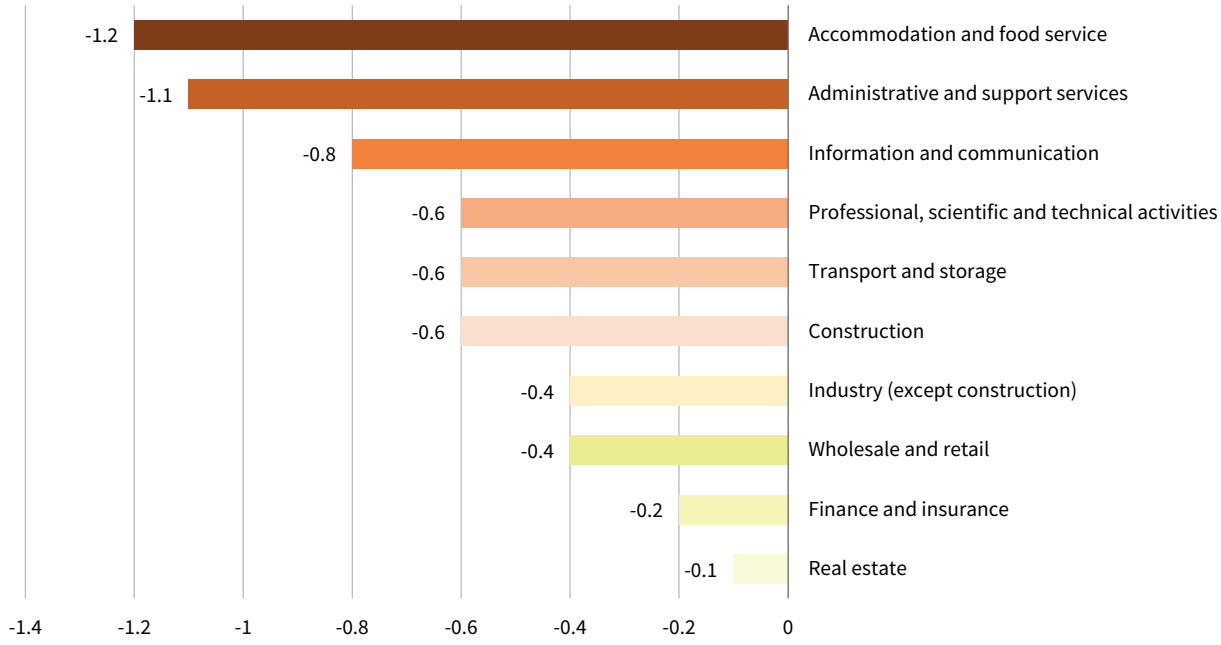
Figure 3: Beveridge curve – job vacancies versus unemployment rate, EU27, 2010–2020



Source: *Authors' own calculations based on Eurostat, Unemployment by sex and age – annual data [une_rt_a] and Job vacancy rate by NACE Rev. 2 activity – annual data (from 2001 onwards) [jvs_a_rate_r2]*

2 A Beveridge curve is a graphical representation of the relationship between unemployment and the job vacancy rate.

Figure 4: Decrease in the job vacancy rate between 2019 and 2020 by sector, EU27 (percentage points)



Source: *Eurostat, Job vacancy rate by NACE Rev. 2 activity – annual data (from 2001 onwards) [jvs_a_rate_r2]*

Sectoral job vacancy rates for 2020, available at EU27 level, suggest a general, cross-sectoral drop in activity compared with 2019. The largest reductions in vacancy rates were measured in accommodation and food services, administrative and support services, and information and communication services (Figure 4). As mentioned previously, accommodation and food services was the sector that employed most young people in 2019. The second largest employer of young people, wholesale and retail, experienced a smaller decrease on average in 2020 (-0.4 percentage points).

National data provide more nuance (Table 2). While the three sectors mentioned above were those most commonly experiencing a large decrease in job vacancies, the situation in each country depended both on the strategy used by the government to prevent the spread of the virus and sectoral activity and employment in that country. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker stringency index, measuring the strictness of economic restrictions (Hale et al, 2021), was highest on average in Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In Ireland, unusually among the countries for which data are available, professional services, financial services and real estate had the highest decreases in job vacancies, reflecting the fact that these were the most active sectors in 2019. In Italy, accommodation and food services, other services, and arts, entertainment and recreation were most affected. Elsewhere, in Latvia, Estonia and Denmark, wholesale and retail were among the highly affected sectors. Young people working in these sectors before the pandemic were at higher risk of job loss than others.

Table 2: Decrease in the job vacancy rate between 2019 and 2020 in the three most affected sectors by Member State (percentage points)

Country	Sector 1		Sector 2		Sector 3	
Austria	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Administration and support	-1.1	Information and communication	-1.0
Belgium	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.8	Accommodation and food services	-1.4	Construction	-1.1
Bulgaria	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Real estate	-0.3	Administrative and support services	-0.2
Croatia	Administration and support	-1.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Transport	-0.5
Cyprus	Administration and support	-1.5	Other services	-1.4	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.9
Czechia	Administration and support	-3.1	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.7	Construction	-1.3
Denmark	Information and communication	-1.3	Accommodation and food services	-0.2	Wholesale and retail	-0.2
Estonia	Information and communication	-1.3	Wholesale and retail	-1.0	Construction	-1.0
Finland	Transport	-1.1	Real estate	-0.8	Construction	-0.7
Germany	Administration and support	-2.8	Transport	-1.6	Accommodation and food services	-1.6
Hungary	Information and communication	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-1.1	Construction	-1.0
Ireland	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.3	Finance and insurance	-0.8	Real estate	-0.5
Italy	Accommodation and food services	-1.7	Other services	-1.1	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-1.1
Latvia	Wholesale and retail	-2.0	Accommodation and food services	-1.9	Construction	-1.8
Lithuania	Accommodation and food services	-0.7	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Real estate	-0.6
Luxembourg	Accommodation and food services	-0.8	Information and communication	-0.8	Education	-0.6
Malta	Other services	-3.2	Professional, scientific and technical	-2.5	Accommodation and food services	-2.1
Netherlands	Accommodation and food services	-2.7	Information and communication	-1.5	Transport	-1.2
Poland	Construction	-1.6	Other services	-1.1	Accommodation and food services	-0.9
Portugal	Accommodation and food services	-1.0	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.7	Transport	-0.6
Romania	Accommodation and food services	-0.5	Finance and insurance	-0.5	Arts, entertainment and recreation	-0.5
Slovakia	Construction	-0.9	Transport	-0.6	Public administration	-0.5
Slovenia	Accommodation and food services	-2.0	Construction	-1.5	Administration and support	-1.0
Spain	Information and communication	-0.5	Accommodation and food services	-0.3	Public administration	-0.3
Sweden	Accommodation and food services	-1.5	Information and communication	-1.5	Professional, scientific and technical	-1.1

Note: *No data for France or Greece. A lighter shade of red indicates a lower decrease in the job vacancy rate; a darker shade of red indicates a larger decrease.*
Source: *Eurostat, Job vacancy rate by NACE Rev. 2 activity – annual data (from 2001 onwards) [jvs_a_rate_r2]*

NEETs: Diversity and risks

The concept and measurement of NEETs, or young people not in employment, education or training, entered into European policy in 2010, although it had been in use in the UK since the 1990s as a way of categorising young people who were not accumulating human capital through formal channels (Eurofound, 2012). The added value that the NEET concept provides is increased understanding of the reasons behind inactivity and unemployment specific to young people and raised public awareness of the specific vulnerabilities of young people, particularly in the aftermath of the economic crisis (Eurofound, 2016). The concept has been criticised for having the potential to stigmatise vulnerable young people (Serracant, 2013) and has sometimes been misinterpreted, with a focus on joblessness and labour market discouragement

(Elder, 2015). To avoid this, it is important to break NEETs down into subgroups, highlighting their diversity (Eurofound, 2016).

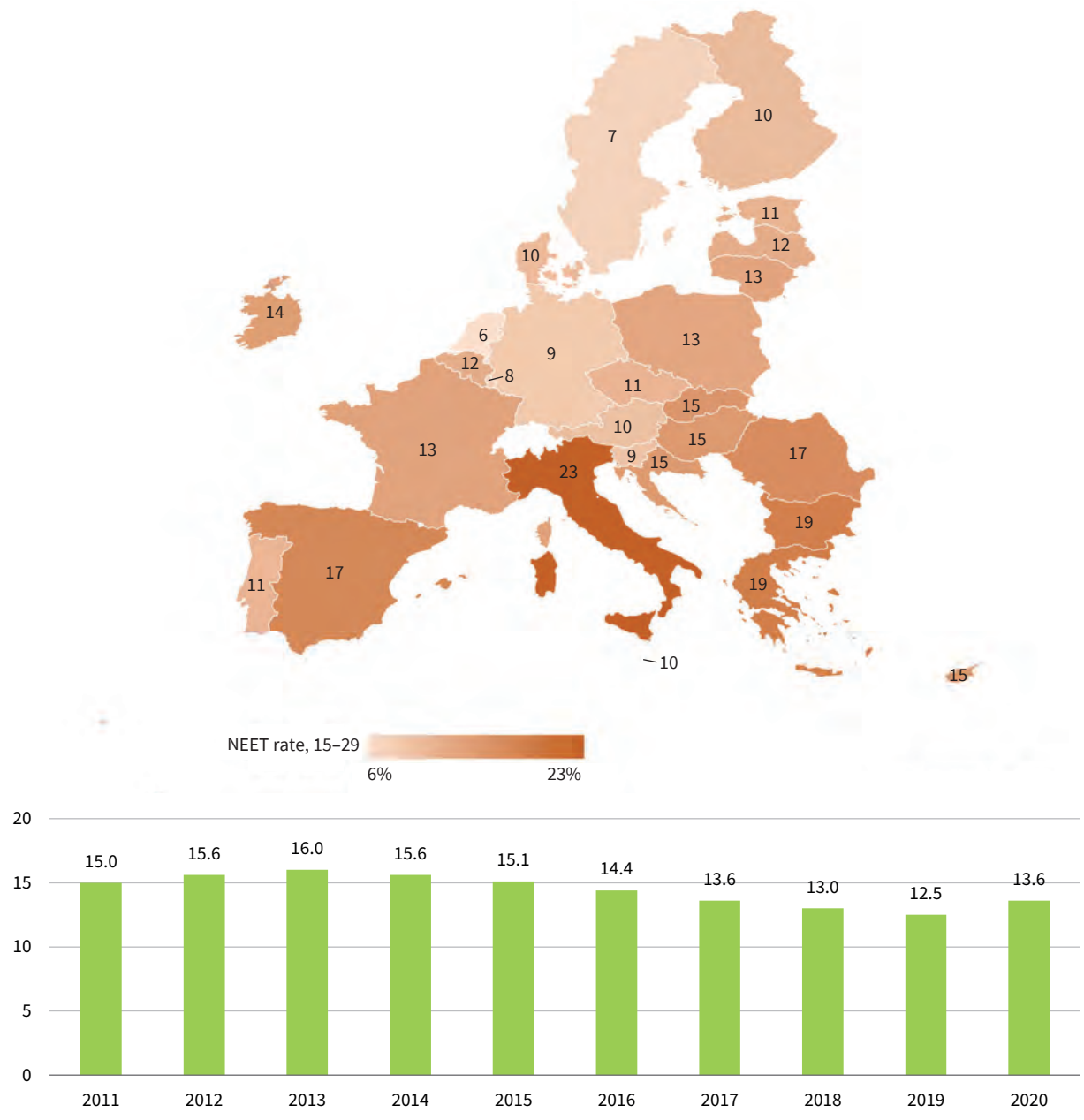
NEETs are at risk of poverty, social exclusion and mental health problems, which is among the reasons why one of the indicators of the Social Scoreboard used to monitor the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights is the NEET rate among 15- to 29-year-olds, with a target to reduce the rate from 12.6% in 2019 to 9% in 2030. Those already in this situation at the onset of the pandemic were among those most vulnerable to the effects of the restrictions on travel, which pushed them further away from jobs, both close to their home and elsewhere. The pandemic has also limited opportunities for education and training.

This section concentrates on NEETs. It combines statistics from the 2019 EU-LFS with the methodology used by Eurofound in its research on the diversity of NEETs (Eurofound, 2016) and aggregated data from 2020 that had been published in the Eurostat database at the time of this report's publication.

The number of NEET 15- to 29-year-olds increased to approximately 9.8 million in 2020 from 9.1 million in 2019, or to 13.6% of the youth population from 12.5% (Figure 5). The largest increases were measured in Ireland (+2.7 percentage points), Spain (+2.4 percentage points) and Lithuania (+2.1 percentage points).

The NEET rate for 15- to 29-year-olds has consistently been higher for women than for men over the past 10 years, which can be attributed largely to greater care

Figure 5: NEET rate among 15- to 29-year-olds, 2020 map and time series since 2011, EU27 (%)



Source: *Eurostat, Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET), by sex and age – annual data [lfsi_neet_a]*

Table 3: NEET rate by level of education among 15- to 29-year-olds, 2007–2020 (%)

Level of education	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Lower secondary or below	14.4	14.7	16.3	16.8	17.8	18.2	18.2	16.8	16.4	16.0	15.3	14.7	14.3	15.0
Secondary & non-tertiary	13.3	12.8	14.8	15.4	15.5	16.1	16.5	16.0	15.5	14.8	13.9	13.2	12.7	14.1
General								10.3	9.9	10.0	9.6	9.2	8.9	10.0
Vocational								20.2	19.7	18.5	17.4	16.4	15.9	17.7
Tertiary	9.6	9.2	11.0	11.6	11.7	12.4	12.6	12.5	11.9	10.9	10.1	9.7	9.4	10.7

Note: *Green shading indicates lower NEET rate, red shading indicates higher NEET rate.*
Source: *Eurostat [yth_empl_160]*

responsibilities. Among young women, 14.4% were NEET in 2019; this increased to 15.1% in 2020. A larger increase was measured in the NEET rate for young men, from 10.8% to 12.2%.

Higher NEET rates can be found in particular among young people with a lower level of education (up to lower secondary) and with vocational education (Table 3).

Within the age group examined in this report, older young people (those aged 25–29) are more likely to be NEET than younger groups. This, again, reflects the greater likelihood of people in this age range having family/care responsibilities. In 2013, before the recovery from the economic crisis began, 21.6% of this age group were NEET; this had decreased to 17.2% by 2019. Between 2007 and 2020, there was comparatively little change in the NEET rate among 15- to 19-year-olds, although the lowest rate was measured in 2019 (5.6%); in 2020, this rate returned to a level last measured in 2015 (6.3%). Meanwhile, during the same period, the NEET rate among those aged 20–24 ranged from 18.7% (in 2013 and 2014) to 14.5% (in 2019) (Table 4).

The population of NEETs can be divided into seven subgroups (Eurofound, 2016). This grouping takes into account young NEETs' distance from the labour market and the reasons for their NEET status, as well as categorising those not looking for work according to the reasons for their unavailability. The seven subgroups are described below.

Re-entrants: Young people who will soon re-enter employment, education or training. They are people who have already been hired or enrolled in education or training and are waiting to begin.

Short-term unemployed: Young people who are unemployed, seeking work and available to start within two weeks, and who have been unemployed for less than a year. A short period of unemployment during the transition from education to work can be considered normal, and the level of vulnerability among people in this category can be expected to be moderate.

Long-term unemployed: Young people who are unemployed, seeking work and available to start within two weeks, and who have been unemployed for more than a year. People in this category are at high risk of disengagement and social exclusion. Long-term disengagement damages young people's employability, their human capital and their future employment outcomes; in some cases, the damage will last for the rest of their lives.

Unavailable owing to family responsibilities: Young people who are not seeking work or available to start a new job because they are caring for children or incapacitated adults, or have other less specific family responsibilities. Young people in this group are a mix of the vulnerable and non-vulnerable; some are not able to participate in the labour market because they cannot afford to pay for care for a child or adult family member, while others have voluntarily withdrawn from the labour market or education to take up family responsibilities.

Unavailable owing to illness or disability: Young people who are not seeking employment or are not available to start a job within two weeks because of illness or disability. This group includes those who need more social support because illness or disability means that they cannot do paid work.

Table 4: NEET rate by age range, 2007–2020 (%)

Age range	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
15–19	6.3	6.4	6.9	6.8	6.8	6.8	6.6	6.5	6.3	6.1	6.0	5.7	5.6	6.3
20–24	15.2	14.9	17.5	18.0	18.1	18.7	18.7	18.2	17.7	17.0	15.8	15.1	14.5	15.7
25–29	17.6	17.2	19.3	20.2	20.2	21.6	21.6	21.1	20.4	19.5	18.4	17.7	17.2	18.6

Note: *Green shading indicates lower NEET rate, red shading indicates higher NEET rate.*
Source: *Eurostat [yth_empl_160]*

Discouraged workers: Young people who have stopped looking for work because they believe that there are no job opportunities for them. They are mostly vulnerable young people at high risk of social exclusion who are very likely to experience poor employment outcomes over the course of their working lives and are at high risk of lifelong disengagement.

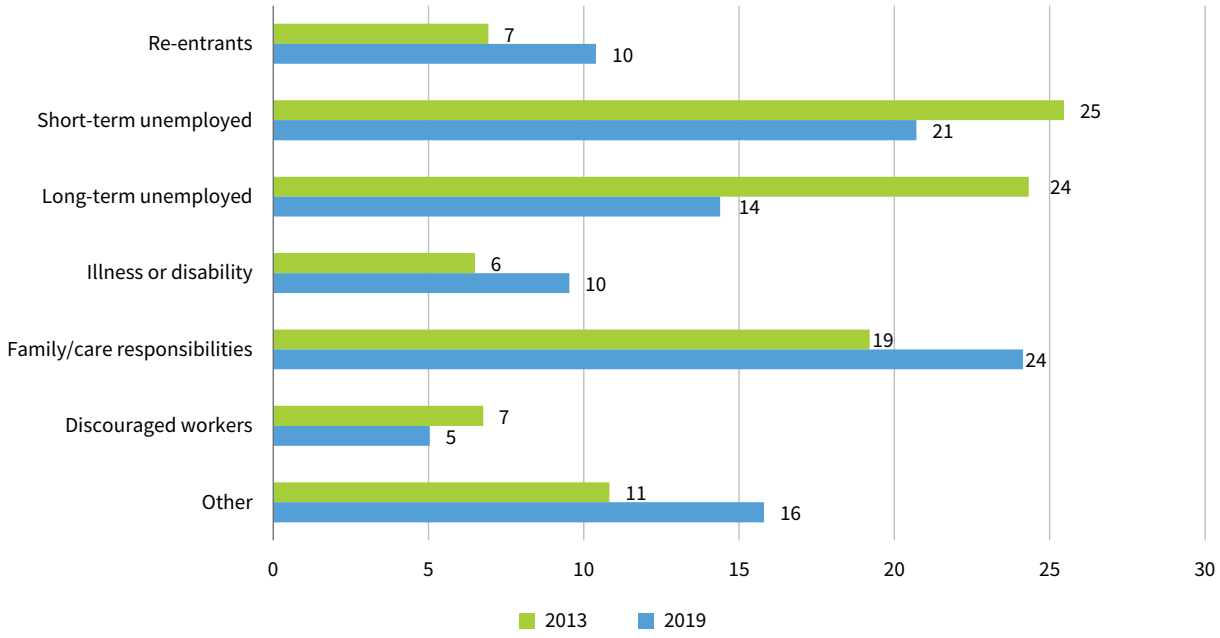
Other inactive: A statistical residual category, made up of those who did not specify any reason for their NEET status. Those in this group are likely to be an extremely heterogeneous mix, including people at all extremes of the spectrum of vulnerability: the most vulnerable, the hard-to-reach, those at risk of being deeply alienated, the most privileged and those who are holding out for a specific opportunity or who are following alternative paths, such as careers in the arts, that have little formal presence in the labour market or education.

As seen earlier in this report, 2013 saw the height of the impact of the economic crisis on young people's economic status, with record youth unemployment, based on figures collected since the 1990s. This was followed by a gradual decrease in youth unemployment until the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. For this reason, the largest categories of NEETs in 2013 were the short-term unemployed and the long-term unemployed, with most people in both categories having become unemployed during the economic crisis or not having found a job after finishing education during that crisis (Figure 6).

When the same disaggregation of NEETs is performed on 2019 data (Figure 6), the most noticeable change is the decrease in the proportion of long-term unemployed people. Most unemployed NEETs in 2019 had been unemployed for less than a year. In addition, the proportion of re-entrants was larger than in 2013, and most NEETs were unavailable for work or education owing to family responsibilities. Coupled with the finding that the overall number of NEETs and the proportion of NEETs in the youth population were lower in 2019, the composition of NEETs is proof of a healthier labour market just before the outbreak of the pandemic.

This is also reflected in the proportion of each of these categories in the active and total population of young people (Table 5). Long-term unemployed young people represented 7% of the active youth population and 4% of the total youth population in 2013; these figures had decreased to 4% and 2%, respectively by 2019. The proportion of those not working or in education because of illness or disability remained practically unchanged. Notably, the proportion of young people not working or in education because of family responsibilities also decreased, in line with the demographic change that occurred over the same period (Eurofound, 2019a); this was probably also a result of more employment opportunities being available to young parents during the expansion phase of the economic cycle.

Figure 6: Breakdown of NEETs aged 15–29, EU27, 2013 and 2019 (%)



Source: *Authors' own calculations based on EU-LFS 2013 and 2019 microdata*

Table 5: Breakdown of NEETs aged 15–29 as a proportion of all young people, EU27, 2013 and 2019 (%)

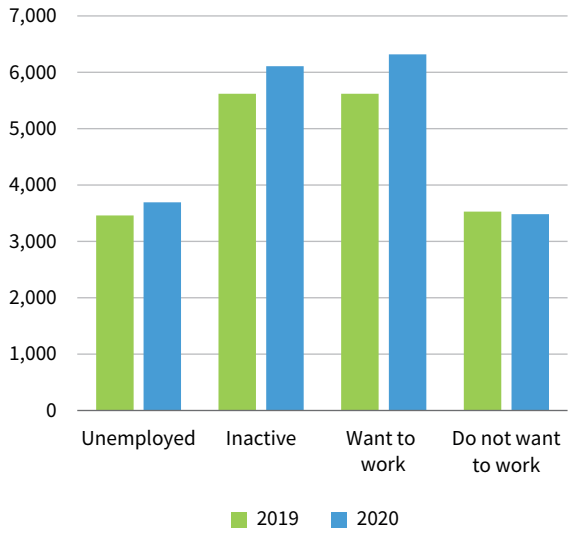
	2013	2019
Re-entrants	1.1	1.3
Short-term unemployed	4.1	2.6
Long-term unemployed	3.9	1.8
Illness or disability	1.0	1.2
Family/care responsibilities	3.1	3.0
Discouraged workers	1.1	0.6
Other	1.7	2.0
All NEETs	16.1	12.5

Source: *Authors' own calculations based on EU-LFS 2019 microdata and Eurostat [lfsi_neet_a]*

There are significant differences at country level in the composition of NEETs in the EU. In 2019, the proportions of re-entrants (those about to (re-)enter the labour market or education) were highest in Luxembourg (24%), Belgium and Ireland (both 19%) and lowest in the central and eastern European Member States, particularly Slovakia (1%), Bulgaria, Czechia and Romania (all 2%). In the central and eastern European countries, most NEETs gave family or care responsibilities as their main reason for not being in education or work, with the highest proportions giving this reason in Czechia (65%), Poland (53%), Bulgaria and Estonia (both 50%). Meanwhile, Greece had the highest proportion of long-term unemployed NEETs (41%), followed by Italy and Portugal (both 20%). The highest proportions of discouraged workers among NEETs were measured in Bulgaria, Italy (both 11%) and Slovakia (10%).

We know that the overall proportion of NEETs increased in 2020. However, the question remains of how the pandemic affected the composition of NEETs. Detailed disaggregation of NEETs into the seven subgroups following the pandemic is not yet possible because the required EU-LFS microdata were not available at the time of writing. However, from aggregated data already available, it is clear that the composition of the NEET population changed during 2020. With increases in both the number of NEETs in the EU and the proportion of NEETs who wanted to work (Figure 7), it is likely that new NEETs in 2020 were once again primarily short-term unemployed.

Figure 7: Composition of NEETs before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, EU27 ('000)



Source: *Eurostat, Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and labour status (NEET rates) [yth_empl_150]*

Other groups of young people vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic

In addition to young people already outside the labour market and education at the beginning of the pandemic, other groups of 18- to 29-year olds were particularly vulnerable to its effects.

Young people working on temporary contracts or part time

The sectors most affected by the pandemic, particularly retail and accommodation and food services, are characterised by high rates of temporary contracts and part-time jobs.

Working on a temporary contract sometimes provides a stepping stone to a permanent position for young people at the beginning of their careers; however, it is a significant source of job insecurity, and often there is a risk of moving from one fixed-term contract to another, rather than acquiring a stable job; this was the case in particular in the aftermath of the economic crisis (Eurofound, 2013). According to Eurostat, 36% of 15- to 29-year-olds in the EU worked on temporary contracts in 2019, up from 34% in 2008 before the worst effects of the Great Recession on employment were seen but slightly down from the peak measured in 2017, which was 37%. Data from 2020 show a drop to 33% (Eurostat [yth_empl_050]), which could indicate that some of those on temporary contracts lost their job. In comparison, the average temporary employment rate

across all workers was just 15% in 2019; this also dropped, to 13%, in 2020 (Eurostat [yth_empl_050]).

Meanwhile, 22% of young people worked part-time in 2019; this percentage had increased from 18% in 2008 but had remained approximately the same since 2015, and it did not change in 2020. For all workers, the part-time employment rate was 18% both in 2019 and in 2020 (Eurostat [yth_empl_060]). Part-time workers are at higher risk of poverty both because they earn less and because they pay a 'part-time penalty' (they work fewer hours than they want and earn less for those hours that they do work) (Horemans et al, 2016). Part-time work is a common way for young people to earn income while completing education, with 47% of young part-time workers in both 2019 and 2020 saying that the reason they worked part-time was because they were in education (Eurostat). On the other hand, over one-quarter (27%) of part-time workers aged 15–29 said in 2019 that they worked part-time because they could not find a full-time job, with this figure decreasing to 25.6% in 2020 (for part-time workers of all working age, this was 26% decreasing to 24% in 2020). This involuntary part-time work can be seen as partial unemployment, with those in this form of employment falling somewhere between unemployed young people and those choosing to work part-time for various reasons. Involuntary part-time employment increased during the economic crisis, and those in this position are at risk of poverty (Horemans et al, 2016).

Young people just out of education

Young people who left education in the year the pandemic started or shortly before, hoping to find their first job, often had difficulties finding a job and had to postpone their job search to the following year. Some of those highly qualified young people who graduated shortly before the pandemic started working in jobs below their qualification level, hoping to move to a different job later on. They were in a similar in-between position to involuntary part-timers, and their chances of moving to a job matching their qualifications worsened during the pandemic.

Eurostat data on young people who left education between one and three years ago show that three-quarters of them (75.7%) were in employment in 2019.[3] This proportion has gradually increased since the low of 68.7% measured in 2013, similarly to other measures of youth employment. However, in 2020, the figure decreased to 73% as the effects of the pandemic took hold. In 2020, at Member State level, the highest employment rates of those graduating between one and three years before were in Germany and the Netherlands (both 86.5%) and the lowest in Greece (50.2%) and Italy (51.6%), while the largest drops between 2019 and 2020 were measured in Ireland (-6.1 percentage points) and Luxembourg (-9.2 percentage points).

There are differences in the employment rates of recent graduates/school leavers by level of education. Those having left tertiary education were most likely to be employed in 2019 (85%), followed by those who had completed upper secondary education (73.4%), while only 38.9% of those with a lower level of education were in employment before the pandemic. In 2020, all of these proportions decreased, to 83.7%, 69.1% and 35.4%, respectively, so the largest decrease in the employment rate was experienced by those leaving upper secondary education (International Standard Classification of Education level 3 or 4).

Young people at risk of poverty or social exclusion

Among the most vulnerable to the economic effects of the pandemic were young people already at risk of poverty or social exclusion: according to Eurostat, 25.1% of people aged 15–29 were in this category in the EU in 2019, ranging from 11% in Czechia to 35% in Romania. This rate increased to an estimated 26.6% in 2020 in the EU overall.

Some young people were at risk of in-work poverty: in other words, they were working but living in households at risk of poverty. People in low-paid jobs or part-time work and/or on temporary contracts are at higher risk of in-work poverty. According to the latest Structure of Earnings Survey, conducted in 2018, 26% of workers aged below 30 in the EU27 were low-wage earners, compared with 15% of employees of all ages (Eurostat [earn_ses_pub1a]).[4]

Low earners and young people at risk of poverty were more likely to qualify for temporary wage support during the pandemic. This is discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3 of this report.

Young people with existing mental health issues

It has been widely documented that the pandemic and related non-pharmaceutical interventions have had an impact on well-being and mental health, particularly for young people; evidence for this is presented in Chapter 2 of this report, while some interventions aimed at reducing the impact are discussed in Chapter 3. However, young people with existing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, were likely to be particularly vulnerable to the effects that lockdowns had on mental health.

3 These data are available for 15- to 34-year olds who left education between one and three years before data collection. No data are published on those who left education less than one year ago.

4 The data cover employees working in establishments with 10 or more employees, excluding apprentices.

Concerns about youth mental health were already being discussed by European policymakers before the pandemic, with the WHO reporting a decline in adolescent mental health as measured by the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey (Inchley et al, 2020). Most EU-level measures concentrated on children's mental well-being, for example the collection of information in the European Platform for Investing in Children.

Data about diagnosed mental illness are scarce at EU level. In the 2014 European Health Interview Survey, 4% of young people aged 15–29 in the EU reported that they had been diagnosed with chronic depression (5.1% of young women, 3.0% of young men), while 5% reported depressive symptoms (6% of young women, 4.1% of young men) (Eurostat [hlth_ehis_cd1e]). Importantly, both of these figures were lower than those for all age groups,[5] which suggests that young people on average usually have better mental health than older groups, which is the opposite of the situation that emerged during the pandemic, as seen in Chapter 2.

Young people with housing or family issues

Household status is important in young people's lives, as living in the family home can provide security during the years of transition to adulthood, including protection from the feeling of social exclusion and low mental health that unemployment can cause (Eurofound, 2019a). Family relationships became even more crucial during the pandemic than before: young people living with their parents, or having to move back in with their parents during lockdowns owing to loss of accommodation, may have felt a loss of autonomy and freedom, while those living alone without a partner may have felt socially excluded as a result of being cut off from their social support network. Young people with young children were subject to pressures arising from no childcare availability and the closure of schools.

Conclusion: Youth employment and vulnerability at the onset of the pandemic

This chapter has shown that before the pandemic young people were in a comparatively better economic position in terms of employment than they had been in the years after the Great Recession. However, the road had been long, with the height of the impact of the 2007–2008 financial crisis delayed to around 2013. The crisis and its aftermath represented a particularly difficult period for young people.

The NEET rate in the EU had decreased continuously between 2013 and 2019, and the composition of NEETs had also changed, with fewer young people in short- or long-term unemployment and more NEETs about to re-enter the labour market or education; the main reason for NEET status in 2019 was family or care responsibilities.

The data show that 15- to 29-year-olds in the EU were more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. The sectors of the economy that were most affected by restrictions, particularly accommodation and food services, employed the largest group of young people before the pandemic hit. Young people were also more likely to be working on less secure, temporary contracts that were easier to terminate, to be working part-time and/or to be working for low wages, all of which put them at higher risk of job loss and social exclusion. In addition, young people who had recently left education, as well as those with existing mental health issues – which had a lower incidence pre-pandemic for young people than for older populations – were identified as being at particular risk of being disproportionately affected by the restrictions.

5 In total, 6.9% reported chronic depression and 6.5% reported current depressive symptoms.

2 Immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people

Overall, young people were in a better economic situation at the beginning of 2020 than they had been at any time since before the Great Recession. However, particular groups of young people, such as NEETs, were in a precarious situation, giving rise to concerns about independence and mental well-being, while some young workers were in jobs at particular risk of redundancy due to the pandemic.

This chapter highlights the situation of young people after the pandemic hit, and the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions on their well-being, looking particularly at the school and workplace closures and stay-at-home requirements that were introduced throughout Europe.

Young people were hit hard by the pandemic in the areas of the labour market and education, and their opportunities for formal human capital accumulation were reduced. Restrictions on the economy resulted in job loss and job insecurity, which exacerbated financial difficulties experienced by young people. Many of them lived with their parents during the pandemic and relied on their families for social and financial support, but for some this resulted in a loss of independence and an increased feeling of social exclusion. Restrictions on social interactions and financial insecurity had a significant negative impact on young people's well-being, particularly their mental well-being.

This chapter will explore the extent of job loss experienced by young people during the pandemic and offer a detailed analysis of transitions in and out of employment, before examining how young people's quality of life changed throughout the pandemic, particularly with regard to their financial situation (including how living with their parents affects their financial situation), perceived social exclusion, life satisfaction and mental well-being. For the last two indicators, additional analyses are included to estimate the impact of various types of non-pharmaceutical interventions when controlling for other factors.

Finally, previous research has suggested that the negative impact of repeated lockdowns on both the economic status and the well-being of young people has resulted in general dissatisfaction and loss of trust in institutions. However, this report finds that young people's trust in institutions, as well as their optimism about their future, remains comparatively high. Developments with regard to trust in government and trust in the EU, and their potential association with various interventions, are discussed at the end of the chapter, showing that, while young people suffered most from the economic and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, their trust in institutions and optimism about their future remained higher than that of older groups.

Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey

Data from 2020 and 2021 are as yet scarce, and official data from 2020 do not show the full extent of the impact of the pandemic. To address some of these data gaps, Eurofound launched an online survey covering all of the EU27, available to people aged 18 or over. The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey aimed to investigate the economic and social impact of the pandemic in Europe. The first round of the survey took place in early April 2020, not long after the pandemic was declared. The second round of the survey was carried out in June and July 2020, and the third round took place in February and March 2021, when most Member States were once again under strict lockdown as they suffered from a second or third wave of the pandemic.

The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey is a unique data source that enables monitoring of quality of life and work as the pandemic progressed based on a large sample size. It is the only large-scale survey providing EU-wide information on the economic and social impacts of the pandemic on Europeans. The survey was open to the entire population aged 18 or older residing in the EU. The online survey was promoted through snowball sampling, with respondents first recruited through Eurofound's communication channels, then through social media advertising (for example, on Facebook and Instagram), which is how most respondents were reached.

Social media recruitment was targeted to achieve a minimum sample size per country and a minimum sample size for people in different age groups and with different levels of education. A total of almost 140,000 respondents participated in the survey. The final sample size achieved surpassed the original target, with approximately 68,000 people in the EU completing the survey in the first round, while the sample for the second round was approximately 24,100 and in the third round it was approximately 46,800. The mean sample size per country was approximately 2,500 in the first round, 900 in the second round and 1,700 in the third round. As the survey was non-probabilistic, an a posteriori weighting stratification was performed.

Data were weighted on the basis of age, gender, education, urbanisation level and country.

The *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey included a large panel component, which made it possible to follow the same respondents through the survey rounds as the pandemic progressed. People who filled in the questionnaire were given the option to provide their email address to be invited to take part in future rounds of the survey. In total, approximately 9,500 respondents took part in all three rounds of the survey, and about 21,000 people participated in at least two rounds. This makes it possible to analyse, for example, job loss and changes in mental well-being among the same group of people as the pandemic progressed.

Young people are often cited as one of the groups that are hard for social surveys, including online surveys, to reach (Tourangeau, 2014). While older adults were overrepresented in the sample for the survey, it reached a considerable number of young people through targeted social media advertising. The first round surveyed a sample of 7,381 respondents in the 18–29 age group, in the second round the sample of young people was 2,143, and in the third round it was 3,828. The sample was weighted by age crossed with gender, educational level, urbanisation and country.

Employment, education and financial situation

There has been general concern throughout Europe that young people have been disproportionately affected by restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As described in the previous chapter, official annual data show an increase in youth unemployment in 2020, from 12% to 13%. In addition, some young people may have temporarily lost their job and received wage support, while others may have become inactive rather than unemployed.

Surveys conducted at national level confirm that youth unemployment increased in most Member States (Box 1), and the Network of Eurofound Correspondents identifies young people as one of the groups hardest hit by the crisis at country level. The insecurity caused by periods of unemployment can have lasting consequences for young people's professional development, future prospects and broader life decisions.

Box 1: Consequences of the pandemic on the employment and education of young people – evidence from national surveys

Belgium: In July 2020, the Flemish public employment service (PES) in cooperation with De Ambrassade (a Flemish organisation providing guidance and support on youth policy) launched a survey among 1,000 young employees and unemployed young people, which yielded the following results: 54.5% of all respondents felt down more often because of the crisis; 31.1% of all respondents had no faith in the future; 32.8% of all unemployed respondents believed it was not a good idea to start working at this time; 30.3% of all respondents had an increased interest in working in essential sectors such as care or food distribution; and 34.9% of unemployed respondents were thinking about (re)starting training or education instead of working (Vlaamse Jeugdraad, 2020).

Febelfin (2020) surveyed 1,000 respondents aged 16–30, of whom 45% reported financial problems due to the crisis. About one-third worried about their financial situation, 35% believed that their parents had been hurt financially by the crisis, about 35% stated that financial support that they had been receiving from their parents had stopped, and 1 in 8 reported that they had been forced to support their parents financially.

Finland: The University of Turku conducted a survey that mapped the experiences of over 5,000 students in high schools and vocational schools during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the survey, the crisis particularly affected the lives and plans of young people who were about to graduate and either start working or go on to university or another form of further education. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to find a job or internship or to graduate from school. The pandemic also had an impact on their view of the future: more young people believed that they would be unemployed for a long period, and fewer believed that they would be able to find a job related to their area of study. Many young people did not get the type of support they wanted or needed – especially those who experienced loneliness or bullying or who had learning difficulties (Repo et al, 2020).

Italy: According to a survey conducted by Istituto Toniolo and Ipsos (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo di Studi Superiori, 2020), 60% of young Italians believe that the COVID-19 emergency will have negative consequences for their future prospects (including those of finding a job, going to live on their own, getting married, having a child and moving to another city or country).

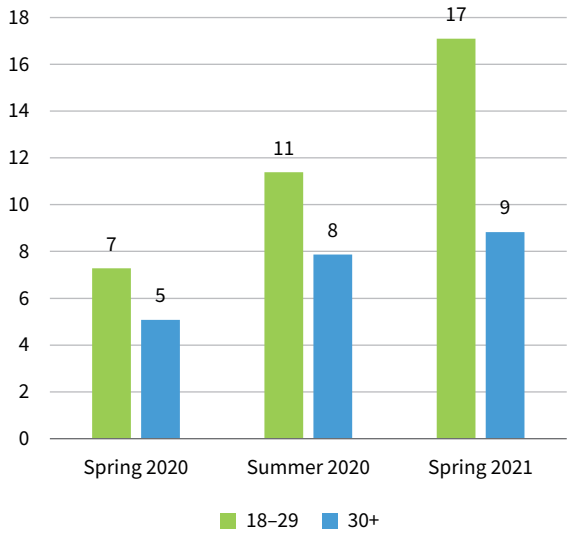
Slovenia: In a survey carried out by the National Youth Council of Slovenia during the first wave of the pandemic, 47% of respondents said that their income had decreased during the pandemic. One-quarter of respondents claimed that their income did not cover their basic needs. The National Youth Council attributed this drop in income to reduced demand for student and other forms of labour (Mladinski Svet Slovenije, 2020).

Source: *Based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey measured the highest level of job insecurity among young workers (thinking that they were likely or very likely to lose their job in the next three months) at the start of the pandemic (32%). This had decreased by summer 2020 (23%) and increased again by spring 2021, albeit to a lower level than early in the pandemic (27%). In spring 2021, job insecurity was at a similar level among young men and young women (27% and 26%, respectively).

The survey consistently measured a higher rate of job loss among young people than among those aged 30 or over, and the gap between the age groups increased with each survey round. In spring 2021, 17% of young people surveyed had been in employment before the pandemic and were now unemployed (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Proportion of respondents aged 18–29 and 30+ who became unemployed during the pandemic, spring 2020 to spring 2021 (%)



Note: *Data for round 1 are based on the question 'During the COVID-19 pandemic have you lost your job(s)/contract(s)?' (answer: 'Yes, permanently'). Data for rounds 2 and 3 are based on current employment status compared with employment status in previous rounds. The source for all figures and tables in this chapter is the microdata for the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey (Eurofound, 2020b).*
Source: *Eurofound, 2020b.*

By spring 2021, job loss was twice as common among young men as among young women (22% versus 11%); the difference had been smaller in summer 2020 (13% versus 10%). If the proportion of NEETs is estimated using employment status and participation in training, the proportion of NEETs participating in the survey increased from 14% in spring and summer 2020 to 17% by spring 2021.[6]

Labour market transitions of young people during the pandemic in the EU

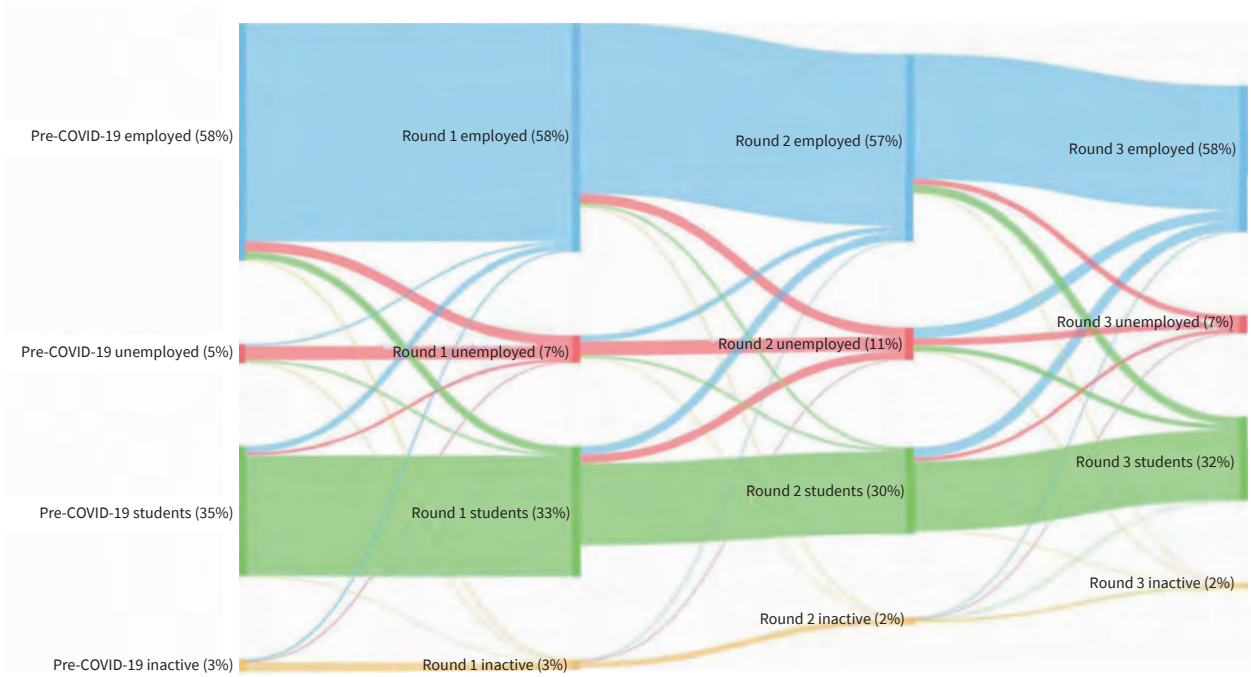
An important feature of the survey is that respondents were asked about their employment status prior to the pandemic. In addition, approximately 2,000 young people participated in at least two rounds of the survey. As a result, the survey can offer unique insights into how the pandemic affected young people's employment: it is possible to follow young respondents through the pandemic to see what proportion became unemployed after being in employment or in education pre-pandemic, at what point they became unemployed and whether they returned to the labour market. The following analysis focuses on the labour market transitions of young people aged 18–29, living in any EU Member State, who participated in at least two rounds of the survey.

The current employment status of respondents was recorded in each round of the survey, as was employment status prior to the pandemic. The first step in the analysis was to look at the transitions of young people between their pre-COVID-19 declared employment status and their employment situations during the three rounds of the survey. Given that the focus is on young people, individuals who declared that they were retired were excluded. The following four categories of employment status were defined: (1) employed (including both self-employed people and employees); (2) unemployed; (3) students; and (4) inactive (those with full-time family/caring responsibilities and people unable to work because of ill health).

A Sankey diagram shows transfers or flows in a system. It can be used to show the movement of people from one group to another, with different colours

6 The question on participation in training was asked only in rounds 2 and 3, so no information on training is included in the spring 2020 data. Young people who spent less than six hours per week on training in the past month while they were not working and not in education are included in the estimate for NEETs.

Figure 9: Sankey diagram – employment status transitions among young people during the pandemic (%)



Source: *Authors' own calculations based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

representing the groups and their input and output flows. Figure 9 shows the transitions of all those who provided information on employment status in each round.[7] As the diagram shows, the share of young people in employment was lowest in summer 2020, while by spring 2021 the figure was slightly higher than before the pandemic. On the other hand, the share of unemployed young people was higher than before the pandemic in each round, reaching a peak of 10.74% during summer 2020. In all three survey rounds, the share of young people declaring themselves to be students was lower than before the pandemic, with a slight increase in the last round.

However, given that not all respondents participated in every round, Figure 9 does not represent the same pool of individuals across time. To gain a more precise understanding of how individuals' employment status changed during the pandemic, it is necessary to look at young people who took part in all three rounds and who gave full information about their employment status (n = 766). Their employment status transitions across survey rounds are shown in Figure 10.

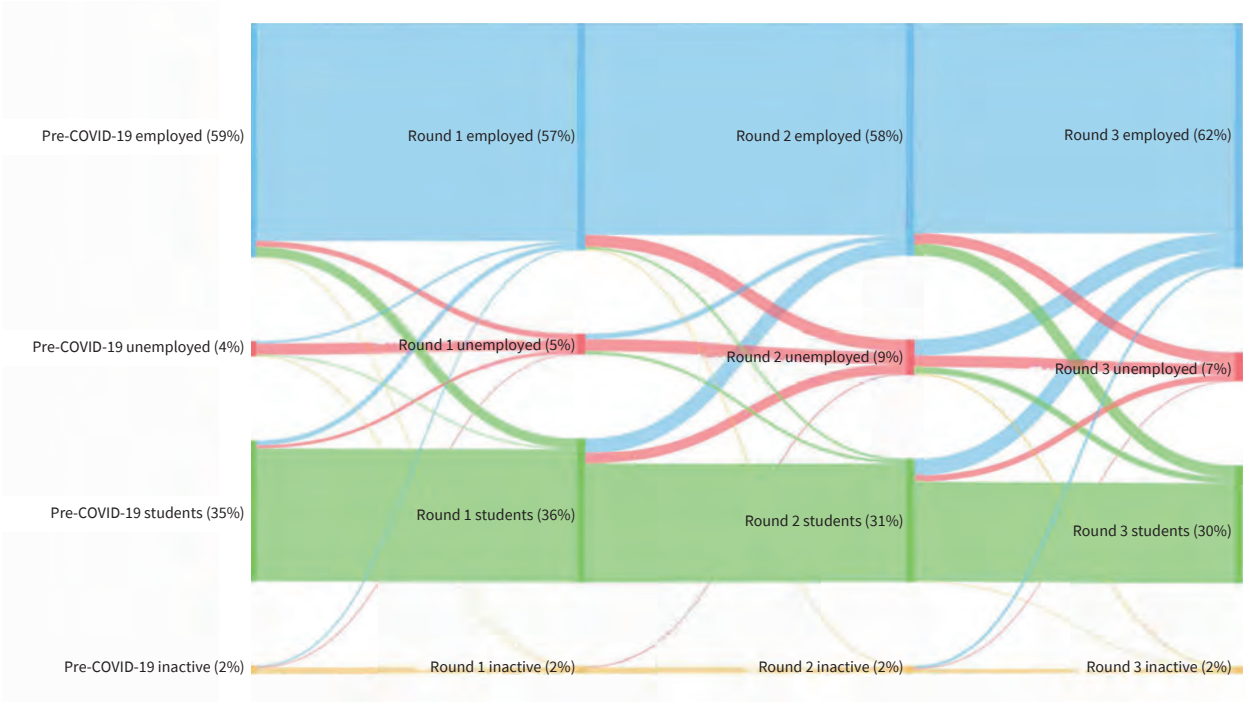
As Figure 10 shows, the proportion of those employed was lowest in April 2020, started to recover during the summer and reached a higher level than pre-pandemic in the last round of the survey. However, the proportion of unemployed young people was higher in all rounds than before the beginning of the pandemic. Peak unemployment was during summer 2020; it was slightly lower in the latest round (spring 2021). The data on this restricted sample of young people show that the share of those in education decreased across time, moving from 35.25% before COVID-19 to 29.63% in spring 2021.

In terms of flows between groups, the percentage of employed young people who became unemployed rose from 2.4% between pre-COVID-19 and round 1 to 5.3% and 4.5% between rounds 1 and 2 and rounds 2 and 3, respectively. The share of employed people who went from employment to education was the lowest between rounds 1 and 2 (0.9%), while it was at similar levels during the first and last periods (4.2% between pre-COVID-19 and round 1, 4.9% between rounds 2 and 3).

Among students, the proportion of those who transitioned into employment was higher between rounds 1 and 2 and between rounds 2 and 3 than in the first period. While only 3.3% transitioned into employment between pre-COVID-19 and round 1, 10.5% made the same transition between rounds 1 and 2 and 13.1% in the last period. A similar trend can be observed for students transitioning into unemployment, with 2.2% of students declaring that they had become unemployed between the beginning of the pandemic

7 Figure 9 presents the percentages (with employment status) of all people providing information in that survey round, numbering 1,797 for pre-COVID-19 status, 1,743 in round 1 (spring 2020), 1,462 in round 2 (summer 2020) and 1,389 in round 3 (spring 2021).

Figure 10: Sankey diagram – employment status transitions among young people during the pandemic, restricted sample of 766 unique individuals



Source: *Authors' own calculations based on the* Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

and the first round. That percentage increased to 6.8% between rounds 1 and 2, while between rounds 2 and 3 it was 5.1%. Of those who were unemployed in round 1, 13.2% went into education in round 2 while 26.3% went into employment. The share of people who were unemployed in round 2 who had gone into employment by round 3 was 46.2%, while the share of those who had gone into education was 17.9%.

Workers transitioning to unemployment

This section looks at job loss among young people, considering only employed people and excluding students and other inactive youth. There were 1,059 young people in employment in the month before the pandemic, with around 12% experiencing job loss during the pandemic.

Figures 11 and 12 show figures for young people transitioning from employment to unemployment by country group and Member State, respectively. Countries are split into groups based on their welfare regime. Five groups have been defined: Nordic or social-democratic (Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden), Continental or conservative (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg), Ireland (as Ireland alone in the EU represents the 'Liberal' category; previously, this category also included the UK), Eastern (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and Mediterranean (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain).

Figure 11: Proportion of young people transitioning from employment into unemployment during the pandemic by country group (%)

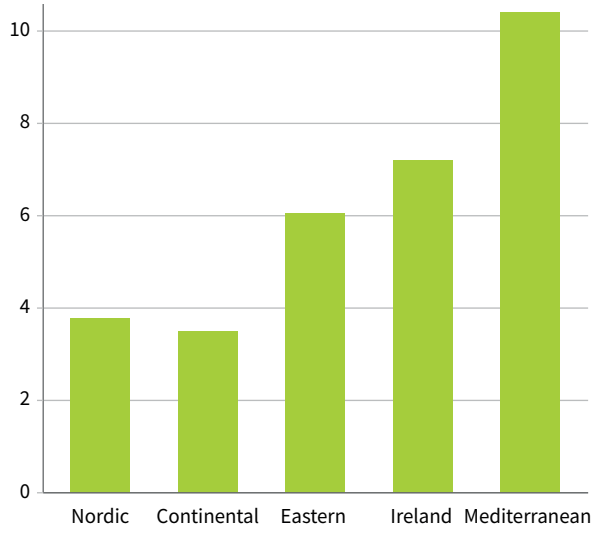
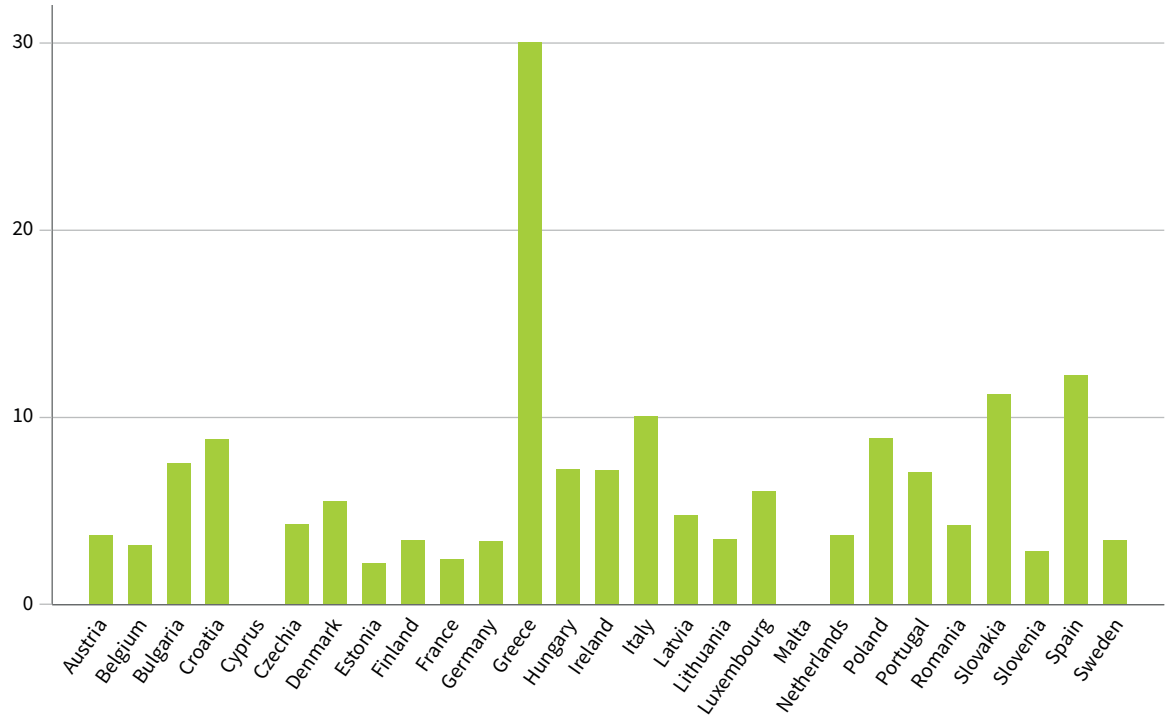


Figure 12: Proportion of young people transitioning from employment into unemployment during the pandemic by Member State (%)



Note: *Insufficient data for Cyprus and Malta.*

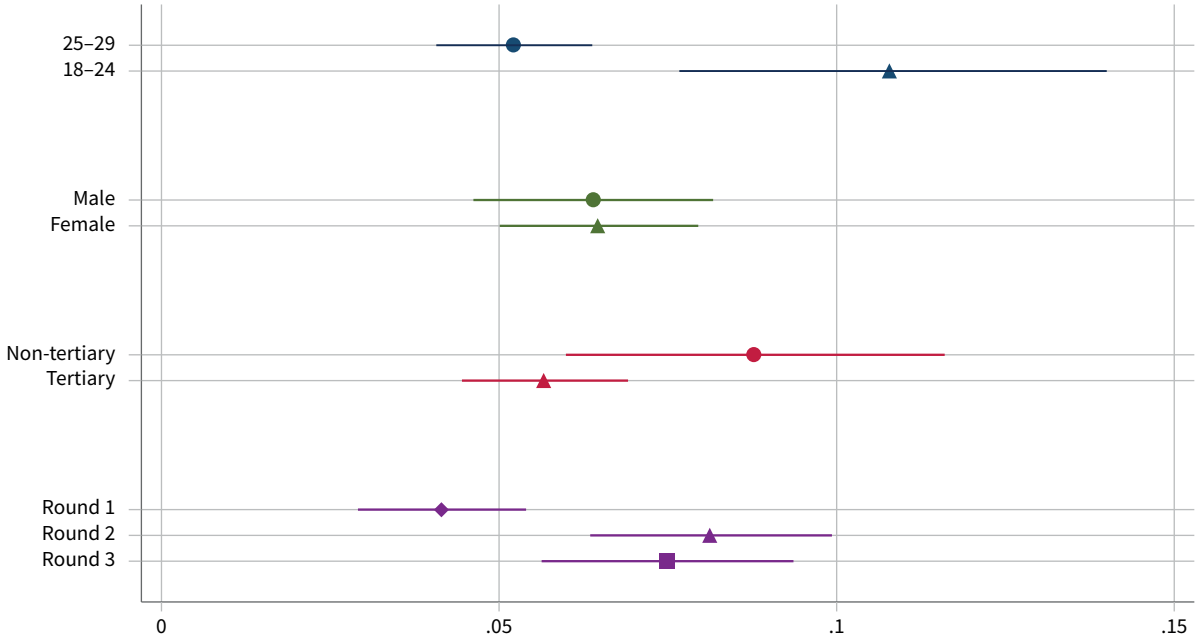
As Figures 11 and 12 show, the highest job loss among young people by country group was around 10% and observed in the Mediterranean countries (with the highest percentage being 30% in Greece, followed by 12.1% in Spain). This is followed by Ireland, with around 8% of young people experiencing job loss during the pandemic. The Eastern countries are positioned in the middle, with around 6% of young people experiencing job loss. In this group, Slovakia had the highest share, around 11%, followed by Poland and Croatia with around 9%. In both the Continental and Nordic groups, the share of young people who lost their job was below 4%.

Logistic regression models can identify the extent to which explanatory variables are significant in explaining job loss. They can also show individual specific effects among young people who participated in multiple survey rounds that cannot be observed using cross-sectional data.

The first explanatory variable added was age: young people were separated into those aged 18–24 and those aged 25–29. Then gender and tertiary education indicators were added. Finally, controls for different survey rounds were included, in order to assess changes over time, as well as controls for country groups. Figures 13 and 14 show the predicted probability of job loss for key groups included in the models and for country groups, respectively.

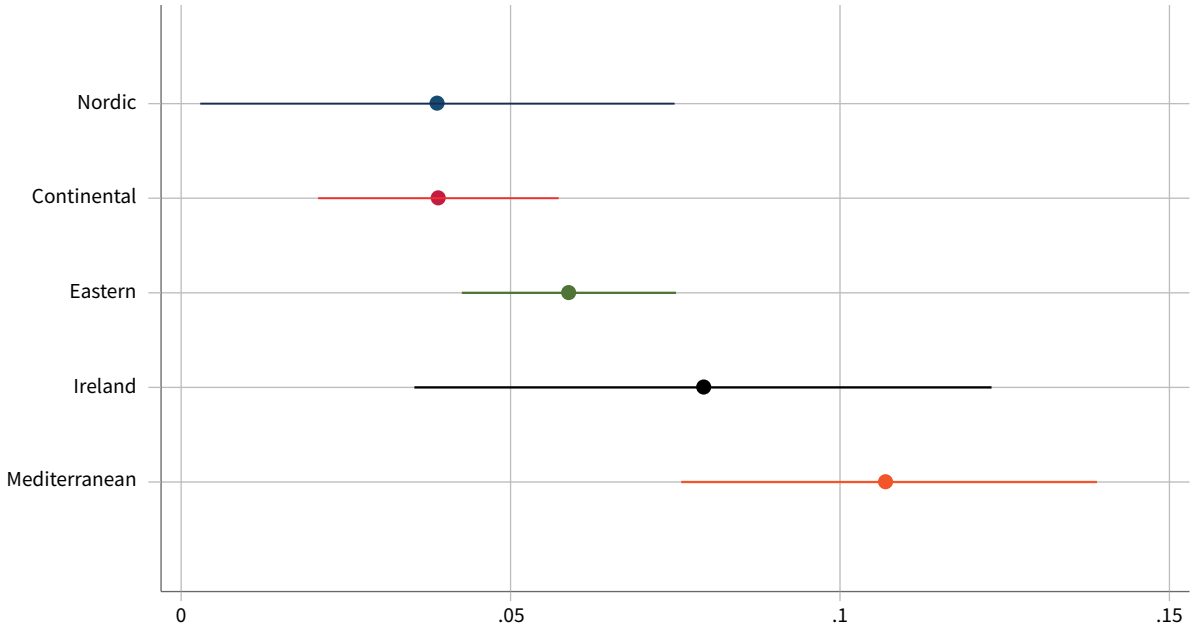
The younger age class (18–24) had a significantly higher probability of experiencing job loss during the pandemic than those aged 25–29. For both age groups, however, during the second and the third round, the probability of job loss was higher than in round 1. The country group differences shown in Figure 11 were confirmed by the model. However, the only finding in this regard that was statistically significant was that young people in the Mediterranean countries were more likely to experience job loss than people of the same age in the Nordic countries. There were no significant differences by gender or educational attainment.

Figure 13: Predicted probability of job loss among young people during the pandemic across time and sociodemographic groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 14: Predicted probability of job loss among young people during the pandemic across country groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Students transitioning to unemployment

The following analysis concentrates on students, looking at the proportion of young people who transitioned from student status into unemployment in comparison with those who stayed in education throughout the whole period or went from student status to employment. Of 692 students in the sample of young people in the month before the pandemic, around 12% transitioned to unemployment. Figures 15 and 16 show figures for young people transitioning from student status to unemployment by country group and Member State, respectively.

Around 15% of young people in Ireland passed from student status into unemployment, the highest percentage in the EU. Next were Greece and Spain, with around 13%, and then Italy, Lithuania and Romania, where around 7% of young students became unemployed. Essentially, these figures represent students graduating during 2020 who ended up going straight into unemployment.

Figure 15: Proportion of young people transitioning from education into unemployment during the pandemic by country group (%)

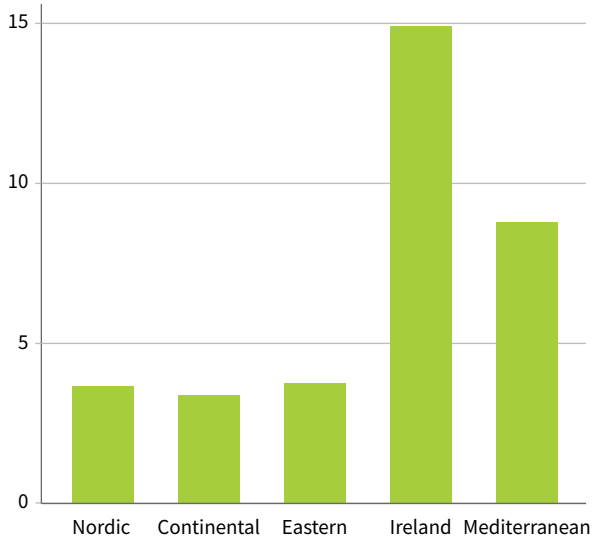
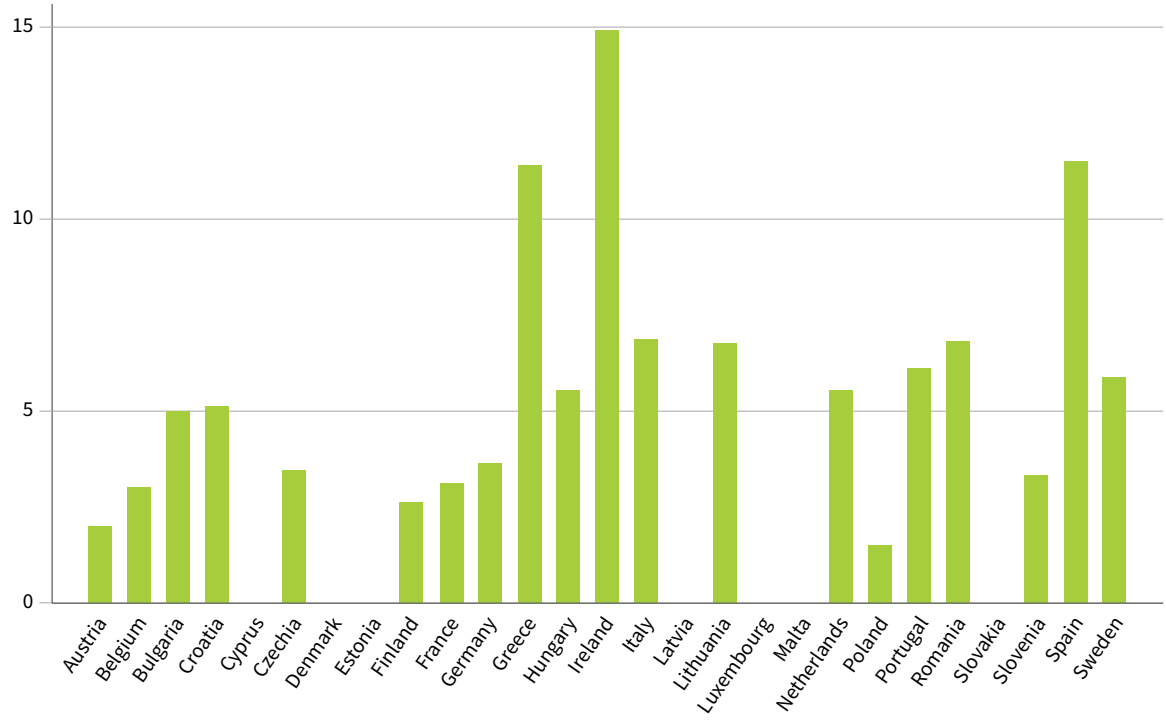


Figure 16: Proportion of young people transitioning from education into unemployment during the pandemic by Member State (%)

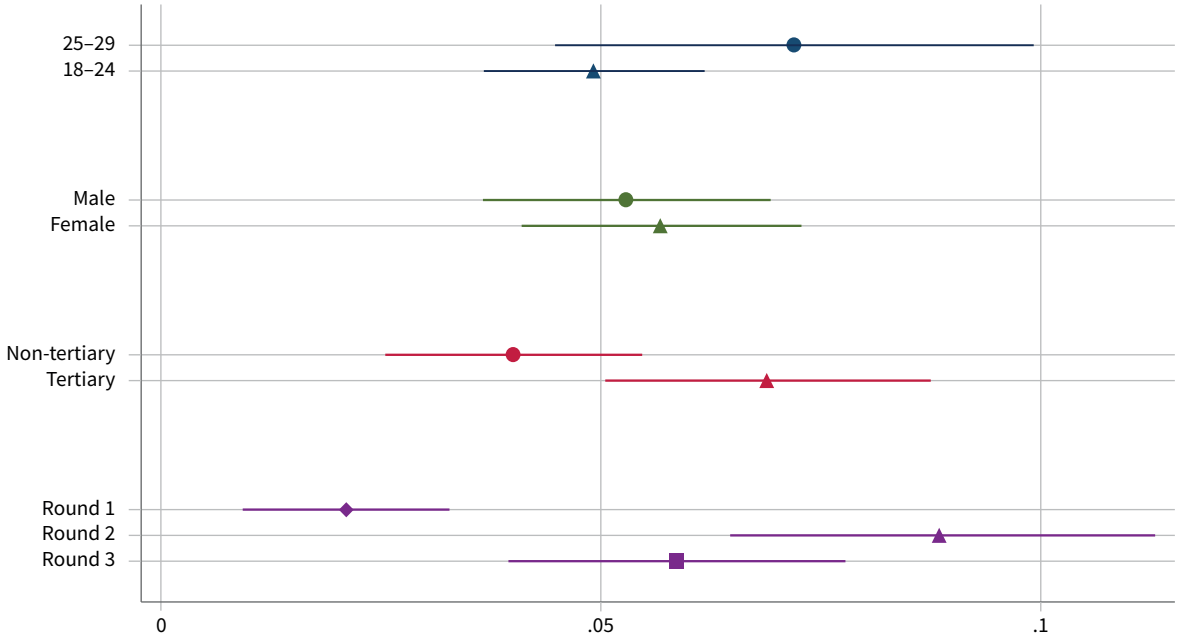


Note: *Insufficient data for Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovakia.*

Logistic regression was used to assess if there were any differences in the probability of passing from education to unemployment by age group, gender, education or country group, or across time. Figures 17 and 18 show the predicted probabilities calculated using the final model.

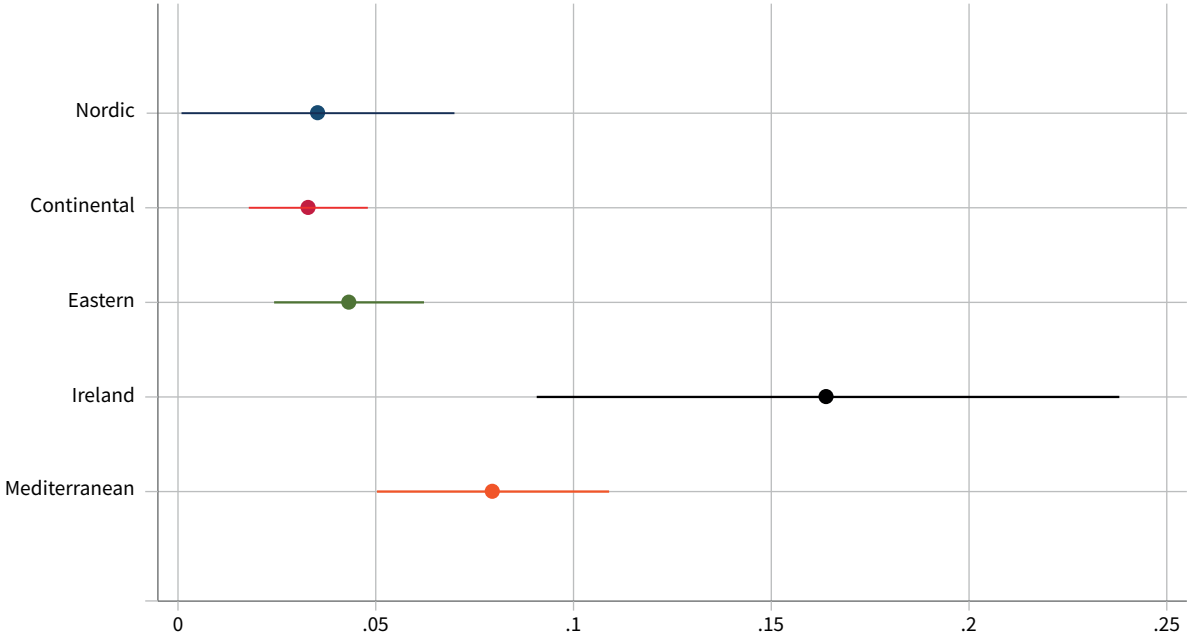
As Figure 17 shows, during the second and third rounds of the survey, the probability of becoming unemployed after being in education was higher than in round 1. Younger people (aged 18–24) were less likely to transition to unemployment from education, while people with tertiary education were more likely to do so

Figure 17: Predicted probability of transitioning to unemployment from student status during the pandemic across time and sociodemographic groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 18: Predicted probability of transitioning to unemployment from student status during the pandemic across country groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

than those with a lower level of education. However, this can be explained by the fact that younger people are probably more likely to still need to complete their education and therefore to retain student status, while people who already have a tertiary education are less likely to continue their education. Figure 18 shows that, compared with those in Nordic countries, young people in Ireland were statistically more likely to transition into unemployment from student status.

Overall transition to unemployment (workers and students)

The following analysis looks at workers and students together, capturing the overall transition into unemployment among young people. Of 1,748 young people considered in this analysis, around 12% transitioned into unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic, either from employment or from education. Figures 19–22 present the results for this combined variable.

Overall, transition to unemployment was most likely in Ireland and the Mediterranean countries; this was confirmed by the regression analysis (Figure 22). At country level, Greece had the highest proportion of young people who transitioned to unemployment, followed by Spain and Ireland.

Figure 19: Proportion of young people who became unemployed during the pandemic by country group (%)

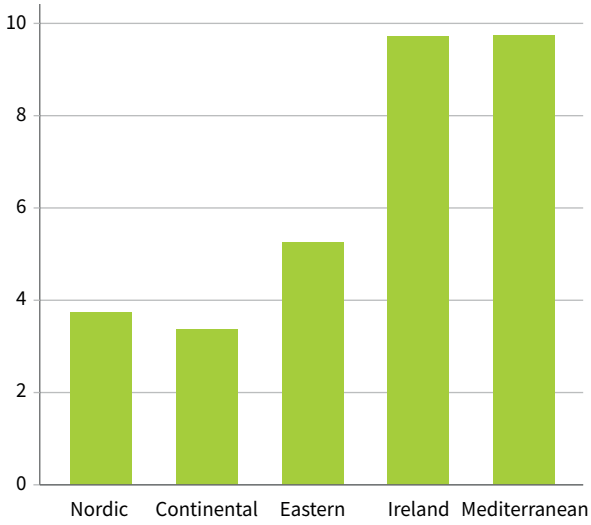
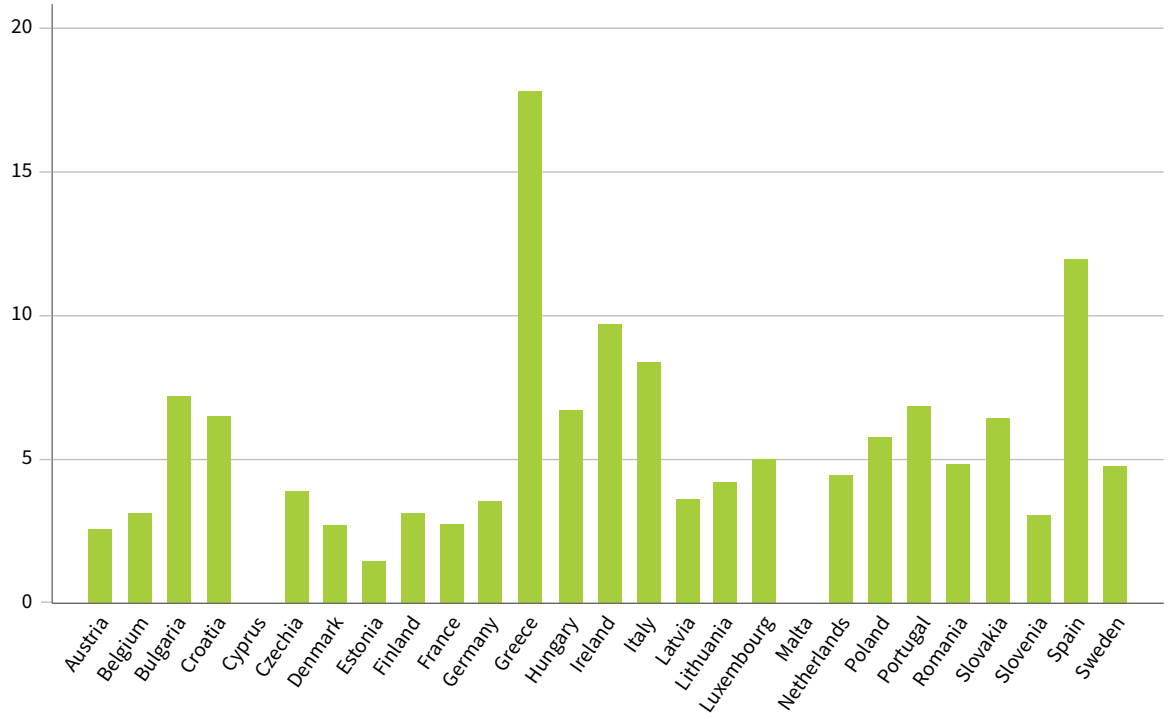


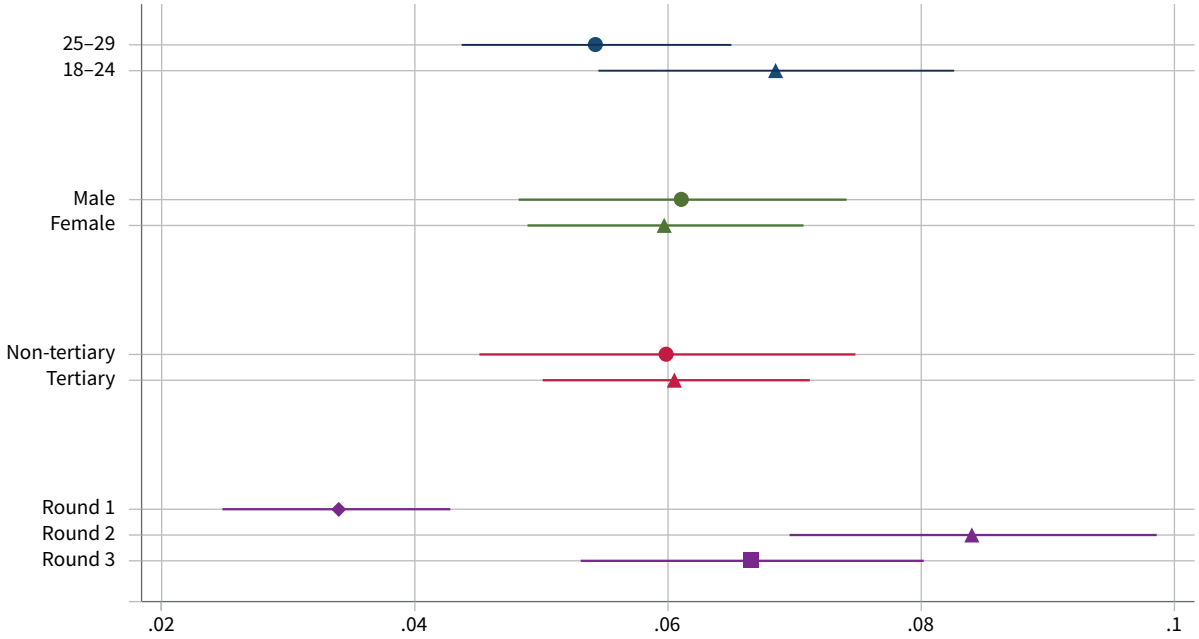
Figure 20: Proportion of young people who became unemployed during the pandemic by Member State (%)



Note: *Insufficient data for Cyprus and Malta.*

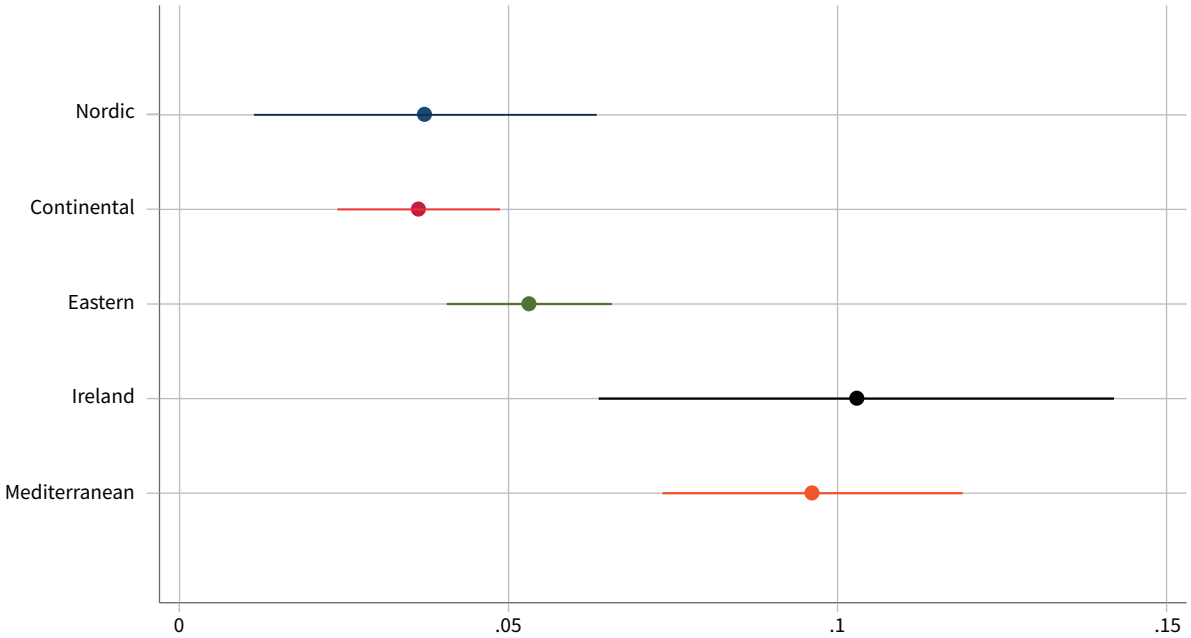
The regression analysis found that those aged 18–24 were more likely to transition to unemployment overall than those aged 25–29, and young people had the highest probability of becoming unemployed in summer 2020 (Figure 21). No significant differences were found by gender or educational level.

Figure 21: Predicted probability of becoming unemployed among young people during the pandemic across time and sociodemographic groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 22: Predicted probability of becoming unemployed among young people during the pandemic across country groups



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Online education: Participation and satisfaction levels

With regard to education, young people in many countries experienced difficulties in the shift to distance learning. While primary and secondary students returned to school when each wave of the pandemic passed, tertiary education moved almost completely online throughout the crisis.

The closure of schools and the shift to online learning may have increased inequalities between young people in vulnerable or low-income households and more privileged young people, because of differences in the amount of support with online learning that families are able give to young people and children (Nature, 2020b). Not all students had the right set-up, such as a personal computer and uninterrupted access to the internet, and this particularly affected students from disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in a digital divide. At particular risk of falling behind were young people who did not have a supportive family environment, as they missed out on formal and informal support with their studies associated with face-to-face interactions.

The unavailability of student accommodation in several universities had a significant impact on young people who had moved to or were about to move to a different town to attend university and did not have a supportive family or other space to remain in or move back to. In some cases, this increased the risk of homelessness (The PIE, 2020). Another group of young people in a particularly vulnerable situation were those finishing or about to finish their studies, who were likely to struggle to access the labour market.

Young people also missed out on opportunities for social interaction usually available in colleges and universities, contributing to mental health problems and feelings of social exclusion.

Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey included questions on experiences with online education in round 2, conducted in June and July 2020. Only 40% of students living in Europe said that they were satisfied with online education during the pandemic (answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree' to the statement 'I am satisfied with the quality of online education' measured on a five-point Likert scale). Meanwhile, only 38% of students agreed that online education during the pandemic had been a positive experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that less than half (42%) of students said they would like more online education when the pandemic is over.

However, there are indications that distance learning is here to stay: several universities are planning to continue online education in the long term. The line between traditional and distance education has been becoming more blurred for several decades, and universities have made use of the pandemic to push through digital transformation and new methods of delivery and assessment (Lockee, 2021).

This can be successful only if inequality in access to equipment, housing and the home environment is addressed. In Eurofound's survey, about four-fifths (79%) of students said they already had, or had obtained, sufficient equipment to engage in online education at home. Among students with difficulties making ends meet, this figure was 74%, compared with 81% among those with no such difficulties. Those living with their parents were also less likely to have the right equipment (77%) than students who lived independently (82%).

Financial situation and support

Insecurity

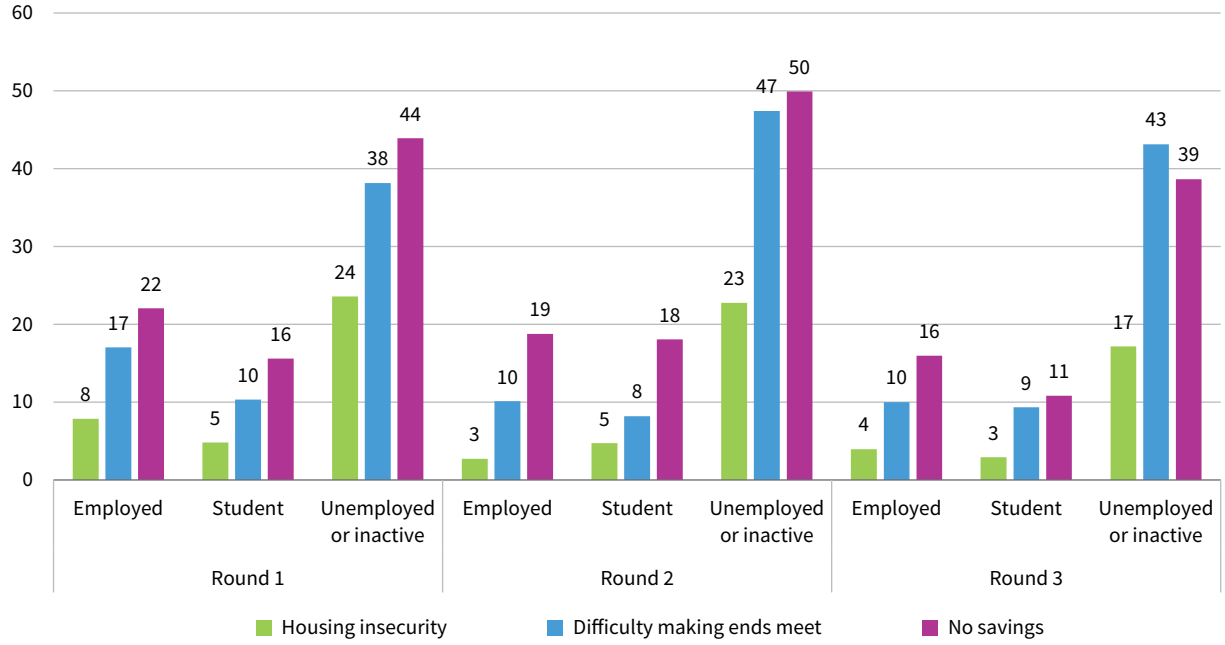
Because they lost access to jobs, education and training, it could be expected that young people would be among those experiencing greater financial difficulties during the pandemic. As most young people do not have secure housing (apart from the parental home), a stable job and a comfortable income, they were more likely to be affected by insecurity about their future.

This section analyses young people's financial situation throughout the pandemic using three main indicators of financial insecurity: difficulty makings end meet (difficult or very difficult), number of months one could live off one's savings (no savings) and housing insecurity owing to finances (very likely or likely to have to leave current accommodation within three months because of inability to afford it).

First, it is important to note that over half of the young people in the sample lived with their parents: 51% in round 2 and 61% in round 3 (the question was not asked in round 1). The proportion living with their parents was highest among students (66% in round 2, 75% in round 3), while among unemployed or other inactive youth it was still over half (55% in round 2, 59% in round 3). While employed young people were less likely to live with their parents, the proportion was still considerable (33% in round 2, 42% in round 3).

Figure 23 shows the proportions of young people in the above-mentioned types of financial difficulties in the three rounds of the e-survey by employment status. For all three indicators, the highest overall proportion was measured in round 2 of the survey. Most employed young people live in households with at least some savings, as do students (probably because most students live with their parents, as mentioned above). On the other hand, among young people not in education or work, the proportion with no savings was over one-third in round 3, with 43% having difficulty making ends meet.

Figure 23: Proportions of young people experiencing financial insecurity during the pandemic by employment status (%)



It is worth noting that in the latest round of the survey, 15% of unemployed or inactive young people had all three types of financial insecurity, compared with 7% of unemployed/inactive people over 30.

Living with their parents provided a source of financial security for many young people throughout the pandemic. In the latest survey round, only 3% of 18- to 29-year-olds living with their parents had experienced housing insecurity, compared with 9% of those living away from home, and only 13% said that they had difficulty making ends meet, compared with 21% of those living outside the parental home. There was less difference in terms of the availability of household savings as reported by young respondents (29% and 28%, respectively, for those living with their parents and those living away from home).

Financial support

Not all young people can rely on their families for financial security. In all EU countries, some kind of income support was given to those who lost their job during the pandemic, either temporarily or permanently. Since young people were at higher risk of job loss, it can be expected that they were also more likely to avail themselves of public financial support.

In the second two survey rounds, respondents were asked whether they had requested any of the following types of financial support from public authorities since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic:[8]

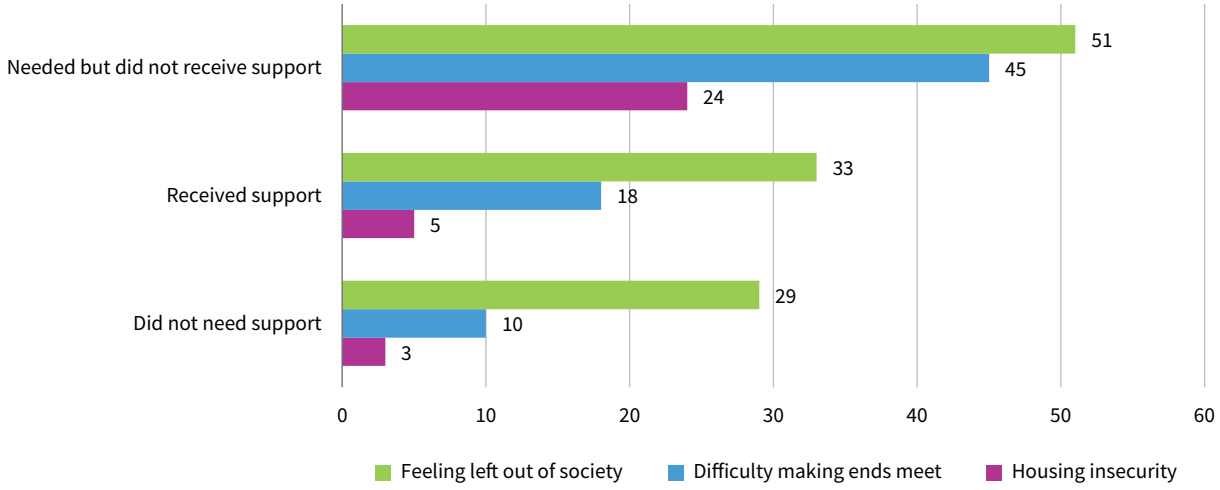
- deferral, reduction or cancellation of tax, bill, mortgage, loan or debt payments
- unemployment benefit
- wage support
- paid sick leave or paid care leave
- other support from public services to help with expenses

In summer 2020, around one-quarter of young respondents (26%) said that they had requested at least one of these types of support, which was the same proportion as that measured among older people. However, by spring 2021 the proportion of those aged 18–29 who had asked for support had increased to one-third (33%), while among those aged 30 or over only 27% had asked for support.

A large proportion of young people, then, had asked for financial support by spring 2021; however, not all of them had actually received some kind of support. Only 17% of all young people said that they had received some kind of support by summer 2020 (20% of those aged 30+), increasing to one-quarter of young people (25%) in round 3 (21% of those aged 30+).

8 In addition, questions about financial support were asked of self-employed respondents about their businesses; however, their responses are not included in the analysis provided here.

Figure 24: Proportions of young people experiencing difficulties by need for/availability of financial support, spring 2021 (%)



Meanwhile, 11% of those who had asked for support by spring 2021 said that they had not received any of the types of support they had requested (either because they had been refused or because they were still waiting). Those who needed but did not receive financial support were more likely to have difficulty making ends meet, experience housing insecurity or feel socially excluded (Figure 24).

Respondents were also asked whether they had received any form of support from family and friends, or from charities or other non-governmental organisations. These types of informal support seem to have at least partially filled gaps in formal financial support: young people who said that they had requested financial support from public authorities were more likely to have asked for informal support as well, particularly those who had not (yet) received any formal support. In rounds 2 and 3 of the survey, half of the latter group of young people had received informal support (Table 6) (this question was not asked in round 1). People aged 30 or over, regardless of whether they had asked for or received formal support, were less likely to either ask for or receive informal support, reflecting the greater reliance of young people on their families during their years of transitioning to adulthood.

Well-being and mental well-being

As described in the previous chapter, young people have been one of the groups most severely affected by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of employment and financial difficulties. In addition to experiencing higher unemployment and worsening economic conditions, as a result of the non-pharmaceutical interventions put in place by governments they have also suffered from limited mobility and physical activity, the closure of face-to-face educational services and the cancellation of social events, resulting in social isolation. Many have experienced emotional difficulties in managing their situation in lockdown. They have also reported experiencing boring routines, stress and compulsive use of smartphones, among other issues (Alberich et al, 2020).

This has resulted in major consequences such as a general sense of insecurity, lower emotional well-being and negative feelings such as depression and anxiety, in some cases leading to suicidal thoughts (Wise, 2020).

Table 6: Proportions of young people who asked for and who received informal support by need for/availability of formal support (%)

	Asked for informal support		Received informal support	
	Summer 2020	Spring 2021	Summer 2020	Spring 2021
Did not need formal support	23	25	22	23
Received formal support	36	45	33	42
Needed but did not receive formal support	62	70	50	50

Young people also reported having a lack of faith in the future and a lack of motivation to start working; they expressed concerns regarding the health of relatives, reduced time spent on learning activities and much less time spent socialising with friends.

Young people already experiencing mental health issues before the pandemic and those from disadvantaged groups were particularly exposed to such negative consequences. For instance, those already deemed most at risk grew more disconnected from education, youth services and support, while many were forced to remain indoors almost all the time, often in overcrowded living spaces.

Forced family cohabitation resulted in a loss of independence, which was particularly hard for young people with unsupportive families. LGBTIQ[9] young people were at higher risk of mental health problems during the pandemic, especially where the family climate was negative (Gato et al, 2020); some had to suppress their identity on returning home.

Research conducted at national level since the beginning of the pandemic has found an increase in mental health issues among young people (Box 2).

Issues relating to increasing inequalities raised by the pandemic also apply to mental health (Singh et al, 2020), which makes it necessary to consider the link between social inequality and mental well-being, as well as the mechanisms that produce inequalities among young people. This section presents evidence of changes in the aspects of young people's well-being that have been most negatively affected by the pandemic: perceived social exclusion, life satisfaction and mental well-being.

Box 2: Consequences of the pandemic on the mental well-being of young people – evidence from national surveys

Czechia: A representative survey on mental health in the pandemic conducted by the Center for Economic Research and Graduate Education – Economics Institute (2,500 respondents, data collected every two weeks between March and June 2020) revealed that young people aged 18–24 and women with children comprised the most anxious and depressed groups in society. In the first months of the pandemic, 20% of respondents stated that they had suffered from impaired mental health (at least moderate depression or anxiety). This was a more than threefold increase on the figure prior to the pandemic (6%). This proportion reached as high as 36% for young people and 37% for women with children (Bartoš et al, 2020).

France: According to CoviPrev (a national survey conducted by Public Health France that interviews online, at short intervals, independent samples of 2,000 people over the age of 18), 21% of those questioned said that they were in a depressed state in November 2020 (compared with 10% in September). The proportion of adults suffering from depression was significantly higher than average among those reporting a very difficult financial situation (35%), those with a history of psychological disorders (30%), economically inactive people (28%), those in education (30%) and young people (29% among 18- to 24-year-olds, 25% among 25- to 34-year-olds). Moreover, a study conducted internally by the University of Lille found that half of the students at the university were suffering from increased or significant anxiety, and 30% to 40% reported feelings of distress.

Germany: A representative online survey conducted among 1,586 families with 7- to 17-year-old children and adolescents between 26 May and 10 June 2020 found that one in every two children aged between 11 and 17 had suffered mentally because of reduced social contact. Children with low socioeconomic status, a migrant background or limited living space were affected significantly more. Among children and teenagers, 29% reported weaker ties with friends (Ravens-Sieberer et al, 2021).

Greece: A survey conducted by Sentio Solutions in October and November 2020 (ekathimerini.com, 2020) among young people in Greece found that more than 60% of respondents believed that their mental health had worsened since the pandemic started. Increased stress, monotony, pessimism and lack of motivation were the negative emotions that participants were most likely to experience. Young people were concerned about lack of social interaction and felt deprived of their youth and career opportunities. Another issue was performance at school or university. Most respondents said that they preferred traditional teaching in the classroom over distance learning, and 59% of them thought that the situation had negatively affected their academic performance. With regard to worries about the coronavirus, about 19% stated that they considered the

9 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, intersex and queer.

probability of getting ill themselves to be small, while 34% believed it was probable or very probable that they would become ill. What worried most young people was that a family member might become ill (46%). Concerning the pandemic's effects on young people's social lives, 68% said that they had reduced their social interactions, while 10% stated that nothing had changed in their social life. Finally, 57% of young people considered that psychological support services were difficult to access.

Ireland: A survey conducted by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs (since renamed the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth) identified difficulties reported by young people, including negative effects on health and well-being, especially among some marginalised groups (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020). The most common negative effects related to the mental health of respondents (overthinking, concern, worry, anxiety, depression and a sense of hopelessness). Over 30% of young people missed their friends. Many had concerns about their education. Other challenges included cabin fever, isolation/loneliness, missing relatives, boredom/lack of motivation and routine, employment and financial problems, loss of social life, lack of sport, social distancing, reduction in mental health/addiction services and other services, cancellation of summer plans and negative effects of media consumption.

Lithuania: A representative survey of the Lithuanian population aged 18–74 conducted by the Centre for Human Studies and Baltijos Tyrimai in June 2020 found that the lockdown had significantly reduced the emotional well-being of young people. People aged 18–29 were the group most affected emotionally by the pandemic. Among young people, 52.8% were experiencing pandemic distress at the beginning of June 2020, while the share of such people in the 30–49 age group was 45.9% and that in the 50–74 age group was 25.8% (LRT.lt, 2020).

Poland: Some surveys among students in higher education have found that they were at higher risk of mental health issues, including depression and increased consumption of stimulants (Gambin et al, 2020; Nauka w Polsce, 2020; Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences, 2020).

Source: *Authors, based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

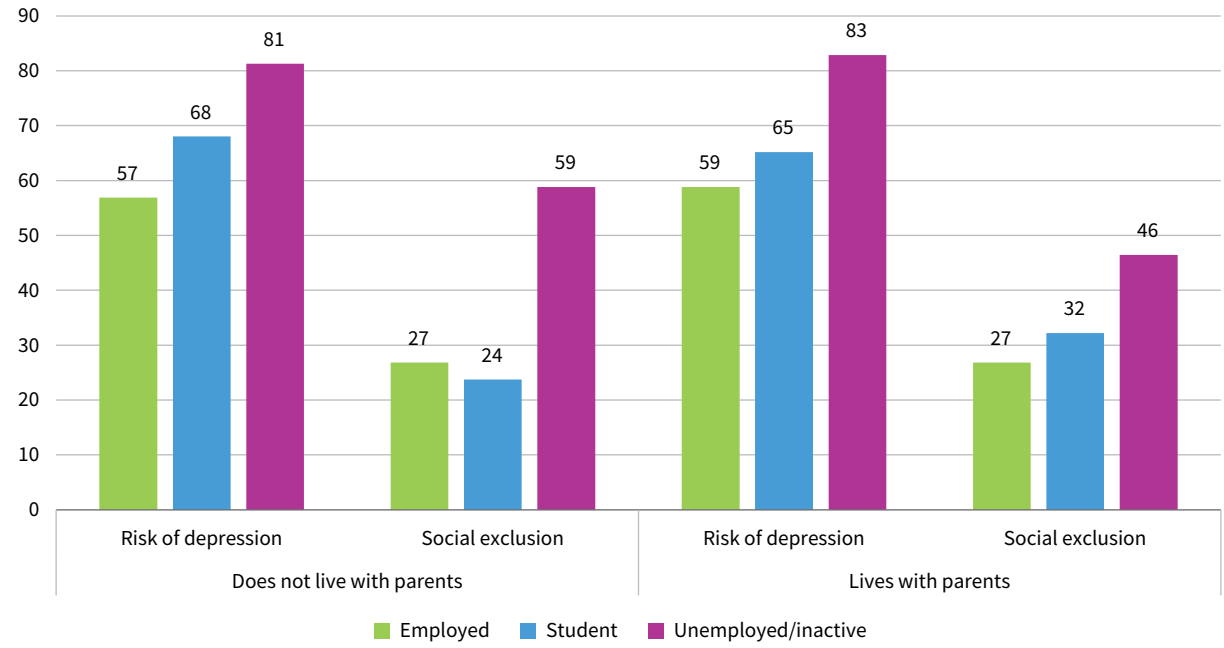
Perceived social exclusion

As educational institutions and many workplaces employing young people closed, while social events were cancelled and restrictions were introduced on meeting other people in person, it can be expected that perceived social exclusion increased, particularly for young people who experienced temporary or permanent job loss and those who had to move away from their usual environment, which may have resulted in feelings of being left out and falling behind others. Social exclusion was measured in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey using a single item, a question asking respondents the extent to which they agreed with the statement 'I feel excluded from society'. The proportion of those who agreed with this statement was highest among unemployed young people (50% in spring 2021, having increased from 42% in summer 2020 when this question was first asked); it was 29% among students (up from 20%) and 27% among young workers (up from 16%).

While living with their parents provided financial security for some young people during the pandemic, on average there was no statistically significant difference in the risk of depression and feeling socially excluded between young people who had moved out and those who were living with their parents.

However, young people who were unemployed or inactive were less likely to feel excluded from society if they lived with their parents in spring 2021. For students, this was the opposite, with those living away from their parents feeling less excluded, while no significant difference was found for working young people. With regard to risk of depression, the differences were less pronounced (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Proportions of young people aged 18–29 at risk of depression and feeling socially excluded by employment status and living situation, spring 2021 (%)



Life satisfaction

Young people are usually more satisfied with their lives in general than older groups. Average life satisfaction across the EU is usually around 7.0, measured on a scale from 1 to 10. Apart from age, life satisfaction is closely related to income, health, employment status and relationship status (Eurofound, 2017). Given the financial insecurity, job loss and insecurity, and loss of social connections experienced by young people, it can be expected that the pandemic reduced their overall life satisfaction.

The question on life satisfaction asks for an evaluation of the respondent's life overall, rather than measuring momentary happiness. In the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey it was measured on a scale of 1–10, where 1 is very dissatisfied and 10 is very satisfied. The question asked was 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life these days?'

Average life satisfaction among young people as measured by the e-survey is significantly below that measured in other, representative social surveys before the pandemic. In the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) 2016, mean life satisfaction among young people was 7.4. In the spring 2021 round of the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, young people had an average life satisfaction of 6.3.[10]

The following analysis examines the life satisfaction of young people aged 18–29 throughout the pandemic and the factors that affected it, using the panel data from the e-survey (that is, data for young people who participated in multiple survey rounds). First, Table 7 provides descriptive statistics on young people's life satisfaction, looking at key possible explanatory variables.

10 This descriptive analysis refers only to panel data.

Table 7 shows important differences in life satisfaction within the group of young people. Young women on average had higher life satisfaction than men. Compared with students and those in employment, those who were unemployed had significantly lower levels of life satisfaction. Scores were higher among those with tertiary education, and those living with a partner, whereas having young children seems to have lowered the level of satisfaction, although this difference is not statistically significant. There is a positive period effect in the second round of the survey: life satisfaction was higher during summer 2020 when the first wave of the pandemic had subsided. The data also show differences by country group. Young people from Nordic countries reported the highest levels of life satisfaction, with an average above 7 points. Continental, Eastern and Mediterranean countries follow, and young people in Ireland reported on average the lowest life satisfaction.

Table 7: Life satisfaction among young people during the pandemic (score out of 10)

		Mean life satisfaction score
Gender	Female	6.6
	Male	6.4
Employment status	Employed	6.8
	Unemployed	4.9
	Students	6.5
Educational level	Tertiary	6.7
	Non-tertiary	6.2
Partner present	Yes	7.0
	No	6.3
Children aged 0–11	Yes	6.3
	No	6.6
Survey round	1	6.4
	2	6.9
	3	6.3
Country group	Nordic	7.3
	Continental	6.9
	Eastern	6.6
	Ireland	5.7
	Mediterranean	6.1

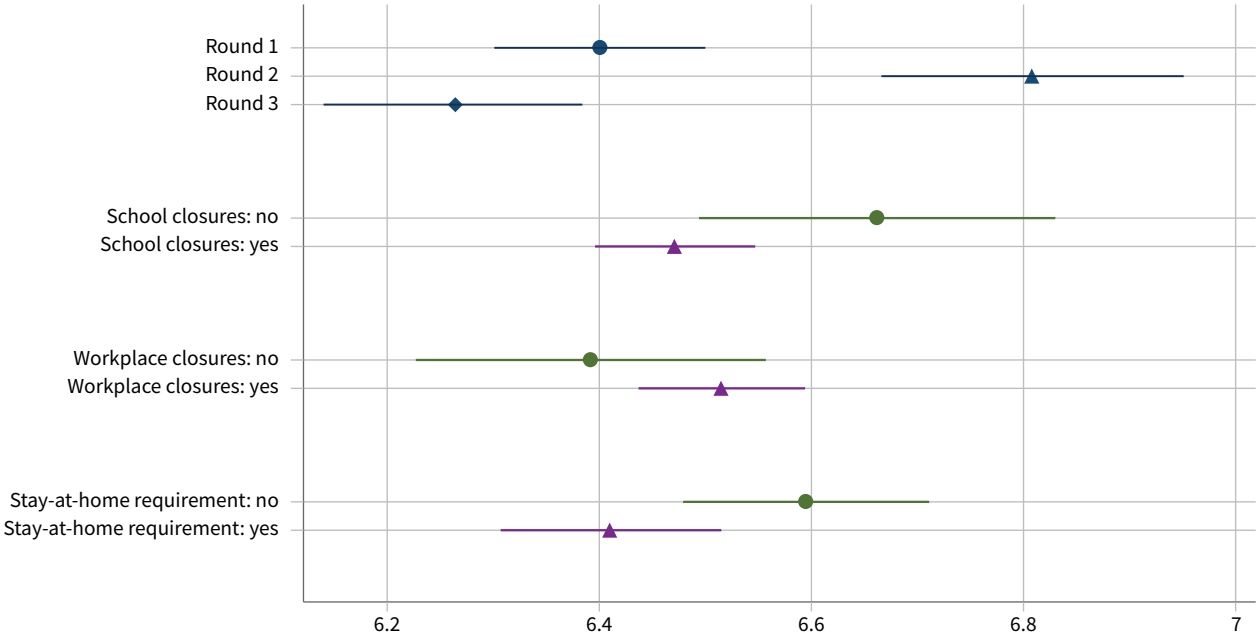
Although descriptive statistics give a useful overview of key groups and the differences between them, firm conclusions cannot be drawn unless other variables are controlled for. Many of the explanatory variables may be related to one another, and therefore the effect of one variable can change once the others are accounted for. Therefore, a regression analysis was carried out step by step, by adding explanatory variables one by one in order to understand the drivers behind life satisfaction and assess the changes.

Figures 26 to 28 present predicted levels of life satisfaction from the final model, which included all explanatory variables.

Figure 26 shows the pattern in levels of life satisfaction across time and in relation to the presence (or not) of restrictive measures, controlling for all other explanatory variables included in the analysis. Compared with spring 2020 (round 1), life satisfaction had improved considerably by July (round 2). The effect is equal to +0.392 and is significant at the 1% level. Again, the results showed great improvements in summer 2020, as many of the restrictions had been lifted and there was hope that the pandemic might soon be at an end. In February to March 2021 (round 3), however, the overall level of life satisfaction was even lower than that first measured in April 2020. The effect amounts to -0.138 and is significant at the 5% level. Clearly, the third wave of the pandemic was taking its toll on young people. This effect is strongest when restrictive measures are controlled for. As can be seen from Figure 26, they also matter for life satisfaction. School closures (universities included) and stay-at-home requirements both drove down life satisfaction, by -0.19 (5% significance level) and -0.17 (10% significance level), respectively. Workplace closures, on the other hand, had a positive but insignificant effect on young people's life satisfaction.

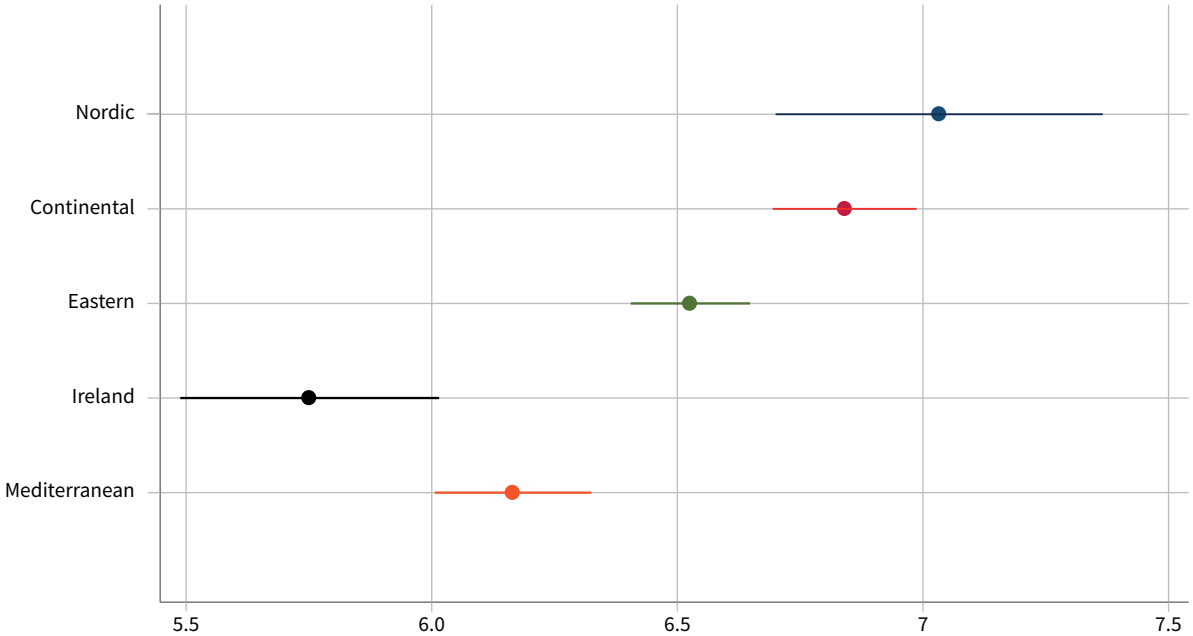
Figure 27 shows differences by country group. The findings suggest that young people in all other country groups reported lower levels of life satisfaction than those in the Nordic countries. The difference is smallest compared with the Continental group, and it is not significant once restrictive measures are controlled for. For the other three country groups, the negative difference is stable, and the largest difference is found between Ireland and the Nordic group (-1.25, 1% significance level), followed by the Mediterranean countries (-0.99, 1% significance level) and finally the Eastern countries (-0.53, 1% significance level).

Figure 26: Predicted levels of life satisfaction among young people during the pandemic in relation to restrictive measures and across time (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

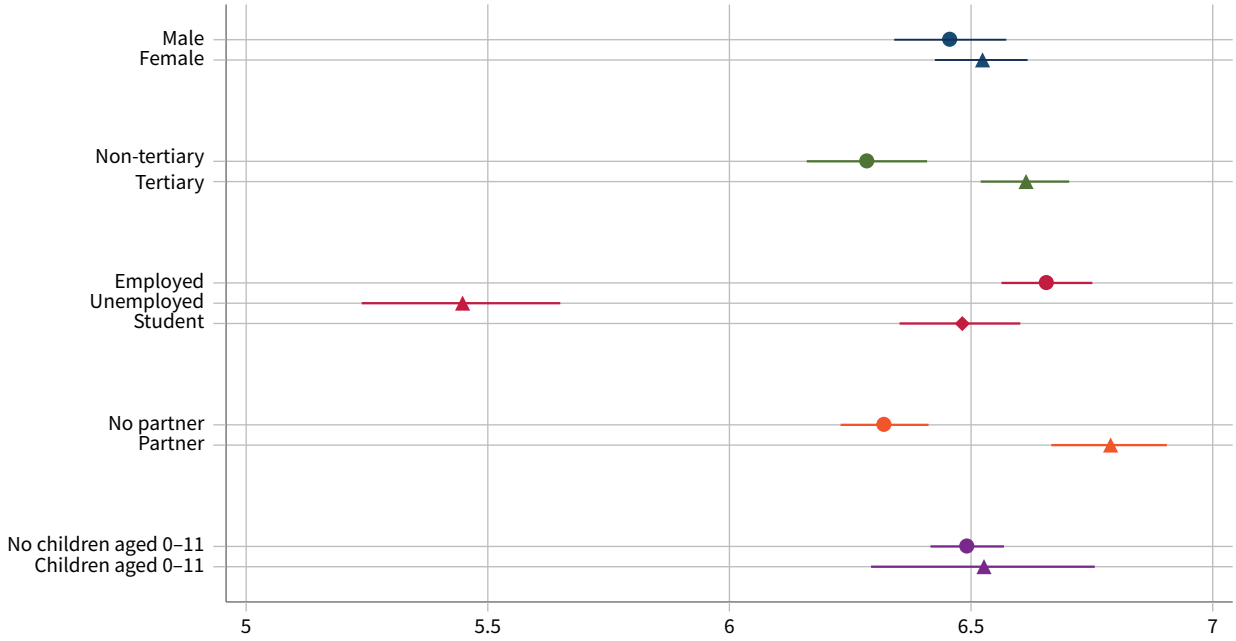
Figure 27: Predicted levels of life satisfaction among young people during the pandemic across country groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 28 shows life satisfaction across sociodemographic groups. Young women generally reported higher life satisfaction than young men, although the difference weakens once the models also control for living arrangements: people living with their partner reported higher satisfaction than those who do not. Moreover, the gender difference disappears entirely once control variables for country differences are added. This implies that household composition and country characteristics play a more significant role than gender in explaining differences in life satisfaction among young people.

Figure 28: Predicted levels of life satisfaction among young people during the pandemic across sociodemographic groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Compared with young people in employment, both students and those who were unemployed reported lower life satisfaction. However, the effect is much larger for unemployed people (-1.15, 1% significance level) and remains unaltered by including any other characteristics captured by the set of explanatory variables. For students, the effect becomes weaker as other explanatory variables are included, and it loses its significance (significant at the 10% level only). Young people with higher education reported higher life satisfaction, and this effect persists when other variables are included (+0.29, 1% significance level). Having a partner improves life satisfaction by about 0.5 points (1% significance level), while having young children has no significant effect on life satisfaction, which is in contrast to the simple descriptive statistics reported in Table 7.

Mental well-being

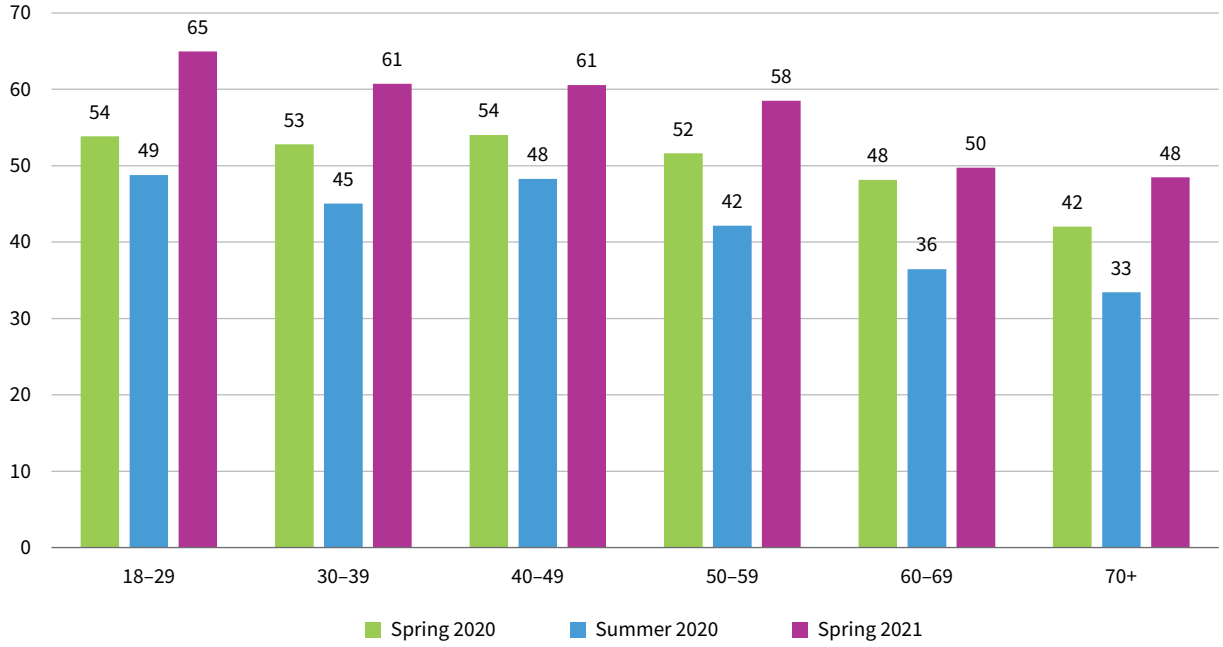
As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the pandemic had a noticeably disproportionate impact on young people's mental well-being compared with that of older groups. Concern about youth mental well-being was regularly raised in public discourse in all EU countries, and it was one of the main driving forces, other than economic considerations, behind efforts to reopen workplaces and, in particular, educational institutions and ease restrictions relatively quickly (France 24, 2021).

In the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, mental well-being was measured using the WHO-5 mental well-being index. It is based on frequency of positive feelings experienced over the previous two weeks. In this report, the WHO-5 score is measured on a scale of 0–25,[11] where a score of 13 or below indicates a risk of depression. The average proportion of people in the EU at risk of depression was 22% in 2016 (Eurofound, 2017).

The WHO-5 score is usually higher for young people aged 18–29 than for older groups. While in the first two rounds of the e-survey young and middle-aged groups had comparatively similar average rates of risk of depression, by spring 2021 young people aged 18–29 stood out in this regard, with risk of depression affecting nearly two-thirds (65%) of them. Notably, the average proportion of people at risk of depression had increased across all age groups since summer 2020 (Figure 29).

11 In the WHO's original method of scoring, the total 'raw' score, which can range between 0 and 25, is multiplied by 4 to get a value on a 0–100 scale. A score of 50 or below indicates a risk of depression (Child Outcomes Research Consortium, undated).

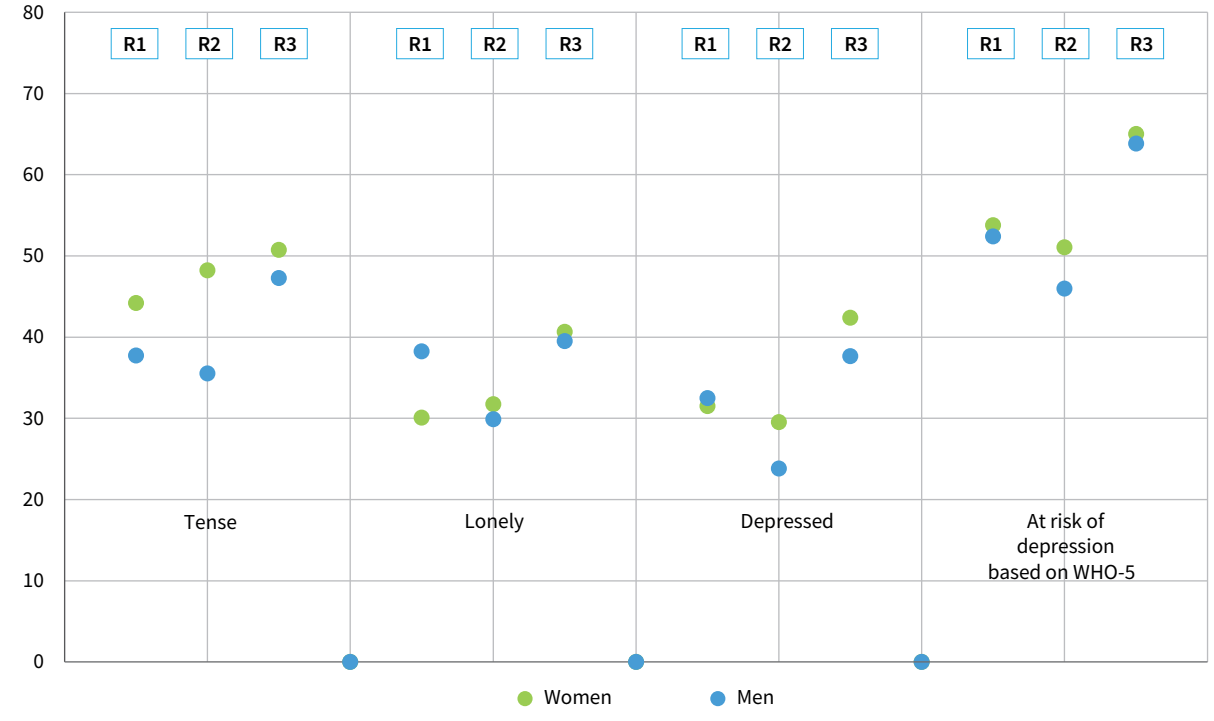
Figure 29: Proportions of people at risk of depression during the pandemic, based on WHO-5 mental well-being score, by age group (%)



Among both young people and those aged 30 or over, women were more likely to experience negative feelings – such as feeling tense, lonely, downhearted or depressed – and were more often at risk of depression based on their frequency of positive feelings. For this reason, young women were among the groups with the lowest mental well-being scores during the pandemic, and their frequency of negative feelings increased on average as the pandemic progressed.

As shown in Figure 30, the largest gender differences can be seen in the proportions feeling tense, particularly in the second round (summer 2020), when this feeling was less frequent for young men, while it did not

Figure 30: Feeling tense, lonely or depressed 'all or most of the time', by gender and survey round (%)



Note: *R1, R2, R3 refer to rounds 1, 2 and 3 of the survey.*
Source: Living, working and COVID-19 *e-survey*

improve for young women. By spring 2021, more than half of young women had felt tense all or most of the time over the previous two weeks. While loneliness was more common among young men early in the pandemic, this gap disappeared in later survey rounds.

Poor mental health in young people, particularly young women, can have an impact on their access to the labour market. Risk of depression was particularly high among unemployed/inactive young people, increasing from 62% in the first round to 66% in the second and reaching 83% in the third, while those in employment were the least likely to be at risk (56% in the latest survey) and students were in between (65%). All of these proportions are particularly high compared with those usually found in social surveys conducted before the pandemic, such as the EQLS (Eurofound, 2017).

The following analysis concentrates on mental well-being among those young people in the survey who participated in multiple rounds and aims to establish the connection between mental well-being and restrictive measures during the pandemic.

First, Table 8 provides descriptive statistics on mental well-being, looking at key possible explanatory variables. During the pandemic, average levels of mental well-being were low, below the threshold of 13, which indicates a risk of depression. In contrast with the figures for life satisfaction, women on average reported lower levels of mental well-being than men, although the difference is not statistically significant. All other differences by group are in line with the results for life satisfaction. The lowest levels of mental well-being on average are experienced by unemployed young people, while those in employment report higher levels than students. There is also a positive association between level of education and reported level of mental well-being. Household composition again plays a significant role. Among young people, having a partner and not having young children protects against poor mental well-being. Compared with spring 2020 (round 1), the average WHO-5 score increased considerably during the summer of the same year (round 2). However, in the last round (February and March 2021) the levels were even lower than in the first round. There are considerable differences by country group, too. Young people from Nordic countries on average reported the highest levels of mental well-being, at around 14.5, putting them above the depression risk threshold. All other country groups fell below this cut-off point. Closest to the Nordic group are the Eastern countries, then Continental group and the Mediterranean countries, and finally Ireland.

The following paragraphs describe the results of a regression analysis and report effects of the variables and changes in them across models. Figures 31 to 33 present the predicted mental well-being scores from the final model.

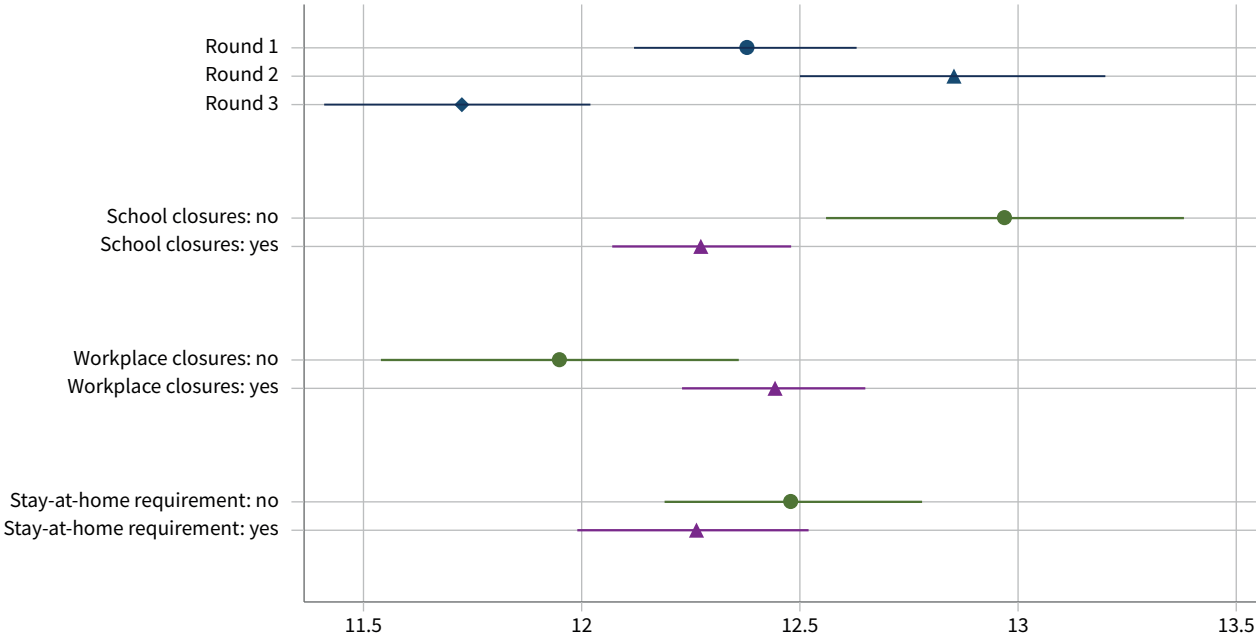
Table 8: Mental well-being among young people during the pandemic (score out of 25)

		Mean WHO-5 score
Gender	Female	12.3
	Male	12.5
Employment status	Employed	12.8
	Unemployed	10.1
	Students	12.2
Educational level	Tertiary	12.7
	Non-tertiary	11.9
Partner present	Yes	13.0
	No	12.0
Children aged 0–11	Yes	11.5
	No	12.4
Survey round	1	12.3
	2	12.9
	3	11.8
Country group	Nordic	14.5
	Continental	12.5
	Eastern	12.6
	Ireland	11.0
	Mediterranean	11.9

Note: *These data refer to panel respondents in the survey.*

Figure 31 shows predicted levels of mental well-being in relation to restrictive measures and across survey rounds. Like the life satisfaction score, the WHO-5 score improved between April 2020 and July of the same year (+0.48, 5% significance level) but had deteriorated quite dramatically when the respondents were interviewed again in February 2021. Note that reported mental well-being was lower in February 2021 than in April 2020 (-0.67, 1% significance level). These effects are both quite unaffected by the inclusion of other variables, except restrictive measures; when these variables are introduced, the positive effect in round 2 becomes smaller and loses its significance. This is because mental well-being among young people was also affected by restrictions. School closures had a relatively strong negative impact of -0.69, significant at the 1% level. Stay-at-home requirements also had a negative effect on mental well-being (-0.2), but it is not statistically significant. However, workplace closures saw a marked improvement in young adults' mental well-being, with an effect of +0.51, significant at the 5% level.

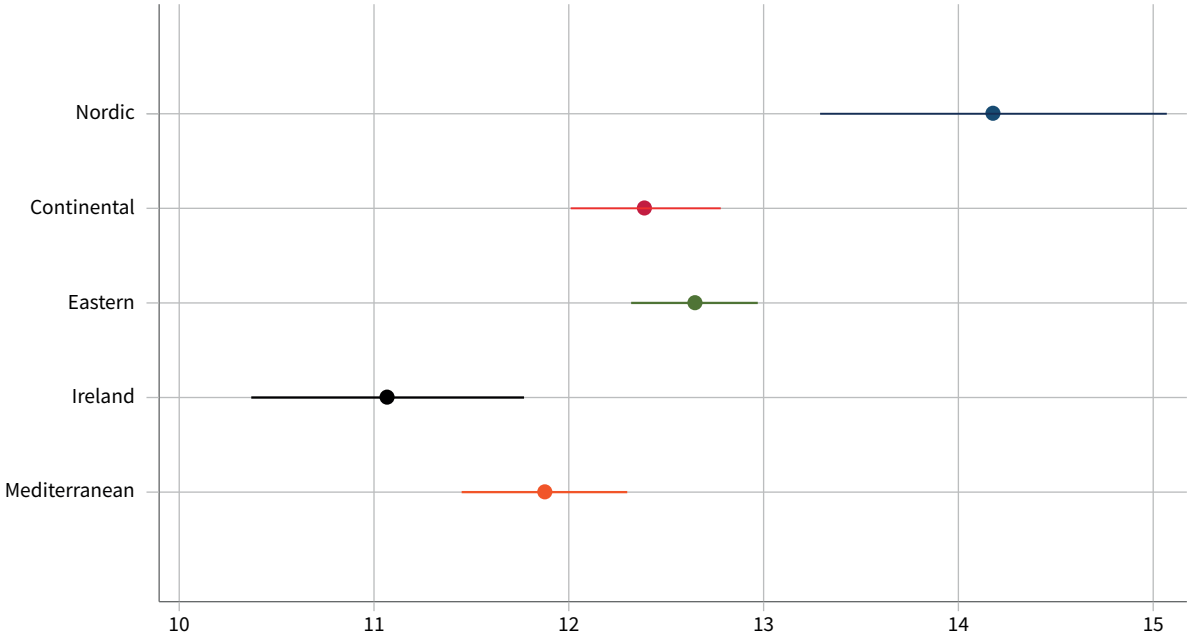
Figure 31: Predicted levels of mental well-being among young people during the pandemic in relation to restrictive measures and across time (score out of 25)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

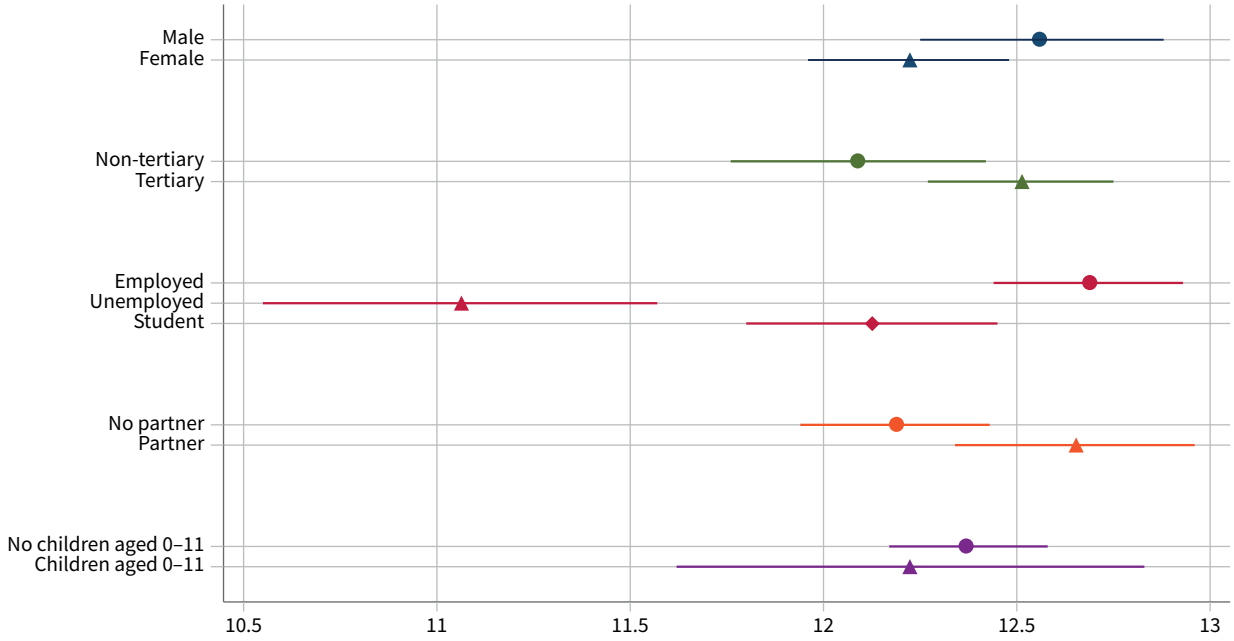
Stark differences across country groups emerge from the results shown in Figure 32. Young people from the Nordic countries reported the highest mental well-being scores. Compared with them, young people from all other country groups had poorer mental health, and the effects are significant at the 1% level. The biggest difference, of -2.86, is observed for Ireland, followed by the Mediterranean countries (-2.18), the Continental group (-1.79) and finally the Eastern countries (-1.58).

Figure 32: Predicted levels of mental well-being among young people during the pandemic across country groups (score out of 25)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 33: Predicted levels of mental well-being among young people during the pandemic across sociodemographic groups (score out of 25)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Predicted levels of mental well-being across sociodemographic groups are presented in Figure 33. Women reported lower levels of mental well-being than men, but this difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels. There are also significant differences related to educational level and employment status. Young respondents with tertiary education reported much higher mental well-being scores than those with a lower level of education, with an effect of around 0.5, significant at the 5% level. The effect of unemployment is striking: being out of work reduces mental well-being substantially (-1.62, 1% significance level), a feature that gives cause for concern, given that young people might have suffered more in terms of job loss than older generations. Students also reported lower levels of mental well-being than employed young people, with an effect of -0.47, significant at the 5% level. While having young children does not significantly affect mental well-being, living with a partner improves the mental well-being of young people by 0.51. This effect is significant at the 1% level and stable when other control variables are included.

Optimism and trust in institutions

The threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic forced governments to adopt several restrictive measures in order to contain the spread of the virus and reduce the pressure on healthcare systems. The measures adopted, such as social distancing, lockdowns and self-isolation, imposed limitations on citizens' basic rights and had major socioeconomic consequences (for example, job insecurity, rising unemployment, loss of revenue and increased inequalities). Given these unprecedented circumstances, it is important to understand how the pandemic affected trust in national governments and in supranational organisations such as the EU (Falcone et al, 2020).

The ability of governments and organisations to contain and manage the emergency and the social and economic consequences caused by government's restrictions are likely to affect the opinions of citizens towards institutions. There are various potential determinants of trust, which include income and education, as well as age. Some studies have suggested that older people may have a higher level of trust in government, sometimes explained in terms of being more strongly 'collective oriented' (Christensen and Laegreid, 2005; Zhao and Hu, 2017). However, Aksoy et al (2020) argue that exposure to an epidemic during a person's 'impressionable years' (ages 18–25) has a persistent negative effect on trust in political institutions and leaders, especially in democracies. The persistence is explained by the fact that, at this age, value systems and opinions are indelibly formed.

This report has shown evidence that young people have been hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of employment prospects and have experienced increased insecurity about their future. This has resulted in decreased life satisfaction and low mental well-being, both of which have a significant association with restrictive measures such as school closures. It would

not be surprising if this resulted in a loss of trust in government and the EU.

However, as this section will show, institutional trust among young people was not as affected by these measures as mental well-being. In addition, young people's optimism about the future remains relatively strong. If this is true, it represents social capital that should not be wasted by policymakers, who should aim to protect young people from any long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis. This section looks at changes in the levels of trust among young people across time, country groups and sociodemographic groups, with a focus on trust in government and trust in the EU; it closes with an analysis of young people's degree of optimism about the future.

Trust in government

As the country of residence is the main factor in institutional trust, all institutions usually enjoy a high degree of trust in countries where the average level of trust is high, while the opposite is true for countries where the average level of trust is lower, suggesting the need for a systemic approach where trust is concerned (Eurofound, 2017). However, among institutions, national governments consistently had the lowest average level of trust in the EU as measured by the EQLS, the latest edition of which (2016) measured an average of 4.5 on a scale of 1 to 10 for trust in government, ranging from 2.7 in Greece to 6.2 in Finland and Luxembourg. According to the EQLS, young people had a slightly lower level of trust in government than older groups.

According to the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, trust in government on average decreased from 4.8 in spring 2020 to 4.6 by the summer of that year and decreased further to 3.9 by spring 2021. However, in all three rounds, young people had a higher level of trust in government than older groups, starting at 5.3 in spring 2020, decreasing to 5.0 by summer 2020 and to 4.2 by spring 2021.

The analysis that follows uses data on young respondents to the panel survey (that is, young people who participated in multiple survey rounds) to look more closely at how trust levels changed throughout the pandemic among the same group of people.

Table 9 provides descriptive statistics on trust in government during the pandemic among this group. There are significant gender differences in the average level of trust in government, with women reporting levels almost 1 point higher. In terms of employment status, students had the highest levels of trust, followed by those in employment and finally unemployed people. Looking at differences by educational level, it can be observed that people with primary or secondary education reported lower levels of trust than those with tertiary education. Living with a partner or not does not change one's level of trust in government. On the other hand, young people with young children did report lower levels of trust than those without. Furthermore, there is a clear negative trend across time, as levels of trust were lower in round 2, and especially in round 3, than in round 1. Country group differences are also notable. Young people from Nordic countries had the highest levels of trust, with an average score of more than 7 points. Close to them were respondents from the Continental group, followed by Ireland and the Mediterranean countries. Young people from Eastern countries reported having the lowest levels of trust in their governments, with the average score being a little below 4.

Table 9: Trust in government among young people during the pandemic (score out of 10)

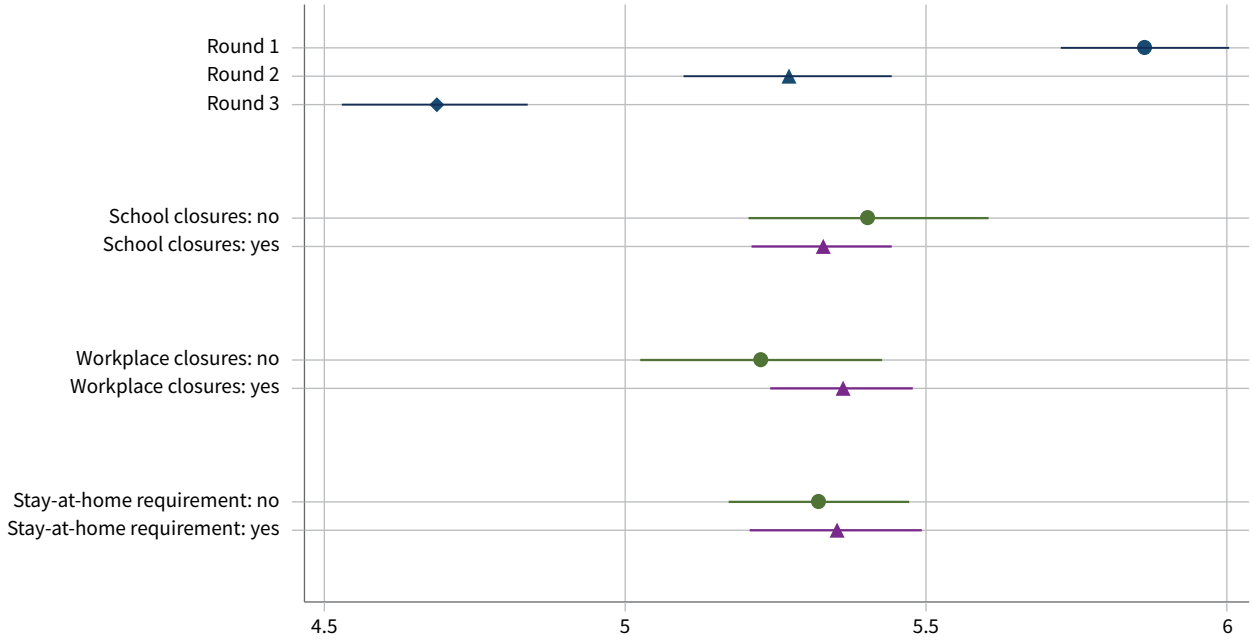
		Mean trust in government score
Gender	Female	5.7
	Male	4.8
Employment status	Employed	5.3
	Unemployed	4.4
	Students	5.7
Educational level	Tertiary	5.6
	Non-tertiary	5.0
Partner present	Yes	5.4
	No	5.3
Children aged 0–11	Yes	5.0
	No	5.4
Survey round	1	5.9
	2	5.2
	3	4.8
Country group	Nordic	7.2
	Continental	7.0
	Eastern	4.0
	Ireland	6.1
	Mediterranean	5.2

Note: *These data refer to panel respondents in the survey.*

A regression analysis was carried out to investigate the main determinants of trust in government while controlling for other factors. Figures 34 to 36 present predicted levels of trust in government obtained using the final regression model.

Figure 34 confirms the negative trend over time. It is immediately clear that trust in government fell during the pandemic. In comparison with the first round of the survey, which corresponded to the first lockdown in most EU countries, trust in government had decreased

Figure 34: Predicted levels of trust in government among young people during the pandemic in relation to restrictive measures and across time (score out of 10)

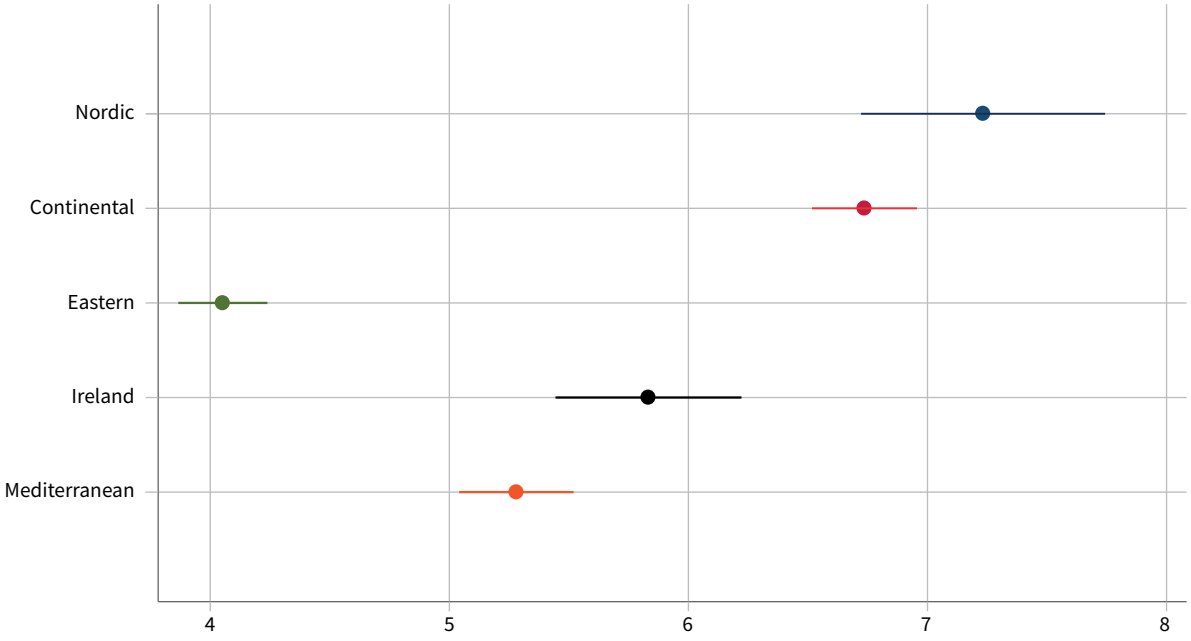


Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

in both the second and the third rounds (despite the easing of restriction measures in summer 2020). The coefficient is particularly strong for round 3 (-1.18, 1% significance level), which took place in February and March 2021 after an increase in COVID-19 cases and when new policies were being implemented. However, the three types of restrictions included in this analysis did not have a direct significant effect on the level of trust in government among young people.

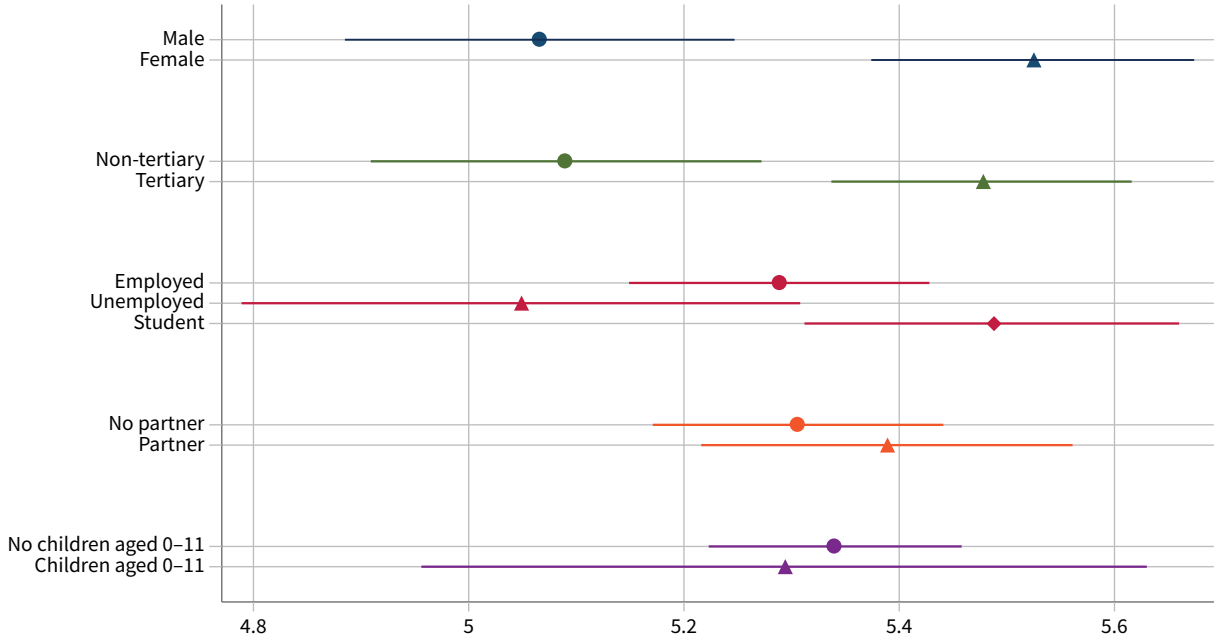
Looking at the results across country groups, shown in Figure 35, the regression analysis confirms large differences in levels of trust among young people across these groups. Young people from all other areas of

Figure 35: Predicted levels of trust in government among young people during the pandemic across country groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figure 36: Predicted levels of trust in government among young people during the pandemic across sociodemographic groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Europe reported lower levels of trust in their national governments than those in the Nordic countries. The difference is smallest for the Continental group, with an effect of -0.5, significant at the 10% level only after controlling for restrictive measures. The difference for Ireland is -1.4, while for the Mediterranean countries it is -1.95. The Eastern countries differ the most from the Nordic countries, the difference amounting to -3.18. The effects for Ireland and the Mediterranean and Nordic groups are significant at the 1% level and persist after the inclusion of restrictive measure variables in the model.

Finally, Figure 36 shows the differences between sociodemographic groups. The regression analysis confirmed that women had more trust in government than did men. This difference persists after the inclusion of other variables, although it is lower in magnitude once country group controls are included. It is equal to -0.59 in the final model and significant at the 1% level. Young people with higher education consistently report stronger trust in government. The difference becomes a little smaller once country differences are accounted for and amounts to -0.39 (1% significance level) in the final model. In line with this result, young people who are still in education have a higher level of trust in government, by around 0.2 points, than those in employment. This effect, however, is in part explained by country differences and is significant only at the 10% level in the last two steps in the analysis. Unemployed people, on the other hand, report lower levels of trust, with the difference being -0.24, significant at the 10% level. Family arrangements do not seem to make much difference when it comes to trust in government. Neither the estimated effect of living with a partner nor that of having young children seems to relate strongly to trust in government among young people.

In conclusion, despite the large impact that the lockdowns have been shown to have had on the life satisfaction and mental well-being of young people, they did not significantly affect young people's trust in government, at least on average in the EU. Individual circumstances – such as employment status and education, as well as gender and the particular country the respondent lived in – were the main determining factors in governmental trust, which decreased throughout the pandemic. While governments did not lose the trust of young people directly as a result of lockdown measures, they did lose their trust nevertheless; the reasons may be complex and include the duration of restrictive measures. It is possible that trust in government will increase as young people's circumstances improve; however, in some countries the loss of trust may be a manifestation of general disappointment in government among young people that cannot be explained by governments having introduced restrictive measures.

Trust in the European Union

Trust in the EU is determined by different factors from trust in government, but the two are strongly connected. People have economic and logical reasons for their levels of trust in the EU, but having a high level of trust in the EU – or, on the other hand, being eurosceptic – can also derive from one's identity and

level of emotional attachment to the EU. In addition, someone's level of trust in the EU can also be extrapolated from their level of trust in national institutions, while at an aggregate level the opposite is often the case: in countries where trust in the government is low, trust in the EU tends to be relatively high (Brosius et al, 2018). Before the pandemic, in autumn 2019, a Eurobarometer survey found that on average more people trusted the EU than trusted national governments (43% versus 34%) (European Commission, 2019).

In the early months of the pandemic, the EU institutions were widely criticised for an uncoordinated response. EU Member States differed greatly on rules regarding lockdowns and quarantine, and they competed for personal protective equipment and antiviral medication (Horizon, 2020). In March 2020, leaders meeting in the European Council disagreed on financial help for countries severely affected by the pandemic – at that point, Italy and Spain in particular (Politico, 2020). By summer, the outline of a recovery plan was taking shape, but once again countries disagreed, including on whether help should come in the form of loans or grants (Euractiv, 2020). However, on 21 July 2020, the Council agreed on a recovery plan worth €750 billion, named NextGenerationEU. While disagreements continued on the allocation of the plan's main instrument, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the final outcome could be considered positive for the countries most affected by the pandemic.

As vaccines became available, this proved to be another challenge for EU leaders, with disagreements over vaccine allocation (Financial Times, 2021) and the introduction of vaccine certificates (Euronews, 2021) taking place in spring 2021.

Against this background, it is interesting that changes in trust in the EU, as measured in the *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey, seem to have reflected the perceived successes and failures of the EU institutions in agreeing on measures, although they also coincided with improvements and deteriorations in controlling the spread of the virus. In April 2020, average trust in the EU among all groups was at 4.5 (below the figure for governments), but this had increased considerably by July 2021, to 5.1. In spring 2021, trust in the EU was lower again, at 4.6, but this reduction was far less than that measured in trust in national governments. Among young people, trust in the EU remained well above the levels found in older groups and also above their trust in government, moving from 5.6 in spring 2020 to 6.1 in the summer and going back to 5.6 by spring 2021.

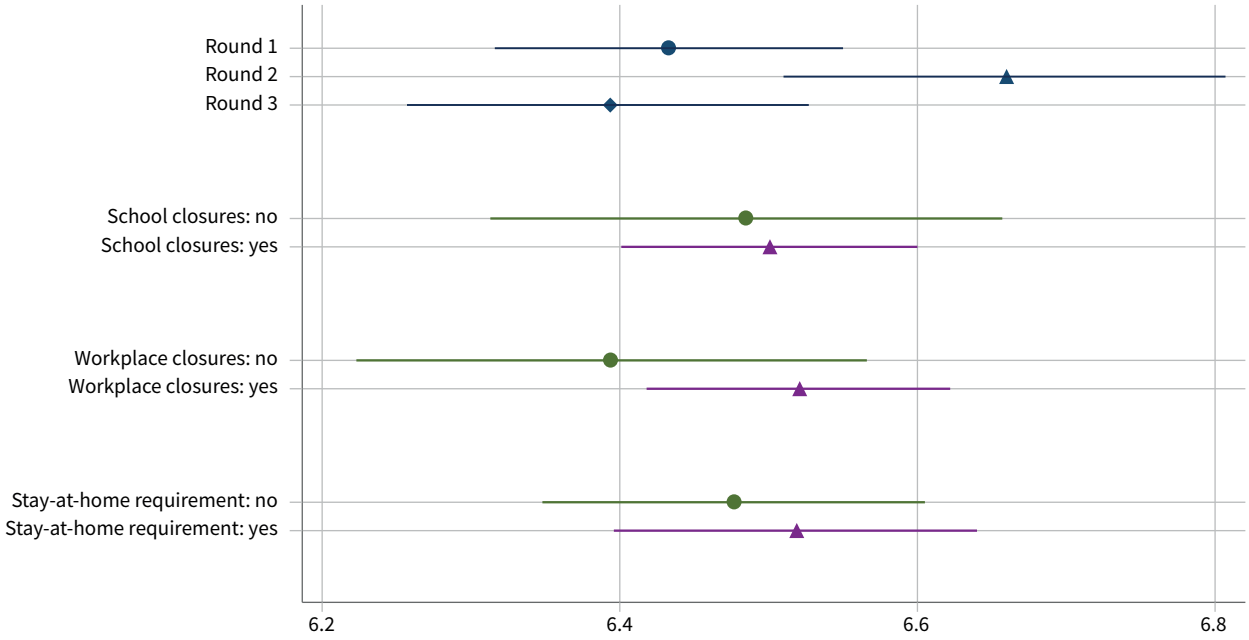
The following analysis looks at trust in the EU among young people who participated in multiple rounds of the survey. Table 10 provides descriptive statistics on young people's trust in the EU, looking at key possible explanatory variables. There are no apparent differences by gender or by partner status. However, the differences by employment status and, to a slighter lesser extent the presence of children, are notable. As is the case for trust in national government, students reported the highest levels of trust in the EU, followed by those in employment and finally by unemployed people. There is also a positive association between level of education and level of trust. In contrast to trust in government, trust in the EU increased in the second round of the survey but then remained at the same level in the last round. The differences between country groups with regard to trust in the EU are less marked than those relating to trust in government. Young people in the Continental group have the highest levels of trust in the EU, followed by Ireland and the Nordic countries, the Eastern countries and finally the Mediterranean countries.

Table 10: Trust in the EU among young people during the pandemic (score out of 10)

		Mean trust in government score
Gender	Female	6.6
	Male	6.6
Employment status	Employed	6.5
	Unemployed	5.6
	Students	6.9
Educational level	Tertiary	6.7
	Non-tertiary	6.4
Partner present	Yes	6.6
	No	6.6
Children aged 0–11	Yes	6.0
	No	6.6
Survey round	1	6.5
	2	6.6
	3	6.6
Country group	Nordic	6.8
	Continental	7.1
	Eastern	6.4
	Ireland	6.8
	Mediterranean	6.2

Note: *These data refer to panel respondents in the survey.*

Figure 37: Predicted levels of trust in the EU among young people during the pandemic in relation to restrictive measures and across time (score out of 10)



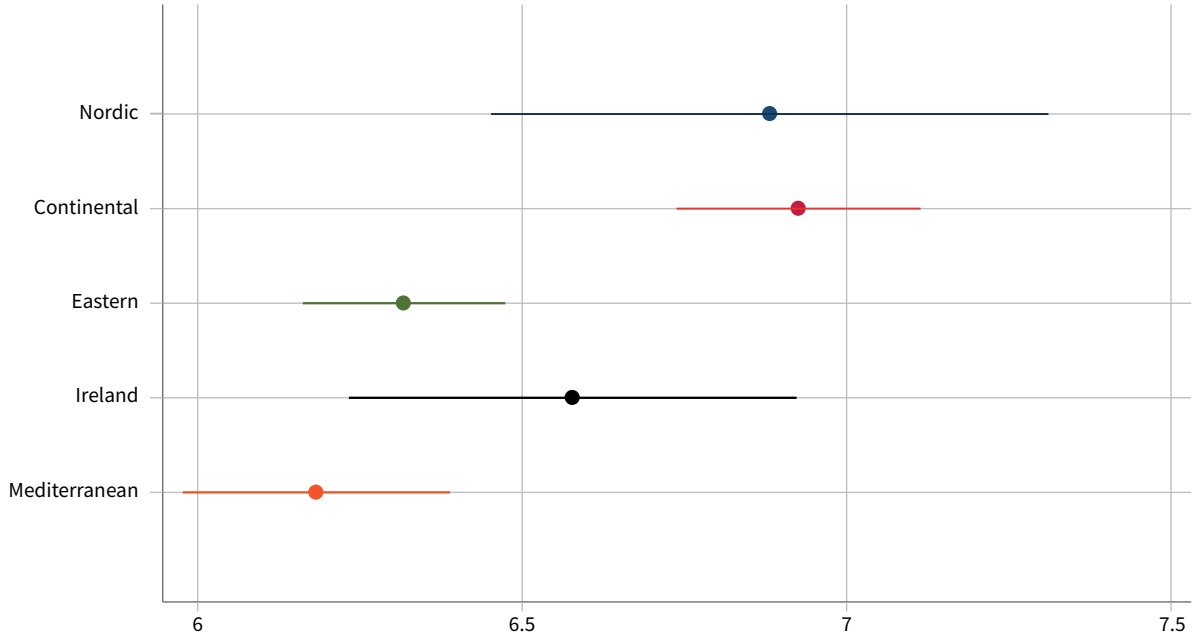
Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Figures 37 to 39 show the results of a regression model on trust in the EU and its determinants when controlling for other factors.

As Figure 37 shows, the trend over time was confirmed by the regression analysis. Trust in the EU improved between the first lockdown period in April and July 2020 by about 0.21 (5% significance level). This may be linked to the fact that, by the summer, the pandemic was easing, although this explanation would not be consistent with the fact that trust in national governments fell during the same period. This suggests that criticisms of the EU for reacting slowly to the pandemic and for lack of cohesion may have caused the low levels of trust in spring. By July 2020, however, the EU had agreed upon the NewGenerationEU package. There is no significant difference between the levels of trust recorded in the third and first rounds, which is to say that the upswing in trust in the EU in July was short-lived. This could be related to disagreements within the EU on vaccines, and perhaps the strict lockdowns during later waves of the pandemic. However, the regression model found no significant relationship between restrictive measures and trust in the EU.

Looking at the country groups in Figure 38, there are no significant differences between young people's levels of trust in the Continental group and Ireland compared to the reference group of the Nordic countries. On the other hand, people in both Eastern and Mediterranean countries reported significantly lower levels of trust in the EU than their Nordic counterparts, with the effects amounting to -0.48 and -0.66 respectively (both significant only at the 10% level).

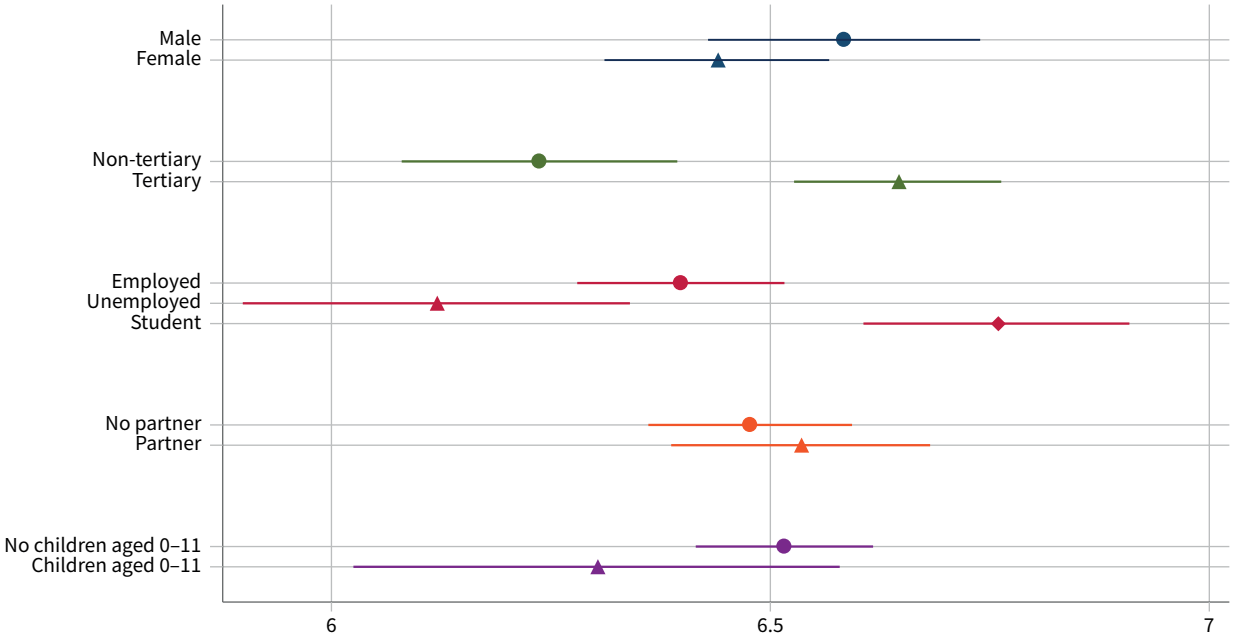
Figure 38: Predicted levels of trust in the EU among young people during the pandemic across country groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

As Figure 39 shows, strong gender differences do not emerge from the data, nor do family arrangements seem to matter. Similarly to the results on trust in government, trust in the EU is higher among people with a tertiary education than among others (+0.37, 1% significance level) and the same is true of students compared with people in employment (+0.31, 1% significance level). However, people who were unemployed reported significantly lower levels of trust in the EU than those in employment. This difference is equal to -0.26 and is significant at the 5% level.

Figure 39: Predicted levels of trust in the EU among young people during the pandemic across sociodemographic groups (score out of 10)



Note: *Lines indicate confidence intervals. Non-overlapping confidence intervals for categories within a group imply a statistically significant difference.*

Unlike average trust in government, which continued to worsen in the first year of the pandemic, young people's trust in the EU changed in a similar way to quality of life indicators such as mental well-being and life satisfaction, improving during summer 2020. Unlike well-being, trust has no demonstrated relationship with lockdown measures. This suggests that the EU's actions and depiction in the media may have a strong impact on young people's levels of trust in it. If it were possible to run country-by-country regressions on trust in government, a similar pattern might appear for at least some countries.

Optimism about the future

As mentioned in the previous sections, young people's trust in both the EU and their national governments remained greater than that of older groups. A similar pattern emerges with regard to optimism: unlike mental well-being and satisfaction with life in general, optimism about the future remained higher among young people than among those aged 30 or over throughout the pandemic. However, optimism dropped to the lowest level across the three survey rounds in spring 2021, when less than half (49%) of young people were optimistic about their own future, down from 54% in spring 2020 and 57% in summer 2020; this was probably related to the strict lockdowns introduced in many countries as the new wave of the pandemic hit. In the third round, the lowest levels of optimism among young people were measured in Spain (35%), Poland (37%) and Cyprus (40%), and the highest were found in Malta, Latvia and Slovenia, countries where more than two-thirds of young people agreed that they were optimistic about their future (Figure 40).

In the two 2020 survey rounds, young men were more often optimistic about their own future, particularly in summer 2020, when 61% of men aged 18–29 and just 53% of women of the same age felt this way. However, this difference had almost disappeared by spring 2021, when the proportion of optimistic young men dropped to 50% and that of young women to 49%. This mirrors the gender differences found in 'feeling tense' throughout the pandemic, which did not improve for young women in the second round, while for young men optimism increased and feeling tense decreased significantly when restrictions loosened, worsening again with the new wave of lockdowns. This could suggest that the two feelings are related and also that optimism may not increase as quickly among young women as among young men when the pandemic ends.

Figure 40: Proportions of people aged 18–29 agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement 'I am optimistic about my future', spring 2020 to spring 2021, by Member State (%)

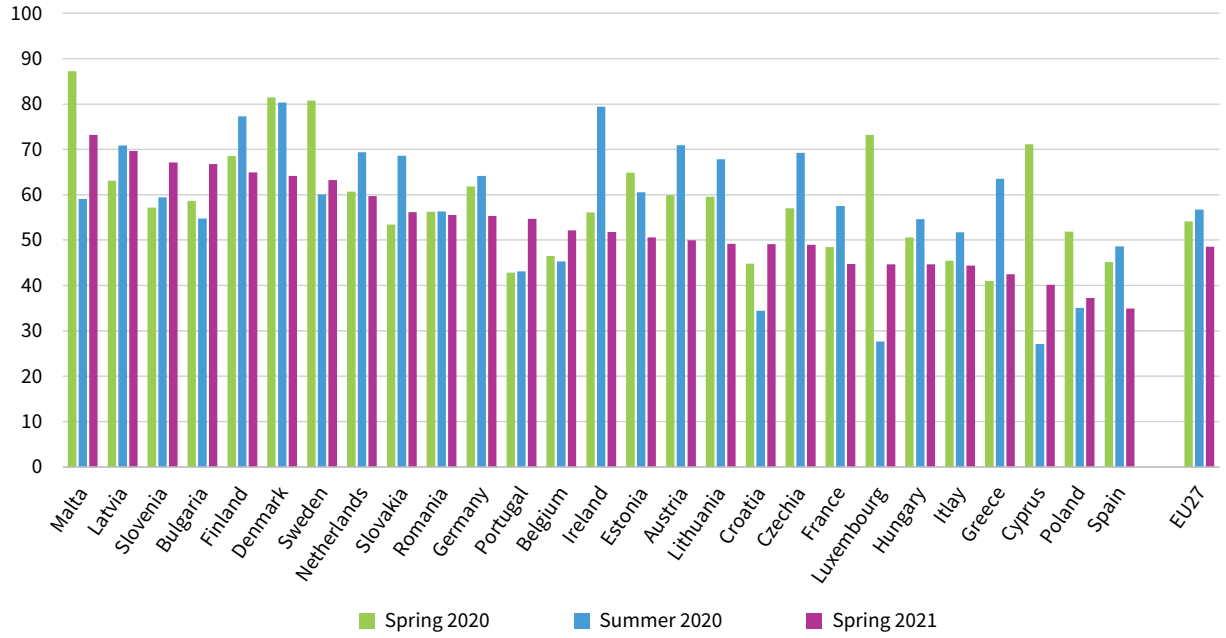
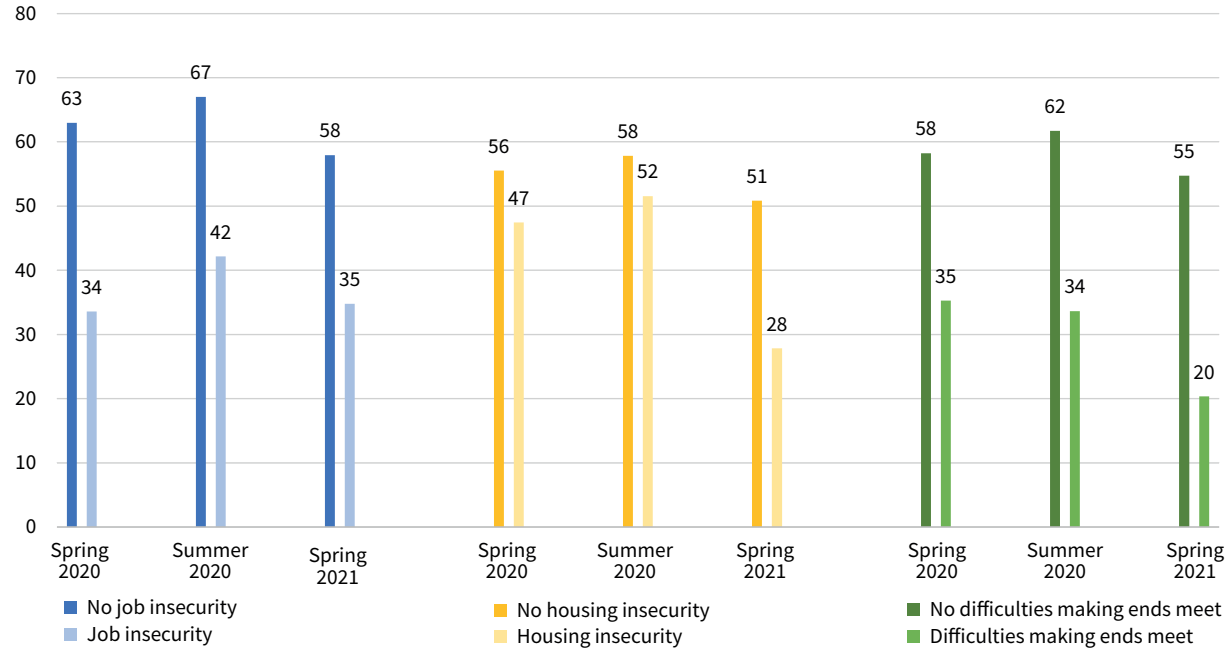


Figure 41: Proportions of people aged 18–29 feeling optimistic about their own future, spring 2020 to spring 2021, by experience of job, housing and financial insecurity (%)



Optimism was lowest among young people experiencing job insecurity, housing insecurity or financial difficulties. The optimism gap between those experiencing housing insecurity and financial difficulties and those free from them increased with each survey round (Figure 41), while the proportion of young people experiencing these difficulties also increased. This suggests that as financial pressure increasingly affected youth, it also had a higher impact on their expected future prospects.

Overall, based on this pattern, young people's optimism about the future is expected to recover in line with the reopening of societies, as it did to some extent when restrictions were loosened in summer 2021, as long as security about their future also returns.

Conclusion: Immediate effects of the pandemic on young people

This chapter has shown that young people in the EU were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly the non-pharmaceutical interventions introduced by governments to slow it down.

As a result of the greater vulnerability of young people in the labour market, as explained in the first chapter of this report, young people were more likely to lose their job during the pandemic. Analysis of labour market transitions showed that the proportion of unemployed young people was highest in summer 2020, with a small improvement in 2021, although the youth employment rate did not reach pre-pandemic levels. The highest levels of job loss were measured in the Mediterranean countries and the lowest in the Continental and Nordic countries, with those aged 18–24 most often losing their job. In addition, a large group of students transitioned to unemployment, particularly in Ireland. Most students would prefer not to continue with online education when the pandemic is over.

As for unemployment, the highest rate of financial insecurity was measured in summer 2020. Unemployed or inactive young people experienced difficulties more often than those over 30 who were unemployed or inactive. Living with their parents provided a source of security for young people, particularly students, and was associated with less likelihood of feeling socially excluded among unemployed or inactive young people. By spring 2021, one-third of young people had requested financial support from public authorities, but 1 in 10 had not received the support they needed, and these young people often experienced social exclusion, insecurity and financial difficulties. Gaps in financial support were partly filled by family and other informal sources.

This increased risk of job loss and financial difficulties and, in some cases, loss of independence and a need to rely on parents may have contributed to the decline in youth mental well-being during the pandemic; however, this report has also found a direct association between lockdown measures and reduced mental well-being, as well as lower satisfaction with life. Young people's life satisfaction and mental well-being improved in summer 2020 in line with the easing of restrictions but fell back during the spring 2021 lockdown to a worse level than that measured early in the pandemic. Young people in

Ireland and the Mediterranean countries had particularly low mental well-being and life satisfaction after other factors were controlled for. School and university closures were associated with lower mental well-being and life satisfaction, while stay-at-home requirements had a significant impact only on life satisfaction. Workplace closures, on the other hand, had a positive impact on young people's mental well-being.

As young people experienced these difficulties throughout the pandemic, their trust in institutions also decreased. Young people's trust in government was reduced significantly during the pandemic, with a drop in each survey round, but the analysis did not confirm an association with the various restrictive measures examined. This meant that trust in government did not recover in summer 2020 when restrictions eased, and the loss of trust cannot be explained by lockdowns but relates to individual circumstances and countries of residence. The lowest levels of trust were measured in the Eastern country group. Governments need to do more than ease lockdowns to regain the trust of their young people; however, it is worth noting that young people on average still trust their governments more than older groups do.

Meanwhile, trust in the EU changed in a similar way to quality of life indicators, improving in summer 2020 and falling back to the spring 2020 level in spring 2021. Member States in the Eastern country group have less trust in the EU than those in other country groups. As for trust in government, no apparent association was found with restrictive measures, yet young people's trust in the EU recovered in summer 2020, which may have been related to EU leaders reaching agreement on the rescue package after months of disagreement earlier in the pandemic. Young people trust the EU more than older groups do, and more than they trust their governments.

Young people's optimism about the future remains higher than that of their older counterparts. As optimism increased in summer 2020, it is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels after the reopening of societies.

3 Policy responses: Measures to protect young people from the effects of the crisis

The first two chapters of this report have shown that the young people of Europe, after a long period of better labour market access during the recovery period and economic growth following the economic crisis, have been among the groups hardest hit by the COVID-19 crisis, both in terms of job loss and resulting financial difficulties and in terms of lack of social progress, giving rise to serious concerns about mental well-being.

It is important for policymakers at EU and national levels to try to learn from the previous crisis, with the aim of achieving a faster recovery. The pandemic has reversed trends towards increased youth employment and social progress and may have interfered with the likelihood of achieving the targets that had been set in this regard. In addition to concentrating on putting young people back to work, it is important to consider their mental well-being and their concerns about their prospects of achieving their goals and becoming independent, and how the pandemic affected these.

It is not an easy task to decide how to prioritise the large amount of funding available (see the section on EU-level policies below), with youth services and mental health services as well as employment and education programmes all needing funds. However, as seen in the previous chapter, young people have greater trust in institutions than older groups, which represents social capital that should not be wasted. Governments lost trust during the pandemic for reasons not directly related to lockdowns, and it will be important to regain that trust and introduce policy interventions that protect young people from the long-term effects of the pandemic.

This chapter aims to show how European and national policymakers have reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of helping young people, by providing an account of the policy measures introduced, particularly in the areas of employment, education and mental health. The main source for this section is information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents. These data were collected in December 2020.

EU-level policies: Connecting the reinforced Youth Guarantee to COVID-19 measures

Before the pandemic hit, the European Commission set out principles on building a strong Europe in the European Pillar of Social Rights, finalised in November 2017. The Social Scoreboard – measuring the performance of Member States against the European Pillar of Social Rights – included the NEET rate for 15- to 24-year-olds and the early school leaver rate among its headline indicators. Meanwhile, European youth policy concentrated on implementing the new (2019–2027) EU youth strategy, focusing on 'engaging, connecting and empowering': increasing youth participation in society and resilience, and communicating better with young people, while improving youth work and reaching out to the most disadvantaged (European Commission, 2018).

After the pandemic hit, a number of changes took place at EU level in the area of youth policy. Importantly, the definition of young people was expanded to incorporate people up to the age of 29. The Youth Guarantee, which was the Member States' commitment to get all young people under 25 into work, education or training within four months of leaving work or education,[12] was expanded to incorporate the new age bracket. The Council recommendation of 30 October 2020 on the reinforced Youth Guarantee acknowledged that the pandemic would impact a large group of young people and that different types of NEETs would have different needs for policy intervention; thus, it makes the importance of exploring the diversity of NEETs explicit (Council of the European Union, 2020).

In addition, the European Commission proposed the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan on 4 March 2021, which was followed up by a declaration at the Porto Social Summit on 7 May 2021 (European Commission, 2021). One of the priorities made explicit at the Porto summit was 'to support young people, who

12 Following the Council recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee.

have been very negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis, which has profoundly disrupted their participation in the labour market as well as their education and training plans' (European Council, 2021).

The action plan proposed targets to be achieved by 2030 that can be seen as ambitious, particularly in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main target relevant to young people is decreasing the NEET rate among those aged 15–29 from 12.6% (in 2019) to 9% by improving their employment prospects. Therefore, the relevant headline indicator in the Social Scoreboard has also been revised to cover those aged 15–29. In order to achieve this target, the EU will support the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights through the European Social Fund Plus, which amounts to €88 billion. Member States with a NEET rate above the EU average (over the period 2017–2019) will need to devote at least 12.5% of the funds allocated to them to investments in young people, particularly in implementing the Youth Guarantee.[13]

The proposed revised Social Scoreboard also includes a reduction in youth unemployment as one of the secondary targets. Overall, the Commission calls on Member States to dedicate at least €22 billion to youth employment support.

Outside employment, the Erasmus+ programme will provide a budget of over €26 billion to improve education and training infrastructure. The Commission hopes that this will help to meet targets on increasing adult participation in learning, reducing the proportion of early school leavers and improving digital skills.

In terms of measures less specifically related to young people, information collected in Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database shows that the EU has adopted a broad range of financial and other support measures to assist Member States in their efforts to mitigate the worst effects (Eurofound, 2021). In April 2020, a €540 billion emergency rescue package was proposed, which included the pan-European Guarantee Fund, providing €200 billion for companies (especially small and medium-sized enterprises), and the newly established SURE instrument,[14] providing up to €100 billion to support Member States in the implementation of short-time working schemes and similar measures in an effort to safeguard jobs. In addition, flexibility in the use of European Structural Funds was increased to allow Member States to transfer money between different funds and target the regions most in need. The hardest-hit sectors, such as tourism, were also supported.

In July 2020, EU leaders agreed on NextGenerationEU, a recovery package worth €750 billion. Part of this package is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which is to provide €672.5 billion in loans and grants to Member States to help them deal with the economic and social impacts of the pandemic, while also ensuring their resilience to green and digital transition. The facility entered into force in February 2021.

Summary of national policy measures

At national level, the policy response to the COVID-19 crisis has been unprecedented. Eurofound provided a first overview of the range of mitigation measures taken (Eurofound, 2020a). When the impact of the pandemic's first wave subsided, the emphasis was mainly on interventions to stimulate the economy and reintegrate those who had lost their job or who were unemployed before the pandemic and whose chances of reemployment had decreased. Over time, different approaches were introduced to manage and adapt workplaces and ways of working.

By October 2020, the largest share of measures recorded in the COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database were initiatives aimed at keeping businesses afloat (Eurofound, 2020a). This reflects the importance attributed to preventing business failure – and, as a result, protecting employment, preventing hardship and preserving purchasing power – in the short to medium term in the face of restrictions that had prevented or reduced activity in various sectors.

When Eurofound started its consultation with the Network of Eurofound Correspondents on youth measures, the correspondents were each asked to describe the situation of young people as seen by policymakers and researchers in their Member State. It was clear that, across Europe, there has been concern regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for young people, especially in the fields of education and employment, and to a lesser extent in relation to social inclusion and mental health (Table 11).

13 Including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

14 SURE stands for 'Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency'.

Table 11: Key challenges of the COVID-19 crisis for young people and policy reactions in EU Member States

Member State	Key challenges involving young people	Policy reactions
Austria	Education: difficulty in reaching disadvantaged students through distance learning; difficulties for students in accessing labour market. Internships: lack of internships offered, impossibility of attending mandatory internships during lockdowns. Labour market: strong increase in youth unemployment; young adults at higher risk of redundancy due to COVID-19; worrying long-term impact.	Provision of education and training measures; less intervention in the form of active labour market policies.
Belgium	Education: inequalities in access to digital devices for distance learning; disadvantaged groups of young people particularly at risk. Labour market: precarious situation of young people in temporary work; non-renewal of contracts. Finances: increasing financial problems due to the COVID-19 crisis. Mental health: young people suffering from social isolation, especially those forced to remain indoors most of the time with many people in a small living space.	General income support measures. Labour market measures rarely target young people; if they do, they tend to be adaptations of existing policies.
Bulgaria	Education: prolonged periods of distance learning have an adverse effect on young people's employment prospects; decreased quality of education, long-term negative effects. Labour market: increase in (long-term) youth unemployment. Finances: lower income, limited social protection. Mental health: deteriorating mental well-being, worse outlook on the future.	Young people not specifically targeted but covered by general labour market policies as a disadvantaged group. Focus on retention in education and transition to employment.
Croatia	Labour market: consequences of COVID-19 for specific sectors (tourism), with spillover effects on the whole economy.	General labour market and financial support measures; no specific focus on youth.
Cyprus	Limited discussion of impact on young people; ad hoc working group stressed psychosocial, economic and technological challenges.	Mainly use of existing policies; no new measures targeting young people.
Czechia	Education: early departure of young people from education, demotivation resulting from distance learning and lack of opportunities for practical training. Labour market: difficulties for unemployed graduates, not entitled to unemployment benefits; suspended PES offers; competition from experienced workers. Consequences expected to affect students, school leavers and young people's mental health in particular.	General labour market measures rarely target young people; if they do, they tend to be adaptations of existing policies. Some initiatives relating to distance learning.
Denmark	Labour market: youth unemployment expected to rise significantly in the near future. Those leaving education are in particular need of support.	Several support measures for young people, especially those in further education.
Estonia	Education: need to ensure that young people stay in education longer. Labour market: young people particularly affected by the crisis, partly because they are overrepresented in sectors that were hit the hardest (services and sales, the hotel, restaurant and catering sector).	Focus on maintaining existing services and moving towards e-provision.
Finland	Education: digital shift causing potential gaps in education outcomes. Labour market: newly graduated young people increasingly struggling to access the labour market; overall, difficult to find jobs and internships; worse future outlook and possible long-term consequences; lifelong learning and well-being of young people at risk.	Supporting and strengthening existing services for young people; focus on education and transition to employment.
France	Labour market: expected increase in youth unemployment. Mental health: severe concerns about mental health; 30% of young people lost access to mental health care during the COVID-19 pandemic owing to lack of resources.	Tailored response targeting young people: the 'One young person, one solution' plan.
Germany	Education: deepening of existing inequalities in education; the most severe consequences felt by young people from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds. Apprenticeships: insecurity in entering and staying in apprenticeships. Labour market: increased youth unemployment. Finances: financial hardship among students. Mental health: lockdown measures affected the mental health and well-being of large parts of the population, particularly young people.	Measures to support young people: securing apprenticeships, preventing university dropout, supporting education and labour market access, improving mental health support facilities, increasing access to social services.

Member State	Key challenges involving young people	Policy reactions
Greece	Labour market: worsening economic situation, with thousands of young people becoming NEET (significant and regionally uneven growth); increasing precariousness; exclusion from support measures of 5,500 young graduates previously covered by a programme implemented by the Manpower Employment Organisation.	General labour market and financial support measures; no specific focus on youth.
Hungary	Education: digital divide; students without access to digital devices and skills at high risk of dropping out. Labour market: youth unemployment particularly high; young people overrepresented in sectors badly hit by the crisis (tourism, catering); young people's employment conditions are precarious and they are not protected against layoffs.	Some attention to young people in policy responses, especially in the fields of education and income protection.
Ireland	Labour market: increasing numbers of unemployed young people. In July 2020, 45% of young people in the labour force were unemployed. Inclusion: young people who were already most at risk have become the cohort most disconnected from youth services and support measures.	Jobs Stimulus ('Helping people, especially young people, get back to work'), education, vocational education and training (VET), job placements, job search assistance and subsidies.
Italy	Education and labour market: worsening situation for young people. Overall life prospects: expected negative consequences for future projects (finding a job, living independently, family plans, moving to another place).	General support measures; specific focus on young people in a few areas (education).
Latvia	Labour market: worsening unemployment situation, despite good resilience during the first months of the pandemic.	General labour market measures; adaptations of existing youth policies.
Lithuania	Labour market: increase in youth unemployment, almost doubling over a year. Education: more than 35,000 students did not have a computer or internet access at the beginning of the pandemic; inequalities in distance learning. Mental health: the lockdown severely worsened young people's emotional well-being.	General measures, some of which are relevant to the needs of young people.
Luxembourg	Overall worrying socioeconomic and psychological situation of young people. Apprenticeships: offers and implementation at risk.	Situation of young people considered a priority; specific labour market and mental health support.
Malta	Education: difficulties related to school closures and delays in exams. Labour market: youth employment mainly affected by changes in sectors; mass exodus of foreign workers causing shortages and need to retain and reskill workers.	General measures, few targeting young people, mainly in education; no measures on youth social protection and prevention of hardship.
Netherlands	Young people affected disproportionately. Overall, worrying economic, employment and mental health situation of young people.	Youth support measures focusing on education, mental health and income support.
Poland	Labour market: strong labour market segmentation; young people particularly vulnerable in the labour market (non-standard employment, working in sectors affected by pandemic-related restrictions); people aged 24–34 are the most represented age group among the unemployed population; lack of social and health protection; expected negative long-term effects. Education and finances: difficult financial situation for students. Social inclusion: difficulties for the most disadvantaged young people. Overall life prospects: delays in leaving home and starting independent life and prolonged dependence on family/parents. Mental health: higher risk of mental health issues, including depression.	General measures supporting employees, citizens, companies and the economy, some relevant for young people, but no specific youth measures.
Portugal	Labour market: young people with intermediate qualifications and precarious employment contracts affected more severely (temporary contracts in the tourism sector and support services accounted for a high share of the absolute yearly increase in registered unemployment in April 2020); strong increase in youth unemployment, with only half of those affected covered by unemployment protection. Education and life prospects: young people affected and young people penalised.	Several measures were designed to promote the employability of groups who are more distant from the labour market, including but often not specifically targeting young people.
Romania	Education: worrying situation, especially in the case of pre-university and university students. Labour market: increased unemployment.	Few measures for young people, mainly focusing on the labour market, online education and higher education; limited focus on disadvantaged young people.

Member State	Key challenges involving young people	Policy reactions
Slovakia	Labour market: increase in unemployment and in the number of registered young jobseekers. Income: sharp increase in the risk of young people defaulting on mortgage loans.	No specific measures for all young people. Pilot projects on youth employment, but with delays and limited scope.
Slovenia	Labour market: youth (long-term) unemployment increased more than general unemployment; most young people (around 90%) not entitled to unemployment benefits; less than 50% of unemployed young people receive social transfers; young people on non-standard employment contracts are particularly disadvantaged.	General labour market measures, such as short-time working schemes; limited youth focus.
Spain	Labour market: increase in (long-term) unemployment and inactivity; dual labour market with temporary contracts exposing young people to risks of dismissal, especially in sectors affected by lockdown measures; lack of social protection coverage. Inclusion: risk of socioeconomic, cultural and social exclusion; young people with low-level qualifications and young people with a migrant background particularly vulnerable. Health: focus on young people's responsibility in the spread of the virus; tendency towards long family dependency.	Generalist approach, limited adaptation of measures to the specific requirements of young people.
Sweden	Labour market: challenges for young people without employment and worries regarding NEETs.	Measures incentivising access for young people to education and the labour market.

Source: *Based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

Collecting policy measures from the correspondents was an exploratory exercise with a specific focus on policies that aimed to support and protect young people from the economic and employment consequences of the crisis, and to prevent negative mental health outcomes. Eurofound asked the correspondents to collect measures that had either been newly launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic or modified in the light of it. The measures were to be categorised into six specific categories, which are listed and described in Table 12.

Table 12: Categories of measures to improve the economic, employment and mental health situation of young people in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

Category	Key types of measures
Direct employment support	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of: - short-time working schemes - support to enable young people's businesses and self-employment activities to continue - direct hiring subsidies - start-up incentives for young entrepreneurs
Social protection and prevention of hardship	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of: - income replacement/top-up - access to services - support to prevent over-indebtedness - provision of services in kind
Internships, VET and apprenticeships to foster employability	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of: - support for young people and employers - direct subsidies for interns and apprentices - placements - retraining, reorientation and training courses to upskill young people for their immediate labour market integration

Category	Key types of measures
Outreach, career management, guidance and individualised support	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of: • support services • outreach and awareness-raising actions • counselling, guidance, mentoring and individualised support to young people • support in the transition from school to work through job search assistance, advice and guidance, and mentoring • post-placement support
Support for staying in or (re-)entering education or to prevent/tackle early school leaving	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of: • support for students/schools to help them in the transition towards online learning • financial aid for students • pathways for reintegration into education and training, including less formal and more flexible forms of education and training • additional places in further/university education to recruit more students
Mental health support	New offers, adaptations of the content and changes in the delivery of mental health support measures: • helplines • counselling services • digital shift • delivery of complex support

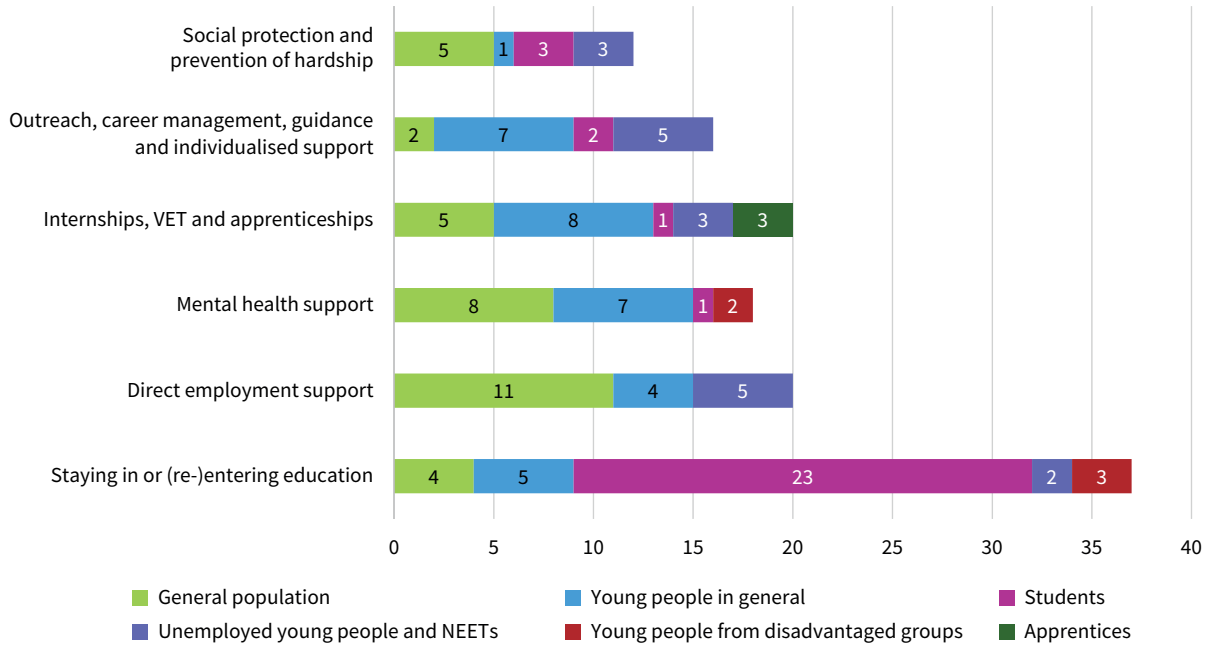
Source: *Authors' instructions to the Network of Eurofound Correspondents for the identification of measure*

The fieldwork, which ended in December 2020, provided 123 examples of measures, which were identified across all EU Member States. Figure 42 shows the distribution of measures collected in each of the categories specified in the instructions to the network.

The highest number of examples related to staying in or (re-)entering education (37 measures), followed by direct employment support (20) and internships, VET and apprenticeships (20), mental health support (18), outreach and guidance (16) and social protection and prevention of hardship (12). Incentives for employers to hire interns and apprentices form a separate category – internships, VET and apprenticeships – although they also consist of direct employment support. Measures to protect students from hardship are included in the category staying in or (re-)entering education.

In terms of target groups, around half of the measures addressed either the general population including but not limited to young people (35) or young people as a whole (32). The other half had more specific targets:

Figure 42: Number of measures in each category by target beneficiaries



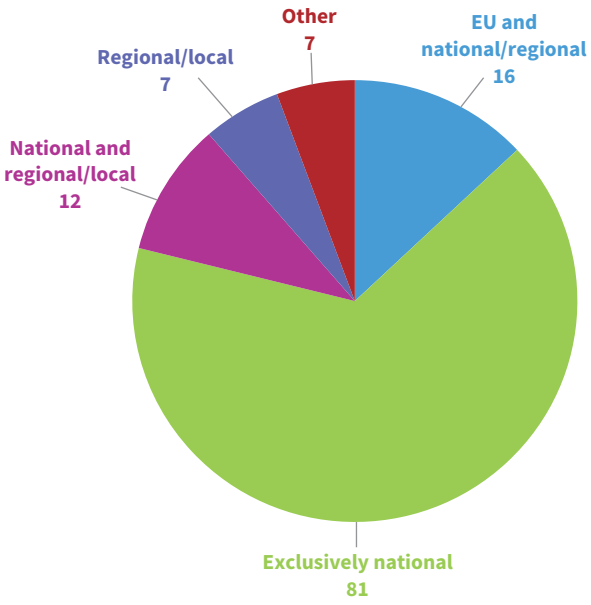
Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

students (30), unemployed young people and NEETs (18), young people from disadvantaged groups (5) and apprentices (3). However, it is important to note that, by their nature, many of the interventions implicitly targeted young people from more vulnerable backgrounds, even where this was not reflected in the formulation of the eligibility criteria. The high proportion of measures targeting the general population seems to confirm that countries tended to take a universal approach in reacting to the crisis, rather than targeting specific age groups, in line with the overall aim of tackling broad issues such as unemployment and keeping businesses afloat.

Of the 123 measures, 108 covered the whole country. In terms of funding, Figure 43 shows that the majority (66%) were funded exclusively by national governments, while in other cases national funds were combined with support from EU funds (13%) or regional/local funds (10%). Some measures, with a more limited geographical scale, were exclusively funded through regional/local funds (6%), and the remaining 6% used funds from other sources, provided by organisations other than public bodies. This suggests that most of the interventions were broad and that they were mainly financially supported by central governments. Although in some cases this type of information was not available, most of the measures identified were of a temporary nature.

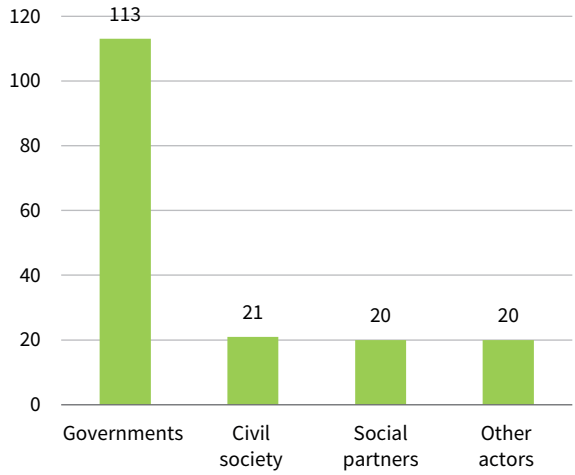
When it comes to the involvement of stakeholders in designing and launching the measures (Figure 44), governments at different administrative levels played a major role (113 measures), while civil society, social partners and other actors (mainly universities and VET providers and trainers) were formally involved to a lesser extent (participating in 20–21 measures each).

Figure 43: Funding sources for the measures identified (number of measures)



Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

Figure 44: Key actors involved in designing and launching the measures (number of measures)



Source: *Authors' own calculations, based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

Nonetheless, policymaking processes have involved other actors in different ways, either in advisory roles or in providing responses to the crisis in specific areas (Box 3).

Box 3: Involvement of non-governmental actors in defining responses to the crisis targeting young people

Czechia – non-governmental organisations: The non-profit sector has played an active and indispensable role in the prevention of early departure from the education system. Social workers provided assistance with online teaching and tutoring, and thanks to their knowledge of the population, they were able to target those children and young people most at risk owing to limited digital literacy and lack of access to devices for distance learning. The Czech Streetwork Association (an umbrella organisation for low-threshold social service providers) was assisted by the Crisis Fund for the Assistance of Children and Families at Risk of Poverty and Domestic Violence in the project 'Support for the education of children at risk of social exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic'.

Slovenia – social partners: The trade union Youth Plus addressed recommendations to the government on the needs of young people when devising measures to mitigate the consequences of the second wave of the pandemic, both directly and through the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia. The recommendations derived from monitoring of various areas of interest and public consultation of 50 young people and representatives of organisations. They covered education, the labour market, housing, culture, the environment and green workplaces.

Cyprus – youth organisations: On the initiative of the Youth Board of Cyprus, an ad hoc working group consisting of representatives of youth organisations, experts from the board and individual young people was constituted to prepare suggestions aimed at mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on young people. The working group prepared suggestions covering psychosocial, economic and technological challenges.

Finland – young people: Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the urgency of the situation made it difficult for decision-makers to involve stakeholders to the same degree as they normally would. As a result, young people's opinions on the restrictions and other measures were not necessarily considered, as they would be in normal circumstances. Consequently, the Finnish National Youth Council (Allianssi) has requested the further involvement of young people in decisions on the use of NextGenerationEU funding.

Source: *Based on information provided by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents*

Direct employment support

Employment protection schemes have been at the core of the policy response to the pandemic, building on lessons learned during the economic crisis (2007–2013). The use of such schemes to preserve jobs in companies experiencing a temporary drop in demand received strong backing from the European Commission and the Council of the European Union with the introduction of the SURE instrument (Eurofound, 2021).

Young people were in a particularly vulnerable situation as regards labour market participation, access to and preservation of employment. Short-time working schemes were usually targeted at the general population and not exclusively at young people. Examples of measures supporting youth employment were also found, however, mainly in the form of incentives to employers, but also measures to support job creation, entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Short-time work and financial support

Some measures aimed to secure the employment and income of workers, including young people, in companies experiencing a temporary reduction in demand and thus work. Although not covered in detail in this report, general short-time working schemes played a key role in the context of the pandemic, aiming to secure employment during economically difficult times and to prevent employment relationships being terminated.

In **Sweden**, the 'Short-time work allowance', targeting the general population, allowed employers in the private sector to apply for financial support for short-time work. The measure aimed to save jobs by easing the financial burden of wage costs for companies experiencing challenges. Employers affected by temporary and serious financial difficulties could receive support for six months (with a possible extension for another three months); working time could be reduced by up to 80% and the support was intended to correspond to 72% of the costs incurred by the employer.

In **Latvia**, the 'Idle time allowance' for employees of companies with reduced revenue, was considered particularly beneficial for young people. Companies affected by the COVID-19 crisis could apply for an allowance, paid directly to their employees who were on reduced hours or furloughed, subject to criteria regarding the decrease in operating income of the company. A furloughed employee could receive 70% of their average monthly gross salary during August–October 2020 (between €330 and €1,000 per month). Although the allowance was available to all employees, a statistically typical recipient was a young woman from Riga working as a waitress who had received a stable but low salary over the past three years, not above 80% of the average salary in the country. The largest number of recipients of the allowance were between the ages of 26 and 35.

In other cases, short-time working schemes were made available to workers on particular types of contracts. **Austria** provided a 'COVID-19 short-time work for apprentices' scheme, enabling companies to reduce apprentices' working hours by a certain percentage for a specified period. The company received funding from the PES for those hours not worked and in turn the apprentice received their compensation in full. To make good use of apprentices' downtime and ensure that they received training, they were also offered the opportunity to attend external courses covering relevant content. According to the PRO-GE manufacturing union, around 48,000 apprentices were on short-time work at the peak of the pandemic – almost 50% of all company apprentices.

Incentives for employers to hire young workers

Countries launched various measures to stimulate demand for young employees, apprentices or interns through incentives to employers – for example, through partial coverage of their wage costs. These measures were intended to facilitate young people's entry into the labour market and aid their transition to employment from unemployment, inactivity or education. Entry into the labour market through such a scheme can act as a stepping stone towards a more stable position or other better opportunity in the future.

Some countries launched measures to support the recruitment of young people and the conversion of temporary contracts to permanent ones. The main goal was to incentivise the employment of new young workers during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as to prevent the dismissal of young workers by reducing labour costs for employers.

In **Italy**, exemptions from welfare contributions for employers hiring workers under 35 years of age meant that employers could be exempted from paying 50–100% (depending on the economic situation of the region in question during the pandemic) of social security contributions for all people under the age of 35 hired on an open-ended contract in 2019 or 2020. To support youth employment, only employers who had not undertaken individual dismissal procedures over the six months prior to the hiring of young workers were entitled to apply for the exemption. This legislative provision extended previously existing incentives by introducing changes in the eligibility criteria and temporarily increasing the age limit to include as many young workers as possible. Nonetheless, the tax exemption did not apply in some cases – for instance, when young people were hired on temporary contracts (apprenticeships, fixed-term contracts, collaboration and project contracts, intermittent contracts) or to work in public bodies.

Through Emergency Order No. 92 of 28 May 2020 establishing active support measures for employees and employers in the context of the epidemiological situation caused by the spread of coronavirus, **Romania** provided incentives to employers to offer permanent contracts to young people (aged 16–29) listed as unemployed by employment agencies. For a year, employers received a monthly reimbursement of 50% of these employees' salaries (capped at €520). The costs incurred by the unemployment insurance budget were covered by EU funds. The intended long-term outcomes were the prevention of youth unemployment and the encouragement of long-term contracts for young people. Efficient coordination between the bodies involved in the measure's implementation and the creation of an online platform that made the process quick and effective were key factors in the measure's success.

Support for both open-ended and fixed-term contracts for young people was provided in **France**, through the 'One young person, one solution' plan, whereby recruitment bonuses were paid to companies that hired young people under 26 years of age on permanent contracts or fixed-term contracts of more than three months (€4,000) or work/study programmes (€5,000–8,000). The employer was required not to have made someone in the position concerned redundant for economic reasons during 2020. The objective was to push companies to recruit quickly, to prevent young people becoming detached from the labour market. In mid-November, more than 100,000 applications were submitted for financial support towards hiring a young person. The accessibility and widespread awareness of the measure were key factors in its effectiveness, but its popularity may also indicate a deadweight effect, since some employers would have hired young people anyway.

Similar measures were identified in other countries. In **Ireland**, through the July Jobs Stimulus, 8,000 recruitment subsidies of up to €7,500 over 2 years were made available under the JobsPlus scheme for employers to hire someone aged under 30 who was on the Live Register or receiving the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. In **Portugal**, the ATIVAR.PT incentive offered financial support to employers hiring an unemployed person registered for at least six months at the PES. Employers converting a fixed-term contract into an open-ended contract could be entitled to a 'conversion award'. In **Cyprus**, a scheme providing incentives for the employment of people aged 15–29 who are NEET was relaunched with an increased budget in October 2020; the target was to bring 1,150 NEETs into the labour market. The scheme was expected to benefit more young graduates during the COVID-19 crisis than in previous implementation periods. An important condition of the scheme is that the recruitment of a young NEET should represent a net increase in the number of employees in the business. As an example of an interesting intervention promoted at local level, in **Finland** the city of Hämeenlinna's summer job grant encourages employers to hire young people over the summer. In many cases, the grant creates an opportunity for a young person to work for the first time and gather valuable professional experience. The grant can be a strong incentive to small enterprises to hire a summer employee. Similar measures have been implemented for years by several municipalities, many of which made the grant more generous to counteract the consequences of COVID-19.

Other measures focused instead on incentivising employers to preserve jobs. The aim was to help enterprises pay their employees' salaries, to maintain employment and the businesses' viability.

Some of these measures did not specifically target young people but are of relevance considering that they are more likely to hold temporary contracts. This is true of the 'Temporary emergency measure for the preservation of jobs' in **the Netherlands**, which covered part of the wage costs of workers for companies having suffered a revenue loss of more than 20%. The government subsidised up to 90% of the wage costs of staff for up to three months. This applied to workers of any age on permanent contracts and flexible contracts, including zero-hour contracts and on call contracts, which are typically held by young people. Similarly, in **Bulgaria** the 'Payment for maintaining employment in the COVID context' offered financial compensation to companies that managed to maintain workers in employment despite reduced revenue.

More targeted measures providing support for preserving jobs were also identified, with either a sectoral focus (financial support for the sports sector in **Croatia**) or the aim of reaching a particular target group (again in **Croatia**, support for the preservation of jobs in workshops for people with disabilities).

Job creation measures

Job creation was boosted not only through specific incentives to employers but also other measures creating favourable conditions for specific occupations and sectors – including using state interventions to create employment in the public sector.

In **Sweden**, the 'Summer jobs for young people' scheme aims to increase opportunities for young people to work over the summer for local governments. This is a regular activity undertaken by the municipalities; however, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the national government increased funding to local governments to create more summer jobs and allocated €18 million for this purpose in spring 2020. In July 2020, the government added another €10 million so that the municipalities could offer young people jobs during autumn 2020. Through this investment, municipalities provided more young people with an insight into, and experience of, working life. However, the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to provide places because of closures and restrictions on various activities, such as elderly care, preschool care and other care-based services.

Another example of job expansion in public administration is the AIRE (Activation, Impetus and Recovery of Employment) initiative in **Spain**. Promoted by the regional government of Andalusia, it aimed to help Andalusian city councils alleviate the social and economic effects of restrictions on mobility and economic activity related to COVID-19. Specifically, the objective of this measure was to promote job creation by encouraging the temporary hiring of unemployed people to work on projects that would improve their employability by providing them with work experience. These temporary contracts were intended to provide public support to facilitate the beneficiaries' transfer to work in the private sector after having gained experience. The aim was the direct creation of (temporary) employment in a territory historically impacted by unemployment and that, owing to the importance of the service sector (and specifically tourism), had been badly affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

Entrepreneurship support

Finally, other measures supported youth entrepreneurship and self-employment.

In **Malta**, the Malta Information Technology Agency YouStartIT Validator (Pre-Accelerator Programme) and YouStartIT Accelerator Programme, a training programme for early-stage tech start-ups, was revamped to tackle the aftermath of the pandemic. The programme aims to validate the ideas of young start-up business founders and test their viability. Up to 10 prospective start-up projects are accepted to participate in the validator phase, after which four of the best projects are chosen to join the accelerator phase. The programme was re-engineered to be delivered completely online. The use of videoconferencing meant that face-to-face sessions were replaced by interactive online sessions held twice weekly. Each team had an additional private session with their mentor on a weekly basis. Moreover, the 2020 edition sought out innovative business ideas that could help to address the growing demand for fast-track innovations and business continuity solutions brought about by the pandemic.

In **Belgium**, the Transition Premium measure, which supports self-employment after unemployment, was expanded to target not only jobseekers aged 45 and over who are starting their own business after unemployment but also people under 30 years of age in the same situation.

Support for internships, apprenticeships and VET

Incentives for employers to take on apprentices and interns

Apprenticeships have suffered serious disruptions because of the restrictions introduced to counteract the pandemic: interruptions caused by sectors closing down and downsizing owing to deteriorating economic conditions for companies. Several countries have seen a general decrease in the number of apprenticeship opportunities since the pandemic started, and governments have reacted with incentives for employers to hire apprentices and interns.

In **Austria**, a bonus for companies creating apprenticeships was created in response to the threat posed by the crisis to an estimated 10,000 apprenticeship places, with many sectors – including commerce, handicrafts, tourism and leisure, and industry – being particularly affected. In order to prevent a large decrease in apprenticeship places, a bonus payment (€2,000 in the first year of the apprenticeship, increasing to €2,500 or €3,000 for smaller companies) was offered to companies employing apprentices and those taking on apprentices through an inter-company scheme. The bonus payment was modelled on a similar one that resulted in the creation of an additional 12,500 apprenticeship places between 2003 and 2008. Of the €62.7 million earmarked, in December 2020 €34 million had been paid for the employment of 17,638 apprentices. The implementation and delivery of the measure were effective, thanks to pre-existing and well-functioning communication channels and infrastructure.
A disadvantage is that a deadweight effect cannot be ruled out – even companies that were not struggling because of COVID-19 could benefit from the support. This drawback was viewed as an acceptable side-effect of a measure, the urgent implementation of which was deemed necessary. If future versions are to be implemented, more restrictive eligibility criteria could be considered.

Germany launched Securing Apprenticeships, a scheme providing direct financial employment support for vocational training and apprenticeships through a bundle of interventions to be implemented throughout 2020 and 2021. This measure targets small and medium-sized enterprises with bonuses (€2,000–3,000) to counterbalance the negative economic effects of lockdowns, social distancing and other pandemic-related restrictions on economic activities, as well as to incentivise small and medium-sized enterprises to maintain or increase the number of apprenticeships they provide (by mid-June 2020, over 10,000 apprenticeship contracts had been cancelled). This new programme draws on experiences with similar measures tackling youth unemployment and was designed based on demand from and in collaboration with social partners. Despite the existence of the programme, preliminary evidence shows that fewer apprenticeships were provided in 2020 than in 2019.

Similar interventions were implemented in other countries too. **France** offered an 'Exceptional assistance to employers recruiting for apprenticeships' scheme as part of the broader 'One young person, one solution' plan. This provided companies with €5,000–8,000, with the objective of supporting the hiring of first-year apprentices and responding to the phenomenon of 'apprenticeship orphans' (around 30,000 young people who had started their training but were unable to find an employer to continue it with). The number of private sector contracts signed in 2020 was higher than in 2019.

Luxembourg temporarily introduced a 'single premium' (from €1,500 to €5,000) for the promotion of apprenticeships in the field of vocational training, to encourage training organisations to maintain apprenticeship contracts, offer more apprenticeship positions and take over apprenticeship contracts interrupted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Other incentives consisted of waiving some costs for companies. In **Luxembourg**, during the crisis, employers were no longer required to pay the co-payment owed to the state in the event of a reintegration employment contract. This measure was intended to incentivise firms to give practical training to a jobseeker registered for at least three months with the Agency for the Development of Employment. A contract was concluded between the employer, the young person and the agency. Under the new measure, the state then reimbursed the employer for all the compensation paid to the young jobseeker. This also applied for the duration of any extension to the contract. The following conditions had to be met by the employer: they had to offer the young person a real prospect of employment at the end of the contract, or at least an improvement in their employability; provide training lasting 12 months with a maximum extension of 6 months; and give priority to hiring the participant in the event of recruitment to the company.

Maintaining and increasing training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities

Particular attention has been paid during the crisis to supporting and increasing offers of training, internship and apprenticeship opportunities. One example is the additional financial support for internships provided through the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market (SBB), the organisation ensuring cooperation between the VET sector and business in **the Netherlands**. The support was provided under an action plan implemented by SBB and based on intensified cooperation with schools and companies. Efforts were made to ensure that internships and apprenticeships were more visible on various websites and to find creative solutions to maintain and increase offers of such positions. The extra funding helped SBB to support an additional 17,500 internship and apprenticeship opportunities.

Several governments committed to increased funding for training offers. In **Sweden**, the government increased opportunities for further education and training throughout the country. This included increased funding for regional vocational adult education and greater support for vocational higher education, with new places, short courses and course packages, as well as various pilot projects to continue training despite restrictions and thus enable people to complete interrupted training courses. Similar commitments were put in place in **Portugal** through the

new ATIVAR.PT Internships measure, which aimed to strengthen support for the integration of young people into the labour market and for vocational retraining of unemployed young people in the aftermath of the pandemic, while **Cyprus** renewed a previously existing scheme for vocational training of unemployed people in the public and third sectors.

In some cases, direct financial support was provided to participants. For example, the scheme '**Netherlands** continues learning through training' was part of a temporary crisis package for which €50 million was made available, offering development advice and (online) training courses. Through this temporary scheme, trainers, trainers' collectives or partnerships could offer online training programmes free of charge to participants, who could apply for a subsidy; the aim was to develop the knowledge and skills of participants and increase their employability. Similarly, **France** aimed to increase the availability of training courses leading to qualifications, in this case with a sectoral focus: to prevent the number of young jobseekers from increasing as a result of the crisis, the Skills Investment Plan provided for an additional 100,000 skills training courses for young people, focusing on the priority sectors in the France Relance recovery plan (digital and green transition, care sector reform, and so on). In **Spain**, an aid and training programme, aimed at providing free training to support the development of digital skills among young people and thus the digital economy, was reinforced to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. Through a combination of training and orientation services, the programme aims to promote youth employment in the digital economy and the integration of NEETs into the labour market through improved ICT skills.

New forms of training were also launched. In **Slovenia**, the employment of final-year undergraduate students as substitute teachers in schools enabled students in university education courses to be involved in the education of primary and secondary students under the mentorship of full-time teachers. The participating students did not acquire the usual rights that teachers would expect from an employment relationship, but the experience gained counted towards the professional experience they would need to accumulate before they could apply for the professional teaching certificate examination. In **Italy**, as a reaction to the suspension of internships at national level, the regional government of Le Marche launched the New Youth Guarantee, offering internships and apprenticeships. The scheme created opportunities for NEETs to take up paid work during a phase of the pandemic when the labour market was badly affected; it was open to NEETs from other regions, on the condition that they moved to Le Marche for the year of the internship or apprenticeship.

Adaptation of delivery modes

A flexible approach to vocational education, to the extent permissible within COVID-19 restrictions, provided one strategy to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic on the delivery of vocational training.

In **Spain**, through the 'Flexibility of vocational training internships' package, the Ministry of Education collaborated with regional governments to implement greater flexibility in relation to company internships for VET students. Measures adopted included the exemption of some students from the need to undertake initial VET internships, reducing the number of hours required for an internship, remote internships and the substitution of other equivalent activities for internships. Moreover, one of the main measures within this package was the total or partial exemption from the requirement for VET final-year students in the health and social services fields to undertake workplace training. Likewise, the requirement for these students to have one year of work experience before they could be hired was eliminated. Instead, they were enabled to enter employment immediately, owing to the urgent demand for health professionals. It is thought that the introduction of greater flexibility in the longer term may accelerate digitisation processes in VET, particularly with regard to the organisation of work and evaluation of tasks using digital technologies during internships.

New analyses and strategies

Maintaining the availability of training and apprenticeship opportunities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also required updated analyses of labour market shortages using new methods, as well as the creation of strategic plans and guidance.

In **Malta**, for example, the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) attempted to forecast the number of future job opportunities for current and future apprentices by asking companies to 'pledge' to take a certain number of students in 2021.

In **Denmark**, a tripartite agreement on extraordinary assistance to students, apprentices and companies included, in addition to wage subsidies to companies hiring apprentices, a number of initiatives aimed at providing students with easier access to school-based practical training. The idea is to ensure that young people will be able to complete their education if they lose their apprenticeship as a result of the crisis.

Outreach, career guidance and individualised support

Employment support and social services were generally disrupted during the pandemic, with drastically changed conditions in place for the delivery of services. This also affected outreach, career guidance and individualised support for young people. In order to preserve some services and ensure their relevance in

the context of the pandemic, Member States adopted measures to adapt the delivery and content of support and to strengthen the capacity of providers and their staff to make the transition.

Adaptation of support delivery and content

The main way in which services were adapted was digitalisation, which allowed them to continue. While the shift to digital services has generally worked well, there have been concerns about the exclusion of young people lacking the technical skills or the devices needed to participate in online activities. Some organisations reacted by providing support to beneficiaries in terms of digital skills and devices. On the other hand, some young people who would have been reluctant to participate in face-to-face youth work activities or did not have access to them because of geographical distance joined in when service delivery moved online.

In some cases, whole youth services moved to digital. A shift to online took place in many national youth services. In **Malta**, a core function of its national youth agency (Aġenzija Żgħażagħ) is managing the Youth Information Service One Stop Shop. During the pandemic, some services were shifted to online platforms. This included meetings allowing young adults to interact and engage on topics of interest; live sessions exploring issues relevant to young people; and online cafes enabling young people to socialise online. Similarly, **Finland** digitised its Ohjaamo one-stop guidance centre, which offers various services (help with studies, employment, housing and so on) to people under the age of 30 and which has a presence all over the country. When the centres had to close to customers because of the COVID-19 outbreak, many of them started providing services using digital platforms popular among young people. In **Czechia**, the managing authority for the Employment Operational Programme conducted an assessment of the potential impacts of the pandemic on the implementation of projects financed by the programme. The authority came up with a strategy, 'Labour offices: Provision of counselling and education in electronic/telephone form during emergency measures', to allow beneficiaries to perform their activities using appropriate alternative approaches and to cover the costs incurred. This also included interruptions to or reductions in the implementation of key activities. It helped implementing organisations to adopt crisis measures and shift to the provision of remote services during the early stages of the pandemic. The strategy allowed exceptions to the regular provision of support for education, retraining and counselling, which used to be provided exclusively on a face-to-face basis, and services were in some cases moved online. The counselling and education department of each labour office adapted to the pandemic according to its situation and the resources available.

The ways in which specific projects and activities were delivered underwent similar digital shifts. This was the case in **Estonia** with regard to the provision of individualised support for NEETs through social media and street work. Youth workers started using new social media tools alongside already familiar platforms, using them in new ways. This included joining more young people's groups on social media, creating and encouraging young people to take part in online challenges, and organising livestreams. Youth workers also received additional training on online youth work. Another example is the digitalisation of workshop activities aimed at young people in **Finland** as a reaction to the closure of face-to-face workshops (providing coaching and opportunities to do practical work, and offering a communal learning environment where young people could get help with issues related to studies, managing work and life, and improving their employability, as well as getting support from peers). Regional state administrative agencies, the funding authorities, also granted funds for digitalisation and other costs caused by the crisis. The target group was people under the age of 29 who struggle with unemployment or life management issues. In the beginning, digital workshops targeted mainly the young people who had participated in face-to-face activities prior to the pandemic. However, when activities moved online the implementing actors noticed that it was possible to reach out to young people who needed these services but who had never participated in the face-to-face workshops. Therefore, the services reached more young people thanks to digitalisation. While for many centres, this was just a temporary transition, others have shifted to a hybrid mode of delivery and continue to offer parts of their services online. In addition, the organisations that tested digital delivery are now better prepared to return to it if it becomes necessary owing to an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases.

Furthermore, large-scale youth events were successfully delivered online. In **Italy**, Job & Orienta – a national annual event organised by the Ministry for Labour and Social Policies, focusing on schools and universities, orientation, school-to-work transition, training and work inclusion for young people – was delivered online. This online version was adapted in terms not only of delivery mode but also of content, with particular attention paid to the relevance of digitalisation in relation to youth, employment and mobility.

From a content perspective, some services for young people were provided with additional funding and/or gained increased relevance in the context of the pandemic. In **Austria**, youth coaching to prevent school dropout gained importance. The coaching services aim to identify and support pupils at risk of dropping out of school and to ensure a successful transition between school and work or training. As a result of increased uncertainty for school leavers regarding their career

options, an increase in youth coaching occurred. An additional €3.5 million was allocated to training/education preparation and youth coaching during the pandemic (the regular annual budget is €37.2 million), partly to help in shifting service delivery to digital. In **Luxembourg**, FutureSkills enables participants to receive training to strengthen their digital skills, so that their skills better match labour demand. After training (in soft skills, digital skills, project management and data automation), beneficiaries can put their new skills into practice by completing a six-month internship in the public sector.

Institutional capacity building and cooperation

To help organisations and staff in charge of service provision for young people adjust their delivery modes to the pandemic context, capacity-building and training activities were conducted in several countries.

In **Estonia**, the Ministry of Social Affairs provided guidelines to local governments on how to continue the implementation of the Youth Guarantee during the COVID-19 crisis. This included emphasising the importance of maintaining communication with young people, suggestions regarding e-solutions that could be used in addition to phone and email, and recommendations on sources of information for NEETs. Estonia also offered financial support to local-level youth work services through calls for funding aimed at providing needs-based support for youth centres and restoring local-level work.

Various initiatives also helped to prepare youth workers to operate in the pandemic context. In **Hungary**, the 'Let's teach for Hungary' programme created a special leaflet for mentors and coaches with guidance on how to mentor during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mentors adapted to using digital tools through peer-to-peer learning, such as online brainstorming sessions and knowledge-sharing forums where people could exchange experiences. The main programme website was developed to support online activity. In **Estonia**, online training courses for youth workers prepared participants to adapt to working in the COVID-19 crisis situation.

New forms of cooperation were also started as a reaction to the crisis. In **Denmark**, the Partnership for Graduates in Work was created by the ministries of employment and education with key players in the field: representatives of social partners, trade unions, municipalities, unemployment insurance funds, higher education institutions, business organisations, companies and students. Through joint efforts, knowledge sharing, practical solutions and cross-cutting initiatives, the partnership aims to ease the transition from education to work, taking into account the difficult situation resulting from the COVID-19 crisis and the significant increase in the number of graduates receiving unemployment benefits.

Support for staying in or (re-)entering education

Various measures supported students to stay in or (re-)enter education, both directly and through assistance to educational institutions. These included support for the transition to online learning, financial aid for students, new and adapted pathways for (re)integration into education, the provision of additional places in tertiary education institutions, and adapted conditions for taking exams during the pandemic.

Support for the transition to online learning

To help in the shift towards online learning, several Member States adopted measures to support students and schools with digital devices and digitalisation processes. In various countries, when the first school closures happened because of the pandemic and distance learning was first implemented, it became evident that some students could not be reached by distance learning because of a lack of access to digital learning devices or a (stable) internet connection. Lockdowns and home schooling deepened existing inequalities in education, with the most severe long-term consequences likely to affect children from socially disadvantaged and migrant households. This happened in a context where broader support for the digital shift in education was necessary, including to keep technical systems running and to provide teachers with sufficient methodological approaches and devices.

Support was provided to students mainly through schools. Students in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations without sufficient means to purchase equipment and who would not otherwise be able to take part in distance learning were provided with digital devices. In **Austria**, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research procured digital notebooks and tablets for secondary schools, which then loaned these devices to their pupils. This ensured that students had access to the infrastructure required for distance learning. The Austrian states also provided students with the mobile devices needed for distance learning and supplemented this with training. In **Ireland**, €10 million in funding was provided under the Digital Strategy ICT Infrastructure Grant for 2019–2020 to support schools in their efforts to help students and teachers to engage with distance learning. In **Romania**, a national programme purchased 250,000 electronic devices with an internet connection for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary students in full-time or part-time education or taking evening classes.

In **Belgium**, 15,000 laptops (secondhand and newly purchased) were made available to Flemish secondary school students living in a precarious situation. This was on top of 12,000 devices already made available

previously. Furthermore, 1,000 devices were provided to students in tertiary education. Similar measures were identified in **Lithuania**, where the National Agency for Education bought 15,000 tablets and 20,000 laptops for schools, which were distributed to municipalities according to the numbers of students from socially vulnerable families; in **Greece**, where several schools were provided with tablets and laptops by the Ministry of Education; and in **Germany**, which launched an 'Action programme for delivery of mobile devices'. The federal government bore most of the cost of the programme (€500 million), while the German states contributed a smaller amount (€50 million). States can apply for funding under the action programme and then use the funds for the delivery of digital devices to pupils in need. Fixed coefficients determine how much funding each state can apply for. States organise the purchase and delivery of the digital devices, which remain school property although pupils use them at home.

While the support measures implemented in this regard made an important contribution to the digitalisation of education, the provision of digital devices, for example, is no substitute for the public infrastructure and qualified teachers that enable high-quality digital education, and better internet access alone is not sufficient to bridge the digital gap. The provision of digital devices needs to be accompanied by human support as well.

Financial aid for students

Some students enjoy a stable financial situation thanks to existing student loans or family support, but many work part-time to secure an income. Students were a group of (part-time) employees hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Governmental pandemic responses, including social distancing measures, lockdowns and temporary occupational bans for some sectors, reduced the number of available student jobs. Several countries reacted to this situation by providing financial aid for students in the form of grants or loans with favourable interest rates and state guarantees to enable young people to prolong their studies or to (re-)enter education or training. These measures are relevant in the context of pandemic-related loss of income for many students, with the possible consequence of university dropout. By design, they cannot address the larger, structural problem of educational inequalities, while in implementation there were issues related to technical problems and delays in delivery.

Allowances and one-off payments

Some measures offered one-off financial aid to students experiencing hardship.

In **Germany**, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research allocated €100 million to 'student bridge funds', or interim financial aid, to help those students who could prove that they were faced with financial hardship caused by the pandemic, who needed immediate help and who were unable to overcome their pandemic-related hardship by making use of other support. Students who successfully applied to this needs-based scheme received between €100 and €500 as a non-repayable grant. Applications could be completed only online. More than 150,000 students applied for bridge funding.

The Netherlands allocated €200 million to new allowances to compensate for the expiration of student grants and for extra costs caused by delayed studies. The aim was to support students who were about to graduate and protect students whose entitlement to grants was going to expire, while minimising study delays caused by the COVID-19 crisis. Students did not have to apply for the allowance themselves. If they were entitled to the allowance, they were notified before the payment took place. The amounts ranged from €150 to €1,500 depending on the type of institution and the length of the delay in studies. Since this measure was specifically intended to support students in the final phase of their studies, students in earlier stages of their education were not covered.

In some cases, requirements for accessing student support were relaxed. In **Poland**, the Anti-Crisis Shield included new regulations that provided additional social and financial support to students while simplifying the process for delivering aid. In **Finland**, the number of university credits required for full-time students to receive social insurance aid was temporarily reduced from 45 to 35. **Sweden** implemented a measure entitled 'Removal of income ceiling for student aid to facilitate work in essential services', so that students who received higher incomes during 2020 than the limit initially set were entitled to keep all of their student grants and loans.

In a critical phase during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the risk that a significant share of potential new university students would decide not to enrol in a university degree programme was high. In response, the Ministry for Education, University and Research in **Italy** allocated extraordinary special funding to support and incentivise students to enrol. Some €40 million was allocated to extra university scholarships and €165 million to expanding the number of students exempted from the payment of university fees. The main goal was to financially support young people in economic need who wished to enrol in a university programme but who were unable to afford the fees.

Loans and better borrowing conditions

Some countries launched measures providing students with better borrowing conditions. In **Hungary**, the maximum monthly amount of Diákhitel 1 (Student Loan 1) was increased to help students in higher education continue their studies. Moreover, an additional measure, Diákhitel Plusz (Student Loan Plus) was

launched to provide an all-purpose, interest-free loan for students who had lost their job or for whom financing their studies had otherwise become more difficult during the crisis. University students were eligible for a €1,400 lump sum. The loan period was set at between one and five years, with repayment to begin after a one-year grace period. In the first few months, 30,000 students applied, and later about 100 students applied per day. **Denmark** ensured that all students in education could make use of increased borrowing capacities in order to protect their disposable income, which was threatened by job losses.

Other measures supported student loan moratoria. In **Hungary**, by November 2020, of the 114,000 clients of the Student Loan Centre, 35% had made use of the voluntary repayment moratorium, while the rest continued to repay their student loans. Similarly, in **Poland**, the Anti-Crisis Shield provided the possibility of suspending the repayment of a student loan for a maximum period of six months.

Germany implemented an extended regular period of study and a parallel extension of student loans. The measure allowed students to continue their education despite delays experienced during the pandemic (for instance, courses or exams cancelled). In particular, students automatically continued receiving student loans who would otherwise have lost eligibility status after the end of their regular period of study.

Pathways for (re)integration into education and training

New and improved pathways for reintegration into education and training involved the development of less formal and more flexible forms of education and training. Examples include (a shift to) online or distance learning, flexible learning pathways, work-based learning, bridging programmes and second chance education programmes, in particular for young people who might be discouraged from continuing their education and training in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Public support for effective distance learning and new pathways proved vital to enabling educational institutions to support students, reducing educational and broader developmental delays caused by pandemic-related disruptions to education and training.

Various initiatives supported the shift to online education. In **Czechia**, the #NaDalku web portal for distance education was prepared by DigiKoalice, an open group of representatives of state institutions, IT companies, the ICT sector, educational institutions, academia, non-profit organisations and others that wanted to contribute to increasing digital literacy. The new web portal offered services and materials for use by schools and educational institutions to support the shift to distance learning. Similarly, the **Greek** programme 'Koronodos: We live at home – we learn at home' provided information to education and training programmes at all levels on distance learning, and the **Czech** 'Methodology in distance learning' measure established a web portal offering methodological recommendations on distance learning. The portal summarised the legal, organisational and pedagogical elements of distance learning and was intended to help schools to establish effective ways of working when required to transition to distance learning.

Some interventions provided integrated 'school catch-up' support, covering different aspects of the students' educational life and involving various actors in the field of education. For instance, acknowledging the importance of the school system in helping students overcome difficulties, **Luxembourg** implemented the 'School catch-up for all' programme, involving: (1) a summer school during the last two weeks of the summer holidays for primary and secondary school students, (2) catch-up support during the first trimester of the new term, (3) learning materials offered via the www.schouldoheem.lu digital platform and (4) a helpline for educational advice. Similarly, in **the Netherlands**, schools and educational institutions could apply to a subsidy scheme for catch-up and support programmes in education during 2020–2021, enabling them to offer pupils and students extra help to overcome learning and development deficits or study delays resulting from the COVID-19 crisis. Schools could use the subsidies to offer extra teaching in addition to the normal hours, or to organise programmes during the summer or autumn holidays or at weekends. VET institutions could also use the subsidies to offer more guidance to students on finding internships. The subsidy scheme does not prescribe the content or format of the catch-up or support programmes, leaving teachers free to determine the best ways of supporting their students. Common approaches have been: extended school days, support during school time, summer/holiday schools, remedial teaching in small groups, extra support materials and, to a lesser extent, one-to-one tuition, provisions for distance learning, support to teachers and trainers, and strengthening parental involvement.

Other examples of measures in this regard consist of more specialised, tailored online education provision. In **Croatia**, the Zagreb School of Business contributed to the improvement and development of students' entrepreneurial skills by providing free web lectures for young people on education, marketing and entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 crisis. In **Austria**, unemployed young people who were registered with the PES and received unemployment benefits could participate in the 'Youth and future-oriented professions' scheme to complete education or training in a 'future-oriented' professional field. The goal was to bring as many young people back into employment as possible by improving their educational qualifications, thus improving their personal situation. To do so, the

scheme offers education and training opportunities – from finishing an apprenticeship to pursuing tertiary studies – to suit different groups of young people.

Providing additional places in higher education

Some countries tried to counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth employment by increasing young people's chances of entering further education, and to strengthen their employability and labour market relevance by providing more places on courses relevant to sectors experiencing labour shortages.

In **Finland**, over 10,000 additional study places were created in traditional universities and universities of applied sciences. In order to improve matching in the labour market, a large proportion of the new places created were relevant to the following sectors and occupations: nursing, teaching in early childhood education, advanced industry, ICT and economics.

The **Swedish** government expanded the number of places in higher education institutions, as well as places on summer courses, so that more people would be eligible to enter further education and training (for example, in healthcare professions). In addition, funding to higher education institutions was increased to strengthen their capacity and enable them to work on distance learning. Funding was allocated to internet-based education through massive open online courses, which are free of charge and open to the public.

Changes to exams and university enrolment

Given the disruptions in education resulting from school closures, it became important to find ways to ensure that students could graduate and continue on to the next educational level. Several countries made adjustments to exam settings and university enrolment.

In **Estonia**, for example, the law was temporarily changed so that final exams were not a prerequisite for graduation in 2020. The final 'basic school' exams were abolished and graduation was based on grades. Some schools decided to use an e-test to assess pupils for admission to the next educational level instead of the final exam grades as usual. In high schools, final exams were made voluntary, but having passed some exams was a criterion for applying for a university place. Moreover, exam dates were postponed so that students who needed more time to prepare for the exams received it. Similarly, the University of **Malta** allowed students still waiting for their final exams results to be admitted to their course of choice as 'probationary students'. This enabled young adults to continue their studies. Upon receiving their results, students who satisfied the entry requirements would subsequently be registered as regular students. In **Sweden**, national university aptitude tests that usually take place in the spring were cancelled and instead the second round of aptitude tests, held in the autumn, were the sole basis for assessment (the test is normally held twice a year and repetitions of the tests are allowed, but they were not on this occasion).

When university courses moved online, not all students experienced the same studying conditions. Several countries anticipated that some students would struggle to meet all the requirements to proceed to the next academic year. Some countries promoted simplified enrolment procedures for the 2020/2021 academic year. For example, in **Slovenia** full-time students could proceed to the next academic year even without having accumulated the number of credits normally required.

Social protection and prevention of hardship

The economic contraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on household earnings (Eurofound, 2021). According to Eurofound survey data, in July 2020 one in three Europeans reported that their financial situation had worsened in the previous three months; both unemployed workers and employees whose working hours were reduced because of the COVID-19 crisis have suffered financial difficulties (Eurofound, 2020b). Moreover, the impact of the crisis is regressive, with poorer households more likely to be negatively impacted (European Anti-Poverty Network, 2020).

New and improved social protection measures

Several measures were launched to offer young people – young professionals, students or new graduates – easier access to and greater coverage by social protection during the pandemic. For instance, **Spain** eased eligibility requirements for young people under the age of 30 to benefit from the minimum income, while **Belgium** expanded and facilitated access to an existing temporary unemployment measure for the general population, which is also available to young people in the final years of secondary school and who combine school with work in a company. If a company employing such a young person had to temporarily shut down its activities, it could apply for temporary unemployment for the pupil as well; if the application was accepted, the young person received 65% of their wages and in some cases additional financial support.

Measures for students included amendments to the Law on Employment in **Lithuania** to entitle higher education and VET students to unemployment status, waiving provisions that had prevented the granting of unemployment status to people studying full-time in higher education or in formal vocational training

programmes. This enabled students to access all the social benefits available to unemployed people, and all the services and measures provided by the PES. According to data from the PES, in June–October 2020, young people accounted for approximately 25% of all beneficiaries in the unemployed group. Between January and November 2020, the number of young people registered increased by more than 50% compared with the previous year. This indicates the deteriorating situation of young people in the labour market. Similarly, **France** announced an emergency allowance and support to prevent hardship among young graduates, consisting of a combination of financial and PES support for young graduates experiencing difficulties in finding their first job because of the crisis. The financial aid consisted of a maximum of €500 per month for eligible young people.

For young professionals, **Latvia** implemented a new unemployment benefit for those who had completed their studies during the year prior to the pandemic and had become unemployed because of the COVID-19 crisis. The new benefit amounted to €500 for the first two months and €375 in the third and fourth months. It was paid while the individual was unemployed but for no longer than four months and no later than 31 December 2020. In **Italy**, Law Decree No. 18/2020, introduced in March 2020, was a measure to provide income support to those workers who were partly or totally prevented from working by the pandemic and who were unprotected by provisions designed to support the majority of the Italian workforce. The law also provided for one-off financial aid to young people enrolled in private social security funds. Amounting to €600 per person, this aid was also available to young professionals and young self-employed workers who had enrolled in a private social security fund in 2019 or during the first months of 2020. Another unemployment-related intervention was the 'Temporary bridging scheme for flexible workers' introduced in **the Netherlands**, which provided financial support for people on precarious contracts who had lost at least half of their income and who could not receive benefits. This included employees with zero-hour contracts, temporary workers and students with a part-time job who were not able to claim social security benefits or social assistance benefits and had insufficient means of support to make ends meet. The programme provided recipients with €550 gross per month during March–May 2020. The scheme covered only those young people not entitled to regular unemployment benefits; those without a job prior to the crisis or who lived off their student loans were not entitled to the support.

Overall, issues of coverage arose in certain cases, for instance for young people who did not have a job before the pandemic and could not access social security support.

Support to prevent hardship

Other forms of support to prevent and reduce social and economic hardship in the context of the pandemic included the provision of financial allowances and services to young people (often students) and their families.

For instance, in **Austria**, an extension of the entitlement to family allowance was designed as an initial response to the pandemic and the lockdown in spring 2020. The measure provided for a six-month increase in the period during which parents of university students were entitled to receive family allowance. **France** provided exceptional solidarity aid to households and young people under the age of 25 most exposed to financial difficulties linked to the COVID-19 crisis, in addition to the social assistance already paid monthly throughout the year. Young people under the age of 25 (apprentices, students in paid employment and non-students) who received personal housing assistance – a benefit intended to help recipients to pay rent on their accommodation – also received an additional €150 in aid. **Slovenia** also provided a one-off solidarity payment to 45,250 full-time students, replacing part of their regular income from part-time work.

Beyond purely financial support to disadvantaged families, some interventions also tackled other housing issues or provided in-kind support. In **Lithuania**, the measure 'Facilitation of conditions for young people/families to purchase/rent housing' amended existing legislation to ensure that incentives for the acquisition of a first home would be available to young families. Furthermore, in the event of a lockdown or quarantine period, families of school pupils who received free meals were to be provided with food rations or prepared meals while the children were learning from home.

Mental health support

While changes to the education and employment situations of young people were prominent topics of public debate across all EU Member States, the level of (policy) attention paid to the mental health consequences of the crisis on young people varied significantly across countries. Still, over time, the subject has gained increasing attention. Practitioners, academics, youth organisations and the social sector have generally highlighted the growing need for the provision of psychological assistance. Increased demand for mental health support has been observed.

In many countries, psychological support for young people is considered deficient. Critical shortages of university and school psychologists exist and many public mental health services target the general population rather than young people specifically. Persistent stigma regarding mental health issues, as well as the limited affordability of psychological support

services, compounds this situation. Moreover, psychological support is often unevenly distributed, with inequalities between, for instance, urban and rural areas. The gap in service provision is often filled by non-governmental organisations engaged in mental health projects and services.

According to information collected at national level, the demand for mental health support strongly increased during the pandemic, especially among young people. Various measures designed to support mental well-being identified in EU Member States are available to the general population, while only some interventions have a youth focus. Some existing services, such as phone helplines, were strengthened during the pandemic. Others, such as counselling or student peer support, either shifted to a digital setting or were newly launched in an online setting.

Overall, key success factors include rapid adaptation of service delivery through digitalisation and an understanding of the need to provide both face-to-face and online support. However, services faced challenges in adapting quickly to the new situation. These mainly related to the availability of specialised staff to cover additional services, organisational barriers and difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable young people, who often lack the digital tools and skills to access online assistance.

Helplines and online chat

To react to increased demand for mental health support, various free helpline services received financial assistance to provide more counselling hours per week, increase the hours of availability of the service or offer parallel online chat support. This partly counteracted the main shortcomings of these services, related to their limited availability.

In **Germany**, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth recognised that social distancing and lockdowns could result in situations of psychosocial hardship for young people and their families, and therefore provided links to helplines and other support structures on its website. It also ensured increased funding for various mental health helplines. An example is Nummer gegen Kummer – a leading helpline providing mental health support and guidance to young people and their parents. The extra funding amounted to €225,000 in 2020, and a similar additional amount was expected to be allocated in 2021. The budget expansion funded six additional hours of availability per week for the helpline for children and teenagers and four additional hours of availability for the helpline for parents, as well as additional hours for the online chat function.

Similar measures were also identified in **Belgium**, where additional subsidies for information and psychological support helplines for young people were made available by the Flemish government. Awel (a service providing online assistance to young people) used the additional resources to support and train volunteers and staff assisting young people, while Watwat.be (a youth information communication platform) used the extra support to collect, disseminate and verify the accuracy of youth-related information available online. There was also cooperation with social media influencers in Flanders, and investments were made in media advertising to provide young people with improved information. In **Austria**, additional financial support was used to expand the live chat hours of the Rat auf Draht telephone advice service for young people. In addition, the service was adapted to offer individual consultations to parents and caregivers in response to increased demand for assistance from adults. With a new action plan for reducing long-term negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public mental health, several youth-oriented measures were also launched in **Lithuania**, including supporting emotional, psychological and counselling support services provided by telephone, online and/or remotely by setting up a single helpline and improving the online chat system; the implementation and development of the www.pagalbasau.lt platform, providing information on how to maintain good emotional health during the pandemic; and expanded mental health services in youth centres and schools, including the provision of confidential counselling.

Various phone support lines for the general population were also strengthened or launched. For instance, the **Italian** 800.833.833 psychological support phone number, the **Czech** Helpline 1212, the **Croatian** Corona 2020 free psychological support phone service, the **Luxembourgish** Hotline 8002-8080, the **Slovenian** Psychosocial Support during the COVID-19 Epidemic line, the **Greek** Telephone Line 10306 and the **Portuguese** psychological counselling line SNS 24 all provided support with managing emotions and promoted psychological resilience in the context of the pandemic. Such helplines were generally supported by the country's ministry of health. In some cases, follow-up counselling after the call was also provided. In some countries, such as Portugal and Slovenia, the service was available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Digital shifts/delivery of complex support

Some complex integrated interventions and youth services were shifted online in order to ensure the continuation of the delivery of mental health support during the pandemic.

This included shifts to digital of broader psychological support services, such as that supported in **Ireland** by the ICT Infrastructure Grant (Youth Services). Since the pandemic, many youth services in Ireland have moved to a blended approach of in-person and online services. During 2021, the funding provided by the grant will be used to strengthen and build this new infrastructure across 1,600 services and clubs nationwide. Investment

will guarantee that those services will be in a position to support young people in the winter of 2021. The funding will contribute to covering the cost of procuring equipment such as servers, laptops and software, as well as specialist ICT equipment and peripheral items that are needed to support online contact with young people. The maximum grant for a local youth club is up to €400. The maximum grant for a single funded organisation or Youth Information Centre is up to €1,750. In **Hungary**, the Snétberger Music Talent Centre – providing musical education to disadvantaged students to promote social inclusion – organised online music courses alongside personal mentoring and support, which was available online and by telephone. Owing to the COVID-19 crisis, face-to-face teaching, mentoring, in-person musical rehearsals, live concerts and in-person auditions became impossible, but online teaching and mentoring replaced the on-campus spring and autumn rehearsals and ensured the programme's continuation.

Innovative mental health solutions were also launched through specific apps. The municipality of Rotterdam, in **the Netherlands**, launched the Grow It! app. While the app was already in development before the COVID-19 crisis, the circumstances led to an accelerated launch. The app was developed to gain further insights into the emotional well-being of young people aged 12–25. It is the first gamified smartphone app in the Netherlands to provide targeted support to young people experiencing feelings of fear, despondency, loneliness and stress. Young people can download the app for free on their phone. Five times a day, they receive a short questionnaire about their sleep patterns, exercise, emotions, social behaviour, loneliness and stress levels. They also participate in assignments and challenges designed to help young people share their feelings or become more active.

Counselling online

Several counselling services moved to online provision. In **Malta**, although the possibility of introducing an online counselling/therapy service had been under discussion by mental health services provider SOS Malta since 2019, the pandemic and surge in requests for mental health support encouraged the accelerated development of this service. SOS Malta drew from examples of international best practices, which were adapted to the local context. It offers online counselling/therapy sessions with a warranted professional based on a self-referral approach and is open to the general population.

Another example, specific to academia, is the Comfort Zone project set up by the Students' Parliament of the Republic of **Poland**. The project provides psychological support to higher education students and promotes awareness of mental health issues across the academic community. Articles, webinars and workshops for people engaged in student politics at their universities were provided. These workshops covered topics such as fear of coronavirus and an uncertain future; effective studying at home; how to take care of your mental health and where to seek help; relations with loved ones during quarantine; self-development and motivation; and depression. Between April and November 2020, about 1,000 online sessions with psychologists were conducted and a guide to the psychological support available at universities was created. All the information was presented in clear and accessible language and adapted to young people's needs, and social media platforms were used to reach different groups of people. The project was designed prior to the pandemic, but its rollout in 2020 meant that all the activities were adjusted to the new context.

In **France**, students were involved directly in providing mental health support. Between November 2020 and January 2021, Regional Centres for University and School Works (which run university halls of residence in France) hired 1,600 students as reference people for their halls, where some 174,000 students live. The role of these students was to support isolating students, detect situations in which people were experiencing poor mental health or other types of hardship and ensure that student life was adapted to their needs, while respecting public health measures.

Awareness raising, strategic commitments, strengthened capacities

Several countries increased their efforts to compile and disseminate lists of available mental support services on government websites in order to raise general awareness of their existence. In some cases, specific awareness-raising campaigns were launched. For instance, in **Luxembourg**, the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, with the Psychosocial and Scholastic Assistance Centre, launched an awareness-raising campaign, Bien-être@home, on well-being in isolation and on simple actions to adopt on a daily basis for better mental health.

Strategic commitments to supporting mental health have become more visible. **Sweden** promoted further investments to strengthen mental health, psychiatric care and suicide prevention, while in **Denmark** the government and all parties in the parliament signed an agreement on initiatives for vulnerable groups in connection with COVID-19. Several of the initiatives target socially disadvantaged young people, including support for young people living in institutions, support for those who are relatives of people with addictions, increased student counselling capacity and grants to organisations that support children with mental illness or other serious illnesses. Besides initiatives such as new partnerships between key organisations charged with identifying challenges and proposing solutions to support vulnerable social groups, the agreement also provides for financial support to civil society

organisations that are in close contact with disadvantaged groups. This broad political agreement thus strengthens existing support and services provided by civil society organisations.

In some cases, initiatives have been put in place since the pandemic to train youth workers to deal with mental health issues. In **Estonia**, psychosocial first aid training courses for frontline workers offer providers basic knowledge on mental health first aid. Most participants have been workers from local municipalities, such as youth workers and representatives of child protection services. The training, initially delivered face to face, has moved online.

Conclusion: Policy measures to help young people during the pandemic

Before the pandemic started, the EU was implementing a youth strategy concentrating mostly on youth dialogue and participation, as well as improving youth work. In 2020, when it became evident that the pandemic might have lasting consequences that would disproportionately affect young people, several steps were taken at EU level: the Youth Guarantee was extended to those aged 25–29, and large amounts of funds were made available to help young people, and in particular to help in achieving the new target of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030. This target seems to signal that the EU expects improvements in youth employment to take place quickly after the pandemic (particularly when compared with the economic crisis).

National policy responses concentrated on preventing the closure of businesses and avoiding widespread unemployment. Where policies that were specific to young people were found in Member States, these were aimed in particular at keeping young people in education and encouraging internships and VET, while most direct employment support measures were aimed at the general population.

Short-time working schemes had an important role in the pandemic, as reduced demand was seen to be temporary and it was considered important to preserve jobs in the meantime. Most of these schemes were not specific to young people but allowed employers to apply for financial support to pay any employee's wages. Several countries introduced incentives for employers to hire young people specifically (France, Ireland, Italy and others), while others focused on preserving jobs, particularly in the most affected sectors. Measures concentrating on job creation and entrepreneurship were less common, probably because of already reduced economic activity.

As apprenticeships suffered from disruption and there were reduced opportunities for potential apprentices, several countries (for example, France, Germany and Luxembourg) tried to incentivise employers to offer apprenticeships, as well as to preserve current opportunities, by providing support. However, some national data show that participation in apprenticeships decreased during the pandemic. Other countries adapted the delivery mode or reduced entry requirements.

Youth support services, such as outreach and career guidance services, were also disrupted, and countries moved a lot of these services to digital delivery, helping institutions to provide them online (for example, in Estonia and Hungary).

Perhaps the largest effort targeted at helping young people was in the area of encouraging them to stay in or (re-)enter education. As school closures happened, there was widespread recognition that not all young people have the necessary devices to be involved in distance learning. The pandemic accelerated the digital shift in many institutions, which may have been too quick in some instances, and digital skills needed to be improved to make it work. Examples of programmes aimed at improving the digital infrastructure were found in Belgium, Ireland and Romania, among many other countries. Countries including Germany and the Netherlands also provided financial aid to students facing financial difficulties during the pandemic, while Finland and Poland removed barriers to accessing financial aid and Hungary extended an existing student loan programme.

University education adapted in considerable ways to help young people both entering and graduating from higher education. In several countries, not only lectures but also exams moved online, and in some countries final school grades (which affected university placements) were provided through teacher assessment rather than exams. In some cases, university exams that were seen as less important were cancelled entirely.

Social protection was also expanded during the pandemic, and countries including Lithuania and Spain significantly reduced barriers to existing financial measures specifically for young people. In some countries, such as Latvia, specific benefits were introduced for recent graduates who could not find employment owing to the pandemic.

Member States have also recognised the impact of restrictive measures on youth mental health, and mental health professionals and other organisations have highlighted the severity of the problem. However, correspondents from several Member States noted shortages in mental health provision as well as issues with access. The need for intervention was urgent, but

adapting to the new situation during the pandemic was seen as difficult, with a lack of availability of skilled staff and difficulties reaching young people, particularly the most vulnerable. Most new support measures in the area of mental health were in the form of online chats or phone helplines, while strengthening of existing measures concentrated on moving the delivery of mental health services (partly) online.

Overall, young people have not been left to cope alone during the pandemic: there was widespread recognition of their vulnerability during workplace and school closures, and efforts have been made to protect the most disadvantaged young people. However, most of the measures identified at the end of 2020 were temporary, and barriers to accessing services and support were to be removed only for the duration of the pandemic.

4 Conclusions

Impact of the pandemic on young people

Impact on youth employment

As 2019 came to a close, the European economy had completed a long recovery from the economic crisis, which had had lasting effects on young people, leaving many of them outside the labour market. The crisis had set back the whole millennial generation, to the extent that they became the first generation not to improve on the previous one in terms of wealth, income and future prospects. However, some 10 years after the Great Recession, youth unemployment and the NEET rate for 15- to 29-year-olds (younger millennials and Generation Z) were for the first time back at pre-recession levels. This improvement also showed in the composition of the NEET population; NEETs were more likely to be re-entrants (about to enter the labour market/education), more likely to be NEET owing to care responsibilities or disability and less likely to be long-term or short-term unemployed than they had been during the economic crisis.

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, it became clear that young people were more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis. Sectors such as accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail, and arts and entertainment, all of which employ a higher than average proportion of young people, were among the worst hit by closures, while young people also had less secure contracts. Official data from 2020 already show a general increase in the youth unemployment rate and the NEET rate, although those data may not capture the full extent of job loss, as they may not take into account those covered by temporary support measures and payments provided by governments during this period.

A series of e-surveys conducted by Eurofound measured a significantly larger rate of job loss among young people than among people aged 30 or over. Analysis of youth labour market transitions suggests that the highest youth unemployment rates were in summer 2020; however, youth employment had not yet completely recovered by spring 2021. Young people in the Mediterranean countries were most likely to transition from employment into unemployment, while moving from education to unemployment was most common for young people in Ireland.

Financial and social impacts

As a large proportion of young people in the survey lived with their parents, young people on average were less likely than older groups to experience financial difficulties, such as problems making ends meet or housing insecurity. However, a large proportion of unemployed young people had financial insecurities, and the main form of security for young people during the pandemic seems to have been the parental home. Like unemployment, financial insecurities also peaked in summer 2020.

Young people were more likely to ask for formal financial support during the pandemic, although approximately 11% of those who needed it had not received any by spring 2021. Once again, the gap in support seems to have been filled by family members and other informal sources.

Young people who did not receive support, as well as unemployed or inactive young people overall, were the most likely to experience social exclusion. For unemployed young people, living with their parents seems to have mitigated the feeling of social exclusion.

Impact on mental well-being

The pandemic seems to have had a more direct impact on young people's mental well-being, as a result not only of loss of jobs and educational opportunities but also of restrictive measures resulting in reduced social contact and delayed future plans.

By spring 2021, nearly two-thirds of young people were at risk of depression. Young women in particular were likely to have negative feelings such as anxiety, loneliness and downheartedness, which increased as the pandemic progressed. Young people's mental well-being and life satisfaction improved in summer 2020, but fell back during the spring 2021 lockdown to a worse level than that measured early in the pandemic. Young people in Ireland and the Mediterranean countries had particularly low mental well-being and life satisfaction after controlling for other factors.

When other factors were controlled for, mental well-being among young people was found to be affected by restrictive measures. School/university closures were associated with lower mental well-being and life satisfaction, while stay-at-home requirements had a significant impact only on life satisfaction. Workplace closures, on the other hand, had a positive impact on young people's mental well-being.

Impact on trust in institutions

Decreased mental well-being and increased social exclusion may also have contributed to the loss of trust in government that took place throughout the past year. Young people's trust in government was reduced significantly during the pandemic, with a drop in each survey round, but the analysis did not confirm an association with the various restrictive measures examined. The lowest levels of trust were measured in eastern European Member States.

On the other hand, trust in the EU changed in a similar way to quality of life indicators, improving in summer 2020 and falling back to the spring 2020 level in spring 2021, with no apparent association with restrictive measures. Eastern European Member States have lower trust in the EU than other countries.

Policy measures introduced during the pandemic

Policymakers throughout Europe recognised that young people were especially vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, and efforts were made to protect them. At EU level, the Youth Guarantee was extended to those aged 25–29, and large amounts of funds were made available to help young people, and in particular to help in achieving the new target of reducing the NEET rate to 9% by 2030. This target seems to signal that the EU expects youth employment to recover quickly post-COVID-19.

National policy responses concentrated on preventing the closure of businesses and avoiding widespread unemployment. Where youth-specific policies were found in Member States, these were aimed in particular at keeping young people in education and encouraging internships and VET, while most direct employment support measures were aimed at the general population. A lot of measures related to education and youth services concentrated on facilitating distance learning and improving the digital infrastructure. Requirements for university entry and for apprenticeships were eased. Social protection measures were also expanded, and some barriers to accessing them were removed. Most of the national-level measures identified were temporary and intended to last only until the pandemic ends.

While policymakers, non-governmental organisations and mental health professionals recognised the impact that restrictive measures have on youth mental health, it was difficult for services to adapt to the quickly increasing demand, and reaching the most vulnerable was difficult. Most new mental health support was in the form of online chats or phone helplines, while some of the delivery of existing services was also moved online.

Policy messages for the post-COVID-19 recovery

Reduce inequalities between generations

A loss of future prospects that may affect some of them long after they have reached the age of 30 is the main concern for the current generation of young people. In nearly all aspects examined, from employment to finances and well-being, young people were hit harder by this crisis than other generations, as was the case in the economic crisis, from which many millennials have yet to recover. It is likely that future crises will also have a disproportionate impact on the young. This accumulating inequality may result in intergenerational tensions and feelings among young people of unfairness and being left behind, which may persist into older adulthood and lead to a loss of trust in institutions. This report did not find a direct relationship between COVID-19-related restrictions and the loss of trust on the part of young people that took place during the pandemic, signalling that other factors may be behind it.

Youth mental health is a significant concern and needs greater attention

This report showed a significant deterioration in youth mental well-being that was associated with school closures and stay-at-home requirements. Older groups did not experience the same incidence of low mental well-being. Meanwhile, qualitative research found that mental health services had difficulties reaching young people, particularly those who needed them most. Youth mental health had already been an issue that had remained largely unaddressed by policy before the pandemic; the youth mental health debate focused mostly on the social media and health behaviour aspects. The pandemic, which has lasted a relatively long time bearing in mind the duration of young adulthood, has created significant additional issues in terms of mental well-being, which is unlikely to recover as quickly as the economy and employment rates will. Greater policy attention and funding are needed to ensure the availability of mental health professionals, to reduce barriers to access, to continue to reduce stigma around mental health and to reach vulnerable young people. Meanwhile, although there is a role for digital services in the area of mental health, this method of delivery needs a rethink if fast and effective services are to be developed. So far no comprehensive solution has been found to a widespread mental health crisis.

A shift to online services is not always the best solution

In terms of education, youth services and mental health services, many of the support measures implemented have concentrated on moving service delivery online. However, young people in a lot of countries experienced difficulties with distance learning as educational institutions and service providers struggled to move teaching online. Inequalities, particularly affecting disadvantaged students and young people with disabilities, and demotivation were mentioned among the main challenges experienced by providers. In summer 2020, less than half of young people wanted to continue receiving online education, and that figure is likely to have decreased further since. Furthermore, not all services can be delivered, or can be delivered efficiently, in this way; youth outreach, counselling and, as mentioned before, mental health services in particular have suffered from disruption, and systems were unable to reach young people in need.

Prepare for a possible future crisis by improving service delivery

Policymakers and companies are keen to move on from the pandemic and get back on track with economic and social progress. However, the pandemic has proved that public services generally were unprepared for such a large-scale event. Education and youth services were examples of areas where lack of digital skills and/or digital infrastructure – as well as the prioritisation of employment services and support for businesses (in addition to, most importantly, healthcare) – may have contributed to slow response times, while fatigue and lack of motivation reduced take-up by young people.

Prioritise long-term measures over temporary solutions

The overwhelming majority of policy responses identified by the Network of Eurofound Correspondents and aimed at protecting young people from the impact of the pandemic were temporary – for example, ad hoc financial assistance or short-term incentives to companies to hire young people. Most examples of measures to remove bureaucratic barriers to accessing services were also temporary. However, the main reason why young people are more vulnerable to the economic effects of crises is insecurity, in the form of short-term contracts, low perceived job security, and instability of finances and housing. Longer-term measures, such as a permanent reduction in barriers to accessing apprenticeships, easier access to financial help for the most vulnerable young people, and the promotion of easier upward mobility towards more secure jobs matching young people's education and skills, could contribute to greater resilience when the next crisis comes.

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Following a long recovery from the economic crisis (2007–2013), young people in the EU proved to be more vulnerable to the effects of the restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people were more likely than older groups to experience job loss, financial insecurity and mental health problems. They reported reduced life satisfaction and mental well-being associated with the stay-at-home requirements and school closures. While governments responded quickly to the pandemic, most efforts to mitigate the effects of restrictions were temporary measures aimed at preventing job loss and keeping young people in education. This report explores the effects of the pandemic on young people, particularly in terms of their employment, well-being and trust in institutions, and assesses the various policy measures introduced to alleviate these effects.

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