

8. FAMILY AND PARTNERSHIP

DANIJELA LAHE, ANDREJ NATERER

University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Maribor, Slovenia
danijela.lahe@um.si, andrej.naterer@um.si

This chapter examines how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped family relationships, partnerships, and youth well-being in Croatia and Slovenia. The findings reveal that family ties acted both as a protective buffer and a source of strain. Slovenian youth reported significant declines in satisfaction with family life and parent-child relationships, likely linked to strict lockdowns, economic pressures, and rising individualism. In contrast, Croatian youth demonstrated greater relational stability, reflecting strong familial norms and resilience reinforced during concurrent crises. Friendships weakened in both countries, particularly in Slovenia, while romantic partnerships proved comparatively stable, with evidence of accelerated cohabitation among Croatian youth. Across both contexts, mothers and family networks remained the dominant influence on young people's key decisions. Mental health, however, emerged as the most negatively affected domain. Policy implications stress the need for targeted family support, expanded youth mental health services, and programmes that rebuild peer connections and address evolving aspirations for family life.

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Family relationship quality emerged as a critical buffer or risk factor for youth well-being during the pandemic. Positive, supportive family relationships had a potential to protect adolescents from COVID-related stress, whereas conflictual or chaotic home environments exacerbated mental health problems, and studies across Europe and North America found that most adolescents experienced some change in how they related to family members (e.g. Bülow, Keijsers, Boele, van Roekel, & Denissen, 2021; Martin-Storey, Dirks, Holfeld, Dryburgh, & Craig, 2021). Notably, youth who saw their family relationships improve during the pandemic showed better psychological functioning (e.g. fewer internalising symptoms), whereas those experiencing heightened family instability or conflict fared worse. This aligns with longstanding research linking high family support and cohesion to better adolescent outcomes, and conversely, associating high family conflict with increased anxiety, depression, and stress in youth (*ibid.*). Several longitudinal studies confirm these trends. For example, a systematic review of international longitudinal research by Lin, Soejima, Zhang, & Kitao (2025), which included 15 studies from 2020-2024, concluded that overall “parent-child relationship quality generally declined” during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. Both parents and youth reported reduced family functioning and satisfaction, and increased family chaos and conflict under lockdown conditions. For example, one Italian study (*ibid.*: 2025: 8) noted more arguments and stress in families as everyone stayed home, while a German survey (*ibid.*, 2025: 6) found parent-adolescent communication worsened for many families in 2020. At the same time, heterogeneity was evident and some families adapted or even thrived in closer quarters, reporting improved relationships or no significant change in family satisfaction (*ibid.*). Some researchers suggest a possible “enhancer effect,” (e.g. Campione-Barr, Skinner, Moeller, Cui, Kealy, & Cookston, 2025:13) where already-strong family relationships grew stronger under adversity, while already strained relationships deteriorated further.

Factors influencing these dynamics and outcomes are numerous and include family structure (e.g. multigenerational households), prevailing cultural norms about interdependence, and pre-pandemic social trends. In many Southern and Eastern European societies, strong family ties and co-residence norms meant that young people typically live with parents well into their twenties, implying that pandemic lockdowns often occurred in extended family settings. In societal contexts in which tight intergenerational bonds and norms of mutual aid are prevalent, young people tend to rely on family as a primary safety net, and they also feel obligated to support

their parents in return. Such familism can be a double-edged sword in crises, for on the one side, it provides built-in support networks (emotional, financial, practical) that help families pull together during hard times, but on the other, close concentrated dependence induced stress within the household. During the pandemics in Slovenia and Croatia, parents faced intense pressure juggling remote work, household management and caring for the children out of school (at home), all within often crowded homes, which often led to heightened family strain. This was particularly hard for families already struggling socio-economically before the pandemics. Within this context, low-income, precarious employment positioned families were hit harder by pandemic disruptions, and working-class parents had less flexibility to work from home or to afford tutoring for remote schooling, which could intensify stress at home and limit the time and energy parents could devote to teens. Youth from disadvantaged families in Europe therefore understandably experienced greater declines in family life satisfaction and mental well-being during COVID-19, reflecting how existing inequalities were amplified (e.g. Moxon, Bacalso, & Șerban, 2021). The exploration of family dynamics and youth during the pandemic cannot be separated from their broader social context, including cultural norms, living arrangements, and socio-economic resources all interacted to shape whether the crisis brought European families closer together or pushed them further apart.

8.1 Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their satisfaction with family life

In Slovenia and Croatia, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the time spent at home, heightening both the opportunities and the pressures within family life. Understanding how satisfied youth are with these relationships therefore offers a critical lens on their overall well-being, complementing the findings presented in other sections of this book. This section examines the quality of family interactions, explores how satisfaction levels shifted through the pandemic, and considers what these patterns reveal about the resources and strains of Slovenian and Croatian youth and their families.

Analysis of youth satisfaction with family life in Slovenia and Croatia between 2018 and 2023 presented in Figure 8.1. reveals both continuity and subtle shifts in perceptions, likely shaped in part by the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, there was a noticeable decline in the proportion of youth who reported being “very satisfied” with their family life, dropping from 47.1% in

2018 to 32.8% in 2023. At the same time, there was an increase in those reporting moderate satisfaction, with level 4 responses rising from 30.2% to 37.4% and level 3 responses from 16.2% to 20%. While dissatisfaction remains relatively low, a slight rise is observed in the lowest categories (“very dissatisfied” and “2”), indicating that a broader range of experiences emerged over time, possibly reflecting increased family tensions during periods of social isolation, economic uncertainty, and disrupted daily life.

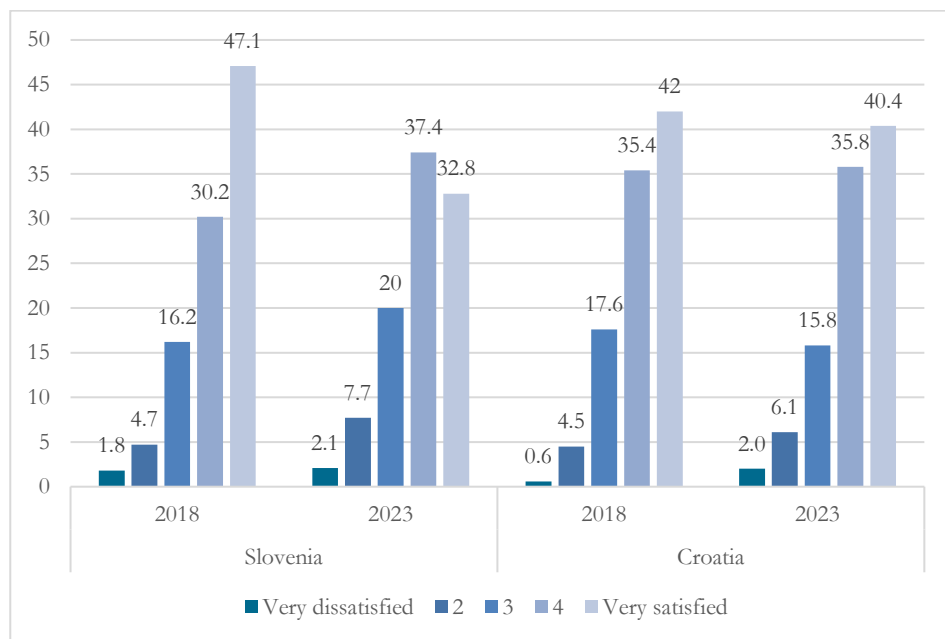


Figure 8.1: Satisfaction with family life of youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In Croatia, by contrast, youth satisfaction with family life remained relatively stable. The share of “very satisfied” respondents changed only marginally, from 42% in 2018 to 40.4% in 2023, and those reporting level 4 satisfaction remained virtually unchanged. However, a minor increase in dissatisfaction is evident, with a rise in the lowest satisfaction categories, including a doubling of those who felt “very dissatisfied.” This suggests that while the overall assessment of family life remained largely positive, a small segment of youth may have experienced increased familial strain.

Furthermore, a statistically significant negative correlation was found between the perceived impact of the pandemic on family relationships and satisfaction with family life in Slovenia (Spearman's $\rho = -0.205$, $p < .001$) and Croatia (Spearman's $\rho = -0.194$, $p < .001$) in 2023, indicating that greater perceived harm to family relationships due to the pandemic was associated with lower levels of family life satisfaction in both countries.

The results show an uneven impact of COVID-19 on family-related well-being in Slovenia and Croatia. Both countries share some regional and cultural commonalities, yet their youth experienced different shifts in family satisfaction. Slovenia's notable decline suggests that Slovenian youths in 2023 felt significantly less satisfied with their family life than their counterparts did pre-pandemic. Several factors could explain this drop. Firstly, Slovenia imposed some of Europe's strictest lockdowns in 2020-21, including very long school closures and a ban on movement between municipalities, which might have intensified family confinement stress. Several Slovenian surveys and qualitative reports indicate many young people felt isolated and frustrated during this period, and some perceived a lack of autonomy or increased friction with parents (e.g. over lockdown rules or use of time) (e.g. Lavrič & Deželan, 2021). Additionally, pre-pandemic trends in Slovenia showed rising youth pessimism and perhaps a more individualistic outlook among the younger generation (e.g. Lavrič et. al, 2011; Lavrič & Deželan, 2021.). It is therefore possible that the pandemic exacerbated this generational gap, with youth becoming more critical of their family situation or disappointed by how their families coped, resulting in lower reported satisfaction. Secondly, Slovenia's economy was hit hard in 2020, and although it rebounded, many families experienced financial strain which can dampen the quality of family interactions.

Croatia's steady satisfaction levels, on the other hand, hint that Croatian families might have navigated the pandemic with less perceived damage to family life, at least from the youth perspective. Culturally, Croatian society places a very strong emphasis on family solidarity. This could mean Croatian youths felt well-supported at home during the crisis, or that they viewed the hardships as something the family faced together (thus not reducing their overall satisfaction with family life). Empirical research supports this notion. Croatian youth consistently report high expectations of mutual help within families, and many likely experienced the pandemic in the comfort of a close family network. It is also worth noting that the Croatian survey data may have been influenced by timing and additional challenges,

most notably a series of earthquakes in 2020, which saw families coming together for support, potentially reinforcing familial appreciation among youth.

Excerpts from a focus group could serve as an illustration:

“Family. It could be better, but I think there are some tensions, probably due to the generational gap, and I think that will always be the case. However, in general, when it comes to advice and support, we are good to each other, in both directions.”

(Male, employed, Croatia).

“I would say that (the lockdown during the pandemic) brought us closer again. At the beginning we had to get used again of spending time together. And that certainly changed the whole dynamics, for I had to move from the high-school dormitory back home /.../ I had to get used to living at home and spending a lot of time with my family. So, in that sense, it helped us (family members) getting back together, particularly with my sister. We helped each other, studied together and after a while (since lockdown persisted and stress within the family increased), we also distanced ourselves from our parents together, because they (parents) had different views and perceptions which me and my sister could not accept easily. /.../ we could not agree on vaccination, and around other things too. There was also a lot of tension.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Many people were not used to it, spending time together and you could see this in numerous families. The same was with me. I was shocked because I was not used to spend so much time with my father...”

(Male, NEET, Slovenia)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping these patterns. In both countries, prolonged lockdowns, reduced access to social spaces, and the pressures of remote learning may have strained family dynamics.

Overall, the pandemic appears to have amplified existing family dynamics, strengthening relationships in some cases, while exacerbating tensions in others.

In Slovenia, the data suggest that the crisis may have led to a slight erosion in the quality of family relationships or at least the perception thereof, with fewer youth expressing full satisfaction. In Croatia, the relative stability of family satisfaction may point to stronger familial bonds or support systems that buffered youth from the worst psychological effects of the pandemic, although the slight uptick in dissatisfaction signals that this support was not universal.

8.2 Relationship with parents

In order to further our understanding of family relationships we focused our attention on the relationship with parents.

In general, young people in Slovenia and Croatia get along well with their parents in 2023, while girls have a slightly better understanding with their parents ($M=1.79$; $SD=.70$; 1=get along very well...4=very conflictual relationship) than boys ($M=1.74$; $SD=.67$).

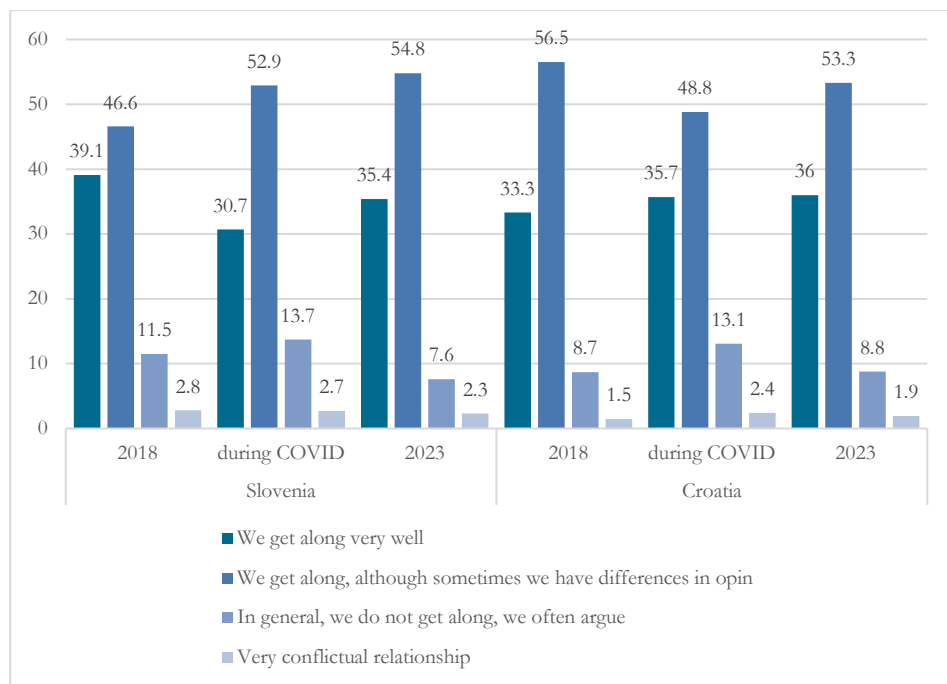


Figure 8.2: Relationship with parents in 2018, during COVID and in 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The Figure 8.2. illustrates how young people in Slovenia and Croatia described their relationships with their parents in 2018, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in 2023. Data from both samples reveal mostly positive but nuanced shifts in how youth evaluated their relationships with their parents across three points in time. In Slovenia, the proportion of youth who reported that they "get along very well" with their parents dropped notably during the pandemic, from 39% in 2018 to 30% at the height of COVID-19, before recovering partially to 35% in 2023. Correspondingly, the share of respondents selecting the more moderate option ("we get along, although sometimes we have differences in opinion") rose steadily from 47% in 2018 to 55% in 2023. Conflictual responses remained a minority, but there was a temporary increase in those reporting frequent arguments (from 11% in 2018 to 14% during the pandemic), which then fell back to 8% by 2023.

In contrast, Croatian youth reported greater consistency in their parent-child relationships. The proportion saying they "get along very well" increased slightly from 33% in 2018 to 36% during and after the pandemic, while moderate responses ("we get along, although...") declined slightly during COVID-19 but rebounded in 2023. Reports of frequent arguing rose during the pandemic (from 8% to 13%) but similarly declined to pre-pandemic levels by 2023. Across both countries, the percentage of youth describing their relationship as "very conflictual" remained low.

The results of the t-test reveal statistically significant differences ($t(2470) = -2.952$; $p < 0.01$) in the relationship with parents between men ($M = 1.81$; $SD = .72$) and women ($M = 1.90$; $SD = .75$) during the COVID in both countries. This suggests that women, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, generally perceive their relationships with parents more positively or maintain closer ties with their parents than men do. It was expected that among young individuals residing in the same household as their parents, having a private room would influence the relationship. Although the differences are not statistically significant, it is noteworthy that, on average, young individuals without a private room ($M = 1.93$; $SD = .83$) report a better relationship with their parents than those who have one ($M = 1.84$; $SD = .72$). This unexpected finding suggests that shared living spaces may promote closer family bonds and more frequent interactions. It is probable that young individuals without private rooms spend more time in communal areas, leading to increased communication and shared activities with their parents. Further research is warranted to explore the underlying factors contributing to this counterintuitive relationship between personal space and parent-child dynamics.

The socioeconomic status of families plays a significant role in shaping parent-child relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia, but not in Slovenia. Lower socioeconomic status correlates with poorer parent-child relationships ($\rho=0.53$; $p<0.001$) among Croatian youth suggests that financial stress and limited resources in lower socioeconomic families can increase conflict and reduce interaction quality. Disparity between Croatia and Slovenia may reflect differences in social welfare systems, economic resilience, or cultural factors affecting family dynamics during crises. Further research is needed to explore how socioeconomic status impacts parent-child relationships in these countries. Understanding these nuances could inform interventions and policies to support vulnerable families during future health emergencies.

These patterns reflect a dynamic interplay between stress, adaptation, and resilience. According to the Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 2002), external stressors, such as job loss, confinement, and disrupted schooling, can heighten parental strain, which spills over into more tense or reactive parenting. European research confirms that the early phases of the pandemic were associated with declines in parent-child relationship quality, especially in households facing economic insecurity or psychological distress (Skinner et al., 2021; Martinsone et al., 2022). In Slovenia, as already mentioned, lockdown measures were among the strictest in the EU and included long school closures and municipal travel bans. It is plausible that increased proximity and stress exacerbated familial tensions, leading youth to downgrade their evaluations of family harmony. While many relationships rebounded by 2023, the decrease in “very good” ratings suggests a lingering shift in how young people assess closeness with their parents.

Resilience theory offers a complementary perspective. Families with strong pre-existing bonds, open communication, and shared coping mechanisms were better positioned to maintain or even strengthen relationships under pressure (Walsh, 2020). In Croatia, where familialism and intergenerational support are deeply embedded cultural norms, family networks may have served as stabilizing structures throughout the pandemic and in the wake of additional national crises (e.g., the 2020 Zagreb earthquakes). This could explain the relatively stable levels of satisfaction and the quicker recovery in relational harmony compared to Slovenia.

From a sociological and anthropological standpoint, family structure, housing conditions, and digital access shaped everyday interactions. Studies across Europe found that homeschooling, crowded living spaces, and limited digital infrastructure increased household stress, particularly where parents struggled to balance remote work with caregiving (e.g. Thorell et al., 2022). Youth in Slovenia, where more individualistic cultural norms prevail (e.g. Lavrič et al, 2011; Lavrič and Deželan, 2021), may have experienced these stressors more acutely, while in Croatia, strong kinship ties and collective coping could have buffered the worst impacts.

Two examples from focus groups could be used as an illustration of both positions:

“I get a lot of support from my parents, I think, both regarding education and social life. I mean, like all parents, when it comes to education, we always have different views, especially regarding grades. But, for example, my parents don’t mind that much, I mean, we have conversations like "why didn’t you study" and stuff like that, but there are no punishments or anything like some others have, like not being allowed to go out or other things ...”.

(Male, high school student, Croatia).

“I provide the most support to my friends and brother and sister. I realised that I don't really give my parents too much support and maybe I need more, considering how much support they give me.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

“... (during the lockdown) we got along great. It is not that we were not doing good before, we were good... but lockdown made us closer, more connected. /.../ We (4 family members in a family house) were together all the time, waking up together, having breakfast together, playing games, working together, lunch together... and over the weekend grill with chevapchici together...”

(Female, high school participant, Slovenia)

“My family dissolved because of the lockdown. /.../ we (family of 4) were locked together (in a one room apartment), and we quickly and most brutally realised we are not used to living together. My mother found an escape by going to the streets to attend the protests and there she would socialise with other men. /.../ we all knew that but when my father found out, he threw us (mother with two teenage girls) out to the street. We were sleeping in a car for a few days and then they accepted us at the safe house (house for abused women in Maribor).”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed both the strengths and fragilities of family relationships among youth in Slovenia and Croatia. While most young people continued to report positive relationships with their parents, the pandemic catalysed temporary shifts toward more moderate or conflicted appraisals, particularly in Slovenia. These changes reflect broader processes of familial stress, resilience, and adaptation under extraordinary circumstances, shaped by cultural norms, developmental expectations, and national policy contexts. The data highlight the need for targeted youth and family support systems that can better withstand future societal disruptions and reinforce relational well-being within the home.

8.3 Influence of family members on important decisions of youth

Exploring the influence of family members and friends on young people's important life decisions is essential for understanding youth experiences, especially within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As findings in other chapters of this book show, the pandemic not only disrupted formal political engagement and democratic trust but also reshaped everyday life and interpersonal dynamics. With schools closed, public life restricted, and peer interactions limited, family members, particularly parents, became central sources of guidance, support, and influence. These intensified family relationships directly shaped how youth perceived their future, navigated uncertainty, and made key decisions during a period of profound social and economic disruption. Understanding these relational dynamics adds critical depth to the broader picture of youth agency, resilience, and post-pandemic recovery.

As depicted in Figure 8.3. in both countries, nuclear family plays a primary role. Mothers are the most influential figures, but their influence is more pronounced in Slovenia, where 66.2% of youth identify their mother as the primary influence, compared to 58.9% in Croatia. This suggests a strong maternal role in shaping personal and life decisions among youth in both contexts, likely tied to family structure, caregiving roles, and cultural norms. Fathers on the other hand, hold the secondary position in both countries but are more influential in Slovenia (44.4%) than in Croatia (28.3%). This significant gap may reflect cultural differences in paternal involvement or perceived emotional closeness in the parent-child dynamic. Siblings also play a notable role, with Croatian youth (24.1%) reporting slightly higher influence from siblings than Slovenians (20.2%). Meanwhile, friends exert relatively low influence overall, with similar responses in both countries -15.4% in

Slovenia and 13.5% in Croatia - suggesting that while peer relationships are important, family remains the dominant influence on major life decisions.

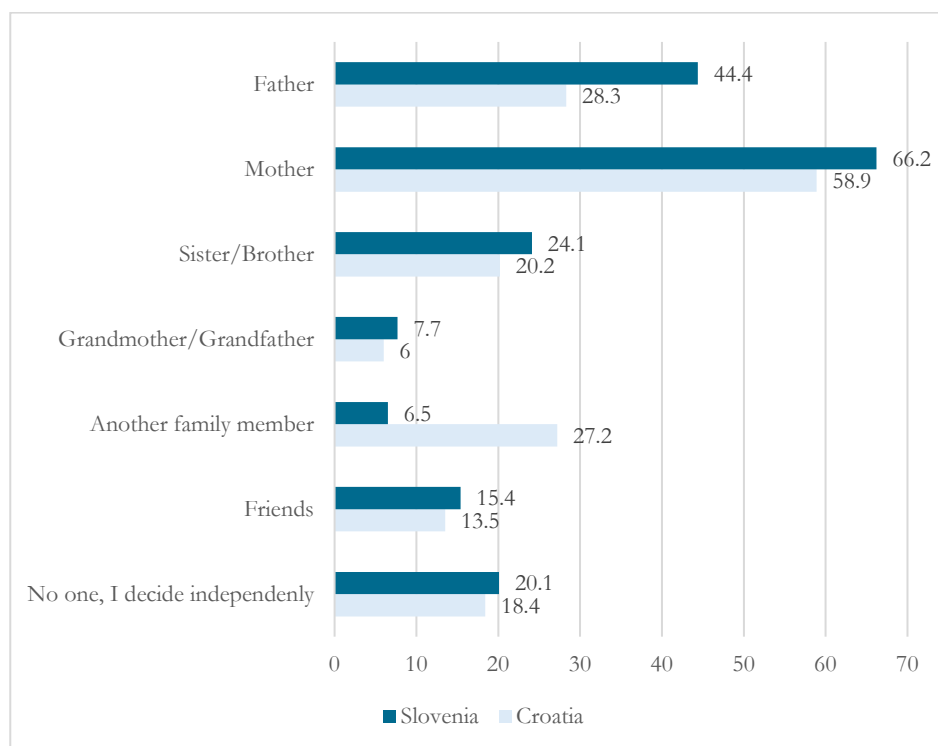


Figure 8.3: Influence of family and friends on important in 2023 (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Secondary role is assigned to other family members. These, interestingly, other family are far more influential in Croatia (27.2%) than in Slovenia (6.5%), pointing to broader familial involvement or extended family dynamics in Croatian households.

And lastly, the share of youth who state that “no one influences them” and that they decide independently is relatively modest, though slightly higher in Slovenia (20.1%) than in Croatia (18.4%). This may reflect a greater sense of autonomy or individualism among Slovenian youth, albeit still within a largely family-influenced decision-making context.

The COVID-19 pandemic likely reinforced these family-centred patterns of influence. During lockdowns and periods of restricted mobility, young people were more physically and emotionally dependent on their households, which may have strengthened parental and familial influence, especially among mothers, who often assumed caregiving and emotional support roles more intensively during the crisis. Reduced contact with peers and external mentors may have also diminished the relative influence of friends, pushing youth to rely more on familial advice and support networks when making decisions about education, health, or future plans.

Qualitative data supports these findings, however, the relationship appears more complex and apart from pure harmony also includes tensions:

“And during the pandemic and Covid, my situation at home with my parents improved a lot; somehow, we grew closer. Before, we were all kind of distant, no one really spent much time with anyone. My relationship with my sister also improved. Because we somehow looked for ways to spend quality time together, and basically, we all became more connected then.”

(Female, university student, Croatia)

“/.../ in that situation (during the lockdown), my mother was the one who was standing by my side the most. /.../ However, we also argued a lot, because she is stubborn by nature and each of us wanted something else. /.../ and then I figured that there are things that parents cannot offer but could only be offered by friends (peers). And I was lucky enough to have such a friend living only 500 meters from our place. /..../ so I would go for a walk with her (friend) and we would slander our mothers (to relieve tension experienced at home).”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

These results underscore the enduring and even heightened importance of family and friends.

While patterns vary somewhat between the two countries, the data suggest that family influence remains central, a dynamic that was likely reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings highlight the importance of involving families in youth-targeted initiatives, especially during periods of societal stress and transition.

8.4 Satisfaction with friends

As shown in the previous section, friends and peers represent a critical group for young people. Understanding young people’s satisfaction with their friendships is crucial for gaining a fuller picture of youth well-being and resilience, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted earlier, the pandemic not only affected family dynamics but also deeply impacted on peer relationships due to prolonged social isolation, school closures, and digital communication replacing in-person interaction. Friendships play a vital role in emotional support, identity development, and social learning during adolescence and early adulthood. Assessing satisfaction with these relationships helps us understand how youth coped with stress, maintained social connections, and rebuilt their social lives in the aftermath of crisis, offering important insight into their broader social integration and mental health.

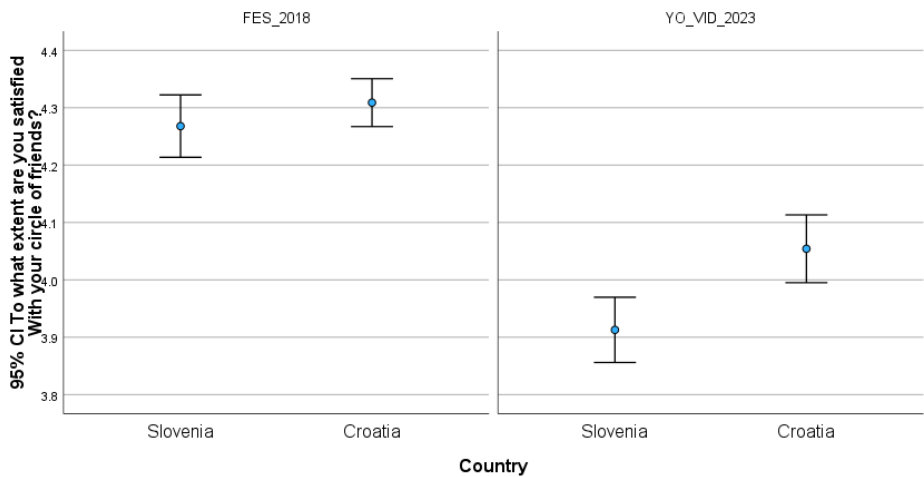


Figure 8.4: Satisfaction with friends among youth in Slovenia and Croatia, 2018 in 2023 (mean scores)
Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

The figure illustrates youth satisfaction with their circle of friends in Slovenia and Croatia. In 2018, young people in both countries reported high levels of satisfaction with their friendships, with average ratings exceeding 4.2 on the satisfaction scale. Croatian youth expressed slightly higher satisfaction than their Slovenian peers, though both groups reflected strong and stable peer connections. By 2023, however,

satisfaction had declined in both countries, with a more pronounced drop observed in Slovenia. Slovenian youth reported average satisfaction scores below 4.0, indicating a more noticeable reduction in the perceived quality of their friendships. While Croatian youth also experienced a decline, their satisfaction remained relatively higher, just above the 4.0.

Statistical analysis shows significant differences in friendship satisfaction in 2023 among Slovenian and Croatian youth based on gender ($t(2488)=-3,12; p<0.01$) and age ($\rho=-0.80; p<0.01$). Men report higher levels of satisfaction with their circle of friends ($M=4.04; SD=1.03$) compared to women ($M=3.91; SD=1.0$) and younger respondents tend to express greater satisfaction with their friendships. The study also found a correlation between the perceived negative impact of the pandemic on friendships and overall satisfaction levels ($\rho=-0.178; p<0.01$), suggesting that those who felt their relationships were more severely affected by the pandemic reported lower satisfaction with their circle of friends. These findings highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing friendship satisfaction and underscore the need for targeted interventions to support social connections in the post-pandemic era.

Data from focus groups provide some insight:

"I totally lost my motivation (because of the lockdown), since I could not go to my football practice. I was locked at home. /.../ there was nothing to do (locked at home), so I ended up watching YouTube or playing online videogames with my friend. /.../ in the end even this (playing games with a single friend) got boring and I ended up playing games by myself on my telephone."

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

"I connected more easily with my peers and I could hang out with them more easily. It was easier to talk to them at that time (in contrast to adults). When the pandemic persisted and we could not go out anymore, even this became harder, so I naturally became more closed off and isolated..."

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

"My friends have really helped me in some key moments, both mentally and specifically with some services when needed, even though each of us is employed and we work quite a lot, it is very difficult to coordinate, we are not even all from Zagreb, but if I were only evaluating the relationship, I would still give it a 10, but if we are talking about frequency - then something less, but okay, it's better less often but quality than every day and "God forbid."

(Female, employed, Croatia).

This downward trend is likely linked to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly disrupted social interactions among youth:

Lockdowns, school closures, and the shift to online communication reduced opportunities for in-person peer bonding and may have led to feelings of isolation or weakened social ties.

The sharper decline in Slovenia may point to differences in pandemic response, post-lockdown social reintegration, or mental health support structures. These findings emphasise the lasting impact of the pandemic on peer relationships and highlight the importance of restoring and supporting social connectedness as part of broader youth recovery strategies.

8.5 Youth, their partnership and projections of the future

Partnerships and romantic relationships are a central aspect of youth development, shaping emotional well-being, identity formation, and social integration. During adolescence and early adulthood, young people begin to explore intimacy, trust, and long-term connection, experiences that influence their future relationships and personal stability. Understanding youth partnerships provides valuable insight into their emotional lives and social maturity, especially in times of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As public life narrowed and social routines shifted, the ability to form, maintain, or grow intimate relationships was significantly challenged, making this area a critical dimension of youth well-being in the post-pandemic context.

The figure compares the partnership status of young adults in Slovenia and Croatia in 2018 and in 2023, offering an insight of how relationship patterns evolved through the COVID-19 period. In Slovenia, the situation remained remarkably stable, since roughly half of young adults remain single (46.7% in 2018 and 47.3% in 2023). Small shifts appear among both in cohabitation (21.6 % to 24.1%) and married (4.4% to 5.7%), while the share of those who are “in a relationship but not living together” dropped from 26.4% in 2018 to 22.5% in 2023. These shifts suggest that some couples formalised their partnerships, possibly by moving in together or marrying. Divorce and widowhood remain negligible (below 1%).

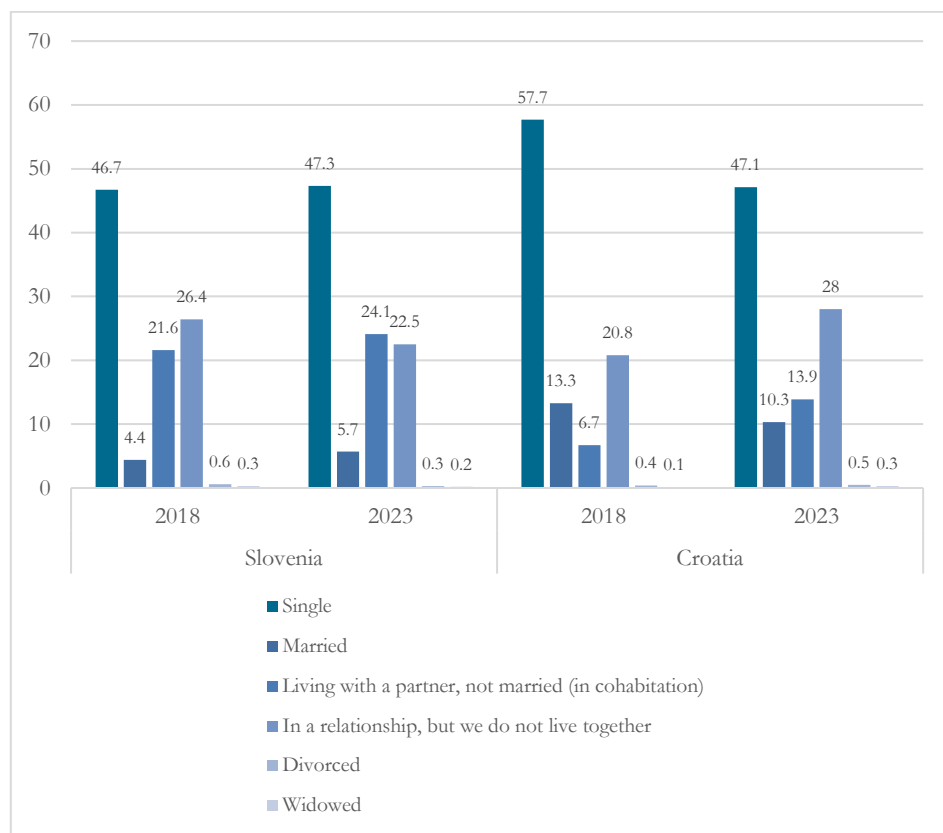


Figure 8.5: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their current partnership status in 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

In Croatia, the situation changed more dramatically. Firstly, the proportion of singles dropped by more than ten percentage points (from 57.7% to 47.1%). Secondly, cohabitation more than doubled (from 6.7% to 13.9%) and the share of non-cohabiting relationships rose (from 20.8% to 28.0%), while marriages declined modestly (from 13.3% to 10.3%). These results show a clear differentiation and diversification of partnerships, with many young Croats moving from singleness toward dating or living together rather than entering marriage.

There are at least two possible interpretations of these results. The pandemic restrictions limited casual socialising, which could encourage established couples to consolidate their households and accelerate the moves into cohabitation, which

could explain the situation in Croatia. At the same time, postponements of weddings and economic uncertainty may have dampened marriage rates in Croatia while only slightly delaying them in Slovenia.

The following example from Slovenia could be used to illustrate these results:

“They closed the place where I worked, and they sent everybody home (because of the lockdown). It was hard for everybody but somehow, I had it easy. I went for long walks with my dog /.../ I was hanging out with my friends, and I also spent a lot of time with my boyfriend, who helped me a lot. This was the main thing in coping with (pandemic induced) stress.”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

“Me and my boyfriend were both sick with Covid, so we couldn’t go out. But this was not a problem - they (delivery service) delivered everything to our apartment, ha, ha...”

(Female, NEET, Slovenia)

“In terms of health, the worst came after a while, I was separated from my partner, I got used to all that with my friends, I couldn't do my hobby, I do music, it just wasn't possible to do that, just getting used to it all was a little depressing from time to time.”

(Male, university student, Croatia).

The overall picture indicates that COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for relationship commitment among some youth, reshuffling the balance between singleness, cohabitation and marriage, and bringing the two countries closer together in their partnership profiles.

Statistically significant differences in current status among youth in 2023 in Slovenia and Croatia were observed based on gender and age. The decision to cohabit with a partner is more common among women (59.7%) compared to men (40.3%) and increases with age. Similarly, marriage is more prevalent among women (57.9%) than men (42.1%) and increases with age. Among singles, there is a higher proportion of men (62.3 %) than women (37.7 %), and as anticipated, younger respondents are more prevalent.

Linking young adults’ current partnership status to their future family projections provides a fuller picture of how life-course pathways are evolving. Current partnership patterns are directly linked to future expectations. Examining these two

snapshots together reveals not only how the pandemic, economic pressures, and shifting norms have reshaped present relationships, but also how they are recalibrating the aspirations that will guide young people's decisions about commitment, parenthood, and household formation in the years ahead.

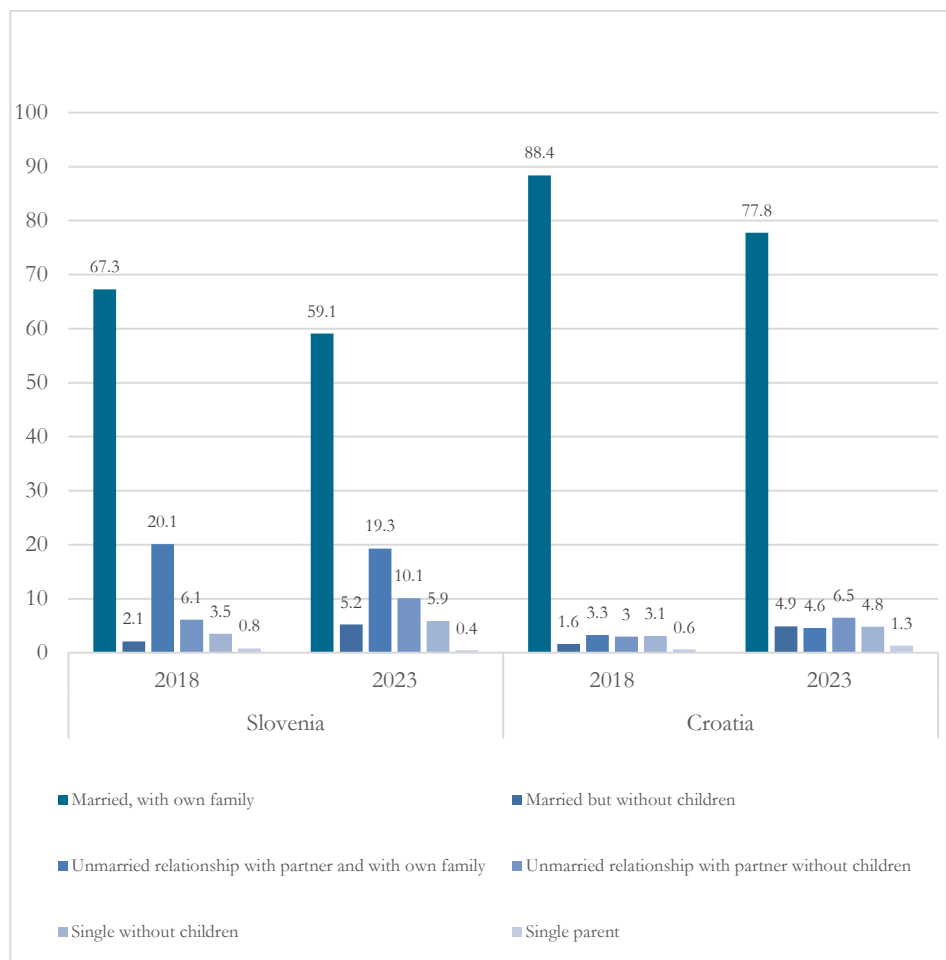


Figure 8.6: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their future projections, 2018 and 2023 (%)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Between 2018 and 2023 young adults in both Slovenia and Croatia became notably less certain that their futures would follow the traditional “married with children” pathway. In Slovenia the share of youngsters who expected to be married with their own family fell from roughly two-thirds (67%) in 2018 to just under three-fifths

(59%) in 2023. Over the same time, more flexible life-plans gained ground, evident in the proportion expecting marriage without children rising from about 2% to 5%, and those foreseeing an unmarried relationship without children growing from 6% to 10%. Slight increase is also visible for the remaining “single without children”, while expectations of cohabiting with children remain steady.

Croatia shows a similar pattern. In 2018 nearly nine in ten Croatian respondents (88%) imagined themselves married with children, but by 2023 this had dropped to 78%, while marriage without children rose from 2% to 5%, unmarried partnerships without children from 3% to 7%, and unmarried partnerships with children from 3% to 5%. Ones expecting to stay single without children also increased slightly, while the future with single parenthood remained rare in both years.

These results suggest a clear diversification of family aspirations during a period that encompassed the COVID-19 pandemic, rising housing and living costs, and heightened labour market uncertainty. While marriage with children remains the majority ideal, a growing minority of youth in both countries now envision child-free marriage, long-term cohabitation, or sustained singleness, signalling shifting norms and greater openness to non-traditional life courses.

8.6 Youth and their assessment of the COVID on selected aspects of their social relations

The preceding analyses have traced how COVID-19 reshaped young people’s social worlds, from shifts in family to changes in friendship quality, partnership patterns, and future family aspirations. Taken together, the findings show a common thread:

Prolonged lockdowns, economic uncertainty, and disrupted routines intensified reliance on close family, strained some peer connections, nudged some toward co-habitation, and tempered the once dominant expectation of marrying and having children.

This final section draws these findings together to examine how young adults themselves evaluate the pandemic’s impact on their everyday relationships. By linking current relationship statuses with future projections, and situating them within broader shifts in trust, satisfaction, and engagement, the section highlights

the pandemic's role as both a stress test and a catalyst, exposing vulnerabilities in youth social ties while accelerating new, more flexible pathways into adulthood.

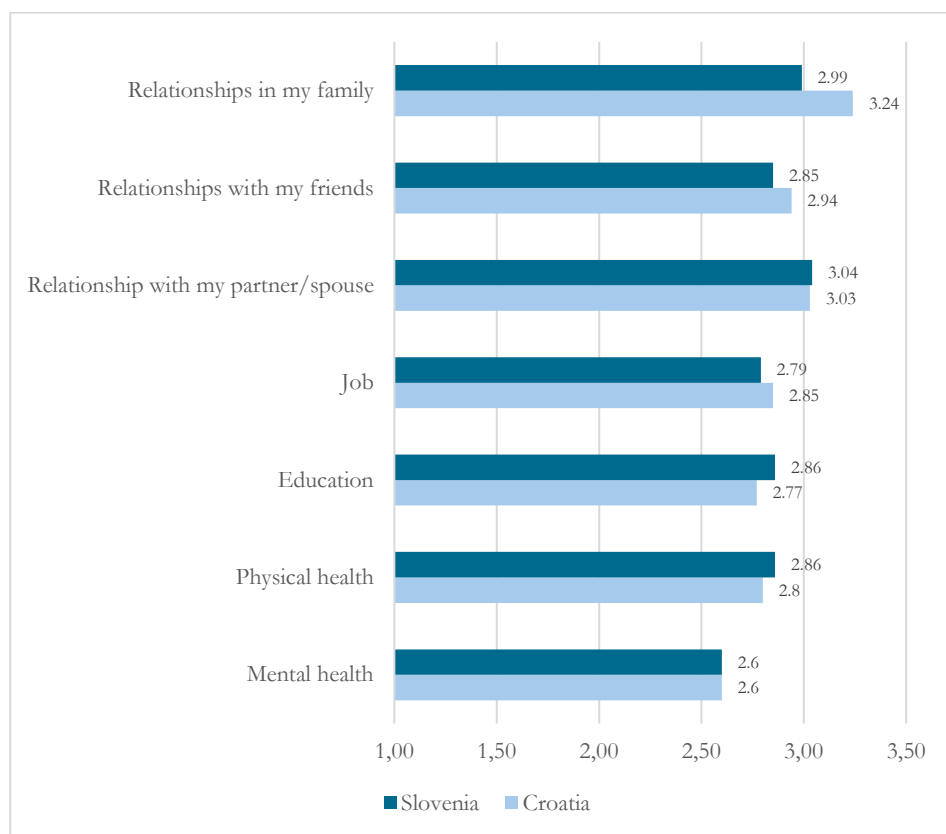


Figure 8.7: Youth in Slovenia and Croatia and their assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on selected aspects of their life 2023 (M)

Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Depicted in Figure 8.7 are results on a five-point scale, where 3 indicates “no real change,” values below 3 signal a negative impact, and values above 3 a positive one, young people in both countries report that the pandemic affected nearly every aspect of their lives, though not all domains were hit equally:

- Family relationships proved the most resilient. Croatian youth in particular rated this area above the neutral point (3.24), while Slovenian respondents clustered

right at neutrality (2.99). These results echo earlier findings that lockdowns intensified the time spent at home and, for many, tightened family bonds.

- Friendships, jobs and physical health all slipped modestly below the neutral line (scores between 2.79 and 2.94), most likely due to the reduced face-to-face contact, which strained peer networks.
- Education registered a slightly stronger setback, notably among Croatian youth (2.77), most likely reflecting prolonged school closures and uneven digital learning environments.
- Partnerships remained relatively stable in both contexts, suggesting that couples who weathered the crisis, for example by moving in together, could maintain relationship quality despite restrictions.
- Mental health stands out as the clearest casualty, with identical ratings of 2.60 in Slovenia and Croatia, aligning with the broader body of research and our previous findings, emphasising increased anxiety, loneliness, and uncertainty during the pandemic.

In other words, the data confirms a pattern already observed:

While family ties often acted as a buffer, the pandemic eroded other social and personal domains and took the heaviest toll on mental well-being of youth. The relative stability of partner relationships and the modest scale of perceived damage to physical health suggest some resilience, yet the uniformly low mental-health scores underline the need for sustained psychosocial support as youth move further into the post-COVID landscape.

Complexity of the situation young people experienced during that time could be illustrated with the following excerpt from the focus group narrative:

“At the beginning (of the lockdown) I found it cool, you could stay at home, no school, sleeping late, no stress. But after a while I noticed something, a tension building up. I was looking for some sort of a closeness to somebody, other human beings, but I could not find it. Right then I experienced intense dissatisfaction and it lasted until we returned to the school, when I was again among school peers. I actually recall, when I stepped on the train full of people for the first time. At that moment I experienced strong anxiety...”

(Male, high school student, Slovenia)

“I was waiting at the bus stop, and the bus was full of high school students. Everybody was already at their seats, it was packed. Although the pandemic was officially over, everybody was still wearing masks and it was totally weird and unpleasant. I experienced weird stress... like there is a wall or a barrier between you and other people, you cannot connect to other people. And this was not limited to other people, it happened between me and my friends. After this (lockdown), it is so much harder to approach somebody and start a conversation.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Disaster. So, I don't know, starting from education, [...] I missed two or three exams, there were no lectures, but, for example, the only year that didn't have a graduation ceremony - I was in that year, that was kind of nasty for me. I don't know, here, I think at home too, you couldn't go anywhere, everyone was sick, it just hit us in the family that my husband and I, who live at a different address, had Covid at the same time, so there was no support from the community or anything, except for the general practitioner, but there was no one to offer, for example, "do you need anything?", and you had to be in isolation for those 20 days, so apart from that test, I didn't even leave (op. the apartment).”

(Female, employed, Croatia).

8.7 Conclusion and recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic served as both a magnifier and a catalyst for change in the family and social lives of youth in Slovenia and Croatia. While family ties often acted as a protective buffer, the crisis also intensified pre-existing tensions and revealed the limits of familial support in conditions of prolonged stress. Slovenian youth showed a more pronounced decline in family satisfaction and parent-child relationship quality, likely due to stricter lockdowns, greater individualism, and rising youth pessimism. Croatian youth, embedded in stronger familial norms, demonstrated greater resilience, though even there, pockets of strain emerged. Friendships and peer satisfaction also declined, with Slovenian youth again more affected, suggesting the need for renewed attention to youth social integration. Partnerships remained relatively stable, but aspirations for traditional family structures (e.g. marriage with children) have noticeably declined in both countries. Throughout, the dominant influence of mothers and the broader family network remained strong, while mental health emerged as the area most negatively affected by the pandemic. These findings indicate the critical role of family and social

relationships in shaping youth well-being during times of crisis, and the importance of targeted support to reinforce these networks and promote youth resilience.

Based on these conclusions the following recommendations should be adopted at the level of youth policies:

- Investment in family support programmes tailored to youth needs, with particular emphasis in 1) development of interventions that strengthen parent-child communication, and 2) support for low-income or single-parent households, which is essential when reducing strain and inequality induced by future crises.
- Expansion of youth mental health services in family and school settings in both countries along with community-based mental health programmes that include family therapy and peer support components.
- Support in rebuilding of peer relationships and youth social networks not only in schools, but also in extracurricular, youth-led initiatives (e.g. local youth centres) that help restore disrupted friendships and promote social reconnection.
- Adaption of life-course education and counselling to address changing youth aspirations, which include flexible models of partnership, cohabitation, and parenting in educational curricula and public campaigns to support youth navigating new norms around intimacy, family planning, and household formation post-pandemic.

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About the authors

Dr. **Danijela Lahe**, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, and a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Post-Socialist Societies (CePSS). Her academic work focuses on family dynamics, lifestyles, education, and social gerontology, with particular expertise in quantitative research methods. She actively contributes to sociological research and teaching, combining methodological rigor with applied perspectives. Through her research, she addresses contemporary social challenges related to demographic change, ageing, and family transformations in post-socialist societies, thereby enriching both national and international academic discussions in sociology.

Dr. **Andrej Naterer**, is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Sociology, University of Maribor. His research focuses on children and youth, youth deviance and delinquency, and small-scale communities. He has participated in over 20 projects as a manager, researcher, or consultant. His work primarily employs qualitative methods, content analysis, and anthropological approaches. He is the author of numerous scientific books and articles and editor of the *Subcultures* series. He is a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Post-Socialist Societies (CePSS) and a member of several professional associations and international editorial boards.

