

7. YOUTH IN TRANSITION: NAVIGATING EXPECTATIONS IN THE POST-COVID ERA

DUNJA POTOČNIK,¹ GORDANA KUTEROVAC JAGODIĆ,²
MINEA RUTAR³

¹ Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia
dunja@idi.hr

² University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of
Psychology, Zagreb, Croatia
gkuterovac@ffzg.hr

³ University of Maribor, Faculty of Arts, Maribor, Slovenia
minea.rutar@student.um.si

This chapter compares youth perceptions of societal norms in Croatia and Slovenia, revealing distinct mechanisms shaping their views. Croatian youth exhibit age-dependent patterns where growing autonomy influences the internalisation of societal expectations, leading to increasing self-confidence paired with a realistic reassessment of attainable life goals, particularly in education, housing, and financial independence. Slovenian youth, especially women, confront pronounced gender disparities rooted in structural inequities, burdening them with extensive societal and familial responsibilities. Both cohorts experience tension between individual aspirations and collective norms, with maturity prompting a shift from optimism to pragmatic evaluation of social milestones. Socioeconomic status (SES) strongly correlates with youths' belief in personal success and adherence to societal expectations, with higher SES linked to greater confidence and internalisation, although national contexts mediate these effects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, age differences in justifying public health norms were minimal, but SES differences were significant, especially in Slovenia. Croatian youth showed less overall support for health measures but greater familial duty endorsement.

DOI
[https://doi.org/
10.18690/um.ff.7.2025.7](https://doi.org/10.18690/um.ff.7.2025.7)

ISBN
978-961-299-047-3

Keywords:
youth,
expectations,
life goals,
COVID-19 pandemic,
Croatia and Slovenia



University of Maribor Press

In contemporary Croatia and Slovenia, the expectations placed upon young people by older generations and wider society are deeply embedded within shifting economic, cultural, and policy landscapes. These expectations encompass various life domains, including education, employment, housing, family formation, and intergenerational care. While aspirations among youth remain notably high, structural inequalities, labour market transformations, and changing cultural norms have significantly complicated the trajectories traditionally associated with the transition to adulthood. What was once perceived as a linear and predictable progression, from education to stable employment, followed by independent living and family formation, is increasingly fragmented and uncertain.

Educational expectations have become increasingly central to societal narratives surrounding youth success. In Croatia and Slovenia, we can observe a trend noted across Europe, with a significant increase in the normative assumption that young people will pursue higher education, regardless of parental education or socio-economic background (Brooks et al., 2021). This widespread emphasis on educational attainment reflects broader global trends linked to the expansion of tertiary education and the perceived necessity of credentials for labour market competitiveness (Reay et al., 2005). Despite this trend, the pathways to higher education are not equally accessible. Families with limited educational capital often lack the navigational knowledge to support their children's academic progress, leading to mismatches between aspirations and realistic educational trajectories (Ball et al., 2002). Furthermore, while parental expectations are typically high, especially among middle-class families, research indicates that in earlier cohorts these expectations may have exceeded those of their children, though this intergenerational discrepancy appears to be narrowing over time (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002). For working-class families, high aspirations may coexist with structural constraints that impede educational mobility, such as limited financial resources or poor institutional support (Devine, 2004).

Successful placement on the labour market, following the completion of formal education, remains a cornerstone of societal expectations regarding the transition to adulthood. However, the structural realities of contemporary labour markets often present obstacles to these ambitions. The post-socialist transition, globalisation, and neoliberal economic reforms have all contributed to labour market instability, with young people disproportionately affected by precarious employment,

underemployment, and extended job search periods (Müller & Gangl, 2003). This mismatch between expectation and opportunity has led to a protracted transition from education to economic independence. Many young people now remain financially reliant on their families well into their twenties and beyond, a phenomenon often referred to as "delayed adulthood" (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), which was confirmed by comparative studies conducted in Croatia and Slovenia (Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Gvozdanović et al., 2024; Naterer et al., 2019; Lavrič, 2024).

The prospect of achieving independent living, particularly through homeownership, has become increasingly elusive for young people in Croatia and Slovenia. The interplay between low youth wages, high property prices, and insufficient rental housing options has forced many to remain in the parental home for longer periods (Mandic, 2008). The Eurostat data show that the average age at which young individuals moved out of their parents' homes across the European Union in 2023 was 26.3 years and remained unchanged in the last five years. This figure, however, differed significantly among EU member states, with Croatia at 31.8 years and Slovenia at 29.1 years¹. This phenomenon, often framed as "prolonged co-residence", is not simply a cultural preference but a response to economic challenges. As a result, the traditional, linear model of housing transitions has given way to more fluid and uncertain pathways, with many young people experiencing periods of housing precarity, including moving in and out of different living arrangements, which creates patterns of jo-jø generation (Kovacheva, 2012). The symbolic value of independent living as a marker of adulthood remains strong, yet its realisation is increasingly conditional on factors beyond young people's control, such as inheritance, parental support, or state subsidies.

Residential independence is strongly aligned with the possibilities for creating one's own family. While older generations may continue to hold normative expectations that young people will marry and have children, these life milestones are being delayed or redefined for the contemporary generations of young people. In both Slovenia and Croatia, the average age of marriage and first childbirth has increased significantly, reflecting broader European trends (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). Although many young people continue to aspire to family life, these aspirations are

¹ Source: Eurostat [yth_demo_30]

often reframed around ideals of emotional maturity, financial readiness, and partnership stability, rather than mere conformity to social expectations. Consequently, young people approach family formation with a higher sense of reflexivity, weighing individual preferences against perceived constraints and opportunities (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), which is reflected in the YO-VID22, 2023 data on 80.9% of young people in Croatia and 74.1% of youth in Slovenia who aspire to become parents.

Expectations concerning young people's anticipated role in providing care for their own family and for older family members become more central to social care provision. However, the retreat of the public social care system, delayed economic independence and increased geographical mobility further complicate young people's ability to assume caregiving roles. At the same time, the extension of parental support, both financial and emotional, has become a key feature of intergenerational relationships, reinforcing a dynamic of prolonged dependency (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). This mutual interdependence represents a departure from traditional models of linear generational succession. Furthermore, there is growing evidence of a disjuncture between these aspirations and young people's sense of their attainability (Arnett, 2004).

7.1 Societal expectations and self-expectations of young people in the context of contemporary uncertainty

In both Croatia and Slovenia, young people's self-expectations reflect a growing tension between traditional markers of adult success and the shifting realities of contemporary life. Shaped by both personal ambition and societal pressure, these expectations also reflect a cultural shift towards valuing mental health and emotional stability, though the pressures of achieving this ideal within unstable conditions often intensify psychological distress. Despite recognising the obstacles, many young people continue to strive for relational and domestic milestones, though these are often deferred or reimagined. The YO-VID22 research paid special attention to the aspirations and expectations of young people, striving to comprehend a patchwork of various expectations that society and the elders have of the youth, and of the self-imposed expectations. Starting from the statements *"I have plans for my future and ways to achieve them"* and *"I am ready to take on the responsibilities expected of an adult"* we gained valuable insights into how young people in Croatia and Slovenia perceive their

transition to adulthood. In both countries, a high proportion of youth expressed agreement with these affirmations, suggesting a generally proactive and responsible orientation among the younger population. In Croatia, 83.4% of respondents agreed with the statement about future planning, while the figure was slightly lower in Slovenia at 77.6%. Conversely, when it comes to assuming adult responsibilities, the proportions were higher: 87.2% in Croatia and 89.4% in Slovenia. For both items and in both national contexts, there were no statistically significant gender differences, which implies a relatively uniform self-perception across male and female youth regarding these developmental markers.

Age-related differences emerged more distinctly. In Croatia, the readiness to take on adult responsibilities showed a modest yet statistically significant variation across age groups ($\chi^2=6.127$; $df=2$; $p=.047$). Here, 83.4% of individuals aged 16-19 felt prepared, rising to 87.6% in the middle age bracket and peaking at 89.4% among those aged 25-29. This upward trajectory likely reflects the natural progression of maturity and experience. In Slovenia, the age effect was slightly more pronounced ($\chi^2=9.258$; $df=2$; $p=.010$), with readiness increasing from 85.1% in the youngest group to 91.5% in the oldest cohort. These findings underline how the subjective sense of adult responsibility strengthens with age, reinforcing the developmental nature of emerging adulthood.

Socio-economic status (SES) appears to exert a differential influence in the two countries. In Croatia, SES did not significantly shape young people's responses to either statement, suggesting a potentially more equitable perception of future orientation and responsibility among Croatian youth regardless of socio-economic background. In contrast, SES-related disparities were evident in Slovenia. For the statement on future plans and their attainability, a statistically significant SES gradient was observed ($\chi^2=8.599$; $df=2$; $p=.014$), with a 73.5% agreement in the lowest SES group, 78.1% in the middle, and 83.8% in the highest. A similar pattern emerged for readiness to assume adult responsibilities ($\chi^2=7.563$; $df=2$; $p=.023$), with agreement rates increasing from 86.0% in the lowest SES stratum to 92.6% in the highest. These disparities suggest that in Slovenia, socio-economic positioning plays a meaningful role in shaping young people's confidence in both their futures and their preparedness for adult roles.

The Figure 7.1 presents comparative data on the societal expectations and youth self-expectations and societal expectations among young people in Croatia and Slovenia across various life goals.

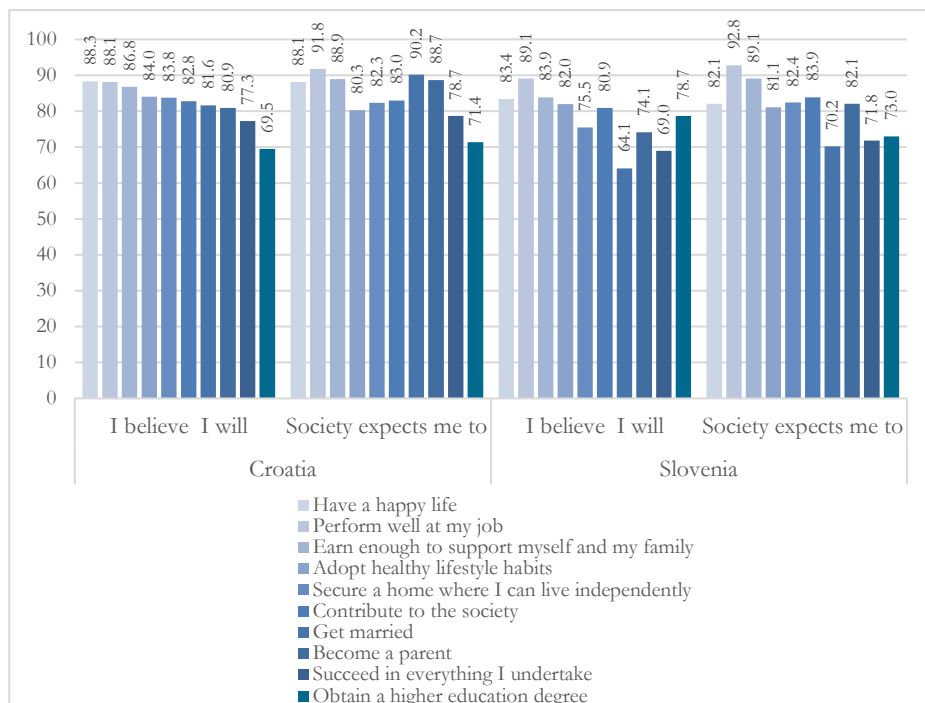


Figure 7.1: Societal expectations and youth self-expectations in Croatia and Slovenia (%)

Source: YO-VID22, 2023

In both countries, individuals exhibit a high level of confidence in their ability to "perform well at my job" (Croatia: 88.1%, Slovenia: 89.1%) and to "earn enough to support myself and my family" (Croatia: 86.8%, Slovenia: 83.9%). An opposite pattern is observed in educational aspirations: 78.7% of young Slovenians believe they will obtain a higher education degree, compared to only 69.5% of Croats. This is coupled with marginally higher societal expectations in Slovenia (73.0% vs 71.4%). A striking disparity emerges in the intention to "get married", with 81.6% of Croatian respondents believing they will do so, compared to only 64.1% in Slovenia. This gap is mirrored in societal expectations, where 90.2% in Croatia perceive this as expected

versus just 70.2% in Slovenia, which highlights a stronger normative emphasis on marriage in Croatian society. Similarly, becoming a parent is more strongly anticipated in Croatia (80.9%) than Slovenia (74.1%), with societal expectations following a comparable trend (Croatia: 88.7%, Slovenia: 82.1%). We can conclude that while both countries show strong personal ambition and perceived societal pressure to achieve, Croatian youth appear more inclined toward traditional life milestones such as marriage and parenthood, whereas Slovenians demonstrate higher academic aspiration.

Regarding the socio-demographic differences, in Croatia, several statistically significant gender differences emerged in young people's perceptions of societal expectations and self-beliefs regarding future life milestones. First of all, women reported significantly higher ($t(1214) = -3.127$; $p = .002$) perceived societal expectations to attain a university-level education ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .372$) than their male peers ($M = 1.67$; $SD = .469$). This difference was mirrored in self-belief ($t(1214) = -3.504$; $p = .000$), where women expressed higher confidence in achieving university-level education ($M = 1.76$; $SD = .430$) than men ($M = 1.65$; $SD = .477$).

In terms of perceived societal expectations related to parenthood, men reported a significantly stronger ($t(1214) = -2.695$; $p = .007$) sense that society expects them to become parents ($M = 1.86$; $SD = .344$) compared to women ($M = 1.74$; $SD = .438$). Interestingly, despite this, women expressed a stronger personal belief ($t(1214) = 2.061$; $p = .040$) that they will become parents ($M = 1.91$; $SD = .284$) than men ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .374$). Conversely, regarding societal expectations to marry, women reported slightly higher agreement ($M = 1.91$; $SD = .284$) than men ($M = 1.89$; $SD = .330$), with $t(1214) = -3.157$; $p = .002$. A significant gender difference was also identified in beliefs regarding independent housing acquisition ($t(1214) = 2.235$; $p = .026$). Women expressed higher belief in their ability to secure housing independently ($M = 1.86$; $SD = .352$) than men ($M = 1.79$; $SD = .411$).

When considering broader life expectations, men were more likely to agree that society expects individuals to have a happy life ($M = 1.85$; $SD = .357$) compared to women ($M = 1.81$; $SD = .390$), with $t(1214) = -3.302$; $p = .001$. Moreover, women expressed a slightly lower belief ($t(1214) = 2.142$; $p = .032$) in contributing to society through their actions ($M = 1.83$; $SD = .372$) than men ($M = 1.85$; $SD = .356$). Finally, a statistically significant difference was observed in beliefs regarding success across all

endeavours ($t(1214)=2.621$; $p=.009$), with men reporting higher confidence across different domains ($M=1.80$; $SD=.398$) than women ($M=1.74$; $SD=.439$).

In Slovenia, the analysis revealed several statistically significant gender differences in young people's perceptions of societal expectations across a range of life domains. Women consistently reported higher levels of perceived societal pressure in comparison to their male peers. Most prominently, women more frequently indicated perceived expectations to maintain healthy lifestyle habits ($M=1.85$; $SD=.356$) than men ($M=1.78$; $SD=.417$), with $t(1282)=-3.483$; $p=.001$. Moreover, there is a significant gender difference in self-belief concerning higher education ($t(1282)=-2.194$, $p=.028$), as women expressed higher belief in their ability to attain a university-level education ($M=1.81$; $SD=.390$) than men ($M=1.76$; $SD=.425$).

Perceptions regarding future family roles also demonstrated statistically significant differences in regard to gender. Women more frequently reported higher ($t(1282)=-6.237$; $p=.000$) societal expectations to become a parent ($M=1.89$; $SD=.313$) than men ($M=1.76$; $SD=.428$). In the domain of marriage, women also reported higher perceived expectations ($M=1.74$; $SD=.439$) than men ($M=1.67$; $SD=.471$), with $t(1282)=-2.793$; $p=.005$. Concerning housing, a statistically significant gender difference ($t(1282)=-3.068$; $p=.002$) was found in perceived expectations to secure independent living arrangements, with women again reporting higher expectations ($M=1.86$; $SD=.349$) than men ($M=1.79$; $SD=.405$). Moreover, women perceived stronger societal expectations to lead a happy life ($M=1.87$; $SD=.340$) compared to men ($M=1.78$; $SD=.414$), with $t(1282)=-4.053$; $p<0.001$.

Beyond personal and familial aspirations, significant gender differences were evident in perceived societal expectations to contribute to society through one's actions, with women once again reporting higher levels ($M=1.87$; $SD=.337$) than men ($M=1.81$; $SD=.391$), with $t(1282)=-2.843$; $p=.005$. Finally, women reported higher ($t(1282)=-2.585$; $p=.010$) perceived societal expectations to succeed in all endeavours ($M=1.75$; $SD=.431$) than men ($M=1.69$; $SD=.464$).

Concerning the age differences among Croatian youth, age appears to be a significant factor in shaping perceptions of adult responsibility and self-belief across various developmental domains. Regarding educational expectations, 74.9% of both the 16-19 and 20-24 age groups perceived societal pressure to attain a university-

level education. This proportion declined to 65.6% among 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=12.229$; $df=2$; $p=.002$). A similar, but more pronounced, downward trend was observed in personal belief in achieving this goal: 74.4% of 16-19-year-olds, 72.2% of 20-24-year-olds, and only 63.2% of the 25-29 cohort expressed this belief ($\chi^2=13.589$; $df=2$; $p=.001$). These findings may reflect changing priorities or growing awareness of structural barriers as youth age. Confidence in one's ability to perform well in a job increased with age: 84.4% of those aged 16-19 reported confidence in their job performance, compared to 87.4% of the 20-24 age group and 91.4% of 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=9.201$; $df=2$; $p=.010$). This trend suggests that older youth generally feel more prepared for the demands of the labour market.

Perceptions of societal expectations to maintain healthy lifestyle habits showed a statistically significant, though less linear, pattern. Among 16-19-year-olds, 84.4% reported feeling such expectations, followed by 77.0% of the 20-24 age group, and 80.6% of 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=6.478$; $df=2$; $p=.039$). Perceived societal expectations to lead a happy life declined modestly across age groups. While 90.3% of the youngest cohort agreed with this statement, the figure fell slightly to 89.8% among those aged 20-24, and more notably to 84.8% among 25-29-year-olds ($\chi^2=7.437$; $df=2$; $p=.024$). Finally, belief in personal success across all endeavours varied significantly with age. Among the youngest group, 77.2% endorsed this belief, compared to 73.8% in the middle group, and a higher 81.0% among the oldest group ($\chi^2=6.645$; $df=2$; $p=.036$).

Among Slovenian youth, several statistically significant age-related differences were observed in both perceptions of societal expectations and personal beliefs regarding key developmental milestones and adult responsibilities. In terms of perceived societal expectations to attain a university-level education, 70.5% of the youngest group held this perception, increasing to 78.3% among 20-24-year-olds, and then decreasing slightly to 69.8% in the oldest group. Despite this fluctuation, the overall association with age remained statistically significant ($\chi^2=9.964$; $df=2$; $p=.007$), pointing to shifting educational expectations or awareness across developmental stages.

Regarding marriage, 65.0% of the youngest group in Slovenia perceived a societal expectation to marry, which increased to 71.9% in the 20-24 age group and 72.3% among 25-29-year-olds. This age-related difference was statistically significant

($\chi^2=6.045$; $df=2$; $p=.049$), indicating a progressive internalisation of societal norms related to long-term relationships. However, personal belief in getting married showed an inverse pattern. While 70.0% of 16-19-year-olds believed they would marry, this proportion dropped to 66.7% among 20-24-year-olds and further to 59.2% in the oldest age group, a statistically significant decline ($\chi^2=11.458$; $df=2$; $p=.003$). This contrast between perceived societal expectations and personal belief may reflect growing scepticism or evolving attitudes towards marriage with age.

Perceptions of societal expectations to perform well in one's job were also widely endorsed across age groups, though with slight variation. Among 16-19-year-olds, 90.6% perceived this expectation, rising to 95.1% among those aged 20-24, before declining slightly to 92.1% among the 25-29 cohort. The age-related pattern was statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.354$; $df=2$; $p=.042$), indicating that while expectations are generally high, they are perceived more intensely during early adulthood. In contrast, belief in securing independent housing declined with age. Among 16-19-year-olds, 82.2% believed they would be able to live independently, compared to 74.9% of 20-24-year-olds and just 71.2% of those aged 25-29. This decline was statistically significant ($\chi^2=13.352$; $df=2$; $p=.001$), potentially reflecting the growing awareness of financial and structural barriers associated with housing autonomy as youth age.

A statistically significant decrease was also observed in the perception that society expects one to lead a happy life. While 87.1% of 16-19-year-olds reported this perception, the figure declined to 83.1% among 20-24-year-olds and further to 77.7% among the 25-29 group ($\chi^2=12.775$; $df=2$; $p=.002$), suggesting a diminishing belief in idealised societal expectations over time.

A position on the spectrum of socio-economic status (SES), estimated by a degree of possession and access to the goods, appears to play a statistically significant role in shaping both perceived societal expectations and personal beliefs of Croatian youth across a range of developmental and aspirational domains. In terms of maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, belief increases significantly with SES: 78.2% of youth with low SES hold this belief, rising to 85.8% among those with medium SES and 89.5% with high SES ($\chi^2=16.928$; $df=2$; $p=.000$). A more modest SES-related pattern is observed in belief in getting married, reported by 78.5% of low SES youth, 81.9% of medium SES youth, and 86.5% of those from high SES backgrounds. This

difference is statistically significant ($\chi^2=6.491$; $df=2$; $p=.039$), indicating increasing personal belief in marriage with higher SES.

Perceived societal expectation to attain university-level education also varies significantly by SES. While 64.0% of low SES youth perceive such an expectation, this increases to 75.6% among those with medium SES and 74.3% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=16.840$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), indicating lower awareness or internalisation of educational norms among the lower SES group. This trend continues in personal belief in attaining university-level education, reported by only 61.5% of youth from low SES backgrounds, but increasing to 73.9% and 73.0% among those from medium and high SES backgrounds, respectively ($\chi^2=18.885$; $df=2$; $p=.000$).

With regard to perceptions that society expects good job performance, 88.4% of individuals from low SES backgrounds hold this view, increasing to 93.1% among those with medium SES and 94.9% among those with high SES. This upward trend is statistically significant at $\chi^2=10.878$; $df=2$; $p=.004$, suggesting a correlation between SES and perceived pressure to meet employment standards. A similar pattern is observed in belief in personal job performance, where 84.5% of youth from low SES backgrounds believe they will perform well in their job, compared to 89.6% of those from medium SES and 90.7% from high SES backgrounds ($\chi^2=7.718$; $df=2$; $p=.021$).

Belief in earning enough to support oneself and one's family is shared by 82.1% of low SES youth, increasing to 86.9% for those with medium SES and 92.0% for those with high SES. This relationship is statistically significant at $\chi^2=12.824$; $df=2$; $p=.002$, reflecting greater financial optimism with increasing SES. In relation to securing independent housing, belief rises significantly from 79.2% among low SES youth to 83.6% among medium SES and 92.4% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=19.451$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), which underlines the critical role of socioeconomic resources in perceptions of housing autonomy.

Regarding the belief in achieving a happy life, 85.3% of youth with low SES express this belief, increasing to 89.2% among those with medium SES and 91.2% among those with high SES ($\chi^2=6.042$; $df=2$; $p=.049$). The perception that society expects individuals to contribute to society also varies by SES, with 79.2% of low SES youth holding this view, compared to 85.1% of those with medium SES and 84.5% of

those with high SES ($\chi^2=6.352$; $df=2$; $p=.042$). Finally, personal belief in contributing to society increases from 77.2% among low SES youth to 85.5% and 86.5% among medium and high SES youth, respectively ($\chi^2=14.152$; $df=2$; $p=.001$), which further accentuates the role of SES in shaping civic self-perception.

In the Slovenian youth sample, perceptions of societal expectations regarding university-level education are also SES-sensitive. Among youth from low SES backgrounds, 69.2% believe society expects them to pursue higher education, compared to 73.2% of those from medium SES and 78.8% from high SES ($\chi^2=6.573$; $df=2$; $p=.037$). These perceptions are mirrored in personal belief in attaining university-level education, where a significant SES-based divide emerges: 69.2% of low SES youth believe they will attain a university-level education, rising sharply to 82.1% in the medium SES group and 84.7% in the high SES group ($\chi^2=30.175$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), highlighting a pronounced disparity in educational self-efficacy. When considering the perception that society expects them to marry, a similar trend emerges, with 75.6% of low SES youth who perceive such an expectation, compared to 68.3% and 67.1% among medium and high SES youth, respectively ($\chi^2=7.473$; $df=2$; $p=.024$), suggesting that traditional social norms may exert stronger influence on youth from less advantaged backgrounds.

Regarding perceived societal expectations to earn enough to support oneself and one's family, 85.8% of low SES youth report feeling this expectation, rising to 91.1% among medium SES and slightly decreasing to 88.4% among high SES youth ($\chi^2=7.375$; $df=2$; $p=.025$). In terms of personal belief in earning sufficient income, the differences are more pronounced: 75.6% of low SES youth believe they will achieve this, in contrast to 86.0% of medium SES and 92.1% of high SES individuals ($\chi^2=32.750$; $df=2$; $p=.000$).

A similar trend appears in belief in securing independent housing, which is reported by 65.8% of low SES youth, increasing to 78.4% for medium SES and 83.3% for high SES youth ($\chi^2=29.843$; $df=2$; $p=.000$), reinforcing the influence of SES on perceived housing autonomy.

Analysis of youth in Croatia and Slovenia reveals that both countries' young people display high confidence in their ability to perform well at work and support themselves financially, but notable differences emerge in educational and family-related aspirations. Slovenian youth report higher academic ambitions and perceive higher societal expectations regarding higher education, while Croatian youth are more inclined towards traditional milestones such as marriage and parenthood.

In terms of belief in maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, 77.2% of low SES youth express confidence, rising to 82.9% in the medium SES group and 87.5% in the high SES group ($\chi^2=10.827$; $df=2$; $p=.004$), further reflecting a SES-based pattern in health-related expectations. Concerning the belief in leading a happy life, 79.2% of youth from low SES backgrounds express confidence in this outcome, compared to 83.9% from medium SES and 89.4% from high SES backgrounds ($\chi^2=10.547$; $df=2$; $p=.005$), which indicates higher optimism among those from more advantaged socioeconomic positions.

Socioeconomic status (SES) exerts a significant influence; higher SES is consistently associated with stronger beliefs in personal success, higher internalisation of societal expectations, and higher optimism regarding employment, financial independence, housing autonomy and maintaining healthy lifestyle habits.

7.2 Pandemic-related expectations

In the very beginning of the pandemic, the voice of the general public became polarised and distorted as a consequence of the imposed anti-pandemic measures and a clash between the informed expert circles and pseudo-science narratives. These differences may reflect broader distinctions in public trust, institutional credibility, and political culture between the two countries. Slovenia has consistently ranked higher than Croatia in international measures of governance effectiveness and public trust in institutions (European Commission, 2021), factors that have been shown to correlate with public compliance and support for collective health measures (Van der Weerd et al., 2011). The difference may also be partially explained by the framing and enforcement of public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Slovenian authorities, particularly during the earlier phases of the pandemic, adopted a relatively technocratic and science-driven approach to

pandemic management, which may have resonated more with youth who identified with expert authority and collective responsibility. In contrast, Croatia experienced more political contestation and fragmented public messaging, including mixed signals from authorities and less consistent enforcement (Koprić, 2020). Such inconsistencies may have eroded the perceived legitimacy of public health expectations among young people, resulting in lower justification ratings for many of the measures. The listed disparities can also be identified in the data presented in the Figure 7.2.

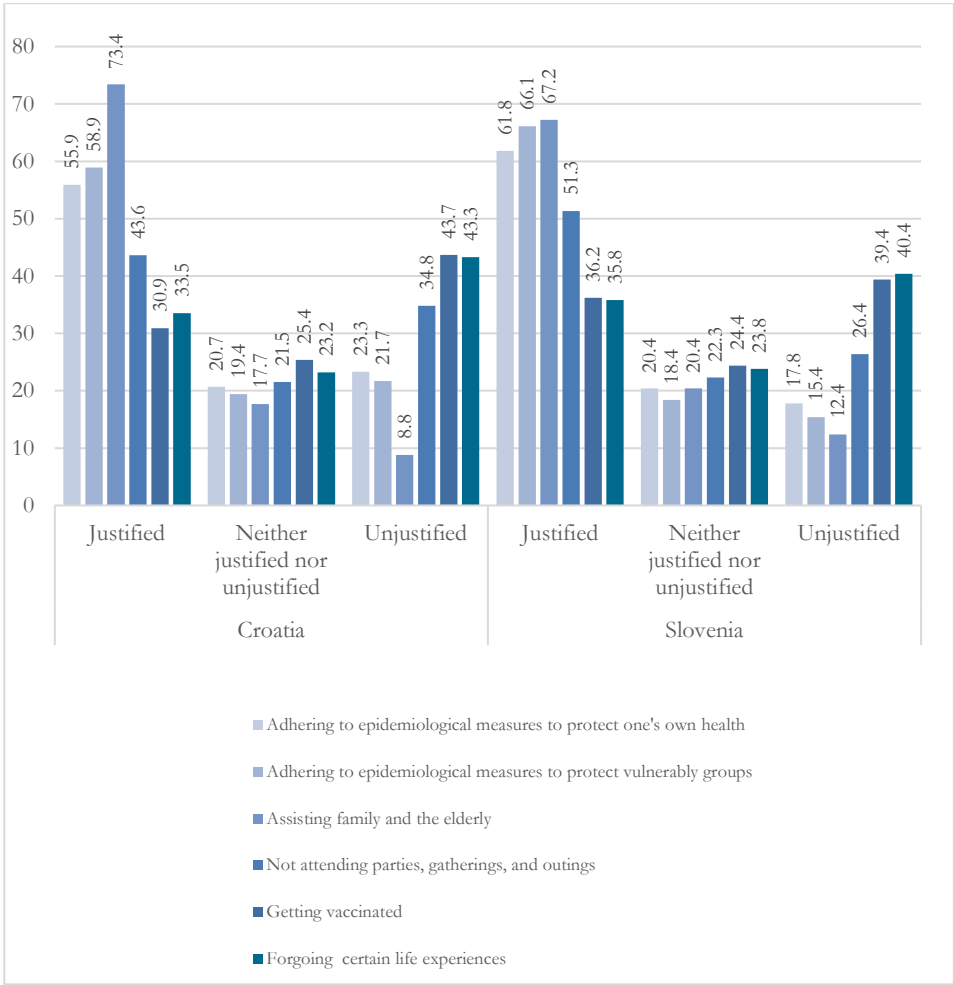


Figure 7.2: Perceived pandemic-related expectations of youth in Croatia and Slovenia (%)
Source: YO-VID22, 2023

A comparative analysis of public attitudes towards pandemic-related behaviours in Croatia and Slovenia reveals differences in the perceived justification of specific epidemiological and social measures. Slovenian respondents consistently reported higher justification rates across all behaviours. The most significant divergence is observed in the category of “not attending parties, gatherings and outings”, where 51.3% of Slovenians considered such behaviour justified, compared to only 43.6% of Croats. Similarly, adherence to measures aimed at protecting vulnerable groups was deemed justified by 66.1% of Slovenian participants, surpassing the Croatian figure of 58.9% by 7.2 points. Conversely, young people in Croatia showed a stronger tendency to view these actions as unjustified, particularly in relation to vaccination and the forgoing of certain life experiences. In Croatia, 43.7% deemed vaccination unjustified, compared to 39.4% in Slovenia. A similar pattern is noted in forgoing life experiences, with 43.3% of Croats versus 40.4% of Slovenians expressing this sentiment. The narrowest gap appears in the domain of assisting family and the elderly, which was widely supported in both countries (Croatia 73.4%; Slovenia 67.2%), which suggests a stronger familial or intergenerational commitment within Croatian society. Also, the focus groups provided us with insights on the possible explanations of country differences, one of which is related to inadequate response to the pandemic from the educational institutions:

“I believe that during that time, specifically during the pandemic, we particularly lacked support from, for instance, the school counsellor in primary school. She was already older, and as a result, the situation unfolded in such a way that she was not familiar with the necessary technology. I think what we truly needed was some form of guidance; someone to explain that we simply had to persevere, what the measures were, and how things would function moving forward. Essentially, we needed to be introduced into that new reality and how it was going to work”

(Female, high school student, Croatia).

Regarding the statistically significant differences, there were significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting one's own health. In Slovenia, women ($M=3.79$; $SD=1.18$) rated these expectations as significantly more justified than men ($M=3.56$; $SD=1.23$), $t(1275.16)=-3.43$; $p<.001$. The same pattern was observed in Croatia, where women ($M=3.70$; $SD=1.22$) again rated the expectations more highly than men ($M=3.26$; $SD=1.31$), $t(1213.24)=-6.07$; $p<.001$.

There were also significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Men reported significantly lower justification than women in both Slovenia, $t(1274.94) = -2.59$; $p = .01$, and Croatia, $t(1213.42) = -5.15$, $p < .001$. In Slovenia, the mean score for men was 3.73 ($SD = 1.21$), compared to 3.90 ($SD = 1.15$) for women; in Croatia, men scored 3.38 ($SD = 1.31$) and women 3.76 ($SD = 1.22$).

There were no significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to help family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands in Slovenia ($p > .05$). However, in Croatia, a significant difference was observed, with men ($M = 3.93$; $SD = 1.12$) reporting lower justification than women ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .96$), $t(1199.71) = -3.24$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, there were no significant gender differences in the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to refrain from attending social gatherings, parties, and outings in Slovenia ($p > .05$). However, in Croatia, a significant difference was observed, with men ($M = 2.95$; $SD = 1.37$) reporting lower justification than women ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.30$), $t(1213.98) = -3.56$, $p < .001$.

We can say that on average, young women express higher levels of justification for societal expectations regarding obeying epidemiological preventive measures for protecting one's own health, as well as protecting the health of the family and the elderly. This aligns with a broader body of literature showing that women tend to express greater health-related risk perception and stronger endorsement of protective behaviours during health crises (Galasso et al., 2020; Moran & Del Valle, 2016). Women are also more likely to adopt a care-oriented ethical stance, particularly in relation to family and vulnerable groups (Carreras et al., 2023; Skinner & Sogstad, 2022), which may help explain their higher agreement with expectations framed around interpersonal responsibility and collective well-being. Furthermore, prior studies during the COVID-19 pandemic found that women were more compliant with public health measures and more willing to endorse restrictive interventions when framed in terms of protecting others (Clark et al., 2020). They also tend to experience greater fear and anticipate more severe health-related consequences of COVID-19, and are also more likely than men to adopt preventive behaviours in response to the pandemic, which mirrors the gender differences observed here (Alsharawy et al., 2021). In contrast, there are no significant gender

differences in the assessment of justification of the societal expectations about getting vaccinated and foregoing life experiences in either country. This could be due to the fact that these expectations were framed more as collective civic duties or biological imperatives, which may elicit less variation by gender and instead reflect broader normative consensus. Prior research has shown that vaccine attitudes and acceptance during COVID-19 were shaped more by trust in authorities, political ideology, and perceived risk than by gender alone (Lin et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2021), which may help explain the absence of a gender gap in this domain.

Furthermore, there are some differences between countries in how justifiable men and women find the societal expectation about helping family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands; in Slovenia, there is no gender difference, and in Croatia, women find it more justifiable than men on average. This is likely related to more traditional gender role orientations in Croatia, where women may be more culturally expected to take on caregiving and domestic support roles, in contrast to Slovenia, where gender norms may be comparatively more egalitarian (Knight & Brinton, 2017; Lomazzi et al., 2018).

A similar pattern emerges regarding the justification of societal expectations to avoid social gatherings and outings. In Croatia, women find this expectation significantly more justifiable than men, whereas no such difference is observed in Slovenia. This may reflect differences in how gendered norms of autonomy and social participation are enacted across the two countries. In more traditionally gendered societies, restrictions on social life may be perceived by men as a greater infringement on personal freedom or masculine identity, which has been linked in past research to lower compliance with public health measures (Capraro & Barcelo, 2020). In contrast, Slovenia's more progressive gender norms may buffer against such divergent interpretations of social restrictions.

Regarding the age differences, no significant age-related effects were found in either country regarding the justification of any of the societal expectations ($p > .05$). On the one hand, the finding that there were no significant age differences in either country with respect to the justification of societal expectations during the pandemic is somewhat unexpected. One might anticipate that older youth (due to greater cognitive maturity, more developed risk perception, and a stronger sense of social responsibility) would evaluate societal expectations (e.g., protective health

behaviours or sacrifices for the collective good) as more justified than younger adolescents. Prior research suggests that age is positively associated with risk awareness and future orientation, particularly in relation to health-related behaviour (Steinberg et al., 2009). In this sense, one could reasonably expect that older youth might show stronger endorsement of measures perceived to protect both self and others. On the other hand, the absence of significant age differences may reflect the relative developmental and attitudinal homogeneity of youth as a group in this specific socio-political context. The entire sample falls within the broader adolescent and emerging adult range, which, despite developmental variation, may share common experiences of pandemic-related disruption (e.g., school closures, limitations on social life, uncertainty about the future) that contribute to a shared generational perspective. It is possible that the salience of these shared experiences, amplified by peer dynamics and digital media exposure, led to relatively uniform attitudes toward public health expectations across age subgroups. In line with social identity theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), youth may have interpreted these expectations not primarily through the lens of age-based developmental stages, but through a collective "youth identity" that was acutely shaped by the perceived societal impact of pandemic restrictions on their generation.

Moreover, the public health messaging and institutional framing of pandemic rules often did not differentiate substantially between younger and older adolescents, especially in media narratives targeting youth behaviour. This lack of differentiation may have further contributed to a shared interpretive frame and similar levels of perceived justification across age. The finding suggests that while age can be a meaningful predictor of public health attitudes in broader population samples, it may exert less influence within relatively narrow age bands during periods of intense collective experience, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification for the societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting one's own health in both countries. In Slovenia, there was a significant main effect of SES, $F(2, 1283) = 14.16$; $p < .001$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.17$) and the highest SES group (SES 3; $M = 3.73$; $SD = 1.21$) rated the expectations as significantly more justified than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.26$), with $p < .001$ and $p < .004$, respectively. In Croatia, the effect of SES was also significant, $F(2, 1212) = 3.56$; $p < .05$, with youth in the middle

SES group ($M=3.54$; $SD=1.28$) reporting significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group ($M=3.34$; $SD=1.30$); $p<.05$.

SES was also significantly associated with justification for the societal expectations to obey epidemiological preventive measures aimed at protecting the health of families and vulnerable groups in both countries. In Slovenia, a one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of SES, $F(2, 1283)=18.83$, $p<.001$. Youth in both the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.89$; $SD=1.15$) and the highest SES group (SES 3; $M=4.07$; $SD=1.10$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.52$; $SD=1.24$); $p<.001$. Similarly, in Croatia, SES differences were significant, $F(2, 1212)=5.25$; $p<.01$. Youth in the middle SES group ($M=3.62$; $SD=1.27$) and SES 3 ($M=3.71$; $SD=1.20$) scored significantly higher than those in SES 1 ($M=3.41$; $SD=1.32$); $p<.05$.

Socioeconomic status was significantly associated with differences in perceived justification of the societal expectation to help family and the elderly obtain supplies and run errands in both Slovenia, $F(2, 1283)=11.86$; $p<.001$, and Croatia, $F(2, 1212)=3.35$; $p<.05$. In Slovenia, youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.87$; $SD=1.10$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.58$; $SD=1.14$); $p<.001$. A similar pattern was observed in Croatia, where youth in the middle group ($M=4.08$; $SD=1.00$) reported higher justification than the ones in the lowest SES group ($M=3.92$; $SD=1.10$); $p<.05$.

Socioeconomic status also had a significant effect on the assessment of the justification for the societal expectation to avoid social gatherings, parties, and outings in Slovenia, $F(2, 1283)=4.86$, $p<.01$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=3.42$; $SD=1.28$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=3.18$; $SD=1.26$), $p<.01$. In Croatia, socioeconomic status was not significantly associated with justification for this expectation.

In Slovenia, socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification of the societal expectation to get vaccinated, $F(2, 1283)=11.26$; $p<.001$. Youth in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M=2.88$; $SD=1.43$) reported significantly higher justification than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M=2.60$; $SD=1.45$), $p<.01$. Those in the highest SES group (SES 3; $M=3.17$; $SD=1.40$) reported significantly higher justification than both the lowest ($p<.001$) and middle SES

group ($p < .05$). In Croatia, no significant differences in justification were observed across SES groups.

In Slovenia socioeconomic status was significantly associated with perceived justification of the societal expectation to forego life experiences (such as school trips, excursions, prom, or wedding ceremonies), $F(2, 1283) = 5.20$; $p < .01$. Youth in the highest SES group (SES 3) reported significantly higher justification ($M = 3.13$; $SD = 1.38$) than those in the lowest SES group (SES 1; $M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.28$), $p < .01$. The highest SES youth also reported significantly higher justification than those in the middle SES group (SES 2; $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.31$); $p < .05$. In Croatia, by contrast, no significant SES differences were observed in relation to this expectation.

Regarding socioeconomic differences, we generally found that individuals with higher SES reported greater justification for societal expectations related to pandemic restrictions in both countries. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that individuals with higher socioeconomic status tend to show greater compliance with and endorsement of public health measures (Reed-Thryselius et al., 2022; Yao et al., 2023), likely due to higher levels of health literacy, greater institutional trust, and more resources that enable adherence (Van der Weerd et al., 2011). Higher SES individuals may also experience fewer practical barriers, such as job insecurity or caregiving strain, that complicate compliance with restrictive measures, making such expectations appear more reasonable and justified from their perspective (Bambra et al., 2020). In this sense, socioeconomic status not only shapes material conditions but also mediates access to dominant narratives and norms around civic responsibility and public health.

SES-related differences were more consistent in Slovenia, where significant effects were observed for every justification item, whereas in Croatia, differences emerged only in relation to expectations involving the protection of oneself and one's family (i.e., obeying preventive measures and helping family members obtain supplies). In Croatia, no SES differences were found for expectations more directly targeted at youth, such as avoiding social gatherings, receiving vaccination, or foregoing life experiences. This pattern suggests that expectations framed in terms of familial responsibility and care may be more broadly endorsed across SES lines in Croatia, potentially reflecting cultural norms that place strong emphasis on intergenerational solidarity and caregiving roles (Montoro-Gurich & Garcia-Vivar, 2019). These

expectations may be viewed less as public health mandates and more as moral imperatives, thus minimizing class-based divergence. In contrast, youth-oriented expectations (such as limiting social life or complying with vaccination campaigns) may have been perceived as more negotiable, individualised, or potentially politicised. The lack of SES variation in Croatia for these expectations may reflect a more homogeneous scepticism or ambivalence toward these types of restrictions, or a less differentiated information environment across class lines. Conversely, in Slovenia, where SES differences were more pervasive, it is possible that public health discourse was more strongly internalised among higher SES groups, resulting in clearer stratification in attitudes across a wider set of behavioural domains.

These contrasts can be illustrated by a focus group's quotation:

"So, there was a kind of hysteria as if there was some kind of scabies and leprosy around, and within a year or two people simply got used to it, as they do to everything, to something they call the "new normal".

(Male, employed, Croatia)".

When analysing the trends between the total samples, we can observe that youth in Slovenia expressed significantly higher justification for several societal expectations related to pandemic-related behaviours compared to their peers in Croatia. Specifically, Slovenian youth reported greater justification for the expectation to get vaccinated ($M=2.85$; $SD=1.44$) than Croatian youth ($M=2.70$; $SD=1.44$), $t(2501)=2.53$, $p<.05$. A similar pattern emerged for the expectation to refrain from attending social gatherings and outings, with higher justification reported among Slovenian youth ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.28$) than among Croatian youth ($M=3.08$; $SD=1.34$), $t(2501)=4.97$; $p<.001$. Slovenian youth also expressed stronger justification for adhering to epidemiological measures aimed at protecting the health of the elderly and other vulnerable groups ($M=3.81$; $SD=1.19$) compared to Croatian youth ($M=3.56$; $SD=1.28$), $t(2460.38)=4.94$; $p<.001$, as well as for measures aimed at protecting their own health ($M=3.67$; $SD=1.21$ vs. $M=3.48$; $SD=1.29$); $t(2468.11)=3.82$, $p<.001$. In contrast, Croatian youth expressed significantly greater justification for the societal expectation to help family and elderly individuals obtain supplies and run errands ($M=4.02$; $SD=1.05$) compared to Slovenian youth ($M=3.80$; $SD=1.10$); $t(2500.81)=-5.23$; $p<.001$. There were no significant differences between countries in the assessment of the justification of the societal expectation to forego life experiences ($p>0.05$).

Conversely to the above elaborated trends, no statistically significant differences were observed between countries in the justification of the societal expectation to forego significant life experiences, such as milestone celebrations, travel, or rites of passage. This may suggest that such sacrifices were viewed as deeply personal and equally difficult across national contexts, transcending broader socio-political narratives. Youth in both countries may have perceived these expectations as disproportionately burdensome and emotionally costly, regardless of their broader stance on compliance with health measures. One notable exception to the general trend was found in relation to the expectation of helping family and elderly individuals obtain supplies and run errands, where Croatian youth expressed greater justification than their Slovenian peers. This could reflect cultural differences in family orientation and intergenerational ties. Croatia is often characterised by stronger familism and more traditional caregiving norms, where youth may be more socialised to view assisting family members as a moral duty, particularly in times of crisis (Hlebec et al., 2016). In Slovenia, where intergenerational responsibilities are more frequently institutionalised or supported by formal services (e.g., eldercare systems), youth may perceive such expectations as less central to their individual role.

A comparative analysis of public attitudes in Croatia and Slovenia reveals that young Slovenians consistently reported higher justification rates for pandemic-related behaviours, while Croatian youth showed a stronger tendency to view actions such as vaccination and forgoing life experiences as unjustified, which highlights potential differences in societal values and institutional trusts.

7.3 Conclusions and recommendations

The Croatian and Slovenian data reveal contrasting mechanisms through which societal norms shape youth perceptions. In Croatia, age-dependent patterns reflect evolving self-concepts tied to life-stage transitions, where accumulating autonomy moderates the internalisation of external expectations. In contrast, Slovenia's pronounced gender disparities highlight structural inequities that persistently burden women with broader societal and familial obligations. Both contexts, however, share a tension between individual aspirations and collective norms. While Croatian youth struggle with reconciling early societal ideals with the realities of adulthood, Slovenian women navigate heightened pressures to fulfil multifaceted roles. These

findings underline the need for policy interventions that support Croatia's ageing youth cohort in bridging aspirational gaps through targeted educational and vocational frameworks, as well as address systemic gender biases in Slovenia.

Across both countries, there is a general trend of self-assurance and perceived readiness for adult roles with age. In Croatia, this is especially visible in findings centred on readiness and self-confidence. However, this growing maturity is accompanied by a more tempered or realistic appraisal of what is achievable, particularly in relation to education, housing, and financial independence. Slovenian data, by contrast, capture a broader set of societal expectations, ranging from work and education to happiness and marriage. Despite these differing emphases, both contexts reveal that as youth mature, they do not merely absorb societal expectations; they also begin to interrogate them. Optimism in the youngest cohorts gives way to a more pragmatic worldview, suggesting that exposure to institutional structures and economic constraints may temper earlier idealism. The result is a dual process of empowerment and recalibration, wherein youth feel increasingly capable yet more circumspect about the likelihood of achieving socially prescribed milestones.

Taking into account youth age and gender dynamics alongside clear SES-related gradients, we can further illuminate the socio-structural forces shaping youth perspectives. In both countries, higher SES is consistently associated with stronger beliefs in personal success and greater internalisation of societal expectations across domains such as employment, education, health, and housing. Croatian data reveal similar patterns to Slovenia, though with slightly more moderate SES gaps and some unexpected fluctuations, such as the elevated societal contribution expectations among middle SES youth. In contrast, Slovenian youth from affluent backgrounds display particularly strong confidence in future outcomes, especially in higher education and income generation, while lower SES youth report markedly lower levels of self-efficacy, except in domains such as marriage, where traditional expectations appear more deeply entrenched. These findings suggest that while SES powerfully shapes aspirations, its influence is also mediated by national contexts and cultural narratives.

Research data in the COVID-19 pandemic context suggests the absence of significant age differences in how youth from Croatia and Slovenia justified societal expectations during the pandemic, which is somewhat surprising, particularly given previous research linking age with heightened risk perception and future orientation. One might reasonably expect that older adolescents and emerging adults, who typically exhibit more developed cognitive maturity and a stronger sense of social responsibility, would be more likely to view public health expectations as justified, such as adhering to protective behaviours or making personal sacrifices. However, the lack of variation suggests that the shared disruptions brought about by the pandemic may have exerted a levelling effect. In Croatia, experiences such as school closures, social restrictions, and widespread uncertainty appear to have cultivated a cohesive generational outlook, wherein youth across age groups interpreted societal expectations not through the lens of developmental stages, but as part of a broader collective youth identity. This pattern was similarly evident in Slovenia. Such homogeneity may have been reinforced by the uniform framing of public health messaging, which seldom distinguished between younger and older adolescents, as well as by digital media and peer discourse that amplified a shared narrative of generational impact.

Socioeconomic status, on the other hand, emerged as a more robust predictor of justification for pandemic-related expectations. In both countries, higher SES was associated with stronger endorsement of public health measures, likely reflecting greater institutional trust, higher health literacy, and fewer practical constraints to compliance. In Croatia, SES variation was observed only in domains tied to familial care, such as helping relatives or observing preventive measures at home, while expectations that directly affected youth autonomy do not demonstrate such divergence, such as limiting social gatherings or getting vaccinated. This pattern may speak to the strength of cultural norms around family in Croatia, where caregiving roles are widely shared and morally salient across class boundaries, while more youth-centred expectations may be subject to broader scepticism or politicisation, diminishing SES-related distinctions. On the other hand, in Slovenia, socioeconomic differences were evident across all justification items, indicating a deeply stratified internalisation of public health norms.

At the national level, Croatian youth were generally less likely than their Slovenian peers to justify a range of public health expectations. Slovenian youth expressed stronger support for vaccination, missing social events, and following protective guidelines to safeguard both oneself and vulnerable groups. These differences likely stem from wider political and institutional contexts, with Slovenia exhibiting higher levels of governance effectiveness and public trust, which are conditions that tend to bolster compliance with collective health measures. The technocratic approach adopted by Slovenian authorities, particularly in the pandemic's early stages, may have further reinforced a sense of legitimacy and responsibility among youth. In contrast, Croatia's more fragmented and politically contested response may have undermined consistent messaging, leading to greater ambivalence among its youth population. However, there were notable exceptions to these trends. Croatian youth were more likely than their Slovenian peers to endorse helping family and elderly individuals, suggesting the influence of cultural values around intergenerational duty. Moreover, both groups of youth showed similar levels of justification when it came to foregoing major life experiences, highlighting the universal emotional toll of such sacrifices.

Corresponding to the research insights, we propose three sets of recommendations:

- Recommendations concerning youth expectations and self-perceptions, which concern promoting critical reflection in the educational settings by integrating curricula that encourage critical engagement with societal norms, helping young people to interrogate, rather than passively internalise, expectations related to success, gender-related roles, adulthood, and life milestones.
- Providing tailored support aligned to the youth SES. Programmes that enhance self-efficacy, such as inclusive career guidance, financial literacy workshops, and access to extracurricular opportunities, can help narrow the aspiration and confidence gap evident across SES lines, especially in domains such as education and employment.
- Enhance trust through transparent governance, citizenship education, science popularisation and media communication. Future crisis management should prioritise transparent communication, consistency in messaging, and the visible involvement of scientific expertise to maintain legitimacy and engagement among youth.

In concluding the recommendation section, we will refer to the quotation from the youth worker and youth expert who expressed during the interview that more targeted actions are needed. The expert explicitly mentions young women, but this recommendation is actually addressing a need of all young people:

“I believe that more meaningful and higher-quality work could be undertaken with young women. There is definitely potential for increased engagement.”

References

- Alsharawy, A., Spoon, R., Smith, A., & Ball, S. (2021). Gender differences in fear and risk perception during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 689467.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*. Oxford University Press.
- Ball, S. J., Reay, D., & David, M. (2002). 'Ethnic choosing': Minority ethnic students, social class and higher education choice. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 5(4), 333-357.
- Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J., & Matthews, F. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and health inequalities. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 74(11), 964-968.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. Sage.
- Brooks, R., Byford, K., & Sela, K. (2021). *Youth Aspirations and the Future of Work: Young People's Perspectives on Education, Training and Employment*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buchmann, C., & Dalton, B. (2002). Interpersonal influences and educational aspirations in 12 countries: The importance of institutional context. *Sociology of Education*, 75(2), 99-122.
- Capraro, V., & Barcelo, H. (2020). The effect of messaging and gender on intentions to wear a face covering to slow down COVID-19 transmission. *arXiv Preprint arXiv:2005.05467*.
- Carreras, M., Vera, S., & Visconti, G. (2023). Who does the caring? Gender disparities in COVID-19 attitudes and behaviors. *Politics & Gender*, 19(1), 5-33.
- Clark, C., Davila, A., Regis, M., & Kraus, S. (2020). Predictors of COVID-19 voluntary compliance behaviors: An international investigation. *Global Transitions*, 2, 76-82.
- Côté, J. E. (2014). *Youth Studies: Fundamental Issues and Debates*. Palgrave.
- Devine, F. (2004). *Class Practices: How Parents Help Their Children Get Good Jobs*. Cambridge University Press.
- European Commission (2021). *Standard Eurobarometer 95*.
<http://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2532>
- Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2007). *Young People and Social Change: New Perspectives*. Open University Press.
- Galasso, V., Pons, V., Profeta, P., Becher, M., Brouard, S., & Foucault, M. (2020). Gender differences in COVID-19 attitudes and behavior: Panel evidence from eight countries. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(44), 27285-27291.
- Gvozdanović, A., Ilišin, V., Adamović, M., Potočnik, D., Baketa, N., Kovačić, M. (2024). *Youth Study Croatia 2024: Youth in Times of Uncertainty*. Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kroatien/21496-20241212.pdf>
- Gvozdanović, A., Ilišin, V., Adamović, M., Potočnik, D., Baketa, N., Kovačić, M. (2019). *Youth Study Croatia 2018/2019*. Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15265.pdf>
- Hlebec, V., Srakar, A., & Majcen, B. (2016). Determinants of unmet needs among Slovenian old population. *Zdravstveno Varstvo*, 55(1), 78.

- Holdsworth, C., & Morgan, D. (2005). *Transitions in context: Leaving home, independence and adulthood*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Knight, C. R., & Brinton, M. C. (2017). One egalitarianism or several? Two decades of gender-role attitude change in Europe. *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(5), 1485-1532.
- Koprić, I. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: Croatian government response. *Good Public Governance in a Global Pandemic*, 247.
- Kovacheva, S. (2012). Managing uncertainty of young people's transitions to adulthood in Bulgaria. *Sociologija*, 54(2), 245-262.
- Lavrič, M. (2024). *Youth Study Slovenia: What Young People Want and Need: Values, Fears and the General Situation of Slovenian Youth*. Zagreb: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kroatien/21297.pdf>
- Lin, C., Tu, P., & Beitsch, L. M. (2020). Confidence and receptivity for COVID-19 vaccines: A rapid systematic review. *Vaccines*, 9(1), 16.
- Lomazzi, V., Israel, S., & Crespi, I. (2018). Gender equality in Europe and the effect of work-family balance policies on gender-role attitudes. *Social Sciences*, 8(1), 5.
- Mandic, S. (2008). Home-leaving and its structural determinants in Western and Eastern Europe: An exploratory comparative analysis. *Housing Studies*, 23(4), 615-637.
- Montoro-Gurich, C., & Garcia-Vivar, C. (2019). The family in Europe: Structure, intergenerational solidarity, and new challenges to family health. *Journal of Family Nursing*, 25(2), 170-189.
- Müller, W., & Gangl, M. (2003). *Transitions from Education to Work in Europe: The Integration of Youth into EU Labour Markets*. Oxford University Press.
- Moran, K. R., & Del Valle, S. Y. (2016). A meta-analysis of the association between gender and protective behaviors in response to respiratory epidemics and pandemics. *PLoS One*, 11(10), e0164541.
- Murphy, J., Vallières, F., Bentall, R. P., Shevlin, M., McBride, O., Hartman, T. K., McKay, R., Bennett, K., Mason, L., & Gibson-Miller, J. (2021). Psychological characteristics associated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and resistance in Ireland and the United Kingdom. *Nature Communications*, 12(1), 29.
- Naterer, A., Lavrič, M., Klanjšek, R., Flere, S., Rutar, T., Lahe, D., Kuhar, M., Hlebec, V., Cupar, T., Kobše, Ž. (2019). *Youth Study Slovenia 2018/2019*. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
- Reay, D., David, M. E., & Ball, S. J. (2005). *Degrees of Choice: Social Class, Race and Gender in Higher Education*. Trentham Books.
- Reed-Thryselius, S., Fuss, L., & Rausch, D. (2022). The relationships between socioeconomic status, COVID-19 risk perceptions, and the adoption of protective measures in a mid-western city in the United States. *Journal of Community Health*, 47(3), 464-474.
- Skinner, M. S., & Sogstad, M. (2022). Social and gender differences in informal caregiving for sick, disabled, or elderly persons: A cross-sectional study. *SAGE Open Nursing*, 8, 23779608221130585.
- Steinberg, L., Graham, S., O'Brien, L., Woolard, J., Cauffman, E., & Banich, M. (2009). Age differences in future orientation and delay discounting. *Child Development*, 80(1), 28-44.
- Turner, J. C., & Tajfel, H. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 5: 7-24.
- Van der Weerd, W., Timmermans, D. R., Beaujean, D. J., Oudhoff, J., & Van Steenberghe, J. E. (2011). Monitoring the level of government trust, risk perception and intention of the general public to adopt protective measures during the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic in the Netherlands. *BMC Public Health*, 11, 1-12.
- Yao, Y., Wu, Y. S., Weng, X., Viswanath, K., Lee, E. W. J., & Wang, M. P. (2023). Socio-economic disparities in exposure to and endorsement of COVID-19 vaccine misinformation and the associations with vaccine hesitancy and vaccination. *Public Health*, 223, 217-222.

About the authors

Dr. **Dunja Potočnik**, is a Senior Research Associate in the field of sociology, employed at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb since 2003. She has over 20 years of experience in research on youth, namely in the area of employment, social inclusion, youth wellbeing, emigration, and information and communication technologies. She has taken part in more than 40 research and expert projects. Dunja has co-authored six and edited six books, and published numerous scientific and expert papers. She has been a member of the Pool of the European Youth Researchers, coordinated by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe, since 2010, and is currently a member of the Advisory Group of the same body. She is also a member of the Expert Group on the economic and societal impact of research and innovation at the European Commission.

Dr. **Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić**, is a tenured full professor at the Chair of Developmental Psychology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. She has served as Head of the Chair and was also Head of the Department of Psychology. She teaches developmental psychology at all study levels and has supervised numerous graduate, specialist, and doctoral theses. Her research focuses on risk factors in child and youth development (such as war, pandemics, and social media), developmental transitions, and parenting. She has received several awards for her professional and scientific contributions. Prof. Kuterovac Jagodić is a member of the Croatian Psychological Society, the Management Board of the Croatian Psychological Chamber, and the EuroPsy National Committee for Croatia. She is also the Croatian representative on the Board of Scientific Affairs of the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA). She is the author and co-author of numerous scientific papers and books, actively participates in national and international research projects, and regularly translates and reviews professional literature.

Minea Rutar is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Department of Psychology and a Research Assistant at the Departments of Psychology and Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Maribor, Slovenia. Her research focuses on subjective well-being and mental health from cross-country and longitudinal perspectives. She is particularly interested in the quantitative analysis of socioeconomic and psychosocial determinants of youth mental health. Through her work, she contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between social conditions, psychological processes, and well-being among young people, with the aim of informing evidence-based approaches to youth mental health and social inclusion.