

2. LIFE SATISFACTION AND ASPECTS OF SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING OF YOUTH AS INDICATORS OF YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: PRE-PANDEMIC, PANDEMIC, AND POST-PANDEMIC PERSPECTIVES

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This chapter examines youth well-being in Croatia and Slovenia before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular emphasis on mental health outcomes. Findings reveal a marked decline in life satisfaction across family life, friendships, and body image, with negative changes disproportionately affecting girls and young people of lower socio-economic status. During the pandemic, around one-fifth of respondents reported rarely or never experiencing positive emotions, while one-third frequently encountered negative states such as sadness, fear, or anger. Loneliness emerged as a significant concern, particularly among girls, though age-specific patterns differed between the two countries. Despite this, most young people retained access to supportive social networks, which served as an important protective factor. On the other hand, the post-pandemic period showed improvements in subjective well-being, which included stronger social connectedness and more positive emotional states. However, persistent vulnerabilities remain, particularly among girls, the youngest cohort, and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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Subjective well-being (SWB) includes both cognitive evaluations, such as life satisfaction and happiness, and affective evaluations, encompassing positive and negative emotional states (Diener et al., 1984; Diener et al., 1995; Diener et al., 2018). In recent decades, increasing attention has been devoted to measuring and monitoring SWB, particularly among children, adolescents, and young adults (Marquez & Long, 2021). These factors include rising individualism, increased academic pressure, and a decline in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, such influences can affect different aspects of youth well-being in distinct ways. For instance, while rising individualism was historically associated with greater well-being (Diener et al., 1995), more recent research indicates it may negatively impact other dimensions of well-being (Humphrey et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic, as a non-normative crisis event, affected various areas of people's lives. Young people who were at important life transitions into adolescence, from adolescence to young adulthood, were especially vulnerable during the pandemic period. Developmentally, during these transitional periods, young people face numerous changes in biological, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of development, which were even more challenging during the pandemic period. Also, the pandemic has disrupted various areas of life, such as education, employment, family relations, relationships with friends, romantic relationships, travel, etc. Graupensperger et al. (2023) identified several stressors and life disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as social and relational stressors, school-related stressors, financial and job-security stressors, as well as media-related stressors. The implications of COVID-19-related stressors may be particularly prominent for adolescents and young adults, who are at higher risk for mental health concerns and risky health behaviours. The huge changes in the lifestyle of youth, their peers, and their families may act as environmental stressors for mood fluctuation. Young people were encouraged to actively avoid social activities for fear of the coronavirus, and were confined to their homes for a long time. That social isolation was associated with higher risk of depression and anxiety, decrease of psychological distress, as well as increase of negative affect and loneliness in research and meta-analysis for both adolescents, high school students, and young adults (Wang et al., 2021; Kauhanen et al., 2023).

The main goal of this chapter is to investigate aspects of the well-being of young people in the period before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Youth well-being is operationalised with measures of life satisfaction and measures of subjective

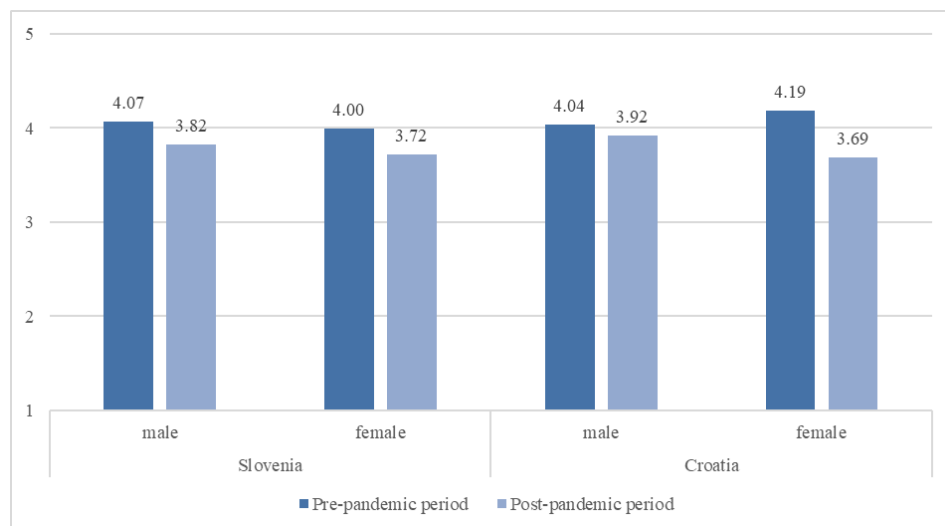
well-being such as positive affect, negative affect, loneliness, meaning of life, and relationships with others. The analysed data were collected on representative samples of young people aged 16 to 29 from Slovenia (N=1,287) and Croatia (N=1,216).

2.1 How are the young people?

Subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) includes self-assessments and evaluations of one's own life based on factors that contribute to thinking about and experiencing one's life in a positive, rather than negative way (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018). Within this perspective, life-satisfaction is recognised as an “cognitive” conceptualisation of happiness (Sirgy, 2012) which can be operationalised as “a cognitive judgmental process dependent upon a comparison of one’s circumstances with what is thought to be an appropriate standard” (Diener et al, 1985; p. 71). Accordingly, the concept of life satisfaction may involve judgments of fulfilment of one’s needs, goals, and wishes (Sirgy, 2012). Measuring the concept of life satisfaction is well-represented in numerous large-scale studies (e.g., Swami et al., 2025; Veenhoven, 2024; Helliwell et al., 2021), which enables monitoring trends in life satisfaction in different populations and different cultures over time. Youth satisfaction in Slovenia and Croatia is continuously monitored through youth studies conducted since 2013 on representative samples of young people (Lavrič & Deželan, 2021; Gvozdanović et al., 2019; Ilišin & Spajić Vrkaš, 2017; Flere et al., 2014; Ilišin et al., 2013), which allows us to track trends over time and make comparisons between countries. Life satisfaction among youth is declining globally (Handa et al., 2023; Marquez & Long, 2021; Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025; Twenge, 2019). However, important country differences exist in these trends and baseline life satisfaction. The data was observed during the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods (Figure 2.1.).

In the pre-pandemic period, the average life satisfaction of Slovenian youth was 4.03 (SD=.867) on a 5-point scale (1 - not satisfied at all; 5 - very satisfied) with no significant differences between sexes ($t=1,317$, $df=895$, $p=0,188$; male: $M=4.07$; $SD=.883$; female: $M=4.00$; $SD=.850$). In comparison, Croatian youth reported significantly higher average overall life-satisfaction of 4.12 ($SD=.825$; $t=2.225$; $df=2249$; $p<0.05$). In the pre-pandemic period in Croatia, the girls reported significantly higher average life satisfaction ($M=4.19$; $SD=.794$) than boys ($M=4.04$;

SD=850; $t=3.328$; $df=1352$; $p<0.01$). In both countries, youth life satisfaction was significantly correlated with family socio-economic status¹, significantly more in Croatia ($\rho=.280$; $p<0.01$) than in Slovenia ($\rho=.081$; $p<0.05$). In both countries, the youth's life satisfaction was stable across different age groups.



Note: The item was originally assessed on a 10-point scale that was transformed to a five-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied), to allow comparison with other items of satisfaction with individual aspects of life.; Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.1: General Youth Life Satisfaction in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic period (mean scores)

In comparison, in the post-pandemic period, average youths' life satisfaction significantly declined in both countries. According to our findings, in the post-pandemic period average life satisfaction of Slovene youth was 3.77 (SD=.887; $t=6.849$; $df=2182$; $p<0.01$), with substantial variation between sexes ($M=3.82$, SD=.886 for men, $M=3.72$, SD=.888 for women). In Croatia, there is also a significantly declining trend in average youth life satisfaction ($M=3.81$; SD=.890; $t=9.057$; $df=2568$; $p<0.01$) in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. As in

¹ As an indicator of the family's socio-economic status, the item "Which of the following best describes the financial situation in your household?" was used. This item was assessed on the scale: 1- We don't have enough money for basic bills (e.g., electricity, heating) and food; 2 - We have enough for basic bills and food, but not for clothes and shoes; 3 - We have enough money for food, clothes and shoes, but not enough for more expensive things (e.g., refrigerator, TV); 4 - We can afford more expensive things, but not as expensive as a car or an apartment; 5 - We can afford everything we need for a good standard of living).

Slovenia, the substantial gender differences were also recorded in Croatia, where boys reported statistically significantly higher average life satisfaction ($M=3.92$; $SD=.875$) than girls ($M=3.69$; $SD=.891$; $t=4.552$; $df=1214$; $p<0.01$). These results suggest that the pandemic period had a significant negative impact on the overall life satisfaction of girls in Croatia, boys appeared to demonstrate greater resilience during the pandemic. Similar to the pre-pandemic period, general life satisfaction is stable across different age groups of young people. Regarding socio-economic status, a significant correlation with youth life satisfaction was also recorded in the post-pandemic period in both countries (Slovenia: $\rho=.182$; $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.148$; $p<0.01$). Compared to the pre-pandemic period, Slovenia recorded an increase in the correlation between young people's life satisfaction and social status (SES), whereas in Croatia, the strength of this correlation decreased. The results imply that in Slovenia the pandemic had a negative impact on young people living in families of lower socioeconomic status, which was reflected in the lower overall life satisfaction in the post-pandemic period.

From the longitudinal perspective, youths' life satisfaction is significantly declining in both countries. During the pandemic girls were less resilient than boys, and lower life satisfaction was more prominent among youth from the lower socio-economic background.

With the aim of better understanding the satisfaction of young people in the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic periods, trends in aspects of life satisfaction were analysed in both countries (Figure 2.2.).

In the pre-pandemic period in Slovenia, both boys and girls were the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=4.23$; $SD=.849$; boys: $M=4.31$, $SD=.814$), followed by the satisfaction with their family life (girls: $M=4.19$; $SD=.987$; boys: $M=4.14$, $SD=.975$), education (girls: $M=3.77$; $SD=1.022$; boys: $M=3.94$, $SD=1.006$) and/or work (girls: $M=3.59$; $SD=1.145$; boys: $M=3.84$, $SD=1.078$) and, finally, their physical appearance (girls: $M=3.54$; $SD=.825$; boys: $M=3.72$, $SD=.851$). Compared to girls, boys were significantly more satisfied with their education (if in the education system, $t=2.501$; $df=883$; $p<0.05$), their job (if employed, $t=2.563$; $df=500$; $p<0.05$), and their physical appearance ($t=2.501$; $df=883$; $p<0.05$). In the pre-pandemic period, like the youth in Slovenia, both girls and boys in Croatia were the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=4.33$; $SD=.786$; boys: $M=4.28$,

SD=.780), followed by the satisfaction with their family life (girls: $M=4.21$; $SD=.892$; boys: $M=4.07$, $SD=.901$) with the girls reporting significantly higher satisfaction with family life in comparison to the boys. Besides friends and family, in Croatia, girls were the most satisfied with their education ($M=4.02$, $SD=.910$), then physical appearance ($M=3.97$, $SD=.802$), and work (those who were employed, $M=3.69$, $SD=1.088$). In comparison, besides friends and family, boys were most satisfied with their physical appearance ($M=4.06$, $SD=.737$), then their education ($M=3.88$, $SD=.928$), and work (those who were employed, $M=3.63$, $SD=1.070$).



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied); Source: YSEE 2018/2019 and YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.2: Domain-specific satisfaction, pre-pandemic (2018) vs post-pandemic period (2023), by Country (mean score)

Compared to the pre-pandemic period, in Slovenia, there has been a statistically significant decrease in the average satisfaction of young people with their family life (from 4.16 to 3.91; $t=5.797$; $df=2177$, $p<0.01$), with their friend circle (from 4.27 to 3.91; $t=8.526$; $df=2182$; $p<0.01$) and with their physical appearance (from 3.63 to 3.46; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) in the post-pandemic period. Both girls and boys reported the lowest satisfaction with their physical appearance (girls: $M=3.35$, $SD=1.013$; boys: $M=3.79$; $SD=0.991$), followed by their work (for those who were employed, girls: $M=3.44$, $SD=1.054$; boys: $M=3.69$; $SD=1.058$), and education

(boys: $M=3.87$; $SD=0.972$). Young people are the most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=3.84$; $SD=1.055$; boys: $M=3.98$; $SD=1.017$) and their family life (girls: $M=3.89$; $SD=1.036$; boys: $M=3.94$; $SD=0.982$), with the exception of girls' satisfaction with the education with the highest average score of 3.91 ($SD=0.982$). Compared to girls, boys were statistically more satisfied with their physical appearance ($t=3.801$; $df=1279$; $p<0.01$) and their friend circle ($t=2.330$; $df=1277$; $p<0.05$). In Slovenia, satisfaction with certain aspects of life is relatively stable across age groups. Statistically significant differences across age groups were recorded for satisfaction with family life ($F_{2,1275}=3.854$; $p<0.05$) and satisfaction with one's friend circle ($F_{2,1279}=6.625$; $p<0.01$), with young people aged 20 to 24 expressing significantly lower satisfaction than other age groups.

Compared to the two observed periods, young people in Croatia in the post-pandemic period are statistically significantly less satisfied with their friend circle (from 4.31 to 4.05; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) and physical appearance (from 4.01 to 3.57; $t=4.507$; $df=2160$; $p<0.01$) than they were in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the post-pandemic period in Croatia, both girls and boys reported the lowest satisfaction with their physical appearance (girls: $M=3.45$, $SD=1.041$; boys: $M=3.68$; $SD=1.072$), followed by their work (for those who were employed, girls: $M=3.51$, $SD=1.234$; boys: $M=3.80$; $SD=1.140$), education (girls: $M=3.90$, $SD=1.083$; boys: $M=3.97$; $SD=1.000$), while they were most satisfied with their friend circle (girls: $M=3.99$; $SD=1.057$; boys: $M=4.12$; $SD=1.036$) and their family life (girls: $M=4.02$; $SD=.977$; boys: $M=4.10$; $SD=1.004$). Compared to girls, boys were significantly more satisfied with their physical appearance ($t=3.739$; $df=1203$; $p<0.01$), work (if employed; $t=3.589$; $df=868$; $p<0.01$), and friend circle ($t=2.159$; $df=1209$; $p<0.05$). In Croatia, satisfaction with certain aspects of life is stable across age groups.

The pandemic has negatively impacted aspects of young people's lives related to family life, friendships, and physical appearance. This impact is more pronounced among girls.

Following the trends within general youth life satisfaction, in both countries, youth satisfaction with the various life domains was significantly correlated with family socioeconomic status. In the pre-pandemic period, young people with lower socioeconomic status also reported lower satisfaction with work (if employed;

Slovenia: $\rho=.130$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.286$, $p<0.01$), education (Slovenia: $\rho=.129$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.276$, $p<0.01$), family (Croatia: $\rho=.257$, $p<0.01$), friend circles (Slovenia: $\rho=.079$, $p<0.05$; Croatia: $\rho=.197$, $p<0.01$) and physical appearance (Slovenia: $\rho=.129$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $\rho=.119$, $p<0.01$). In the post-pandemic period in Slovenia although the correlations are slightly weaker, the trends remained similar, with the exception of statistically significant positive correlation between family socio-economic status and satisfaction with family life ($\rho=.158$; $p<0.01$), meaning that with higher family socio-economic status the youths' satisfaction with family life increases. In Croatia, in the post-pandemic period, there was a significant decrease in the correlation between the socio-economic status of the family and youths' satisfaction with certain aspects of life, whereby only satisfaction with family life ($\rho=.140$; $p<0.01$), friend circle ($\rho=.080$; $p<0.01$), and education ($\rho=.076$; $p<0.05$), remained significantly correlated with the socio-economic status of the family.

In the post-pandemic period, there is a lower impact of the socioeconomic status of young people's families on general life satisfaction as well as on domains of satisfaction related to family life, friendships, and education.

According to these findings, it can be concluded that relationships with friends, satisfaction with physical appearance, and, in the case of Slovenia, family relationships contributed to the decline in youth satisfaction in the post-pandemic period. Youths' satisfaction with specific domains in life and the average life satisfaction have significantly declined in both countries' post-pandemic period. These trends are in line with previous research documenting similar declines in English-speaking countries (Twenge & Blanchflower, 2025), France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden (Blanchflower et al., 2024), Ex-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2025), and most recently, in most UN countries (Blanchflower, 2025). These findings highlight specific areas of young people's lives that were disrupted during the pandemic, the consequences of which are still being felt today.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the key aspects that make up the quality of life of young people.

“I would say that relationships are definitely the most important thing. Somehow, they understand you, understand them, and support each other. Yet, on the other hand, that you can have fun, that everything is not so serious, simply that you find someone who suits you. For me, that's the most important thing.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“For me, it's important to have people around me who I know I can rely on, who are there when I need something and I don't know, more or less that's the most important thing to me, to know that I have people around me who are always there regardless of all the other things that happen in life.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I firmly believe that we humans are social beings, meaning that we have to be in contact with other people in order to function normally. In that sense parents are not the only ones, you have to be in contact with your peers, to be able to go through certain life phases. You share your feelings and experiences with your peers differently than with your parents. /.../ For our generation this was terrible. For 2 years we were deprived of having friends and peers by our side... And once you are alone alienation sneaks in. You feel bad and even after a while that you've been fooling yourself with your computer games you feel a lack of these connections... In the end you get it, the consequences on your mental health are real and it's all because of the social isolation during pandemics.”

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“Maybe a feeling that we are satisfied with ourselves, that we are working on ourselves, that we love ourselves first and foremost, that we focus on, I don't know, on education, on sports maybe, on some hobby, interest and that we are working on ourselves. At least that's how I see it.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I've always been more into helping others, and that's where I found purpose and some kind of inner peace. That's the only thing that hasn't changed over the past few years, from the beginning of the pandemic until now.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

“Well, well, maybe I would say a sense of belonging, that we belong both with friends and in class, and that I don't feel lonely or separated, isolated.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

Young people in both Croatia and Slovenia, when they state what makes them satisfied, are mainly focused on their social connections and reciprocal support that they provide to the people around them and that they receive from their environment. The period of the pandemic, specifically the social distancing measures, seriously disrupted the social relations of young people, specifically, making friends, hanging out, building trust, and other aspects of the everyday life of young people. As the young people themselves state, the lack of social contact is consequently reflected in their sense of loneliness and belonging. At the same time, it is social connectedness that helps young people find their purpose and meaning, the essence of normal functioning, and a significant source of satisfaction.

2.2 How were the young people coping during the COVID-19 pandemic?

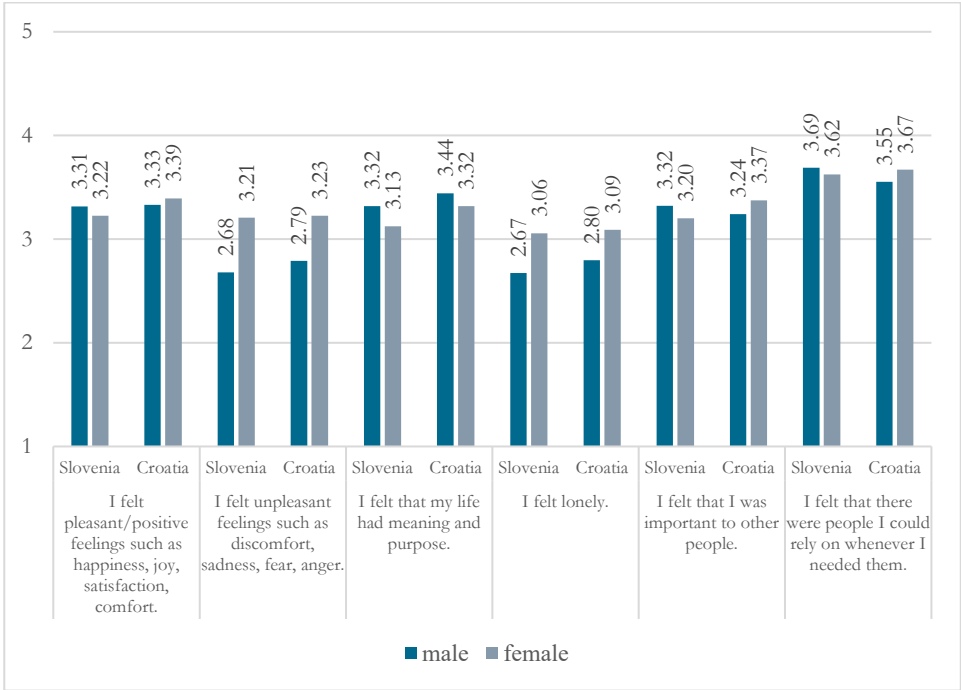
From a eudaemonic perspective, an individual's subjective well-being, in addition to life satisfaction, also includes the individual's emotional response to the events and circumstances in ongoing life in terms of positive and pleasant emotions versus unpleasant and negative emotions (Diener et al., 2018), and the balance between the two (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Another important concept of subjective well-being is the concept of purpose and meaning of life (Diener et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2006; Ryff & Keyes, 1995), which includes one's goals in life and sense of direction, feeling of ascribing meaning to past and present life, beliefs that give life meaning, along with aims and objectives of living. Higher subjective well-being is associated with an awareness of the most important aspects of life and living in accordance with these values (Diener et al., 2018). Positive relations with others are one of the basic human needs, especially given the sensitive periods of adolescence and young adulthood. Positive relations with others are reflected in warm, trusting and satisfying relationships, concern for the well-being of others, and the capacity for strong empathy, affection and intimacy (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In contrast, loneliness, as a profoundly disabling condition (Sirgy, 2012) has a significant negative association with psychological well-being, and is recognised as a fast-growing problem among the youth (Bhagchandani, 2017). In times of uncertainty and crisis, all of the above aspects of well-being can serve as protective mechanisms for youth well-being, but at the same time, they can also represent risk factors for the most vulnerable groups of youth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted youth well-being by reshaping their daily lives, social interactions, and family relationships (Ellis et al., 2020). The pandemic introduced an unprecedented period of disruption, causing stress, uncertainty, and isolation, particularly during crucial developmental transitions related to education, employment, and social engagement (Gruber et al., 2021). School closures, restrictions on in-person interactions, and economic instability further exacerbated these challenges, leading to significant disruptions in young people's academic progress, career prospects, and overall sense of stability. The abrupt shift to remote learning created disparities in access to education, disproportionately affecting those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who faced barriers such as limited digital resources and inadequate learning environments (OECD, 2021). This period of instability significantly influenced young people's mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Research has highlighted a marked rise in psychological distress among youth, with reports of heightened emotional difficulties stemming from social isolation, fear of infection, and concerns about the future (Van de Velde et al., 2024).

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of young people was also explored in our research on a representative sample of young people from Croatia and Slovenia. We explored how young people felt during the COVID-19 pandemic and examined which contextual factors or individual characteristics played a protective role in young people's well-being during the pandemic.

Specifically, the young were asked to assess how they felt during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2.3.). The results indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, around one-fifth of young people in both countries rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, or comfort. Moreover, approximately one-third of them reported that they often or very often experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear, or anger during the pandemic. Young people in Croatia felt positive and pleasant emotions somewhat more often ($M=3.36$; $SD=1.011$) compared to young people in Slovenia ($M=3.27$; $SD=.987$; $t=2.243$; $df=2501$; $p<0.05$), while they felt unpleasant feelings to an equal extent during the pandemic. In both countries, girls report that they experienced somewhat more unpleasant feelings than boys during the pandemic (Slovenia: $M=2.68$, $SD=1.066$; $t=9.097$, $df=1282$, $p<0.01$; Croatia: $M=2.79$; $SD=1.070$; $t=7.188$,

df=1214, $p<0.01$), which may indicate different patterns in life circumstances during the pandemic concerning gender roles. The prevalence of positive and negative emotions during the pandemic was relatively stable across age groups of young people, except for the experience of positive emotions among young people in Slovenia. Namely, young people in the oldest age group (25-29 years) experienced statistically significantly more positive emotions during the pandemic ($M=3.36$; $SD=.934$), followed by young people in the middle age group (20-24 years; $M=3.24$; $SD=.981$), and the youngest group (16-19 years) who reported feeling positive emotions somewhat less frequently than others during the pandemic ($M=3.19$; $SD=1.058$; $F_{2,1283}=3.649$; $p<0.05$).



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - very rarely or never; 5 - very often or always). The data was collected in 2023 with instructions to recall how they felt during the COVID-19 pandemic.; Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.3. Average (mean) scores on aspects of youth well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, by gender and by country

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one in five young people rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction or comfort. Moreover, one in three young people often or very often felt unpleasant emotions such as discomfort, sadness, fear or anger during the pandemic.

The prevalence of positive and negative feelings should be viewed in the context of relationships with others. One of the measured aspects of youth well-being was the feeling of loneliness. This aspect of well-being was particularly important in the context of various measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially quarantine, school closures, remote work/learning, social distancing, etc. The feeling of loneliness among young people during the pandemic highlights the extent of the negative effects of these measures on young people's well-being. In both countries, almost a third of young people often or very often felt lonely during the pandemic. In both countries, girls reported feeling significantly lonelier than boys during the pandemic ($p < 0.01$)². Regarding age groups, in Slovenia, young people in the youngest age cohort (16-19 years; $M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.265$) felt the loneliest ($p < 0.01$)³. They were followed by young people aged 20–24 years ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.154$), while young people in the oldest cohort (24-29 years; $M = 2.66$; $SD = 1.163$) felt the least lonely during the pandemic. In Croatia, an opposite trend was observed. Young people in the oldest age group (25-29 years, $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.123$) felt the loneliest, followed by the youngest cohort (16-19 years, $M = 2.90$; $SD = 1.218$), while the group aged 20 to 24 felt the least lonely during the pandemic ($p < 0.05$)⁴. The differences obtained could be explained by different pandemic measures related to education, and the support network of young people, such as family, friends, immediate and extended relatives, etc.

The pandemic has led to a more pronounced sense of loneliness, especially among girls, with one in three young people often or very often feeling lonely during the pandemic.

Despite the concerning trends in loneliness, the majority of respondents demonstrated relatively strong social connectedness during the pandemic. Around 60% of participants (Slovenia: 60.7%, Croatia: 58.2%) felt they had reliable people

² Slovenia: girls, $M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.167$; boys: $M = 2.67$; $SD = 1.195$; $t = 5.798$; $df = 1282$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: girls, $M = 3.09$; $SD = 1.107$; boys: $M = 2.80$; $SD = 1.193$; $t = 4.422$; $df = 1214$; $p < 0.01$.

³ $F_{2,1283} = 10.413$; $p < 0.01$.

⁴ $M = 3.06$; $SD = 1.148$; $F_{2,1212} = 4.018$, $p < 0.05$.

in their lives, while around 45% of young people (Slovenia: 44.1%, Croatia: 44.2%) frequently experienced a sense of importance to others during the pandemic. In both Croatia and Slovenia, during the pandemic, support from close people they could rely on was equally available to both young men and young women. On the other hand, the sense of importance to others was somewhat more pronounced among men in Slovenia ($p < 0.05$), while in Croatia it was somewhat more pronounced among women ($p < 0.05$)⁵. Social connectedness in Croatia was relatively stable across age groups. In Slovenia, the sense of importance to other people increases with age ($p < 0.01$)⁶. Thus, the greatest feeling of importance to other people is present in the oldest cohort of young people (25-29 years, $M=3.40$; $SD=1.048$), followed by the age group of 20-24 years ($M=3.24$; $SD=1.077$) and the youngest age cohort (16-19 years, $M=3.10$; $SD=1.152$). Given that the data were relatively stable in relation to the country where young people live, it can be concluded that measures related to social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic were relatively uniform between countries and that they had an equal impact on the social life of young people.

Young people managed to preserve their social support network in their immediate environment during the pandemic, which served as a protective factor in times of crisis.

Finally, young people were asked to assess their sense of life purpose during the pandemic. One in four young people in Slovenia never or rarely felt during the pandemic that their life had meaning and purpose. By comparison, one in five young people in Croatia felt this way. In both countries, girls struggled somewhat more with recognising the meaning of life during the pandemic than men ($p < 0.01$)⁷. In Croatia, the sense of meaning in life is stable across different age groups, while in Slovenia it is least expressed in young people aged 16-19 ($M=3.12$; $SD=1.205$) and most expressed in the oldest cohort of young people ($M=3.35$; $SD=1.030$)⁸. The socio-economic status of young people was also significantly associated with their well-being during the pandemic. Young people of lower socioeconomic status

⁵ Slovenia: girls, $M=3.20$; $SD=1.092$; boys: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.1092$; $t=1.979$; $df=1282$; $p < 0.05$; Croatia: girls, $M=3.37$; $SD=1.060$; boys: $M=3.24$; $SD=1.087$; $t=2.154$; $df=1214$; $p < 0.05$.

⁶ $F_{2,1283}=7.943$

⁷ Slovenia: $t=3.113$; $df=1282$; $p > 0.05$; boys: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.074$; girls: 3.13 ; $SD=1.145$; Croatia: $t=1.994$; $df=1214$; $p < 0.05$; boys: $M=3.44$; $SD=1.136$; girls: $M=3.32$; $SD=1.059$.

⁸ $F_{2,1283}=6.645$; $p < 0.01$.

experienced fewer positive emotions ($\rho=.155$; $p<0.01$) and more negative emotions ($\rho=-.095$; $p<0.01$) during the pandemic, and were more likely to feel lonely ($\rho=-.134$; $p<0.01$). Also, more socially disadvantaged young people reported having fewer people they could rely on ($\rho=.121$; $p<0.01$), and were significantly less likely to feel important to others ($\rho=.109$; $p<0.01$) and had a harder time recognising the meaning of life ($\rho=.150$; $p<0.01$).

During the pandemic, every fourth young person in Slovenia and every fifth young person in Croatia rarely or never felt that their life had meaning, with the feeling of meaninglessness of life being more pronounced among girls.

When considering these findings alongside the earlier evidence of rising meaninglessness and loneliness, a more complex picture of youth well-being emerges. Although many young people report heightened levels of negative affect and isolation, a substantial degree of social support among the majority suggests a protective factor that may help mitigate negative mental health trends. This duality implies that while targeted interventions are urgently needed to address feelings of meaninglessness and persistent loneliness, especially given their links to other negative mental health outcomes and suicidality, it is equally important to bolster and leverage these existing strong social connections to foster resilience and overall well-being.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups ($N=100$; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the diverse impact the pandemic has had on young people.

"I don't remember. I don't know, I just remember feeling a kind of anger and confusion, like "why is this even happening?"

(Male, employed, Croatia)

"Everybody got lazier because of corona."

(Male, employed, Slovenia)

"For example, I had other things happen in my life that devastated me more than the pandemic itself. It was just a "dot on the i" that made me say to myself "you have to change something, this is how the situation is, get the best out of it and fight in all

aspects as much as you can", so in a way, maybe it's better that something like that happened for a person to make some change. The whole world turned upside down, and then you can't stay in the same place, you have to adapt to the situation as it is. And then, everyone came out of that pandemic as a new person. Now, is it better? Is it worse? Depends on how everyone got through it."

(Female, employed, Croatia)

"In the beginning it was cool. I was at home, sleeping all day, no stress... All fine. But it started building the feeling of unease, of isolation. I was really seeking some connection with other people. But you could get none! The feelings of unease, isolation and deep dissatisfaction were strong."

(Female, student, Slovenia)

"I wanted to add that I think that at the end of it all, the pandemic had a big impact on our psyche. While, for example, I remember, my family members didn't have COVID, I had it and then, while you have to be locked in a room for 14 days without being in contact with anyone, I think that it had a big impact on us and that we actually decided to appreciate how much that contact actually means to us."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

"I would like to add that the pandemic had a very bad impact on my mental health because, for example, I was in isolation four times in a row, without a break. I was in my room at home for two months and I remember the first time I went out among people, I know we had a gym class, that I was kind of anxious, tense, I didn't feel comfortable in society at all, I felt like someone had let me off the chain, if I may say so, it took me a week to come to my senses and somehow fit into society and accept that I was now surrounded by so many people again."

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

"When corona started, I was a bit anxious, not because I was pressured with health or the healthcare system, but because it was interesting. We did not go to school, which was great, but then it started dragging... I had no social connections with my friends. I was totally isolated and this was my biggest problem. I could not wait for the whole thing to be over and for us to go back to school. I was sick of hanging with people at home (other family members)".

(Female, high school student, Slovenia)

“I agree that before the pandemic I had much more support than when the isolation came, I had no support from school, my friends were all just for themselves, as I would say, everyone was focused on themselves, on their own problems, on all sorts of struggles with themselves. We were left to ourselves, somehow, we had to be our own support, support, push ourselves forward.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

“I was in my first year of high school when the coronavirus started. I would say that somehow our generation, maybe a year or two more, is somehow the most deprived in terms of social life because those were the years when we started going out, socialising more and everything lively, but, in fact, we couldn't do it, we weren't able to, we weren't allowed to. Everything was closed and we just closed ourselves off and, like, were in our own four walls and were on our phones, watching series, and in fact, nothing good happened from spending so much time alone with ourselves. Let's say, I notice, or, I don't know, that's maybe some kind of my, my reflection on all of that, that our generation doesn't really know how to socialise unless it's, let's say, I don't know, going for coffee or some kind of specific activity like that.”

(Female, high school student, Croatia)

Young people, when recalling the pandemic period, highlight confusion, anger, fear, anxiety, lack of support and loneliness as the predominant emotions. At the same time, for some, this period marked a turning point, and encouragement for some important life decisions, recognition of priorities, and greater awareness of the importance and appreciation of social support in their immediate environment.

2.3 How are young people today, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic?

If youth well-being is viewed through life satisfaction, as previously stated, in comparison to the pre-pandemic period, a significant decline in life satisfaction among young people was recorded in the post-pandemic period, in both Slovenia and Croatia. Regarding specific aspects of life, in the post-pandemic period, young people in both countries are significantly less satisfied with their circle of friends and physical appearance, while young people in Slovenia are also less satisfied with their family life. Along with the concept of life satisfaction, in this research, the subjective well-being of young people is addressed from the aspect of emotions, feelings of loneliness, meaning of life and social connection. Subjective well-being was explored

in relation to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and in regard to the period of one month before the implementation of the research (at the end of 2023). We wanted to explore how young people felt during the post-pandemic period, in comparison to the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine which contextual factors or individual characteristics are playing a protective role in young people's well-being in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analyses confirm that in the post-pandemic period, there have been significant differences in all aspects of young people's psychological well-being compared to the pre-pandemic period in both countries (Figure 2.4). In the post-pandemic period, young people feel significantly more positive emotions ($p < 0.01$)⁹, and significantly fewer negative emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁰. Young people in the post-pandemic period feel significantly less lonely ($p < 0.01$)¹¹, and they felt significantly more that there were people they could rely on whenever they needed them ($p < 0.01$)¹². After the pandemic, young people are significantly more likely to believe that they are important to other people ($p < 0.01$)¹³ and to a significantly greater extent see the meaning and purpose of life ($p < 0.01$)¹⁴.

In the post-pandemic period, compared to young people in Slovenia, young people in Croatia report slightly more frequent positive emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁵, but at the same time, they also report more frequent negative emotions ($p < 0.01$)¹⁶ and a feeling of loneliness ($p < 0.01$)¹⁷ and report a slightly more pronounced feeling of meaning and purpose in life ($p < 0.01$)¹⁸. The indicators of social connectedness among young people were consistent in both countries.

⁹ Slovenia: $t=19.250$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=17.909$; $df=1215$.

¹⁰ Slovenia: $t=10.181$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=7.561$; $df=1215$.

¹¹ Slovenia: $t=16.614$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=15.026$; $df=1215$.

¹² Slovenia: $t=9.835$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=9.672$; $df=1215$.

¹³ Slovenia: $t=10.148$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=10.256$; $df=1215$.

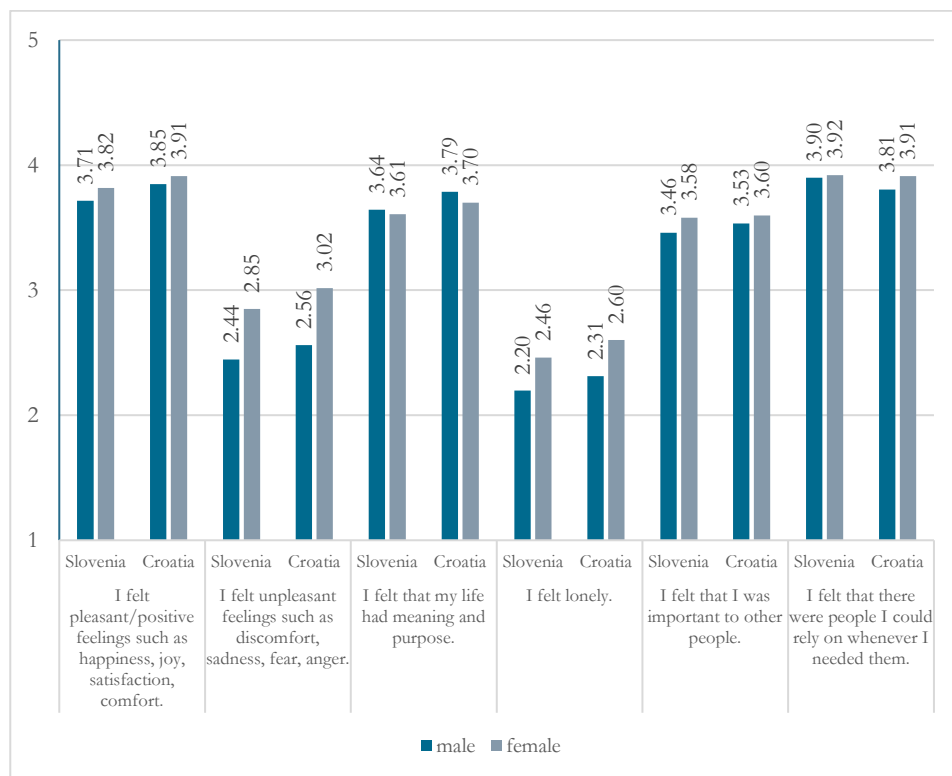
¹⁴ Slovenia: $t=15.691$; $df=1286$; Croatia: $t=13.933$; $df=1215$.

¹⁵ $t=3.240$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=3.76$, $SD=.922$; Croatia: $M=3.88$; $SD=.883$.

¹⁶ $t=3.505$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=2.64$, $SD=1.029$; Croatia: $M=2.78$; $SD=1.068$.

¹⁷ $t=2.969$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=2.32$, $SD=1.104$; Croatia: $M=2.45$; $SD=1.107$.

¹⁸ $t=2.877$; $df=2501$; Slovenia: $M=3.63$, $SD=1.028$; Croatia: $M=3.74$; $SD=1.033$.



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - very rarely or never; 5 - very often or always). The data was collected in 2023 with instructions to recall how they felt during the month prior to the data collection (end of 2023); Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.4: Mean scores on aspects of youth well-being in the post-pandemic period, by gender and country

In both countries, girls report that in the post-pandemic period, compared to boys, they are significantly more likely to experience unpleasant emotions such as discomfort, sadness, fear and anger ($p < 0.01$)¹⁹ and loneliness ($p < 0.01$)²⁰. Additionally, in Slovenia, compared to boys, girls are significantly more likely to experience positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction, joy and comfort

¹⁹ Slovenia: $t = 7.169$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.018$; girls, $M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.002$; Croatia: $t = 7.611$; $df = 1214$; boys, $M = 2.56$; $SD = 1.041$; girls, $M = 3.02$; $SD = 1.047$.

²⁰ Slovenia: $t = 4.322$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 2.20$; $SD = 1.074$; girls, $M = 2.46$; $SD = 1.123$; Croatia: $t = 4.588$; $df = 1214$; boys, $M = 2.31$; $SD = 1.073$; girls, $M = 2.60$; $SD = 1.124$.

($p < 0.05$)²¹ and being important to other people ($p < 0.05$)²². The findings may indicate more significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls in both countries, which manifest in more frequent negative affect and a more pronounced sense of loneliness. At the same time, in Slovenia, compared to boys, girls expressed a slightly higher level of positive emotions and a greater sense of importance to other people, which may be a protective mechanism in terms of the well-being of young people in the post-pandemic period.

Regarding different age groups, the findings were consistent for all age groups studied in both countries. The exception is the feeling of loneliness, which is significantly more pronounced in the 20-24 age group in Slovenia ($p < 0.05$)²³. This group of young people was at many turning points in their lives during the pandemic, including education, making friends, romantic relationships, and social life, which was disrupted during the pandemic. These findings point to possible consequences for this specific group of young people, which should receive additional attention. These patterns resonate with previous research reporting increasing levels of loneliness among young people worldwide (Twenge et al., 2021). The observed trends have been discussed in the context of “liquid modernity” (Ünal, 2018), building on foundational sociological insights (Bauman, 2013; Giddens, 2023). This theoretical framework suggests that the erosion of stable social structures contributes to historically unique dilemmas of identity among youth, potentially fuelling the observed increases in meaninglessness and loneliness. These results are particularly concerning given that both a crisis of meaning (Kleiman & Beaver, 2013; Schnell et al., 2018) and persistent loneliness (McClelland et al., 2020; Schinka et al., 2013) have been independently linked to higher risks of suicidality in young people. These findings indicate the urgent need for interventions that address these critical aspects of youth mental health.

Just as during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the post-pandemic period, socioeconomic inequalities are still present among young people in Slovenia and Croatia. In the post-pandemic period young people from lower socioeconomic

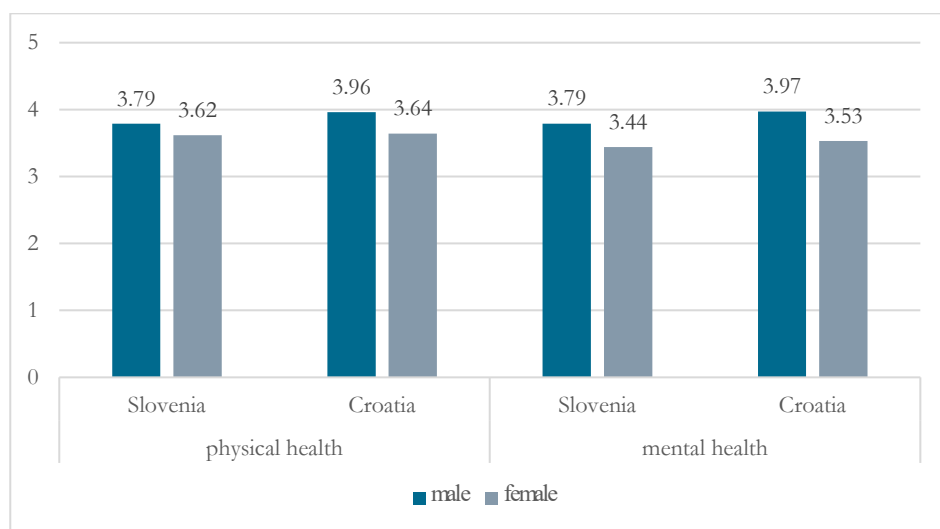
²¹ $t = 2.033$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 3.46$; $SD = 1.078$; girls, $M = 3.58$; $SD = 1.017$.

²² $t = 1.989$; $df = 1282$; boys, $M = 3.71$; $SD = .930$; girls, $M = 3.82$; $SD = .913$.

²³ $F_{2,1283} = 3.891$; age group 16 – 19, $M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.094$; age group 20-24, $M = 2.44$; $SD = 1.110$; age group 25-29, $M = 2.26$; $SD = 1.099$.

background are still experiencing fewer positive emotions ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = .112$, Croatia: $\rho = .158$) and more negative emotions ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = -.083$; Croatia: $\rho = -.086$), and are more likely to feel lonely ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = -.080$; Croatia: $\rho = -.112$). Also, more socially disadvantaged young people are reporting to have fewer people they could rely on ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = .130$; Croatia: $\rho = .145$), and were significantly less likely to feel important to others ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = .159$; Croatia: $\rho = .144$) and had a harder time recognizing the meaning of life ($p < 0.01$; Slovenia: $\rho = .122$; Croatia: $\rho = .149$). Trends in differences in the association between the socio-economic status of young people and aspects of well-being during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods and across countries may indicate the effectiveness of individual measures targeting the most vulnerable groups, which would be worth exploring further.

Although in the post-pandemic period, young people feel much more positive emotions, much less negative emotions, feel less lonely and consequently have more meaningful social relationships, significant gender differences and socioeconomic inequalities among young people are still present, and manifested at the level of subjective well-being.



Note: Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 - I am not satisfied at all; 5 - I am completely satisfied); Source: YO-VID22, 2023

Figure 2.5: Mean satisfaction scores for mental and physical health among youth in the post-pandemic period, by gender and country

Finally, to gain insight into the importance of specific aspects of youth health, young people assessed the extent to which they were satisfied with their mental health, referring to the post-pandemic period (Figure 2.5.).

Average satisfaction with the physical and mental health of young people is slightly lower in Slovenia compared to Croatia ($p < 0.05$)²⁴. In both countries, satisfaction with physical health is significantly lower among girls (Slovenia: $M = 3.62$; $SD = .977$; $t = 3.153$; $df = 1282$; $p = .002$; Croatia: $M = 3.64$; $SD = .999$; $t = 5.515$; $df = 1205$; $p = .000$) compared to boys (Slovenia: $M = 3.79$; $SD = .991$; Croatia: $M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.007$). Satisfaction with physical health among young people in Croatia is similar across all age groups, while in Slovenia it is significantly higher in the 16-19 age cohort ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .974$)²⁵ compared to other age cohorts (20-24 years: $M = 3.65$; $SD = 1.018$; 36-29 years: $M = 3.65$; $SD = .957$). The satisfaction with mental health of young people today, in the post-pandemic period, also differs by gender. Compared to young men, girls are statistically significantly more dissatisfied with their mental health in both Slovenia ($p < 0.01$)²⁶ and Croatia ($p < 0.01$)²⁷. In both countries, satisfaction with mental health is relatively stable across different age cohorts of young people. Both satisfaction with mental health and satisfaction with physical health in both countries are significantly correlated with the socio-economic status of young people. The lower the socioeconomic status of the family, the lower their satisfaction with physical health (Slovenia: $\rho = .110$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: $\rho = .082$; $p < 0.05$). The correlation is somewhat more pronounced with mental health, whereas the socio-economic status of the family from which the young people come decreases, the satisfaction with mental health of young people decreases (Slovenia: $p < 0.01$; $\rho = .104$; Croatia: $\rho = .105$; $p < 0.01$). In both countries, satisfaction with mental health is significantly correlated with general satisfaction with life (Slovenia: $\rho = .594$; $p < 0.01$; Croatia: $\rho = .574$; $p < 0.01$), and therefore, it is crucial to ensure mechanisms for providing different models of mental health support to young people, especially to girls and especially to the most vulnerable groups of young people, who often lack support.

²⁴ physical health: $t = 2.476$; $df = 2492$; $p = 0.013$; Slovenia, $M = 3.71$; $SD = .987$; Croatia: $M = 3.80$; $SD = 1.015$; mental health: $t = 3.038$; $df = 2493$; $p = 0.02$; Slovenia, $M = 3.62$; $SD = 1.075$; Croatia, $M = 3.76$; $SD = 1.111$).

²⁵ $F_{2,1283} = 6.324$; $p < 0.01$

²⁶ Slovenia: $t = 5.849$; $df = 1280$; girls: $M = 3.44$; $SD = 1.054$; boys: $M = 3.79$; $SD = 1.070$.

²⁷ Croatia: $t = 6.977$; $df = 1207$; girls: $M = 3.53$; $SD = 1.118$; boys: $M = 3.97$; $SD = 1.063$.

In both countries, girls are less satisfied with both their physical and mental health. When it comes to mental health, young people from families of lower socio-economic status are particularly vulnerable.

Quotes from young people who participated in focus groups (N=100; age 16-29; Slovenia and Croatia) can serve as an illustration of the youth's reflection on their needs, challenges, and perspectives on the vision they hold for the future.

“So, what young people really need is to just understand what they feel, to understand what they want and to help others explain what is happening to them and how they, if possible, could help them in any way. Because, really, now we are a new generation. If we are adults and if we grow up the way we are, things are going badly for us. And it's hard now, you all know that it's hard to get yourself into something, helping yourself is the best, but the hardest thing. So, we always need that encouragement from someone else. And there is always someone ready for it, it's just the hardest thing to ask.”

(Male, high school student, Croatia)

“On all these topics, I absolutely agree with all of you, from housing, job quality, work-life balance, and family planning. In general, I think I feel more scared than I see some, well, optimistic future. In any case, I don't think I would like to raise children in this kind of environment one day. I think the human rights situation in Croatia is quite bad, it's getting worse and worse, and that's it, at least from my experience. And what young people might need is that opportunity and the feeling that they can achieve what they want with their own effort, their own knowledge and their own commitment.”

(Female, employed, Croatia)

The well-being of the generation of young people who at the time of the pandemic were at different turning points in their lives experienced challenges in many aspects so that some groups coped with it better and some were not so resilient. Although the consequences of the pandemic on the well-being of young people will be felt for a long time to come, it is important to focus on the key needs of young people today. According to young people, the key needs of young people today can be summarised as the need of young people to be seen, heard, respected, and supported both as individuals and as important members of society.

2.4 Conclusions and recommendations

Awareness of youth well-being and mental health concerns has already begun to occupy the space of scientific and professional discourse towards the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The youths' mental health concerns became predominant, especially in the post-pandemic period, when youth mental health was detected as an area that needed to be strategically approached, including different levels of the system. This primarily refers to the national health system, the social welfare system, the education system, etc., then to health and educational institutions, and finally, to key stakeholders in the local community as the primary community that should support every individual, and should especially take care of young people. The results of our research confirm the following:

- In both countries, there is a significant decline in youths' life satisfaction, especially regarding family life, friends and physical appearance. Negative changes were more pronounced among girls and young people of lower socio-economic status.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, around one-fifth of young people in both countries rarely or never felt pleasant and positive emotions such as happiness, joy, satisfaction or comfort, and around one-third of them report that they often or very often experienced unpleasant feelings such as discomfort, sadness, fear or anger during the pandemic. The prevalence of negative emotions during the pandemic was more pronounced among girls, which may indicate different patterns in life circumstances during the pandemic concerning gender roles.
- In both countries, almost a third of young people often or very often felt lonely during the pandemic, which highlights the extent of its negative effects on young people's lives, especially girls. Interestingly, in Slovenia, the loneliest were young people in the youngest age cohort (16-19), while in Croatia, the loneliest were young people in the oldest age cohort (25-29), which can be a reflection of different pandemic measures, specific to each country.
- Despite the concerning trends in loneliness, in both countries, the majority of respondents demonstrated relatively strong social connectedness during the pandemic, whereby the support from close people they could rely on was equally available to both young men and young women.

- In the post-pandemic period, a significant improvement in all aspects of the subjective well-being of young people was recorded in both countries. They are feeling significantly more positive emotions, significantly fewer negative emotions, less lonely and better connected with their social environment.
- Nevertheless, in the aftermath of COVID-19, mental health problems among young people are continuously increasing, with the most vulnerable groups being women, the youngest age cohort and young people of lower socio-economic status.

These findings indicate trends in aspects of youth subjective well-being before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate characteristics of youth that may represent risk factors and highlight the importance of relationships, family environment, friendships and other forms of social support as an important protective mechanism for youth mental health. It is essential to emphasise that additional efforts are needed at local, regional and national levels to respond to the needs of young people and to provide them with assistance and support, especially taking into account the most vulnerable ones. Based on these findings, we developed the following recommendations for policymakers, youth workers, and social service professionals, aiming to address the key challenges while leveraging existing strengths in youth social networks and resilience:

- Prioritisation of accessible gender-sensitive mental health services. Policymakers should ensure the expansion of accessible, affordable, and youth-friendly mental health services, with special attention to girls and young women, who consistently report higher levels of distress, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with mental health. Services must be culturally and developmentally appropriate, and schools and community centres should serve as key access points.
- Strengthening of socio-economic support for vulnerable youth. The pandemic has deepened the link between socio-economic status and well-being. Targeted support measures, such as educational grants, housing assistance, career counselling, and digital inclusion programmes, should be prioritised for young people from lower-income families to reduce inequality and enhance life satisfaction across life domains.

- Fostering of social connectedness through community-based initiatives. Youth workers and social workers should invest in programmes that promote positive peer interactions and intergenerational relationships, especially for young people recovering from social isolation. Support networks such as youth clubs, mentorship programmes, and volunteer opportunities can serve as protective mechanisms for psychological well-being and social integration.
- Introduction of mental health literacy and life skills in education. Educational systems should integrate mental health literacy, emotional regulation, and resilience training into formal curricula from an early age. Teaching young people to recognise, understand, and manage emotions can improve long-term outcomes in both mental health and life satisfaction.
- Longitudinal monitoring of youth well-being. Governments and research institutions should support the regular collection of data on youth well-being through nationally representative, longitudinal studies. This allows for real-time monitoring, evidence-based policymaking, and early identification of emerging crises, especially among at-risk subgroups.
- Engagement of youth in policy design and implementation. To ensure policies are relevant and impactful, young people must be included as co-creators in the design, implementation, and evaluation of youth-focused initiatives. Participatory policymaking, through youth advisory boards, forums, and consultations, builds trust and ensures that responses align with their lived experiences and evolving needs.

These recommendations provide an answer to the urgent need for a coordinated and inclusive response to the evolving challenges in youth well-being. By investing in preventive measures, targeted support, and meaningful youth engagement, we can create environments where all young people, regardless of gender or socio-economic background, have the opportunity to thrive mentally, emotionally, and socially in the post-pandemic world.

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