

1. INTRODUCTION: WHY ANOTHER STUDY ON COVID-19 AND YOUTH? INTRODUCTION TO THE YO-VID22 PROJECT MAIN PUBLICATION

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The introductory chapter outlines the methodological design and rationale of the YO-VID22 project, which investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth well-being and support structures in Croatia and Slovenia. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study combined large-scale quantitative nationally representative surveys with qualitative methods, which included focus groups, expert interviews, and media content analysis. Quantitative data were collected through stratified online surveys on nationally representative samples of 16-29-year-olds, which enabled comparisons with pre-pandemic datasets. Qualitative components provided more profound insights into lived experiences, institutional responses, and public discourse surrounding youth. Focus groups captured peer-based dynamics and shared cultural values, while expert interviews highlighted systemic adaptations and policy gaps. At the same time, media analysis revealed shifting portrayals of young people in the public sphere. This integrated research design ensured both statistical robustness and contextual richness, and offered comprehensive evidence for understanding youth experiences during the pandemic and informing future policy and academic debates.

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In March 2020, when the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 had become a pandemic, everyday life in Croatia and Slovenia came to a standstill. Schools closed, first jobs were lost before they had properly begun, hugs were banned and deserved celebrations were cancelled. For teenagers and young adults, the crisis did not merely interrupt routines but also collided head-on with the formative years in which identities, careers and relationships are and should normally be forged. The impact was swift and severe, but societies somehow pulled through. And while some, mostly adults, forgot relatively quickly about the whole ordeal, its impact endured among youth. How did it impact them? Who did they turn to? Who and what should have been available for their support but was not? Was it the same everywhere? Was it really all that bad?

The YO-VID22 project – Youth Well-being and Support Structures Before, During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic – was created to answer that question among youth in Croatia and Slovenia. By returning to national youth cohorts first surveyed in 2018 and combining new quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered after the crisis, the study provides one of the few genuinely comparative, pre-/post-pandemic datasets on European youth. This opening chapter invites scholars, politicians, practitioners, students and interested citizens into the project's logic, results and findings and recommendations aimed at improving our collective preparedness in mitigating existing negative results of the pandemic and bolstering resilience in future crises. It traces why the research was needed, how it was designed and executed, what the main results are and why its findings speak to anyone concerned with social recovery.

1.1 A research gap that mattered

Numerous pandemic scholars gravitated toward elderly vulnerability, intensive-care, medicine and macro-economic turbulence. At the same time, youth appeared peripheral, presented mainly in anecdotes or media moralising headlines that blamed youth's irresponsible behaviour or parties for viral spikes. A systematic scan of the EU's CORDIS database found thousands of projects with a youth angle and hundreds that addressed COVID-19, yet almost none bridged the two themes. Yet, developmental psychology warns that late adolescence and emerging adulthood are sensitive periods and shocks encountered there can impact widening inequalities for

decades. Were COVID-19 and the lockdown that followed not a shock of that sort? A question is a rhetorical one; therefore, the answer is an obvious “Yes”. All stakeholders, but particularly policymakers planning recovery packages and future actions, need evidence that could distinguish fleeting discomfort from lasting damage. The YO-VID22 consortium, which brings together sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, based at the University of Maribor, the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, and the University of Zagreb, aimed to provide that evidence. This book presents a comprehensive summary of their findings and recommendations, intended to inform and support all stakeholders and interested parties.

Our starting point rests on the recognition of well-being as a multidimensional phenomenon. Hedonic theories focus on happiness and life satisfaction, whereas eudemonic perspectives stress meaning, autonomy and relatedness. YO-VID22 combined both, measuring subjective life satisfaction and mental-health indices while also mapping purpose, agency and belonging. At the same time, the team treated well-being as inseparable from the web of support that young people can mobilise, particularly their parents, siblings, partners, friends, teachers, youth clinics and social workers, civil society organisations (CSO), online communities and religious organisations. Previous Southeast European studies suggested that those sources are unevenly available, shaped by socio-economic status, gender, settlement type and national welfare regimes. The design within YO-VID22, therefore, focused on three intertwined questions, namely “How did self-reported well-being among 16- to 29-year-olds change from the pre-pandemic baseline of 2018 to the post-pandemic moment of early 2022?”, “Which support structures proved most resilient or most brittle under the pandemic pressure?”, and “Did services in both countries, Slovenia and Croatia, produce different protective patterns?”.

The project consortium pursued the following main objectives. Firstly, to build a mixed-method database linking pre-pandemic (2018) and post-pandemic (2023) snapshots of youth well-being and support, secondly, to identify mechanisms that explain any observed changes, and thirdly to generate concrete recommendations sensitive to national specificities yet transferable across Europe and lastly, to communicate the findings for diverse publics through policy briefs, multimedia, and an international conference. In order to accommodate these objectives, an approach

resting on mixed-methods was adopted. Two nationally representative online surveys capturing approximately 1,200 respondents per country, and stratified by gender, three age cohorts (16-19, 20-24, 25-29), settlement type and region were planned. Core items from the 2018 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies Southeast Europe (YSEE) survey were replicated verbatim, while new modules asked about lockdown experiences, digital substitution, vaccine attitudes and institutional trust. Sample quotas ensured that the second wave mirrored the pre-pandemic cohort, creating a quasi-longitudinal design that compared statistically equivalent groups. In order to secure depth, a set of complementary qualitative approaches was introduced. Numbers alone cannot capture the feel of cancelled proms, pandemic-induced broken relationships or an internship that never began. To secure that richness, the project ran focus groups with young people in each country, conducted expert interviews with representatives of public institutions, educators, social workers and CSO leaders, and analysed media depictions of youth during and after the pandemic.

So, why Croatia and Slovenia? The two countries share Yugoslav legacies and EU membership, yet diverge in several important respects regarding youth. Croatia has higher youth unemployment and lower social spending, factors that traditionally push young adults back onto family support. Slovenia, on the other hand, invests more in public welfare and education, implying a thicker institutional safety net. Studying both contexts promised insight into how different welfare systems mediate the same pandemic stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted weaknesses in the support systems that young Europeans depend on, but it also uncovered a wealth of creativity in devising ad-hoc support structures, such as online study groups, neighbourhood support groups, and youth-driven mental health discussions. YO-VID22 reflects both the vulnerabilities and strengths, offering data to create more equitable systems and narratives to bring them to life. Its central message is pressing: a generation cannot be expected to rebuild society relying solely on family and friendship networks as their safety net. If academics, politicians, practitioners and CSOs, young people, and citizens collaborate, Croatia and Slovenia can transition from reactive crisis management to a meaningful intergenerational social contract suitable for the twenty-first century.

This Book is structured in 11 thematic chapters, following the introductory chapter and the chapter on methodology. In the chapter *Life satisfaction and aspects of subjective well-being of youth as indicators of youth mental health: pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic perspective*, Sandra Antulić Majcen, Andrej Naterer and Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić take a close look at how young people's life satisfaction and mental health shifted over time. Drawing on comparative data from Croatia and Slovenia, they trace a marked decline in well-being, particularly among girls and youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While some mental recovery is evident after the crisis, the chapter highlights enduring feelings of isolation and underscores the central role of social relationships in sustaining youth mental health.

Rudi Klanjšek and Iva Odak in their chapter titled *Housing and living conditions of youth – Caught between COVID-19 and structural challenges*, explore the intersection of pandemic pressures and long-standing structural barriers to housing independence. They show how financial insecurity and family background continue to shape young people's living conditions, with youth in Slovenia and Croatia especially affected by factors closely linked to psychological distress and reduced life satisfaction.

The chapter *Youth's educational experiences before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, by Iva Odak, Sandra Antulić Majcen, and Suzana Košir, focuses on the educational disruptions triggered by the pandemic and their lasting effects. While enrolment in tertiary education continues to rise, the authors highlight persistent gender and socioeconomic disparities, and reveal how the emergence of remote learning and increased stress levels burdened students, particularly girls and disadvantaged youth. Although well-being has somewhat improved, the need for sustained support across educational systems remains clear.

In *School-to-work transition and labour market*, Darja Maslić Seršić, Rudi Klanjšek, and Suzana Košir analyse the evolving landscape of youth employment. Their findings show a gradual shift toward greater job stability, yet young women still face obstacles in securing permanent positions. Although the pandemic's economic disruptions were largely temporary, it reshaped employment values, stimulating flexibility, autonomy, and work-life balance among young people.

The chapter *Mental health, burnout and stress-related symptoms among youth: prevalence and pandemic effects*, by Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, Darja Maslić Seršić, and Sandra Antulić Majcen, focuses on the rising incidence of mental health issues among youth, especially among adolescent girls and students. With symptoms of depression and burnout widespread, the chapter emphasises how vulnerabilities differ by age, gender, and life stage, making a strong case for focused mental health interventions in the post-pandemic recovery.

In *Youth in transition: Navigating expectations in the post-COVID era*, Dunja Potočnik, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, and Minea Rutar investigate how young people's aspirations and confidence evolved in the wake of the crisis. Among others, their results reveal that Slovenian youth appear to be driven by academic achievement, while their Croatian peers lean toward traditional family milestones. The authors show how these aspirations are deeply shaped by gender roles and class background, reflecting wider social norms and divergent pathways to adulthood.

The chapter *Family and partnership* by Danijela Lahe and Andrej Naterer reveals how the pandemic reshaped family dynamics and relationship expectations. While Croatian youth generally experienced strong familial support, Slovenian youth reported more tension and distance. The crisis prompted many to rethink personal goals and relationship models, with growing openness to non-traditional life paths such as long-term singleness or child-free unions—a shift with lasting social implications.

In *Support structures and intergenerational support during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, Dunja Potočnik and Andrej Naterer examine how youth leaned on different sources of support during the pandemic. Parents were the most consistent providers of help, while public institutions often remained on the margins. Among others, the authors notably find that young people express a strong sense of duty toward caregiving in later life, suggesting evolving notions of intergenerational solidarity.

The chapter *Slovenian and Croatian youth and their civic and political participation* by Andrej Naterer and Anja Gvozdanović offers a nuanced view of youth engagement. While Croatian youth express growing disillusionment with politics, Slovenian youth show rising political interest and ideological diversification. The chapter points to a widening gap between active and disengaged youth, raising questions about

democratic participation and how to meaningfully include younger voices in public life.

In *Young people's online engagement during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, Rudi Klanjšek, Gordana Kuterovac Jagodić, and Dunja Potočnik focus on the digital world, to which much of youth life shifted during lockdowns. They analyse how young people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds used social media, both as a platform for expression and a potential source of harm. While online spaces offered vital social connections, concerns about cyberbullying and digital overuse reveal the complex emotional landscape of youth internet engagement.

Finally, in *Youth in a broader socio-cultural context*, Miran Lavrič, Anja Gvozdanović and Vesna Vuk Godina situate the experiences of Croatian and Slovenian youth within broader shifts in cultural values. Trust in others and in institutions has declined, while religiosity shows growing polarisation. Most striking is the documented erosion of solidaristic and altruistic attitudes, raising alarms about the long-term health of civic life and social cohesion in the region.

Together, these chapters offer a deep and multidimensional insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reshaped the everyday realities of youth in Croatia and Slovenia. From well-being and education to housing, labour, digital life, and civic engagement, the findings expose both shared vulnerabilities and national specificities, but also examples of resilience, adaptation, and emerging agency among young people. By combining rigorous data with lived experience, this volume provides a vital evidence base for reimagining youth policy and support systems in a post-pandemic era.

1.2 Methodology

To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth well-being and support structures in Croatia and Slovenia, the YO-VID22 project employed a mixed-method research design. The study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture broad trends and deeper contextual meanings likewise. Quantitative data were gathered through a large-scale, stratified online survey on the nationally representative samples of young people aged 16 to 29 in both countries, alongside secondary analysis of relevant pre-pandemic and EU-wide datasets. To

enrich and interpret these findings, the project incorporated a series of qualitative methods, including focus groups, in-depth interviews with experts from youth-related institutions, and media content analysis. This multi-layered design allowed the research team to trace both structural patterns and lived experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how young people navigated the pandemic and its aftermath.

The methodological components are presented in the following table:

Table 1.1: Methodological components.

Approach	Method	Description
Quantitative methods	Survey	Target population: young people aged 16-29: Sample: n=1,200/country; stratified, based on gender, age group (16-19; 20-24, 25-29), type of settlement and region. Type: online survey
	Secondary data analysis	YSEE2018 and other relevant databases: the European Social Survey (ESS – round 9 (year 2018) – “Justice and Fairness” and “Timing in Life”) and EUROSTAT
Qualitative methods	Focus groups	5 per country, 5-10 participants per group, employed to (1) gain qualitative insights into the period during and after the pandemic and (2) gain insights into the areas identified as the most striking results from the survey
	Expert in-depth interviews	10 per country, with selected representatives of institutions relevant for young people, and representatives of youth CSOs to gain insights into practices and policies regarding the intersection of well-being, youth and the pandemic
	Content analysis of media reports	with youth designated as the unit of analysis, electronic media coverage of selected topics during and after the pandemic was analysed to identify changes in social perceptions of youth roles during the pandemic. Ten internet news portals in Slovenia and 15 news media portals in Croatia were analysed, comprising the period between March 2020 and May 2023.

Together, these methodological components formed a comprehensive and complementary research framework. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled the project not only to identify statistically significant trends across youth populations, but also to explore the underlying mechanisms, personal narratives, and contextual factors that shape young people's experiences. By drawing on multiple data sources, including first-hand accounts, expert perspectives, and public discourse, the project provided a rich, evidence-based understanding of the challenges and support systems that defined youth life during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This robust design strengthens the reliability of the findings and ensures their relevance for both national policy and broader academic inquiry.

1.2.1 Quantitative approach

The YO-VID22 project was based on a comparison of data gathered during the 2018 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Youth Studies Southeast Europe (YSEE), therefore the design closely followed the sampling logic, field procedures and quality controls first established there. In that baseline survey, the target population comprised all citizens aged 14-29 in Slovenia ($\approx 334,000$ individuals in 2017) and Croatia ($\approx 670,000$ young individuals in 2017). In Slovenia, a net sample of 1,015 completed questionnaires was achieved, comfortably meeting the planned 1,000 cases and limiting the sampling error to ± 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level, while in Croatia the sample size was 1,500. These procedures, along with a suitable content of the questionnaire, delivered a rigorously controlled, nationally representative dataset that served as the empirical backbone for the longitudinal comparisons presented in YO-VID22.

All young participants were residents of Croatia and Slovenia, aged 16-29. Minimum age was slightly modified (from 14 in YSEE to 16 in YO-VID22) mainly because of the administrative accessibility of the respondents. The survey comprised an extensive array of questions aimed at assessing the well-being of young individuals across various dimensions. Data was gathered in the autumn of 2023 through the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique. Participants filled out an online questionnaire, submitting their answers directly on a web-based platform. On average, each survey took 28 minutes to complete.

In each country, a quota sampling strategy was utilised to achieve a representative distribution across essential demographic and regional traits. Valicon Agency oversaw the sampling process, leveraging their online panel, 'JaZnam'. While most participants were drawn from this existing panel, additional individuals were recruited through panel referrals and targeted social media promotions to meet the target sample size of 1,200 respondents per country. Quotas were set based on national census data and demographic projections for people aged 16-29 years, ensuring balanced representation across gender, age brackets, geographic areas, and educational levels.

The final sample included 2,502 individuals. The Croatian sample comprised 1,216 participants, with 51.2% being male, 26.3% of the entire sample were aged 16–19, 36.4% 20–24, and 37.3% 25–29 (an average age of 22.77 years, $SD=3.89$). The Slovenian group included 1,287 participants, 52.8% of whom were male, 26.6% of whom were aged 16–19, 35.1% 20–24, and 38.3% 25–29 (an average age of 22.87 years, $SD=4.00$). Among the Croatian respondents, 28.9% lived in rural areas or villages, 12.4% in areas more rural than urban, 15.8% in areas more urban than rural, and 42.9% in urban settlements. In Slovenia, 42% of respondents resided in rural areas or villages, 20.4% in more rural than urban areas, 17.3% in more urban than rural areas, and 20.4% in urban settlements.

1.2.2 Qualitative approach

1.2.2.1 Focus groups

Focus groups represent an integral part of the project. The method is suitable for researching youth because it creates an open, peer-based environment while at the same time encouraging honest conversation and reflection. Young people often feel more comfortable sharing their views in a group setting with peers, especially when discussing topics related to their personal lives, emotions, and everyday challenges. The social dynamic of a focus group helps participants build on each other's thoughts, challenge ideas, and negotiate meaning collectively. This makes it possible not only to gather individual perspectives but also to observe how opinions are shaped and reshaped through dialogue. Another key strength of focus groups lies in their ability to uncover the shared experiences and values that define youth culture. In discussing issues such as mental health, education, employment, or relationships, participants often find validation in each other's stories, which can lead to more open and insightful discussions than those typically found in individual interviews or written surveys. This format also allows researchers to explore sensitive or emotionally complex topics in a setting where participants may feel less isolated and more supported.

The flexibility of focus groups is especially valuable when working with youth, as it allows researchers to follow up on unexpected topics, clarify ambiguous responses, and adapt questions to the group's natural flow of conversation. This responsiveness is crucial when investigating new or rapidly evolving issues, such as the social and

emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. More broadly, focus groups are well-suited to youth research because they reflect the conversational nature of how young people engage with the world. They offer a space in which young participants can articulate their experiences and insights on their own terms. Thus, focus groups not only generate rich qualitative data but also serve as a form of recognition and inclusion, treating young people as active contributors to understanding the world they are helping to shape.

The design of the focus groups was based on approaches that are well established in social sciences (e.g. Flick, 2014; 2018; Given, 2008). Guidelines for the focus groups and interviews were developed after an extensive state-of-the-art and secondary data analysis, with the main goal to gain deep insight into the lives of the participants. In both countries, five focus groups were executed, with a total of 50 young people that took part in Croatia, and 30 in Slovenia. The findings provided deep insights into young people's life experiences and support systems.

Concerning focus group composition in Croatia, there were 32 female and 18 male participants (64.0% and 36.0% respectively), with 42.0% (N=21) of participants in the youngest cohort (age 16-19), 28.0% in the middle age group (20-24 years of age) – N=14, and 15 participants aged 25-29 (30.0%). There were only 4 participants who were both in education and employment (8.0%), while 2 participants (4.0%) were unemployed, 11 were employed (22.0%), and 33 (66.0%) were still in education. Out of the total focus group sample in Croatia, 42 participants (84.0%) were from urban or more urban than rural areas, while 8 participants (16.0%) were from rural or more rural than urban settlements.

Regarding focus group composition in Slovenia, there were 19 female and 11 male participants (63.4% and 36.6% respectively). The sample included an equal number (N=6) from populations from primary school (age 15-16), secondary school (age 16-18), university (age 20+), NEET population within project PUMO+ (age 16-23) and employed youth (age 25-29). All participants were from urban or more urban than rural areas.

1.2.2.2 Interviews

The interviewing of experts in youth policy, services, and CSOs was a vital component of the project, offering a systemic and institutional perspective that complemented the personal experiences captured through surveys and focus groups. While young people described how they navigated daily life during the pandemic, expert interviews provided insight into how youth-serving systems responded to this unprecedented disruption. These professionals, ranging from representatives of the ministries in charge of youth, education, health and employment, over educators and social workers to youth workers, youth centre coordinators and advisors, were often on the front lines of the crisis response during the pandemic. Their reflections and perspectives helped the research team understand how formal structures adapted, or often failed to adapt to meet the needs of young people, particularly in areas such as mental health, education, employment, and social inclusion.

Beyond offering practical observations, expert interviews also revealed how institutional priorities shifted during the pandemic, what assumptions shaped policy decisions, and how coordination between different sectors influenced outcomes for youth. These perspectives were critical in identifying gaps between what young people needed and what services were actually delivered. Moreover, expert accounts shed light on the challenges of implementing youth-focused policies under emergency conditions, including resource limitations, bureaucratic constraints, and varying levels of political will. By integrating these insights, the project was able to develop relatively realistic, context-sensitive policy recommendations.

1.2.2.3 Media analysis

The analysis of media content was another crucial part of the project, for it offered valuable insight into how youth were portrayed, discussed, and positioned in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Media, whether traditional like newspapers and television or digital platforms and social networks, not only reflect societal attitudes but also shape them. By examining how young people were represented across different media formats, the project aimed to understand the narratives that influenced public perception and, in turn, potentially affected policy decisions, social trust, and youth self-image. This layer of analysis helped uncover whether youth were framed as vulnerable, resilient, irresponsible, or invisible, and

how these portrayals shifted over time. At the same time, it shed light on the visibility of youth voices in public debate: whether young people were included as active participants in discussions about education, employment, and mental health, or merely spoken about by others? Understanding these dynamics was essential to grasping the broader social context in which young people experienced the pandemic, and to identifying the cultural and communicative gaps that may have deepened their sense of exclusion or misunderstanding.

The Slovenian sample was developed according to a report by MOSS, a project measuring website traffic, for the time of the pandemic (MOSS, 2025). The keywords used in the design of the sample were based on the concepts and focal points of the project and included the following words: COVID-19, pandemic, young people, welfare, support, help, problems, needs, work with young people, youth work, support for young people's families, friendship, young people and living conditions, education, career directions, social perception of young people, media image of young people, social roles of young people, participation of young people, generation. In its final form, the sample included 150 pieces of various content from 10 most popular platforms. The Croatian sample for the media content analysis was devised in the same manner, following the cooperation with the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing via usage of their platform TakeLab Retriever: AI-Driven Search Engine for Articles from Croatian News Outlets. In total, 15 news media portals were analysed, which resulted in 290 news articles.

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