

Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world

Introduction

By the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people in Europe found that they had been forced to change at least parts of their plans for the future – for their educational and career paths, for their housing circumstances and for starting their own families. The labour market in Europe continues to be strong, and favourable economic conditions have contributed to a youth employment rate higher than that seen at any time in the previous 15 years. However, pressures on young people's plans have increased when it comes to housing and the cost of living, and concerns about youth mental well-being remain. This report provides an in-depth overview of young people's lives post-pandemic, with a focus on plans for the future and the circumstances that can either hinder their fulfilment or help towards it.

Policy context

During the pandemic, the focus of policy was helping businesses survive, but the EU institutions were also quick to increase youth employment support, introducing the reinforced Youth Guarantee, which extended the age limit for those targeted under the scheme from 25 to 29 years. Progress made and challenges experienced in implementing the scheme are outlined in this report, highlighting the importance of continued support for the reinforced Youth Guarantee. This is particularly necessary because youth-related employment measures have been somewhat underrepresented among those supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Key findings

- The youth employment rate in the EU is higher than at any time since 2007, and the percentage of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) is historically low. Furthermore, the proportion of discouraged workers among NEET young people is at its lowest recorded level.
- There are signs of improvements in job quality for young people, with fewer involuntary temporary contracts, greater perceived job security and better work–life balance than during the pandemic years.
- However, young people are less satisfied with their jobs than older cohorts and would like more autonomy at work. Nearly half of young people want to change jobs within a year, and the proportions are higher among those never able to work from home and those with insecure contracts.
- Most young people are looking for opportunities for training or further education. Experience of a traineeship is common in the EU. However, inequalities – for example, gender disparities – have been found to affect traineeship quality.
- Housing difficulties are among the main obstacles to young people becoming independent. Young people who are less financially well off are less likely to be able to move out of the parental home, which in turn may put financial strain on the household. As a result, young people living with their parents are most likely to have difficulty making ends meet.
- Mismatches between young people's aspirations and their concrete plans are particularly common when it comes to housing. Increasingly, young people would like to buy a home but find themselves stuck renting. In addition, this report found that unfulfilled aspirations to move out of the parental home are associated with a higher likelihood of feeling excluded from society.

- Young people reported unusually low levels of mental well-being during the pandemic. By 2023, youth mental well-being had improved. However, this improvement was weaker than it was among people over 30. Furthermore, the research found that a mismatch between aspirations and concrete plans, when it comes to getting a job, is associated with higher risk of depression among young people.
- Among young respondents across the EU, 40% would move abroad in the next three years if they could, and nearly a quarter have plans to do so. However, there are large differences between countries.
- Many young people have plans to start their own family soon: over half of under-35s would like to move in with a partner within three years, while about a third would like to get married and a similar proportion would like to have children. Having a higher income and living with parents is associated with a higher likelihood of planning to have children soon. Conversely, LGBTQ+ young people and those at risk of depression are more likely to experience a mismatch between wanting and planning to have children.
- With regard to progress on the reinforced Youth Guarantee, pressures on active labour market policies are lower, now that the employment rate among youth is as high as it is, resulting in an overall sense of delay. However, in many southern European countries there are still high NEET rates and regional disparities, and these countries have expressed concerns about the scheme's capacity to deliver in the most deprived regions.
- In many countries, young mothers are now more likely to be NEET than young men, with family responsibilities now the biggest reason for being NEET. However, EU policy measures specifically aimed at young mothers or young women more generally are scarce.

Policy pointers

- Continued support for the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee is crucial, especially given evidence that youth-related policies have disproportionately emphasised formal education over labour market integration.
- Increased emphasis may be needed on the gender dimension of the NEET rate, as in several countries young mothers are now the group most likely to be NEET.
- Previous efforts to implement the Youth Guarantee aimed to expand the capabilities of each country to reach out to young people and improve the framework for matching them with the appropriate service, while setting up new services where necessary. Current efforts also seek to monitor the alignment of services with young people's needs, with a stronger participatory approach. National and regional strategies should focus on disengaged and vulnerable young people, especially in contexts of lower urbanisation and neighbourhood deprivation, and on providing the required resources and information to institutions and their partners. The report provides examples of good practices from countries including Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland and Spain.
- Decent work must be a focus of youth employment policy. The labour market remains precarious and unfair to the young generation, given the cost of living and housing costs. While jobs are available, many are unattractive, badly paid and unable to offer young people a decent living.
- While the reinforced Youth Guarantee is seen as primarily an economic/employment policy, its success is closely related to the policy areas of family, housing and childcare, to measures fighting gender and intersectional discrimination, and to synergies with the European Commission's 2023 mental health strategy.

Further information

The report *Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef23097>

Research manager: Eszter Sandor

information@eurofound.europa.eu