

The Life of Young People in Serbia: The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic marked 2020 and completely changed the whole world, especially in the first half of the year. The context of education, work, movement, gatherings, behaviors, leisure, life with family, partners etc. has completely changed and has certainly affected almost the entire population - both throughout the world and in Serbia. Young people (age 15 to 30), as a particular social category, were particularly affected during the pandemic, as shown by numerous reports and interventions on a global level. [1]

The key aim of this research was to determine how the pandemic affects the lives of young people in the Republic of Serbia and how it redefines them. Throughout the research - quantitatively and qualitatively, the focus was put on the youth rights through different areas (right to education, right to employment, right to security, right to health, right to mental health, etc.).

The key topics we covered in this research were:

1. Work and earnings;
2. Education;
3. Security and feelings during the pandemic;
4. Behaviors during the pandemic and trust in institutions;
5. Migrations;
6. Volunteering.

Work and earnings

The pandemic has affected the right to work of a significant number of young people during the pandemic, as well as lead to a situation in which approximately 1/3 of young people had or have a fear of an endangered right to work, or more precisely, the fear of losing their job. 33% of young people had the fear of losing their jobs during the state of emergency, and 31% after the end of the state of emergency. In terms of work commitments, the pandemic has affected a significant proportion of young people and their productivity and, on a scale from 1 - Significantly decreased to 5 - Significantly increased, average response values were 2.51 (from home) and 2.80 (at the workplace). For a significant percent of young people, 42.2% of them, incomes declined during the state of emergency and for 32.4% young people after the state of emergency, which had a great impact on their quality of life. 23.2% of young people are experiencing the feeling of insecurity for their job at this moment, and 27.9% of young people fear for the future prospect of their job.

An interesting fact is that young people from the region of Belgrade (43.3%) and Vojvodina (42.7%) are significantly more scared for the status of their job in comparison to young people from the region of Eastern and Southern Serbia (28.4%) and Western and Central Serbia (15.4%). Also, as the size of the settlement grows, so does the fear among young people. Fear was felt by 19% of young people from settlements with less than 10,000 inhabitants, 32% from municipalities, 33.9% from cities, while fear was felt by 42.4% of young people from big cities.

A young person who lost their job during the state of emergency points out that it was one of the harder parts of their "adult life". As a catering worker, who predominantly lives off tips, and works formally through a youth cooperative – they point out that they were aware and had nothing to expect if the catering facilities were to be closed and that they immediately feared losing their job for a long period of time.

Education

A significant number of young people, as much as over 1/2, believes that the pandemic has negatively affected their schooling and certainly jeopardized their right to education. 26% of young people did not have online classes, while only 58% of young people from settlements with less than 10,000 inhabitants had online classes. The evaluations of young people in relation to quality of online classes are worrying as 29.6% of them deem they are unsatisfactory. Only 6.1% of young people said that they had access to the level of education necessary for personal growth, while 36.5% of young people believe that they did not have access to education necessary for personal growth. Finally, about 70% of young people believe that the consequences of the pandemic will be negative which significantly affects their results and ability to exercise their right to quality education, and consequently right to work.

An interesting fact is that young women evaluate online teaching more positively with an average grade of 2.78 compared to young men with an average score of 2.30.

Upon the state of emergency was declared and schools and colleges closed, young people on the one hand had a sense of "eased" schooling, but also felt great fear about their further education as time went by.

As they point out, from day to day and from week to week the situation with regard to education deteriorated negatively.

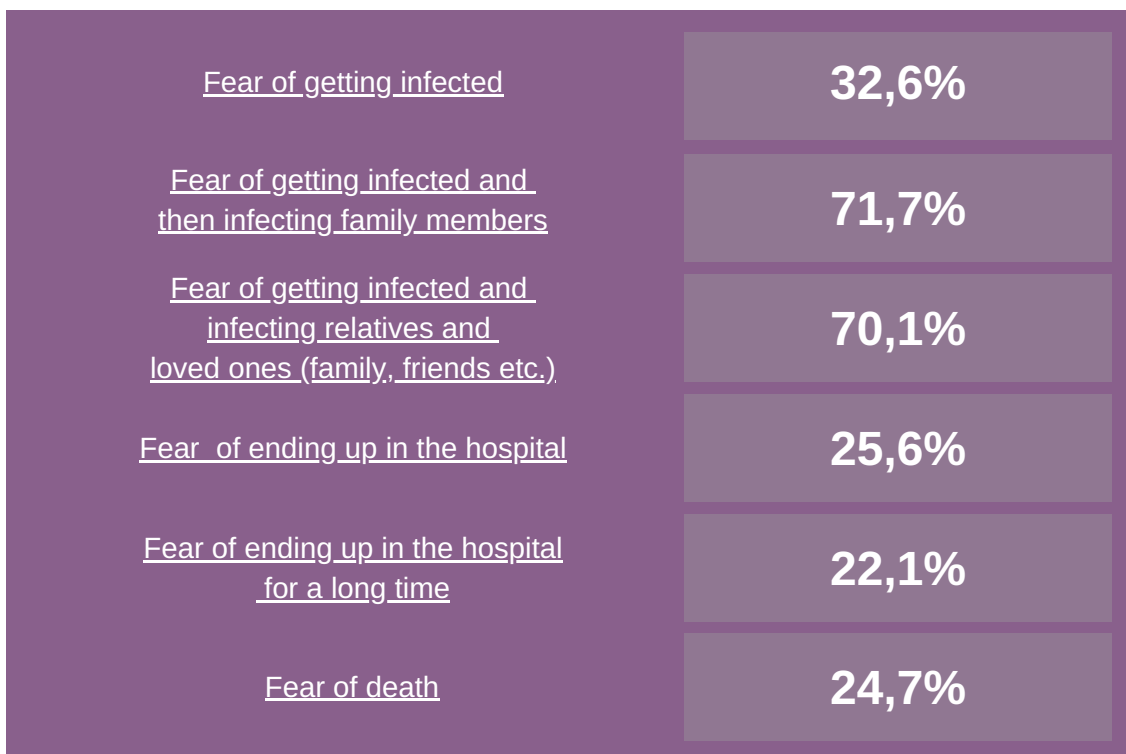
Mental health and the feeling of safety during the pandemic

The data that showcases the feelings of endangerment of young people during the state of emergency, feelings of endangerment for their health and the fears that they had during the state of emergency can be perceived as troublesome. During the state of emergency as much as 42.7% of young people felt as if their health was threatened, while 29.9% of them had the same feeling after the state of emergency. Most of the young people felt fear of becoming infected and endangering their families (71.7%) and fear of infecting some of their relatives and loved ones (70.1%). In smaller percentages, young people feared becoming infected (32.6%), ending up in the hospital (25.6%), death (24.7%) or ending up in the hospital for a long period of time (22.1%). The young people who live in larger settlements felt the greater level of fear. Young people from big cities have felt the most vulnerable (3.13), followed by cities (2.90), municipalities (2.84) and settlements of less than 10,000 population (2.53).

An interesting fact is that those young people with a higher-level education felt more endangered during the state of emergency (faculty = 40.7%, secondary vocational school or grammar school = 32.4%, primary school 27.5%).

The attitudes of young people about the impact the isolation had on them are also worrying, as are the data that show the feelings of young people during the state of emergency. 26.2% of young people felt very bad, 27.2% bad, while only 11% felt good 6.6% very good. Uncertainty occurred among 51.5% of young people, infirmity among 48.5%, and concern for the future among 45.7% of young people, anxiety among 43.1%. Between the respondents, 11% of them experienced violence out of which 10.4% physical, 60.4% verbal and as much as 54.5% online. The largest number of young people experienced domestic violence (30.3%) and violence from unknown people (18.6%).

An interesting fact is that the isolation had a worse effects on young men (average score 2.36) than on young women (average score 2.53), as well as the fact that 42% of young people indicated that they felt ready to return to a normal condition of life and regular activities.



Behavior during the pandemic and trust in institutions

Young people expressed dissatisfaction with the state's reactions during and after the state of emergency. As much as 41.4% of young people deemed the state's response to the pandemic during March and April (during the state of emergency) and 58.9% from May to September as unsatisfactory. The data on the extremely small number of young people who had access to institutions and services during a state of emergency are worrying. Most young people believe that they had partial access to institutions during the state of emergency (43.4%), a quarter of young people claimed they had no access (26.1%), and as little as every tenth young person (10.9%) believes that they had access to institutions during a state of emergency. During that period, young people had significantly more trust in all institutions than in the period after the state of emergency was abrogated.

The data from the research that shows the instance to which young people respected the measures during the state of emergency are encouraging, but are also concerning when compared to the respect of measures after the state of emergency was abrogated. The largest number of young people were fully complied with the measures of the rules of physical distancing during the state of emergency (49.3%), while respecting of these measures dropped significantly in the post-emergency period (19.1%). Adherence to movement restriction measures and gatherings during the state of emergency was respected by 64.7% of young people, while after its abrogation by 28.8% of young people.

***An interesting fact** is that young women were more respectful of measures of physical distancing, restraint and movement. During the state of emergency, the average value of responses for young women is 4.28 for physical measures distancing and 4.50 for restraint and movement measures, and 3.72 and 3.93 for young men. In the period after the state of emergency, the average value of responses from women to respect measures of physical distancing was 3.30, for restraint and movement measures 3.43, and for men, it was 3.08 and 3.16.*

The young people pointed out that, although they were not objects or subjects of violence, in conversations with their friends, colleagues, etc. they received information that the pandemic influenced violence to increase, but as the participants point out – it wasn't the case for them. Moreover, they say that they were much more tolerant than usual, not only in their families, but also in the city / neighborhood or in the street. They emphasized the quarrels among crowds and the "fights" for masks and disinfectants, when people gathered in groups "breathed at each other's necks".

Migrations

The data on the plans and thoughts of young people about leaving the country are worrying, because 27% of young people responded that they intend to emigrate from Serbia. The same number said they do not intend it, but as many as 46% claimed that they were considering it, but not planning to do it for now. Due to the pandemic, 41.8% of young people now want to leave Serbia even more, and 73.8% of young people believe that this is the general attitude of young people about the impact of the pandemic and that they want to leave even more.

Volunteering

Less than a quarter of young people volunteered during the pandemic (22.6%), and the largest number of young people (78.7%) volunteered on their own initiative (assistance in the neighborhood or through informal organizations) in relation to the organized volunteering (by an organization, local government, etc.). The largest number of young people who took a part in organized volunteering did so through the CSOs (31.9%), in the Red Cross, UNICEF or some other international organization (24.5%) or local government (18.1%).

Most young people felt completely safe during the volunteering (35.1%). 12.2% felt completely unsafe or just unsafe, while less than half of the young volunteers were fully provided with equipment (43.5%).

Representatives of youth and for youth organizations pointed out during the focus groups that the functioning of the organizations was difficult, that they were not sure how they would be able to realize and whether they would be able to realize their activities at all and what the realization of their projects would look like. Representatives of organizations that have employees pointed out that they quickly switched to working remotely, to the use of new tools, software and "gadgets" and that they managed to achieve optimal work relatively quickly, but that the priority was communication with participants of the ongoing activities that were mostly canceled, and also communication with donors and thinking about the next steps.

Note: The development and publication of this research was supported by the OSCE Mission to Serbia. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.