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Transnational Perspectives on Youth Mental Health

**Challenges and Solutions
Across Bulgaria, Croatia,
Germany, Serbia, and Spain**



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Disclaimer:

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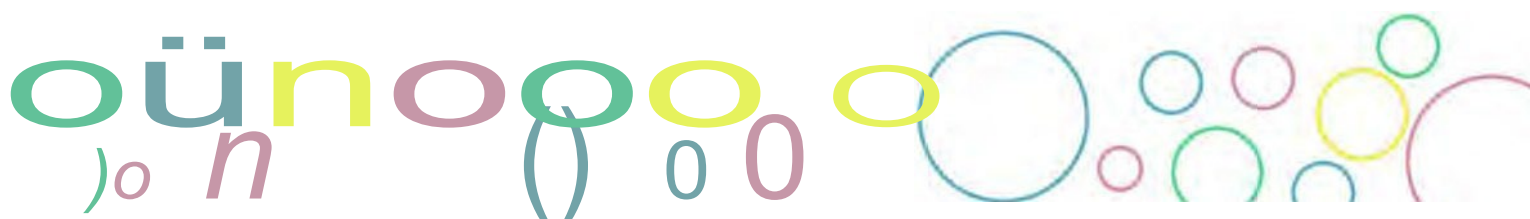


Table of contents

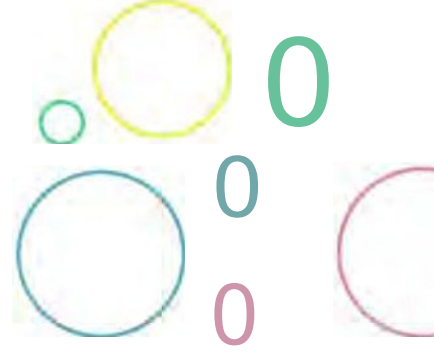
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	2
Mental Health and the Well-Being of Young People	2
Scope and Objectives of the Research	2
Overview of the Five National-Level Studies	4
Transnational Collaboration and Seminar Activities	5
METHODOLOGY	7
NATIONAL-LEVEL RESEARCH FINDINGS	10
BULGARIA	10
Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People	10
Key Findings from Research	11
Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups	13
Recommendations	14
CROATIA	15
Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People	15
Key Findings from Research	17
Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups	18
Recommendations	19
GERMANY	20
Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People	20
Key Findings from Research	21
Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups	23
Recommendations	24



SERBIA	26
Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People	26
Key Findings from Research	28
Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups	29
Recommendations	31
SPAIN	33
Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People	33
Key Findings from Research	35
Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups	36
Recommendations	37
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THE TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE	39
Divergences or Unique Issues Observed at the National Level	40
Insights from Transnational Seminars and Collaborative Discussions	41
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	42
Recommendations for Policymakers	42
Recommendations for NGOs and Youth Organizations	43
Suggestions for Further Research and Collaboration	44
Ideas for Improving Mental Health Support for Young People at a Transnational Level	44
CONCLUSION	45
Key Insights and Transnational Perspectives	45
Final Thoughts on the Way Forward in Addressing Young People's Mental Health	46
Building a Future of Inclusive and Supportive Mental Health Systems	47
WHAT IS METAPHOR?	48
WHY THIS RESEARCH?	49
WHY METAPHOR	50
REFERENCES	51



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report presents a transnational perspective on the mental health of young people across Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain. The aim of this research is to explore the mental health landscape for youth in these countries, identifying common challenges, unique national issues, and opportunities for improving mental health support. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including national surveys, round tables, interviews with key stakeholders, and analyses of existing mental health strategies, this report provides a comprehensive overview of the factors influencing youth mental health in each context.

The research reveals several key findings. Firstly, common trends across the countries include the significant impact of socio-economic factors, the enduring effects of historical events, and the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health issues. Despite differences in their mental health systems, all five countries demonstrate a pressing need for improved access to mental health services and increased funding to support youth-oriented programs. In Bulgaria and Serbia, fragmented mental health systems and stigmatization are particularly pronounced, leading to inadequate support for young people. Conversely, Croatia, Germany, and Spain exhibit more structured approaches, with comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing mental health challenges, though they still face unique difficulties, such as regional disparities in service availability and the lingering effects of recent crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on these findings, the report outlines several key recommendations for policymakers, NGOs, and youth organizations. These include the development of comprehensive national mental health strategies, increased funding for mental health services, enhanced mental health education and awareness campaigns, and the establishment of intersectoral collaboration frameworks. Additionally, suggestions for further research and collaboration emphasize the need for longitudinal studies, cross-national comparisons, and the creation of a transnational youth mental health network.

In conclusion, addressing the mental health needs of young people requires a concerted effort that transcends national borders. By learning from each other's experiences and fostering collaboration, stakeholders can build more effective and inclusive mental health care systems. The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for improving mental health support for youth, ensuring that they receive the care they need to thrive.





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Mental Health and the Well-Being of Young People

The mental health of young people is increasingly recognized as a critical issue in both global and national public health agendas. With a growing body of research highlighting the alarming rise in anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges among adolescents and young adults (WHO, 2021), the urgency of addressing these concerns has never been more pronounced. Mental health issues during youth can have long-lasting impacts, shaping the future well-being and life opportunities of individuals, as well as affecting broader social and economic systems.

In today's complex and evolving social, cultural, and economic landscapes, young people face a myriad of pressures that can deeply affect their mental health. Challenges such as forced displacement, economic instability, family disruptions, social media influence, and rising violence are creating an environment where mental health conditions are becoming more prevalent (WHO, 2020). These mental health issues are often interwoven with various factors, including social determinants like poverty, education, and access to healthcare, all of which can significantly shape the experiences of youth.

This report, which draws upon five national-level studies from Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain, seeks to provide a transnational perspective on youth mental health. Conducted as part of the "Metaphor-Youth Mental Health Advocacy" project co-funded by the European Commission, the research aims to offer insights that can inform mental health policies and practices tailored to young people across different cultural, social, and economic contexts.

Scope and Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to explore the mental health needs, experiences, and perspectives of young people aged 12-30 across five countries. The present draws upon five national-level studies from Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain, and seeks to provide a transnational perspective on youth mental health. Conducted as part of the "Metaphor-Youth Mental Health Advocacy" project co-funded by the European Commission, the research aims to offer insights that can inform mental health policies and practices tailored to young people across different cultural, social, and economic contexts.

Understanding these perspectives is crucial to developing strategies for prevention, intervention, and support, as well as to advocating for systemic changes that prioritize the mental well-being of younger generations. By centering youth voices and fostering collaboration between sociological researchers, psychologists, policymakers, and youth workers, the study aims to inform evidence-based interventions that are sensitive to the unique cultural and societal contexts of each nation.

The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mental health landscape for youth, focusing on the following core areas:

- Identification of Key Mental Health Issues: Exploring the most pressing mental health challenges faced by young people today, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders, and their root causes.
- Impact of Social Determinants: Examining how factors such as socioeconomic status, education, gender, and family dynamics influence mental health outcomes among young people.
- Youth Perspectives on Mental Health Services: Investigating how young individuals perceive the availability, accessibility, and quality of mental health services, including gaps in care and opportunities for improvement.
- Policy and Advocacy: Identifying opportunities for policy reforms and advocacy that can support mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment at both national and transnational levels.



Overview of the Five National-Level Studies

The research presented in this report is rooted in five national-level studies, each conducted between February and April 2024, in Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain. These countries represent a diverse cross-section of Europe, each with its own unique socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts that influence how mental health is understood, experienced, and addressed among youth populations.

The national studies followed a unified questionnaire designed to prioritize youth perspectives and ensure that the voices of young people themselves were at the forefront of the research process. Following the completion of the national studies, round tables were organized in each country, bringing together youth, researchers, policymakers, and mental health professionals to present and discuss the findings. These discussions served as a platform to validate the research results and explore potential solutions to the mental health challenges identified.

The studies collectively emphasize the importance of cross-sectoral approaches, addressing not only individual mental health conditions but also the social, economic, and educational factors that significantly impact the mental well-being of young people.

In the context of **Bulgaria**, the research filled a crucial gap by highlighting the mental health needs of young people, with an emphasis on systemic barriers that hinder access to care. The findings underscored the importance of involving youth in discussions about mental health to advocate for policy changes and better resource allocation. The round table in Bulgaria sparked a lively debate about the fragmented nature of mental health services and the need for a more integrated approach to youth well-being.

In **Croatia**, the study revealed the profound influence of socio-economic instability on youth mental health, with specific attention to factors such as forced displacement, economic uncertainty, and the rise of violence. The findings pointed to the need for multi-sectoral interventions that address both mental health and the broader social determinants contributing to youth stress and anxiety. During the round table, stakeholders discussed strategies for strengthening mental health support systems and emphasized the role of education and social services in mitigating the negative impacts of these challenges.

The **German** study focused on the alarming rise in anxiety and depression among young people, highlighting the growing demand for mental health services that are more attuned to the diverse needs of youth populations. The research pointed to disparities in access to care, particularly among marginalized groups, and called for a more comprehensive and equitable approach to mental health service provision. The round table discussion in Germany centered on enhancing prevention and early intervention strategies, with a strong focus on integrating mental health support into schools and community settings.

In Serbia, the study explored the specific mental health challenges faced by young people at different developmental stages, from adolescence to early adulthood. It called for age-specific interventions that take into account the unique stressors associated with each life stage, such as transitioning from education to employment or navigating changing family dynamics. The round table in Serbia highlighted the importance of tailoring mental health services to the varying needs of young people and improving access to care in rural and underserved areas.

Finally, the research in Spain emphasized the role of education, social support systems, and community engagement in promoting youth mental health. It also examined the influence of media and societal expectations on young people's mental well-being, particularly in terms of body image and social media pressure. The round table in Spain focused on strengthening community-based mental health services and enhancing the collaboration between schools, families, and healthcare providers to better support youth.

Overall, the national-level studies and subsequent round table discussions provided critical insights into the mental health challenges facing young people in these five countries. Despite the unique contexts of each country, there were shared concerns about the accessibility of mental health services, the impact of socio-economic conditions, and the need for more inclusive and youth-centered approaches to mental health care. These findings underscore the importance of continued transnational collaboration to address the complex and multifaceted nature of youth mental health across Europe.

Transnational Collaboration and Seminar Activities

A key aspect of this project was fostering transnational collaboration to understand youth mental health challenges across five countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Spain, and Serbia. This collaboration was central to a seminar held from June 24-29, 2024, in Bulgaria, which gathered 40 participants, including youth, youth workers, and other stakeholders from across these nations. The event provided a platform to present, discuss, and validate the research findings from each country while promoting collaboration on mental health strategies for young people.

The four-day seminar aimed to present research results to a wider audience and gather feedback for improving mental health interventions. Representatives from each country shared their findings, comparing national-level mental health challenges and identifying common trends, such as stigma, service accessibility, and digital pressures. Youth and other stakeholders engaged in presentations, workshops, and practical sessions, fostering a collaborative and communicative environment. Team-building activities and round-table discussions further strengthened these connections, allowing for an exchange of best practices and innovative solutions to address mental health challenges.

A significant outcome of the seminar was the drafting of a framework for a manual featuring non-formal education tools for youth workers, which will help address mental health through community and youth work initiatives.



Insights and Collaborative Outcomes

The seminar facilitated the sharing of valuable insights from diverse national contexts. While common challenges, such as stigma and socio-economic pressures, were recognized across all five countries, there were notable differences. Countries like Germany and Spain, for example, showcased more centralized, structured mental health systems, while Bulgaria and Serbia struggled with fragmented services. These differences, along with shared issues, informed the discussion of potential transnational solutions.

Grassroots activities, such as youth-led mental health discussions and awareness campaigns, added depth to the research findings by providing local perspectives. These activities emphasized the need to engage young people directly in the development of interventions and policy frameworks.

Future Directions

The seminar's collaborative environment fostered the creation of a draft framework for future transnational mental health efforts. This framework will emphasize cross-sectoral partnerships among policymakers, healthcare professionals, youth organizations, and educators to ensure a comprehensive approach to youth mental health.

The event also provided an opportunity to reevaluate the research methodologies based on stakeholder feedback, leading to a more refined understanding of how to address youth mental health in different socio-political contexts.

The Bulgaria seminar was a pivotal event in the project's transnational collaboration efforts, allowing for the validation of research findings and the exchange of practical ideas. By connecting diverse perspectives, it laid the foundation for future transnational cooperation on youth mental health, ensuring that the project's impact continues beyond its duration.

The mental health of young people is a global concern that requires both localized interventions and transnational cooperation. By exploring the experiences of youth in Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain, this research offers critical insights into the diverse and complex factors that influence mental health outcomes. As mental health becomes increasingly recognized as a priority for public health and social development, the findings of this report aim to inform policies and practices that prioritize the well-being of young people, ensuring that they receive the care, support, and opportunities they need to thrive.



Methodology

Research Design and National-Level Methods

The research conducted in Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain between February and April 2024 employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth mental health perspectives. The mixed-methods design combined quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, allowing for an in-depth exploration of diverse demographic groups, including youth from varying socioeconomic statuses, education levels, and geographic locations.

This approach was designed to address the unique mental health challenges faced by young people in each country while ensuring that the findings were representative of their distinct social, cultural, and economic contexts.

By integrating both quantitative measures (such as closed-ended questions and standardized scales) and qualitative techniques (such as open-ended questions and focus groups), the research was able to capture a rich array of insights into the lived experiences, attitudes, and mental health needs of young people across different countries.



Each country followed the same general research framework, while also adapting certain elements of the study design to better reflect the local context:

- Bulgaria conducted its survey online from February 1 to March 15, 2024, with a total of 166 respondents, ensuring representation across diverse demographic groups.
- Croatia carried out its survey from February 10 to March 10, 2024, collecting responses from 100 participants.
- Germany implemented its survey online from February 7 to April 8, 2024, with 102 respondents, maintaining demographic diversity in the sample.
- Serbia ran the survey from February 10 to March 10, 2024, with 107 participants.
- Spain followed a similar approach, with 107 participants in the survey.

Data Collection Process

The data collection process in each country involved both online surveys and focus group discussions to deepen understanding of the participants' perspectives. This method allowed for flexibility in reaching young people, particularly during a time when digital access is crucial for participation in research.

- In **Bulgaria**, the survey was distributed via online platforms and focused on capturing a broad cross-section of youth from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. The inclusion of focus groups further enriched the qualitative aspect of the research, providing space for more nuanced discussions around mental health challenges and coping mechanisms.
- In **Croatia**, the survey used accidental sampling, selecting participants based on their availability and access to the survey. This pragmatic approach facilitated data collection from a wide range of youth, ensuring diversity in responses despite the limitations of the sample size.
- **Germany** conducted a fully online survey with a robust quantitative focus, complemented by thematic analysis of open-ended responses to uncover deeper insights into youth experiences with mental health issues.
- **Serbia** employed accidental sampling to target young people involved in youth work and volunteer networks. The questionnaire was developed with special attention to age differences, creating four versions of the survey to ensure age-appropriate questions.
- In **Spain**, the mixed-methods approach is designed to ensure representation across diverse demographic groups, though specific data collection details are still forthcoming.

Data Analysis

The research adopted a two-pronged approach to data analysis, involving both quantitative and qualitative methods:

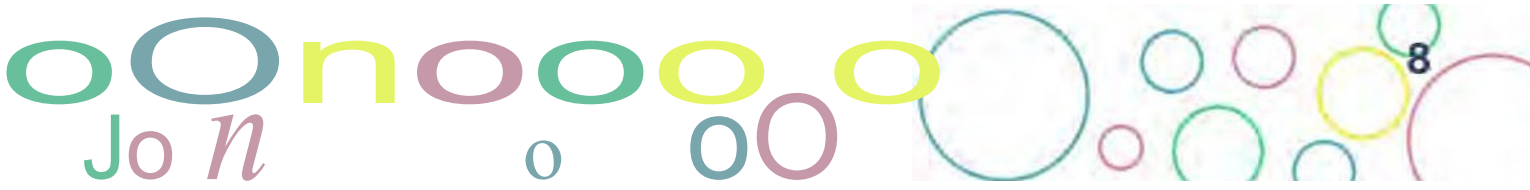
Quantitative Analysis used descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics and survey responses across all countries. Measures such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were employed to provide a clear picture of the general trends in youth mental health across the five countries.

The **Qualitative Analysis** incorporated thematic analyses to identify recurring patterns and insights from the open-ended responses. This method enabled the research teams to extract key themes related to mental health challenges, coping mechanisms, and recommendations for improving youth mental health support systems. In some cases, focus groups were conducted to explore these themes in more depth, allowing for richer, more detailed data on youth experiences and perceptions.

Key Stakeholders Involved

The research engaged a broad range of stakeholders, including youth organizations, mental health professionals, policymakers, educators, and social workers. These stakeholders played a vital role in both the design and implementation of the surveys, ensuring that the research remained relevant and contextually appropriate.

In **Bulgaria**, the focus was on engaging youth-led organizations and mental health advocacy groups, which helped shape the questions and interpret the data through a culturally sensitive lens.



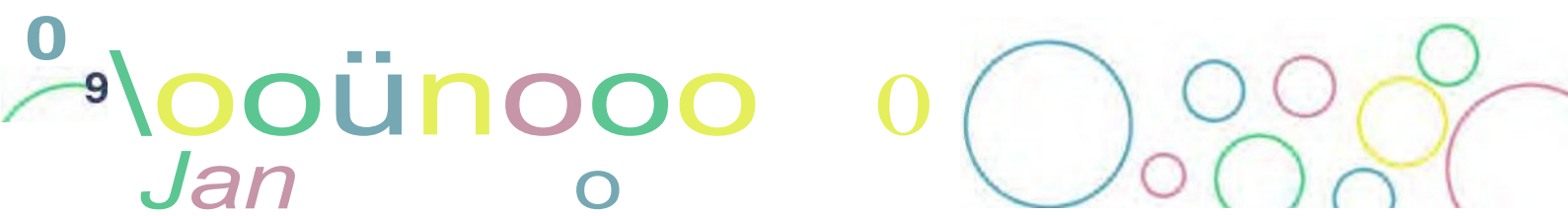
Croatia involved policymakers and youth workers in the data collection process, ensuring that the findings could be directly applied to local mental health strategies. Germany partnered with educational institutions and youth services to ensure a broad and representative sample of young people participated in the research. In Serbia, collaboration with volunteer networks and youth associations facilitated access to a diverse group of participants, while mental health professionals helped interpret the results for practical applications. Spain involved national youth agencies and social service providers, with further stakeholder engagement to be detailed as the research progresses.

Transnational Perspective Gathering

The transnational perspective is a critical component of this research, aiming to draw out commonalities and differences in youth mental health across the five countries. Collaborative round tables were held with young people and experts from each nation to discuss the preliminary findings, compare trends, and identify shared challenges and opportunities for policy development.

These seminars also facilitated cross-country learning, where successful interventions in one context could be adapted or tested in another. The transnational aspect not only enriched the analysis but also provided a platform for fostering ongoing collaboration among mental health advocates, researchers, and policymakers across Europe.

By aligning the methodologies across countries, the research ensures that findings are comparable, enabling the identification of broad trends and the development of holistic recommendations for addressing youth mental health issues on a transnational scale.



Bulgaria

Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People

In Bulgaria, mental health has gained increasing attention as a crucial aspect of overall well-being, particularly for the younger population. This aligns with broader European Union (EU) priorities, which emphasize mental health as an essential component of public health strategies. Bulgaria's youth, however, faces a growing burden of mental health issues, driven by a combination of socio-economic and environmental stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, domestic violence, bullying, and the pressures of digitalization have all contributed to a heightened prevalence of mental health challenges among Bulgarian youth.

The National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of Bulgaria (2021-2030) and the National Youth Strategy (2021-2030) are key policy frameworks that seek to address this growing concern. These documents outline comprehensive approaches to improve mental health services for young people, with a particular emphasis on developing child psychiatry services, strengthening coordination between mental health providers, and closing the gap between the increasing demand for mental health services and the limited funding allocated to this sector.

Mental Health Challenges and Alarming Trends

The global COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of young people in Bulgaria, disrupting their education, social interactions, and sense of security. Lockdowns, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future exacerbated existing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The war in Ukraine, which has directly affected the region due to its proximity and Bulgaria's involvement in humanitarian efforts, adds another layer of stress, particularly for young people already grappling with complex socio-political dynamics.

Furthermore, domestic violence and bullying continue to be prevalent issues affecting the mental health of youth in Bulgaria. According to studies, these forms of violence are closely linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders among young people. The rise in digitalization, while providing new avenues for communication and information, has also introduced increased exposure to cyberbullying and the pressure to conform to unrealistic social media standards, further exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and isolation among youth.

Key Policy Responses and Initiatives

In response to these challenges, the National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of Bulgaria (2021-2030) lays out a clear roadmap for improving mental health services. One of the primary goals of the strategy is to strengthen child and adolescent psychiatry services, which are currently under-resourced. The strategy also calls for the development of community-based mental health services to ensure that young people, particularly those in rural and underserved areas, have access to care.

The National Youth Strategy (2021-2030) complements these efforts by focusing on creating a supportive environment for the healthy development of young people. This includes promoting mental health education in schools, encouraging early intervention, and improving the coordination of services across health, education, and social sectors. The strategy recognizes the need for a multi-sectoral approach to address the social determinants of mental health, such as poverty, unemployment, and family instability, which disproportionately affect young people in Bulgaria.

Addressing Gaps In Mental Health Funding and Services

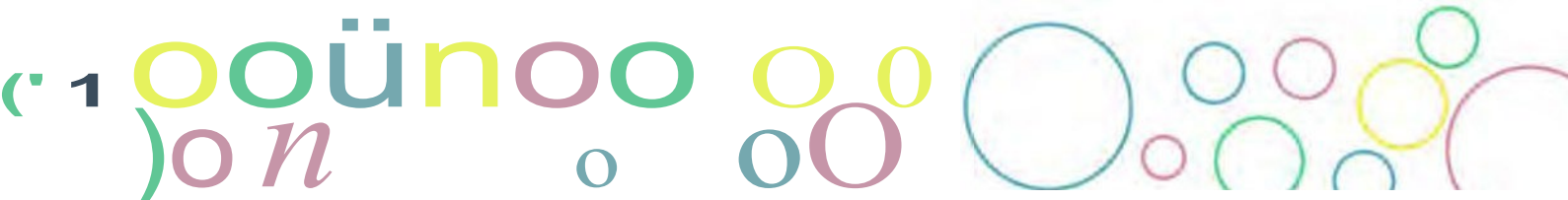
A significant barrier to addressing youth mental health in Bulgaria is the gap between the growing demand for mental health services and the funding allocated to this sector. Despite the recognized need for improvement, mental health remains underfunded compared to other areas of public health. This disparity is particularly evident in child psychiatry, where there is a shortage of specialists and inadequate facilities to meet the needs of the population. The National Strategy for Mental Health emphasizes the importance of increasing financial resources dedicated to mental health services, advocating for a more equitable distribution of healthcare funding to ensure that mental health receives the attention it deserves.

Furthermore, Bulgaria's mental health infrastructure faces challenges in terms of coordination between different service providers. Many young people experience difficulties navigating the healthcare system, often encountering long wait times and fragmented care. The National Strategy for the Mental Health of the Citizens of Bulgaria seeks to address this issue by improving the integration of mental health services within the broader healthcare system, ensuring that young people receive timely and appropriate care.

Key Findings from Research



The research showed that mental health challenges faced by young people in Bulgaria are complex and multifaceted, shaped by a combination of socio-economic, environmental, and cultural factors. In recent years, several exacerbating factors have worsened the mental health landscape for Bulgarian adolescents, necessitating urgent attention from policymakers, healthcare providers, and educators.



Exacerbating Factors

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified existing mental health issues among Bulgaria's youth, with a marked increase in anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. Adolescents, already prone to emotional fluctuations due to developmental changes, found themselves further overwhelmed by the uncertainty and disruption caused by the pandemic. Social isolation, the loss of routine, and fears related to the health of family members compounded these emotional strains, leading to a rise in mental health disorders among the younger population.

In addition to pandemic-related stress, issues such as bullying and domestic violence have continued to plague many young people in Bulgaria. Bullying, both in schools and online, has a profound impact on self-esteem and psychological well-being, often leading to long-term consequences such as chronic anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Similarly, domestic violence exacerbates mental health challenges, trapping young people in environments where they experience fear, helplessness, and trauma. The combined effects of these stressors can have lasting psychosocial impacts, contributing to a cycle of mental health issues that are difficult to break without appropriate intervention.

Digitalization Challenges

As Bulgaria undergoes rapid digital transformation, the lives of young people are increasingly shaped by social media and online interactions. While digital platforms offer opportunities for connection and learning, they also present significant risks. Social media, in particular, has become a space where unrealistic expectations around body image, lifestyle, and social status are perpetuated by influencers and online personalities. These pressures, coupled with the constant comparison to peers and public figures, can lead to feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, and low self-esteem among young people.

The relentless exposure to curated, idealized images on social media fosters a distorted perception of reality, leading adolescents to feel that they are falling short in various aspects of their lives. This dissatisfaction can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Furthermore, the digital world can be a breeding ground for cyberbullying, which adds another layer of stress and alienation for young people, often without the support structures needed to manage the emotional fallout.

Substance Abuse and Violence

Substance abuse remains a critical issue affecting the mental health of young Bulgarians. Alcohol and drug use among adolescents is alarmingly high, with Bulgaria ranking among the highest in Europe for early initiation into these risky behaviors. Alcohol consumption, in particular, is prevalent, and its abuse is closely linked to a range of mental health concerns, including depression, aggression, and impulsivity. Substance abuse not only contributes to immediate mental health problems but also increases the likelihood of engaging in violent behavior, self-harm, and suicide.



The relationship between substance abuse and mental health is cyclical. Adolescents who struggle with mental health issues may turn to substances as a coping mechanism, only to find that their use exacerbates feelings of hopelessness and despair. This dynamic is further complicated by other risk factors such as early sexual initiation, which is also linked to a higher incidence of mental health problems, violence, and risky behaviors. The social and psychological impact of these behaviors underscores the need for comprehensive mental health education and early intervention programs aimed at reducing substance use and promoting healthier coping strategies.

Stigma and Mental Health Services

Despite growing recognition of mental health as a priority in Bulgaria, stigma remains a significant barrier to seeking help. Many young people avoid professional support due to shame or fear of judgment. The healthcare system's fragmented, symptom-focused approach limits treatment effectiveness, neglecting preventive measures and holistic care. A shortage of mental health professionals for youth further complicates access to timely support, with long wait times and inadequate resources. These challenges highlight the urgent need for reform in Bulgaria's mental health care system.

Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups

While there are some differences in trends between age groups, there are also common themes and challenges related to mental health awareness, stigma, access to support, and coping mechanisms that cut across different stages of young adulthood.

- **Age Group 13-15:** Adolescents showed moderate awareness of mental health issues but reported limited discussions around these topics. Discrimination, bullying, and low engagement in school mental health activities were prevalent.
- **Age Group 16-21:** A stronger emphasis on mental health education was evident, yet there were varying levels of understanding. Anxiety, depression, and underuse of mental health resources remained significant challenges.
- **Age Group 22-26:** Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the healthcare system's engagement with mental health, and stigma persisted in their communities.
- **Age Group 27-30:** Higher familiarity with mental health issues but significant concerns about workplace mental health and the effectiveness of available support systems were prevalent.



Recommendations

- **Strengthen Prevention Efforts:** Campaigns targeting children and parents should be systematically planned and executed to promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma.
- **Enhance Mental Health Services:** Improvements in child psychiatry, including the establishment of psychiatric units and additional resources for adolescents, are critical.
- **Promote Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:** Health professionals, educators, and policymakers need to collaborate to create holistic approaches addressing both physical and mental health.
- **Increase Public Awareness:** Information on available mental health professionals should be publicly accessible to reduce barriers to care.

Focus on Digital Literacy: Programs that promote safe and balanced use of digital platforms and counteract the harmful influence of unrealistic social media expectations are essential.

Moving forward, it is essential that Bulgaria continues to prioritize the mental health of its youth through both policy reform and practical implementation. Key recommendations include increasing funding for mental health services, particularly in child and adolescent psychiatry, and enhancing the capacity of mental health professionals through training and development programs. Schools should play a more active role in promoting mental health awareness, providing early intervention services, and supporting students in managing stress and mental health challenges.

In addition, there is a growing need for digital mental health tools that can provide accessible and anonymous support to young people, especially in light of the pressures associated with social media and cyberbullying. These tools can complement existing mental health services by offering immediate support and resources to those who may be hesitant to seek help in traditional settings.

Ultimately, Bulgaria's ability to improve youth mental health will depend on the successful implementation of its national strategies and the continued collaboration between government agencies, healthcare providers, educators, and civil society organizations. With the right investments and policy initiatives, Bulgaria can create a more supportive and resilient environment for its young people, ensuring that mental health becomes a priority in the country's overall well-being agenda.

The mental health crisis among young people in Bulgaria is a reflection of broader societal challenges. To address these issues, it is essential to take a multi-faceted approach that includes expanding mental health education, increasing access to services, reducing stigma, and implementing preventive measures. By fostering a more supportive environment for mental health discussions and offering comprehensive care, Bulgaria can better equip its youth to navigate the complex mental health challenges they face.



Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People

Youth mental health has become a critical public health concern in Croatia, reflecting broader global trends. Mental disorders are increasingly prevalent among young people, with many experiencing early onset during adolescence. These issues can persist into adulthood, significantly impairing quality of life for individuals and their families. Mental health challenges also contribute to a considerable burden on Croatia's healthcare system, making the mental well-being of youth a public health priority. According to the Strategic Framework for Mental Health until 2030, Croatia has identified mental health as one of the most pressing health issues and is working to develop strategies that address the needs of its young population.

Mental Health Challenges and Alarming Trends

The 2019 European School Survey on Alcohol and Drugs (ESPAD) data reveals troubling trends in the mental health of Croatian youth. The survey, conducted every four years, found that 5.6% of 16-year-olds reported experiencing at least four of six depressive symptoms over the past seven days, with girls (8.7%) more affected than boys (2.6%). Nearly one in five 16-year-old girls expressed feeling sad most of the time, while the prevalence of depressive symptoms has notably increased since 2011. Alarmingly, one in four 16-year-olds reported self-harm ideation, with one in three girls and nearly one in five boys admitting to having such thoughts. Additionally, almost one in ten Croatian adolescents has attempted suicide at least once. These statistics underscore the urgency of addressing mental health needs among youth, particularly for early intervention and targeted support for young girls, who appear to be disproportionately affected.

Exacerbating Factors; Socioeconomic and Post-Conflict Challenges

Croatia faces several unique challenges that shape the mental health landscape for young people. The legacy of the 1990s war continues to influence mental health outcomes, especially as families and communities still deal with the long-term psychological impact. Social uncertainties, exacerbated by high youth unemployment rates and economic instability, further contribute to mental health stressors. Additionally, Croatia has witnessed the impact of recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 earthquakes, which have intensified anxiety, depression, and stress levels among young people. These crises have put additional strain on mental health services and increased the need for robust, long-term mental health planning.

Strategie Frameworks and National Initiatives

Recognizing these rising concerns, the Croatian government has adopted several comprehensive strategies to improve mental health outcomes. Key documents, such as the National Health Development Plan (2021-2027) and the Health Protection Plan (2020), lay the groundwork for improving healthcare infrastructure, with specific focus areas including child and adolescent psychiatry. These plans aim to address gaps in access to care and coordination between services.



Central to this effort is the Strategie Framework for Mental Health until 2030, which outlines Croatia's long-term vision for enhancing mental health services, improving early detection, and expanding community-based mental health programs. The framework focuses on promoting mental health, preventing problems, and ensuring timely diagnosis and treatment for mental health disorders. Special attention is given to vulnerable populations, such as children, adolescents, and individuals affected by social disparities.

Digitalization and Its Impact on Mental Health

The rapid digital transformation and the omnipresence of social media also play a significant role in shaping youth mental health in Croatia. Young people face mounting pressure from social media platforms, where the portrayal of idealized lifestyles and appearances fosters feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction. This digital pressure, coupled with the limited awareness of digital well-being, often exacerbates issues like anxiety, depression, and body image concerns among adolescents. Schools and communities are starting to recognize the need for digital literacy programs to help youth navigate these challenges in a healthy and informed manner.

Addressing Stigma and Access to Care

Stigma around mental health remains one of the most significant barriers to care in Croatia. Many young people avoid seeking professional help due to fear of judgment or shame, and a lack of awareness about available mental health services compounds this issue. Efforts are underway to address this, with the Strategie Framework for Mental Health focusing on reducing stigma, improving mental health literacy, and fostering community-based mental health initiatives. The framework also aims to improve accessibility to mental health professionals through the development of mobile mental health teams and expanded community services, making it easier for young people to receive the care they need.

Key Findings from Research

The research on youth mental health perspectives in Croatia reveals several important trends across different age groups. While there is a growing awareness of mental health issues, stigma remains a significant barrier, particularly for younger teens. Many adolescents are reluctant to discuss mental health problems openly, reflecting deep-seated societal attitudes that prevent early intervention and support. Despite this, there is a strong demand for improved mental health education across all age groups, indicating a clear need for schools and communities to play a more active role in addressing mental health challenges.

Schools and Communities as Key Support Systems

Schools and community organizations are seen as crucial in providing mental health support and resources. Adolescents and young adults express the need for open conversations about mental health in educational settings, where mental health is often sidelined or inadequately addressed. There is a particular need for younger teens to receive early education about mental health to foster understanding and reduce stigma. Schools are also positioned to create a safe space where students can discuss their mental health without fear of judgment or isolation.

Barriers to Accessing Mental Health Care

Access to quality mental health care remains a significant challenge in Croatia. The research highlights issues such as the limited availability of mental health professionals, long wait times for appointments, and inadequate insurance coverage. These factors make it difficult for young people to receive timely and effective care, particularly for those facing more severe mental health issues. Adolescents and young adults also report that the mental health care system is often not responsive to their specific needs, further discouraging them from seeking help.

Impact of Societal Norms, Academic Pressure, and Social Media

Societal norms and expectations play a critical role in shaping the mental health experiences of young people in Croatia. Many young people face considerable academic pressure, which contributes to heightened stress and anxiety. Social media also has a significant impact, with the pressures of online personas and the comparison culture contributing to feelings of inadequacy, especially regarding body image and lifestyle. These challenges are more pronounced for younger teens, who are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of social media.

Specific Needs of Different Age Groups

The research emphasizes the different needs of younger teens, older adolescents, and young adults. Younger teens require more education and open conversations in schools to normalize discussions about mental health. Older teens experience significant stress and report limited communication about mental health both at school and at home, calling for increased support systems and better access to professional care.

Young adults, on the other hand, face ongoing stigma and struggle to access affordable mental health services. They need more open dialogue, reduced stigma, and expanded access to professional services tailored to their age group.

The research underlines the urgent need for Croatia to address these gaps in mental health care and education. Fostering more open conversations, reducing stigma, and improving access to mental health resources are critical steps in supporting the mental well-being of Croatia's youth.

Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups

The national research reveals some critical insights into the state of mental health among different youth age groups:

- **Age Group 13-15:** This group demonstrates a broad, albeit basic, understanding of mental health, often associating it with emotional well-being, happiness, and self-acceptance. However, there is a lack of familiarity with specific mental health terminology. Schools are seen as inadequately equipped to address mental health concerns, and the impact of social media is considered moderate. Although family support is considered crucial, there is still considerable stigma surrounding mental health discussions, making it challenging for teens to seek professional help. Many report stress, anxiety, and experiences of bullying.
- **Age Group 16-21:** A more significant number in this age group seek mental health education (68.7%), with nearly half participating in self-care activities. However, only 25% feel there is enough community support. Mental health stigma persists, and the overwhelming stress of daily responsibilities leads to high levels of anxiety and emotional instability. While peer support remains essential, mental health conversations are still rare among this group. Although half feel they manage their stress well, knowledge of mental health first aid is low, and help-seeking behaviors remain limited.
- **Age Group 22-26:** Young adults in this age group are increasingly turning to professional help but still face stigma, with 82% perceiving it and 41% reporting discrimination. Cultural expectations play a significant role in shaping mental health perceptions, and many struggle with stress, particularly related to work and academics. There is also a strong desire for affordable mental health services, better access, and a reduction in societal pressures.
- **Age Group 27-30:** This group demonstrates moderate to high familiarity with mental health disorders, with many strongly advocating for mental health to be treated as important as physical health. However, limited access to mental health resources (only 39% rate it as adequate) and insurance coverage remains a significant barrier. The stigma around mental health persists in their communities, and many report difficulty managing stress due to societal expectations. Nearly 70% believe universities should prioritize mental health education.

Recommendations

The mental health landscape for young people in Croatia highlights the need for proactive measures that address the root causes of mental distress, reduce stigma, and improve access to care. Schools, communities, and healthcare providers must collaborate to create supportive environments where young people feel comfortable seeking help. Initiatives such as school-based mental health education, peer support networks, and expanded mental health services will be critical in safeguarding the mental well-being of Croatia's youth.

To address the mental health challenges facing Croatian youth, several key actions are recommended:

- **Education and Awareness:** Schools should implement age-appropriate mental health education programs that foster open discussions about mental health and its importance. These programs should aim to reduce stigma by normalizing mental health conversations and encouraging early help-seeking behaviors. Schools should also promote peer support networks and provide positive social connections.
- **Access to Professional Care:** Increasing the availability of mental health professionals within schools and communities is crucial, as long wait times and limited access continue to prevent many young people from receiving care. Public healthcare systems should prioritize making affordable, high-quality mental health services accessible to all youth.
- **Support Systems:** More robust support systems in schools and families should be encouraged. Schools should have dedicated mental health counselors and psychologists available to provide regular, easily accessible support. Educators and family members should be equipped with the tools to support young people dealing with mental health challenges.
- **Stigma Reduction:** National campaigns should work toward reducing the stigma surrounding mental health discussions, particularly among younger teens and young adults. Providing mental health first aid training and promoting mental health literacy can contribute to reducing this stigma and encouraging a culture of openness.
- **Managing Stress and Social Media:** Educational programs should raise awareness about the impact of social media on mental health. Additionally, young people should be given resources to manage stress, build resilience, and balance work-life responsibilities.

While Croatia has made significant strides in developing a comprehensive national mental health framework, many gaps remain in the provision of care and support for young people. The research underscores the need for improved mental health education, increased access to professional services, and a sustained effort to reduce stigma. Collaborative action among healthcare providers, educators, policymakers, and families is essential to safeguarding the mental well-being of Croatia's youth.

Germany

Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People

Germany is home to approximately 13 million children and young people, comprising 16% of the population. The mental health of these young individuals is shaped by various stages of development, social environments, family structures, and healthcare access. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for mental health services among children and adolescents has surged, particularly among adolescent girls. The DAK-Gesundheit Children and Adolescents Report reveals that depression, anxiety, and eating disorders are the most prevalent issues facing young people, with girls disproportionately affected. Mental illnesses and behavioral disorders accounted for nearly 18% of hospital treatments for those aged 15 to 24 in 2020, highlighting the severity of the mental health crisis.



Socio-Economic Disparities in Access to Care

Socio-economic differences play a significant role in the access and utilization of mental health services. The DAK report shows stark contrasts between adolescents from different social classes. Depression rates among socially disadvantaged girls returned to near pre-pandemic levels in 2022, while diagnoses soared among middle- and upper-class girls. Families from higher social classes tend to be more aware of mental health issues, and mental health services are less stigmatized in these groups. In contrast, young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds often face barriers to accessing care, despite being equally at risk. This gap highlights the ongoing challenge of addressing mental health inequalities across different socio-economic groups.

Government Response and Preventive Strategies

In response to the growing mental health burden, the German federal government has developed a comprehensive child health strategy that emphasizes mental health. A key component of this strategy is the expansion of preventive pediatric check-ups to include mental health screenings. By recognizing and treating conditions like depression, anxiety, and eating disorders at an early stage, the government aims to mitigate long-term mental health problems. Additionally, efforts are underway to increase the participation of socially disadvantaged and migrant families in these check-ups, as they have historically underutilized these services compared to higher social classes.

Promoting Mental Health and Reducing Stigma

Germany's strategy goes beyond preventive care, focusing on promoting mental health and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness. The government has identified key areas for intervention, including the prevention of neglect and domestic violence, which are essential for the normal mental development of children. Targeted initiatives focus on conditions like depression, ADHD, anxiety disorders, and social behavior disorders, offering comprehensive psychosocial support and education. The rise in mental health service utilization suggests that stigma is gradually decreasing, and public awareness of mental health challenges is growing, particularly in more affluent communities.

Key Findings from Research

Increased Mental Health Challenges Post-Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the mental health of young people in Germany, as highlighted in the DAK-Gesundheit report. There has been a notable surge in the usage of mental health services, which has now stabilized at a high level. The most prevalent mental health issues among adolescents include depression, anxiety disorders, and eating disorders. Behavioral disorders linked to excessive alcohol consumption and depressive episodes are also prominent among hospital treatments for young individuals.

This trend is particularly pronounced among adolescent girls, where there has been a sharp rise in depression diagnoses. Specifically, depression diagnoses among adolescent girls from middle-class backgrounds increased by 29%, while those from higher social classes experienced an increase of 28%. In contrast, girls from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have seen their treatment rates return to pre-pandemic levels by 2022. This disparity suggests differences in awareness, access to care, and stigma surrounding mental health across socio-economic groups.

Socio-Economic Disparities in Mental Health Support

A significant finding from recent studies is the disparity in access to mental health services based on socio-economic status. Young people from higher-income families tend to seek and receive mental health treatment more frequently than their counterparts from lower-income families. This trend can be attributed to greater awareness of mental health issues in higher social classes and a lower level of stigma associated with seeking help. Conversely, young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to seek assistance, despite potentially facing similar or more severe mental health challenges. This inequality highlights the widening gap in access to healthcare and mental health services across different social groups.

Role of Social and Family Support

The findings emphasize the crucial role that social and family structures play in shaping the mental health outcomes of young people in Germany. Adolescents from higher-income families are more likely to benefit from early intervention and support systems, enhancing their mental health resilience.

In contrast, those from disadvantaged backgrounds often encounter significant barriers to accessing care, which exacerbates their mental health challenges. This divide has far-reaching implications for public health policy, indicating the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to mental health services for all young people, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Government Initiatives and Strategic Frameworks

The German federal government has acknowledged the pressing need to address the mental health requirements of young people. As part of its broader strategy to promote child health, the government has implemented measures to expand preventive medical check-ups to include mental health assessments. The aim is to detect and address emotional problems, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders at an early stage. This initiative is particularly focused on increasing participation in pediatric check-ups among socially disadvantaged and migrant families, who are often underrepresented in healthcare engagement.

Additionally, the government's strategy encompasses efforts to prevent neglect and domestic violence—key risk factors for poor mental health among youth. There is also an emphasis on providing comprehensive psychosocial care and health education, specifically targeting common mental health issues such as depression, anxiety disorders, and behavioral disorders.

In conclusion, the German Survey on Mental Health Perspectives reveals critical insights into the mental health landscape for young people, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address disparities in mental health support and access, with a focus on fostering equitable mental health outcomes for all young individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background.



Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups

Knowledge about Mental Health and Psychological Disorders

Across age groups, mental health education is universally considered important, with participants rating its significance between 3.5 and 5. However, differences emerge in the level of knowledge about mental health and specific psychological disorders. The youngest participants, aged 13 to 15, demonstrated limited awareness of particular mental health disorders. Those aged 16 to 21 rated their knowledge as moderate, while older respondents (22 to 30) had a more confident understanding. The oldest age group also showed a better ability to identify warning signs in others. Despite this, all age groups acknowledged gaps in their mental health awareness, suggesting room for improvement across the board.

Access to Mental Health Resources

A clear trend regarding access to mental health resources emerged: older participants reported greater confidence in accessing regional support and therapy services. This disparity may indicate that younger respondents lack information or access to age-specific services, while older participants (especially those aged 27-30) are more aware of the resources available in their region. Younger individuals (13 to 21) seem to face more significant challenges in locating mental health services, possibly because fewer resources are targeted toward their demographic, or they may lack awareness of available services. This highlights the need for better dissemination of information about mental health resources to younger populations.

Stigma and Social Perception

Stigma surrounding mental health persists across all age groups, though the nature of this stigma varies. Younger respondents (13 to 21) reported feeling supported by their peers but often misunderstood by adults, indicating a disconnect between generations when it comes to discussing mental health. In contrast, participants aged 22 to 30 noted improvements in societal acceptance of mental health issues, with many in this group more willing to seek professional help. Notably, respondents aged 27 to 30 observed increasing acceptance among younger generations, indicating a positive shift in attitudes. However, this shift has not permeated all societal levels, and younger individuals still feel hesitant to approach professionals, underscoring the need for ongoing mental health education to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior.

Prevention and Mindfulness

Participation in activities that support mental well-being, such as sports, mindfulness, and meditation, varies significantly by age. The youngest group (13 to 15) reported minimal engagement in such activities, with only one participant having used a digital tool for mental health support. In contrast, older adolescents (16 to 21) showed a stronger connection between lifestyle and mental health, with many valuing mindfulness and meditation practices, though few used digital tools. The 22 to 26 age group participates in physical activities and discusses mental health with peers but is less likely to engage in mindfulness practices compared to the younger group. The oldest cohort (27 to 30) is the most active in mental health-related activities, with many taking time off for mental well-being. However, across all age groups, the use of digital tools to support mental health remains rare, despite general awareness of their benefits. This suggests that education on the potential of digital resources could improve engagement in mental health practices across all ages.

Social Media Influence

All age groups identified social media as a significant risk to mental health, pointing to issues such as unrealistic comparisons, cyberbullying, and negative spirals of thought. Many participants also felt that mental health

education through social media platforms is insufficient. However, older participants, particularly those over 27, were more optimistic about the role of social media in promoting mental well-being, viewing it as a potential educational tool. This generational difference in perspective suggests that while social media is perceived as harmful, it also holds promise as a platform for positive mental health messaging, particularly for older young adults.

In summary, while mental health awareness and education are valued across age groups, significant disparities exist in knowledge, access to resources, and attitudes toward mental health. Younger adolescents require more support in accessing mental health services and engaging in preventive practices, while older young adults are more informed but face challenges in maintaining consistent mental health care practices. Social media's impact is broadly seen as negative, though older participants acknowledge its potential as a mental health education tool. These findings underscore the importance of tailored interventions for different age groups to ensure equitable mental health support for all.

Recommendations

The mental health landscape for young people in Germany is evolving, shaped by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressing need for comprehensive support systems. As the nation grapples with rising mental health issues among adolescents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, there is a critical opportunity to implement strategies that address these challenges head-on. By fostering an environment that prioritizes mental well-being and ensuring equitable access to resources, Germany can pave the way for a healthier future generation. Here are the five key recommendations for enhancing mental health support for young people from the survey:

- **Expand Mental Health Education in Schools:** To address knowledge gaps and reduce stigma, it is crucial to incorporate mental health education into school curricula. This initiative would involve age-appropriate discussions on mental health topics, coping strategies, and resources for seeking help. Schools should also foster environments where students feel comfortable discussing mental health issues with peers and adults, creating a culture of openness and support.
- **Targeted Interventions for Disadvantaged Youth:** Given the socio-economic disparities in access to care, targeted interventions are necessary to reach young people from lower-income families. These initiatives could include outreach programs, increased funding for school-based mental health services, and community support initiatives designed to make mental health care more accessible. By prioritizing disadvantaged youth, these interventions can help bridge the gap in mental health support.
- **Increase Access to Mental Health Services:** The German healthcare system must continue to expand access to mental health services, particularly for adolescents. This expansion includes increasing the availability of mental health professionals, reducing wait times for therapy, and improving insurance coverage for mental health treatments. Ensuring that services are affordable and accessible to all socio-economic groups is essential for fostering a healthier population.

- **Address the Impact of Social Media:** Many young people report feeling the negative effects of social media on their mental health, including issues related to unrealistic body standards, cyberbullying, and isolation. To mitigate these effects, public health campaigns should focus on educating young people about the risks of social media and promoting healthier online behaviors. Additionally, stricter regulations around youth protection in social media spaces may be necessary to safeguard mental well-being.
- **Promote Early Intervention and Prevention:** Early intervention is key to preventing long-term mental health problems. This can be achieved through regular mental health screenings, particularly in schools and pediatric settings, and by raising awareness among parents and guardians about the signs of mental health disorders. By prioritizing early detection and intervention, the overall mental health landscape for young people can be significantly improved.

By implementing these recommendations, Germany can create a robust framework for supporting the mental health of its young population. As awareness of mental health continues to grow, it is essential to ensure that all young people have the resources and support they need to thrive.

Germany is facing an increasing mental health crisis among its young population, with adolescent girls being particularly vulnerable to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these challenges, but it has also brought greater awareness to the importance of mental health. The German government has responded with strategies to improve prevention, early detection, and treatment of mental health disorders. However, more work is needed to reduce the socio-economic disparities in access to care and to ensure that all young people receive the support they need. By expanding education, reducing stigma, and increasing access to services, Germany can help safeguard the mental health of its younger generations.

In summary, the mental health landscape for young people in Germany reflects many of the challenges seen globally, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While socio-economic disparities persist, the government's focus on expanding preventive care, promoting mental health, and reducing stigma represents a positive step toward addressing these issues. By implementing targeted interventions and encouraging early treatment, Germany is working to create a more equitable mental health care system for its youth population.

Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People



The mental health landscape in Serbia presents a complex picture characterized by systemic challenges, geographical disparities, and significant socio-economic influences. As in many countries, residents face obstacles, particularly the centralization of mental health services, which are primarily accessible in larger cities such as Beigrade, Novi Sad, and Nis. This centralization creates barriers for youth living in rural and remote areas, where specialized mental health services are often non-existent. Consequently, access to adequate support for mental health issues is limited, and preventive and educational content remains scarce.

Policy Frameworks and Mental Health Challenges

In 2006, Serbia established the Strategy for Youth Development and Health, which advocates for cross-sector collaboration aimed at creating an environment where young people can grow and develop uninterruptedly. This strategy acknowledges the increasing prevalence of mental health challenges among youth, including behavioral disorders, addictions, depression, and suicide. A multitude of factors contributes to this deterioration, such as a disruption of values, educational challenges, youth unemployment, poverty-driven promiscuity, and a lack of parental awareness regarding their children's needs. Family alienation and breakdown also play a significant role in exacerbating these issues. Furthermore, the existing infrastructure for mental health care is often inadequate, with insufficient facilities, outdated equipment, long waiting times, and a lack of confidentiality in service delivery.

Recognizing the urgency of these issues, the Strategy for the Protection of Mental Health in the Republic of Serbia (2018-2026) aims to address systemic problems that have persisted over the years, such as the low prioritization of mental health and the prevailing culture of stigmatization. Urgent deinstitutionalization efforts are needed to create a more supportive environment for young people. One of the key challenges is the unclear division of responsibilities among service providers, which undermines the effectiveness of the mental health system. This issue is compounded by a lack of interdisciplinary approaches, inadequate tracking of evidence, and insufficient youth involvement in the system's organization.



Service Provision and Systematic Issues

In Serbia, the first line of support for mental health issues typically lies within schools, where designated psychologists are available, as well as in local community health centers. However, youth seeking more specialized care must navigate a complex system that requires them to first visit dispensaries for specialist consultations before being referred to the Clinic for Children and Youth at the Institute for Mental Health. This clinic provides various services, including individual and group psychotherapy, family therapy, pharmacotherapy, and specialized pedagogical treatment. However, a significant concern is that youth over 19 years of age who are not students are transferred to specialized departments for adults, which may not adequately address their unique developmental needs.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is one of the key institutions dealing with mental health issues related to violence and youth support. However, this public institution faces challenges as its available resources and capacities often exceed the workload and clientele within its jurisdiction. Additionally, professionals within the system frequently lack the specialized knowledge necessary to provide appropriate care for youth, further complicating the landscape of mental health support.

Initiatives and Support Services

Despite these systemic challenges, there are some initiatives aimed at supporting youth mental health in Serbia. For instance, the NADELhotline for children and youth has been operational 24/7 since 2005, providing essential support for young people facing everyday challenges. Moreover, additional phone lines for mental health institutions and emotional support services, such as the Centre Heart, focus on suicide prevention and emotional assistance. However, these resources are still relatively scarce compared to the growing demand for mental health services.

In conclusion, the mental health landscape in Serbia reflects significant barriers and disparities, particularly for young people. To create a more equitable and effective mental health system, there is an urgent need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges faced by youth, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The government and mental health organizations must prioritize mental health education, increase accessibility to services, and develop a more comprehensive approach to addressing the unique needs of Serbia's youth.



Key Findings from Research

Centralization and Gaps in Services

Serbia's mental health services are concentrated in larger urban centers, making it difficult for youth in other regions to access care. There are few services dedicated exclusively to the mental health of young people, and prevention efforts are minimal. The mental health system is hindered by an unclear division of responsibility among service providers, a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, and insufficient youth involvement in the design and organization of services.

Youth seeking help often turn to school psychologists or medical staff at school dispensaries. For more severe cases, referrals are made to specialist-consultative services for children up to 15 and day hospitals for young people aged 15-24. However, youth over 19 who are not students are required to seek treatment in general hospitals or adult clinics, further complicating access to appropriate care.

Limited Resources and Professional Training

Public institutions, such as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), face significant challenges in meeting the needs of the youth population. The available resources and capacities are often insufficient for the number of clients they serve. Additionally, many professionals lack specialized training to adequately support young people, limiting the effectiveness of the services provided. While institutions like the **Institute for Mental Health** in Beigrade offer a range of services-including individual and group therapy, family therapy, and pharmacotherapy-the demand far exceeds the supply, especially in less populated areas.

Barriers in Education and Preventive Care

The lack of mental health education in schools is a critical issue in Serbia. Younger age groups, in particular, report a lack of understanding about mental health, which exacerbates stigmatization and prevents open discussions among peers. Although some older youth (16-21 years old) are more aware of mental health issues, many still report insufficient action and support. A considerable proportion of this age group experiences anxiety and depression, but only about half seek professional help due to limited resources and persistent stigma.

Stigmatization and Gaps in Awareness

Mental health stigmatization remains a significant problem across all age groups, with youth over 22 years old pointing out the lack of adequate mental health support in healthcare packages and the need for greater education on the issue. Despite some improvements in open conversations about mental health, particularly among older youth, seeking professional help is still accompanied by fears of discrimination and judgment.

Recommendations for System Enhancement

The findings also suggest several enhancements to the mental health support system in Serbia. Participants proposed the introduction of compulsory counseling for new parents to equip them with the tools necessary for supporting their children's mental health. Additionally, increasing access to psychological assistance in workplaces and updating legal regulations to facilitate broader availability of mental health expertise and education were highlighted as critical areas for improvement.

Limitations of the Research

It is important to note that the survey's online format may limit its representativeness, particularly for marginalized groups, educational dropouts, and individuals who may lack access to or interest in online resources. This limitation underscores the need for inclusive research methods that can capture the perspectives of those most at risk and ensure that mental health initiatives reach all segments of the population.

In summary, the keyfindings emphasize the importance of education, stigma reduction, non-pharmacological interventions, and a multi-sectoral approach to mental health in Serbia. Addressing these areas will be crucial for creating a more supportive and effective mental health system for youth in the country.

Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups

- **Age group 13 - 15:** The youngest age group in the study reveals a significant gap in mental health education, indicating that these individuals are notably ill-equipped to engage in discussions about mental health, particularly among peers. Respondents in this category express difficulty in broaching the subject, largely attributing this to a perceived lack of knowledge and awareness surrounding mental health issues. The stigma associated with mental health appears to deter open conversations, leading to an environment where ignorance prevails.

However, these challenges are somewhat alleviated when discussions are initiated with adults, suggesting a potential avenue for increasing understanding and reducing stigma. This highlights the need for targeted educational initiatives designed to engage young adolescents in mental health topics, fostering an environment that encourages open dialogue and understanding. Implementing age-appropriate mental health education in schools could empower young people to discuss these topics with their peers and adults, ultimately reducing stigma and increasing awareness.



Age group 16-21: The second age group also recognizes the educational shortcomings within the current system. Approximately one-third of respondents in this category report experiencing anxiety and depression, and nearly half have sought professional help. This age group acknowledges that while conversations about mental health have started to gain traction, the necessary actions and resources to support these discussions are still lacking. These insights reveal a critical transitional phase where young individuals are becoming more aware of their mental health needs and the importance of seeking help. However, the gap between awareness and action indicates a need for enhanced resources and initiatives aimed at bridging this divide. Increasing access to mental health services, such as counseling and therapy, and ensuring that these services are adequately integrated into educational institutions would benefit this age group significantly.

Age group 22-26: In the third category, young adults aged 22 to 26 show a more nuanced understanding of the mental health landscape. They express concern over the low levels of awareness regarding mental health challenges within their communities. While they engage in conversations about mental health without perceiving stigma, they still face barriers when it comes to seeking help. Participants report experiencing discrimination and questioning the access and quality of available mental health services. Interestingly, this age group also shares positive experiences with psychotherapy and peer support, suggesting that while systemic issues persist, there are pockets of effective support that can be built upon. Their willingness to discuss mental health issues openly indicates a shifting cultural landscape that can be leveraged to promote further destigmatization and increase awareness.

Age group 27 and Above: The oldest age group approaches the issue of mental health with a critical lens, identifying specific problems such as the inadequate support available within healthcare packages. Like younger participants, they acknowledge the prevalence of stigma surrounding mental health; which remains a barrier to seeking help. This group is particularly vocal about the urgent need for comprehensive education at various levels, both within the formal educational system and in broader societal contexts.

A concerning statistic that emerges from this age group is that nearly 70% of participants report having a close acquaintance with a diagnosed mental health issue. This personal connection to mental health challenges underscores the urgency for systemic improvements in mental health support and education.

When comparing the insights from the different age groups, several key themes emerge:

- Younger respondents express the greatest need for education about mental health, indicating a gap that persists as they transition into older age categories. In contrast, older age groups are more aware of the systemic issues but call for increased education to reduce stigma and enhance support.
- While stigma remains a barrier across all age groups, younger individuals find it more challenging to discuss mental health with peers. In contrast, older respondents engage in discussions more freely, though they still experience stigma when seeking help.



- The willingness to seek professional help increases with age, yet systemic barriers persist for all. Young adults exhibit both positive and negative experiences with mental health services, while older adults are more critical of the support available within the healthcare system.
- Across all age groups, there is a consensus on the need for improved access to mental health services, highlighting the urgent need for a multi-sectoral approach to address these disparities effectively.

In conclusion, the insights from Serbia's youth and young adults highlight significant gaps in mental health education, awareness, and access to services. While progress is being made in some areas, there is still a considerable journey ahead to ensure that all individuals, regardless of age, have the knowledge, resources, and support they need to navigate mental health challenges effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gathered from the research on the mental health landscape in Serbia, several key recommendations emerge to address the identified gaps and improve mental health support across various age groups:

- **Implement Comprehensive Mental Health Education in Schools:** To address the significant knowledge gaps regarding mental health, it is essential to incorporate comprehensive mental health education into the school curricula. This education should focus on age-appropriate content that empowers students to understand mental health issues, recognize the signs of distress, and seek help when needed. Schools should create safe environments where students feel comfortable discussing mental health topics with peers and adults, thereby fostering a culture of openness and support.
- **Increase Access to Mental Health Services for Adolescents:** Given the disparities in access to mental health services, particularly for young people, it is crucial to expand the availability of mental health professionals and resources in schools and communities. This could involve increasing funding for school-based mental health services, establishing partnerships with local healthcare providers, and implementing outreach programs targeting underserved areas. Ensuring that mental health services are easily accessible, affordable, and culturally relevant will help address the needs of adolescents, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds.
- **Foster Peer Support Networks:** Encouraging the establishment of peer support networks within schools and communities can be an effective way to address mental health challenges. Training peer leaders to provide support and resources to their peers can enhance the sense of community and belonging, reduce stigma, and promote mental wellness. These networks can serve as a bridge between youth and professional mental health services, ensuring that young people have multiple avenues for support.



- **Develop Targeted Interventions for Vulnerable Populations:** To effectively reach marginalized groups, targeted interventions must be developed that address their unique needs. This could include specialized programs for youth experiencing homelessness, poverty, or social exclusion. Additionally, initiatives should aim to engage parents and families, providing them with the knowledge and tools necessary to support their children's mental health. Compulsory counseling for new parents and workshops on emotional well-being can also help create a supportive home environment.
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- **Enhance Training for Mental Health Professionals:** To improve the quality of mental health care available to young people, it is essential to invest in the training and ongoing professional development of mental health providers. This includes enhancing their understanding of youth-specific mental health issues, effective communication strategies, and culturally sensitive practices. By equipping professionals with the skills they need to support young people effectively, the overall quality of mental health services can be significantly improved.
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- **Promote Public Awareness Campaigns:** Public awareness campaigns focused on mental health can play a crucial role in reducing stigma and encouraging individuals to seek help. These campaigns should highlight the importance of mental well-being, share success stories, and provide information about available resources. By leveraging social media and other digital platforms, these campaigns can effectively reach young people and their families, fostering a more informed and supportive community.
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- **Establish a Multi-Sectoral Approach:** A multi-sectoral approach is essential to address the various factors contributing to mental health challenges among youth. Collaboration between healthcare providers, educational institutions, community organizations, and governmental agencies can create a comprehensive support network that addresses the needs of young people holistically. This collaboration should include the development of clear protocols for referral and follow-up services to ensure continuity of care.
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- **Incorporate Mental Health into Policy Frameworks:** Integrating mental health considerations into existing policy frameworks, such as the Strategy for Youth Development and Health, will enhance the visibility and prioritization of mental health issues. Policymakers should focus on deinstitutionalization efforts, ensuring that community-based mental health services are adequately supported and accessible. Regular assessments of mental health policies and programs can help identify areas for improvement and ensure that the needs of young people are met effectively.

Addressing the mental health challenges faced by young people in Serbia requires a comprehensive and coordinated effort. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can create an environment where mental health is prioritized, stigma is reduced, and young individuals have access to the support and resources they need to thrive. A collaborative approach that involves education, community engagement, and policy reform will be key to improving mental health outcomes for youth in Serbia.

Spain

Overview of Mental Health Landscape for Young People

Mental health in Spain has increasingly garnered attention in recent years, particularly due to the exacerbation of issues stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, mental health has been stigmatized and often neglected within Spanish society, leading to widespread social discrimination against individuals with mental health conditions. Prevalent beliefs regarding the dangerousness and unpredictability of those suffering from mental health issues have fueled fear, anger, and guilt, creating barriers to open dialogue and understanding. The pandemic has underscored the urgent need for action in addressing these challenges, revealing significant gaps in prevention, early detection, and effective treatment of mental illnesses.

Government Initiatives and Funding

Recognizing the critical need to address mental health, the Spanish government has made it a national priority, allocating €1.23 billion in EU funding. This investment supports 20 flagship initiatives aimed at tackling mental health challenges, with a strong focus on prevention, affordable healthcare access, and facilitating reintegration into society after recovery. In a bid to improve mental health services, the government updated the Mental Health Strategy, emphasizing the importance of proactive measures and community engagement. Additionally, the launch of a suicide prevention hotline (024) aims to provide immediate support for individuals at risk of suicide, highlighting the government's commitment to addressing this pressing concern.

Mental Health Services

Spain's healthcare system operates on a decentralized model, meaning that mental health services are administered at both regional and national levels. This structure can lead to disparities in access to mental health resources, with some regions experiencing significant shortages of mental health professionals. While urban centers may have more robust mental health services, rural areas often lack sufficient support, leaving many individuals without adequate care. Efforts to standardize access and improve resource allocation across regions are essential to ensure equitable mental health care for all.

Mental Health Awareness and Stigma Reduction

Efforts to raise awareness about mental health issues have gained momentum in Spain, as organizations and advocacy groups work diligently to educate the public and promote mental health literacy. These initiatives aim to foster open discussions about mental health, thereby reducing stigma and encouraging individuals to seek help. Public campaigns, community workshops, and educational programs in schools are integral to shifting societal attitudes towards mental health, making it a more approachable and less stigmatized topic.

Legislative Framework

Spain has established a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals with mental health conditions. The Mental Health Act of 1986 outlines the rights of those receiving mental health care and sets forth procedures for involuntary hospitalization when necessary. This legislation emphasizes the importance of upholding the dignity and rights of individuals with mental health issues, providing a foundation for ongoing improvements in mental health care.

Research and Community Support

Spain is actively engaged in mental health research, with universities, research institutions, and healthcare organizations conducting studies to better understand mental health disorders and effective treatments. Research efforts focus on identifying the prevalence of mental health conditions and examining the social determinants that impact mental health. Furthermore, community-based mental health programs play a vital role in the landscape, offering outreach, counseling, peer support, and rehabilitation services to those facing mental health challenges. These programs aim to foster a sense of belonging and support within communities.

Integration of Mental Health into Primary Care

To improve access to mental health services, Spain is working to integrate mental health care into primary care settings. This approach facilitates early intervention and ensures that individuals receive holistic care that addresses both physical and mental health needs. By equipping primary care providers with the training and resources necessary to identify and address mental health issues, Spain aims to create a more inclusive and responsive healthcare system.

Mental Health in Schools

Promoting mental health in schools is gaining traction in Spain, with various programs focusing on mental health education, emotional well-being, and early intervention strategies. These initiatives aim to equip students with the knowledge and skills to manage their mental health effectively, fostering resilience and promoting a supportive school environment. By prioritizing mental health education, Spain seeks to cultivate a generation of young people who are more aware of mental health issues and better equipped to address them.

The mental health landscape in Spain is evolving, driven by increased awareness, government initiatives, and a growing recognition of the importance of mental health care. While challenges remain, the ongoing efforts to address stigma, improve access to services, and integrate mental health into various aspects of society represent significant steps towards creating a more supportive environment for individuals facing mental health issues. By continuing to prioritize mental health, Spain can foster a culture of understanding and compassion, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes for its population.

Key Findings from Research

The research conducted on mental health in Spain has yielded several critical findings that illuminate the current landscape across various age groups:

Awareness of Mental Health Importance

All age groups show a growing recognition of the significance of mental health, often equating it with physical health. This holistic perspective reflects a positive shift in societal attitudes, fostering an environment where mental well-being is acknowledged as essential for overall health. Respondents emphasized the normalization of mental health discussions, indicating that this trend is vital for reducing stigma and encouraging individuals to seek help.

Recognition of Social Stigma

Despite increased awareness, social stigma surrounding mental health remains prevalent. Many individuals across age groups recognize that stigma poses a significant barrier to seeking help. This acknowledgment underscores the urgent need for advocacy and educational initiatives to challenge negative stereotypes and foster a supportive environment for mental health discussions.

Desire for Improvement in Mental Health Support

Participants across all age groups expressed a desire for enhanced mental health support, both in workplace settings and through government initiatives. There is a clear expectation for organizations and policymakers to prioritize mental well-being, highlighting the need for systemic changes that promote equitable access to mental health resources.

Challenges in Seeking Help

The research revealed common challenges in accessing mental health support. Younger respondents (18-21 years old) often cited uncertainty regarding available resources, while older individuals (22-35 years old) faced barriers related to balancing career and family responsibilities alongside the lingering stigma associated with mental health.

Importance of Mental Health Education

A strong consensus emerged regarding the importance of mental health education across all age groups. Younger individuals emphasized the need for integrating mental health topics into school curricula, while older participants advocated for comprehensive mental health literacy programs that extend into workplaces and communities. This recognition of the role of education in fostering mental well-being highlights the potential for proactive measures to address mental health challenges.

Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

Stigma continues to be a significant concern for individuals of all ages. Younger respondents expressed feelings of shame surrounding mental health discussions, while older groups recognized societal norms that perpetuate stigma. The widespread acknowledgment of stigma emphasizes the need for efforts to destigmatize mental health issues and promote open dialogues.



Insights and Comparisons Across Age Groups

- **Age group 13 -15:** In this group the familiarity with the concept of mental health varied, with most demonstrating moderate to high awareness. Stress levels were diverse, with academic pressures emerging as a significant factor influencing mental well-being. While mental health education was perceived as essential, respondents noted the presence of stigma within their communities. Social networks were recognized as impactful on mental health, and the family environment was highlighted as a major influence. Schools were seen as offering some mental health support, though improvements are desired. Many respondents called for greater openness in discussions about mental health, emphasizing the need for better representation in media and a more supportive educational environment.
- **Age group 16-21:** The research findings highlighted a wide range of perceptions and experiences regarding mental health. When asked about mental health education in schools, respondents showed strong support, with most rating its importance highly. However, when asked if their mental health needs were adequately addressed, responses varied significantly, reflecting diverse personal experiences. Additionally, while social media was seen as both a potential source of support and stress, lifestyle choices were widely acknowledged to impact mental health. The results underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions for this age group.
- **Age group 22-26:** The survey's findings offer a nuanced look at mental health perceptions and challenges. The 22-26 age group highlights a complex and interconnected set of factors influencing mental health. While many respondents recognize the importance of social relationships and technology in shaping their mental well-being, there remains a persistent stigma around mental health issues, particularly in seeking help. Cultural background and societal expectations also play crucial roles in shaping attitudes. Additionally, the accessibility and quality of mental health services are major concerns, with many calling for more awareness, affordability, and better resources to address the growing mental health needs of young adults in their communities.
- **Age group 27 - 30:** This group shows increasing awareness of mental health's importance, but challenges persist. Although many view it as equally vital as physical health, issues like workplace inadequacies, societal stigma, and limited resources remain. The push for public discussions and emotional support programs indicates a desire for change. Personal experiences highlight the need for better access to services, community support, and mental health training. Addressing these concerns is crucial for shaping future policies and creating a more supportive environment for this age group.



The findings highlight both commonalities and differences across age groups concerning mental health awareness, support, and stigma.

1. Younger individuals (18-21 years old) display lower awareness of mental health complexities compared to older groups (22-35 years old), who have a more nuanced understanding of the subject. This difference suggests a need for targeted educational efforts aimed at younger populations to improve their mental health literacy.
2. Younger age groups may show reluctance to seek professional help, while older groups exhibit a greater willingness to pursue support. This discrepancy could stem from varying levels of exposure to mental health resources and the influence of societal expectations.
3. Older individuals demonstrate higher engagement in mental health advocacy or volunteer activities compared to their younger counterparts. This difference highlights the importance of mentorship and involvement opportunities to foster advocacy among younger generations.
4. Older groups express more significant concerns about workplace mental health initiatives, likely reflecting their increased responsibilities in their careers and families. In contrast, younger individuals may not yet have experienced the same level of workplace pressures, indicating a potential area for development.
5. Older participants voiced more concerns regarding the availability and quality of mental health resources in their communities compared to younger respondents. This highlights the need for ongoing improvements in mental health infrastructure and accessibility.
6. The older demographic prioritizes workplace policies that support work-life balance and caregiver responsibilities, while younger individuals may not yet be facing these issues as acutely. This distinction underscores the need for tailored support structures that consider the specific challenges faced by different age groups.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and insights gathered from the research, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the mental health landscape in Spain:

- **Enhance Mental Health Education:** Implement comprehensive mental health education programs in schools and communities to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and equip individuals with the knowledge and skills to manage their mental well-being effectively. This includes integrating mental health topics into existing curricula and providing resources for educators and parents.
- **Strengthen Mental Health Support Services:** Increase funding and resources for mental health services, particularly in underserved areas, to ensure equitable access to care. This includes hiring more mental health professionals and expanding community-based support programs to reach individuals in need.
- **Foster Open Dialogue and Stigma Reduction:** Launch public awareness campaigns aimed at destigmatizing mental health issues and encouraging open conversations about mental health struggles. Engage community leaders, influencers, and mental health advocates in these initiatives to promote understanding and acceptance.

- **Promote Workplace Mental Health Initiatives:** Encourage organizations to implement mental health policies that prioritize employee well-being, including access to mental health resources, flexible work arrangements, and support for caregivers. Training programs should be developed to educate managers on recognizing and addressing mental health concerns in the workplace.
- **Facilitate Help-Seeking Behaviors:** Develop user-friendly resources that guide individuals on how to access mental health support. This could include online platforms that provide information about available services and how to navigate the mental health system, targeting both younger and older populations.
- **Encourage Advocacy and Engagement:** Foster opportunities for individuals of all ages to engage in mental health advocacy, volunteer work, or community service related to mental health. This will help build a culture of support and empowerment while promoting a sense of community and belonging.

By addressing these recommendations, Spain can create a more supportive environment for mental health, ensuring that individuals of all ages receive the care and resources they need to thrive.



Comparative Analysis:

The Transnational Perspective

Across all five countries, there is a noticeable shift toward recognizing the significance of mental health as equally important as physical health. This growing awareness reflects a broader societal understanding of mental well-being, with discussions becoming more normalized and stigma gradually decreasing. This trend is crucial for fostering environments where individuals feel empowered to seek help without fear of judgment.

Socio-economic pressures remain a common theme affecting mental health across all nations. Many young people face challenges related to unemployment, poverty, and instability, which can exacerbate mental health issues. The influence of these factors highlights the need for comprehensive support systems that address the root causes of mental health challenges rather than solely focusing on treatment.

Despite progress, stigma surrounding mental health continues to be a significant barrier in all countries, deterring individuals from seeking support. The recognition of stigma underscores the necessity for advocacy and education initiatives aimed at challenging stereotypes and fostering a culture of acceptance. Additionally, access to mental health care varies significantly, with many individuals facing difficulties in navigating fragmented systems or finding available resources.

Across the board, individuals express a strong desire for more robust mental health support systems, whether through workplace initiatives, community resources, or governmental policies. This collective aspiration reflects a recognition of the need for holistic approaches that prioritize mental well-being and create supportive environments for individuals to thrive.

There is a unanimous consensus on the critical role of mental health education in promoting awareness and reducing stigma. All countries recognize the need for integrating mental health topics into educational curricula and community programs to equip individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate mental health challenges effectively.



Divergences or Unique Issues Observed at the National Level

Bulgaria

Bulgaria faces severe mental health challenges among youth, exacerbated by factors such as digitalization, substance abuse, and socio-economic pressures. The mental health system is characterized by fragmentation and inadequate resources, with a medical model of care lacking in follow-up support. The legacy of stigmatization presents significant barriers to accessing care, resulting in untreated conditions and reliance on negative coping mechanisms.

Croatia

In contrast to Bulgaria, Croatia benefits from a long tradition of public health protection, reflected in comprehensive mental health strategies. The Croatian government has recognized the rising burden of mental health issues, particularly among youth, and has implemented a strategic framework for mental health until 2030. However, ongoing challenges stem from the lingering effects of past conflicts, social uncertainties, and recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Germany

Germany exhibits a more structured approach to mental health, emphasizing preventive measures and addressing the needs of children and adolescents. The country acknowledges social determinants of mental health and has proactively responded to the heightened demand for services, particularly during the pandemic. In contrast to more fragmented systems like Bulgaria's, Germany's well-organized health strategy reflects a commitment to reducing stigma and improving mental health outcomes.

Serbia

Serbia shares similarities with Bulgaria regarding centralization issues and the stigmatization of mental health. The lack of preventive education in rural areas, coupled with inadequate infrastructure, creates significant barriers to care. While the Serbian government has made efforts to address these challenges, systemic issues persist, including unclear responsibilities among service providers and a lack of interdisciplinary approaches.

Spain

Spain faces a dual challenge of social stigma and regional disparities in mental health care access. Despite these challenges, the Spanish government has made substantial progress, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initiatives such as updating the Mental Health Strategy and launching a suicide hotline demonstrate a commitment to prioritizing mental health. However, the decentralized healthcare system leads to variability in service quality, underscoring the need for standardized care across regions.

Insights from Transnational Seminars and Collaborative Discussions

The transnational seminars and collaborative discussions among stakeholders from the five countries have yielded valuable insights into best practices and potential strategies for enhancing mental health systems. Key takeaways include:

Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Effective mental health care requires collaboration across various sectors, including healthcare, education, and community organizations. Participants emphasized the importance of creating networks that facilitate information sharing and resource allocation to develop comprehensive mental health strategies.



Early Intervention and Community-Based Care

Emphasizing early intervention and community-based approaches emerged as a consensus among participants. Engaging young people in preventative mental health programs can reduce the incidence of mental health issues and empower communities to support their members effectively.



Addressing Stigma Through Cultural Change

The discussions highlighted the need for cultural change to combat stigma effectively. Initiatives that promote open dialogues about mental health, supported by public figures and community leaders, can shift perceptions and encourage individuals to seek help.

Utilizing Technology for Mental Health Support

Participants recognized the potential of technology in improving mental health access and support, particularly among younger populations. Telehealth services, online resources, and mental health apps can bridge gaps in care and provide accessible support.



Tailored Approaches for Diverse Populations

The need for tailored approaches that consider the unique cultural and social contexts of each country was a recurring theme. Mental health strategies must be adaptable to address the specific challenges and needs of different populations, particularly marginalized groups.

The comparative analysis of mental health across Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain highlights shared struggles with stigma and access, while also reflecting unique challenges shaped by socio-cultural contexts. Croatia, Germany, and Spain show more structured approaches, whereas Bulgaria and Serbia emphasize the need for systemic reforms and better youth support. Transnational seminars underline the importance of collaboration, early intervention, and customized strategies. By learning from one another, these nations can improve mental health outcomes, particularly for youth, who are pivotal to the future.

Key Recommendations

Recommendations for Policymakers

Develop Comprehensive National Mental Health Strategies

Policymakers should prioritize the creation and implementation of comprehensive national mental health strategies that address the specific needs of youth. These strategies should incorporate preventive measures, early intervention, and community-based support services. An emphasis on a holistic approach will ensure that mental health is integrated into broader health and social policies.

Increase Funding for Mental Health Services

Governments must allocate sufficient funding to mental health services, particularly for youth-oriented programs. This funding should support the expansion of mental health infrastructure, training for mental health professionals, and the development of community resources. Increased investment is essential for reducing waiting times and ensuring that young people have timely access to care.

Enhance Mental Health Education and Awareness

Implementing educational programs in schools and communities is vital for reducing stigma and promoting mental health awareness. Policymakers should support initiatives that educate students, parents, and educators about mental health issues, available resources, and the importance of seeking help. Promoting mental health literacy will empower young people to understand their mental well-being and navigate challenges effectively.

Strengthen Intersectoral Collaboration

Establishing collaborative frameworks among healthcare providers, educational institutions, NGOs, and community organizations is crucial. Policymakers should facilitate intersectoral partnerships to ensure a coordinated approach to mental health care. Collaborative efforts can help streamline services, improve resource sharing, and enhance the overall effectiveness of mental health interventions.

Focus on Digital Health Innovations

Policymakers should encourage the integration of digital health innovations into mental health care. This includes developing telehealth services, mobile applications, and online platforms that provide mental health support and resources. Digital solutions can bridge gaps in care, particularly in rural or underserved areas, making mental health services more accessible to young people.

Recommendations for NGOs and Youth Organizations

Advocate for Policy Change

NGOs and youth organizations should actively advocate for mental health policy changes at both national and local levels. This advocacy can help raise awareness of the specific mental health needs of young people and push for reforms that prioritize mental health services and support systems.

Implement Community-Based Programs

Organizations should develop and implement community-based mental health programs that focus on prevention and early intervention. These programs can include peer support groups, workshops, and outreach initiatives that engage young people in discussions about mental health, coping strategies, and available resources.

Foster Youth Participation

Involve young people in decision-making processes related to mental health initiatives. By fostering youth participation, organizations can ensure that programs are tailored to the needs and preferences of young people, leading to more effective and relevant support systems.

Promote Collaboration Among NGOs

Encourage collaboration among NGOs working in mental health to share resources, knowledge, and best practices. Joint initiatives can amplify the impact of individual organizations and foster a united approach to addressing youth mental health challenges.



Suggestions for Further Research and Collaboration

1. Further research is needed to understand the long-term effects of various socio-economic, cultural, and political factors on youth mental health. Longitudinal studies can provide valuable insights into trends over time, informing evidence-based interventions.
2. Research should focus on cross-national comparisons of mental health strategies and outcomes, identifying successful practices that can be adapted in different contexts. Understanding the unique experiences of each country can foster learning and inform policy recommendations.
3. Conduct evaluations of existing mental health programs to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. These evaluations can guide future investments and inform the development of evidence-based practices that better serve young people.
4. Establish platforms for knowledge exchange among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from different countries. These platforms can facilitate discussions about mental health challenges, share successful interventions, and promote collaboration across borders.

Ideas for Improving Mental Health Support for Young People at a Transnational Level

1. **Create a Transnational Youth Mental Health Network:** Establishing a network that connects youth organizations, NGOs, and policymakers across countries can promote collaboration and knowledge sharing. This network can facilitate joint initiatives, collective advocacy efforts, and the exchange of best practices in addressing youth mental health.
2. **Develop Standardized Training Programs:** Creating standardized training programs for mental health professionals that focus on youth mental health can enhance the quality of care provided across countries. These programs should address the unique challenges faced by young people and emphasize culturally sensitive approaches.
3. **Launch International Awareness Campaigns:** Conducting international awareness campaigns focused on youth mental health can help destigmatize mental health issues and promote help-seeking behavior. These campaigns can leverage social media and other platforms to reach a wide audience and foster discussions around mental well-being.

Conclusion

Key Insights and Transnational Perspectives

The comparative analysis of mental health systems across Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain highlights both common challenges and country-specific issues that affect the mental health of young people. Key insights from this research reveal several critical factors influencing youth mental health: Across all five countries, socio-economic status plays a significant role in shaping young people's mental health outcomes. Economic instability, unemployment, and access to education and healthcare are directly linked to mental well-being. This finding underscores the need for targeted support programs that address these socioeconomic disparities, particularly for youth from marginalized or vulnerable backgrounds.

The effects of historical legacies -such as political transitions, conflicts, and economic crises-remain potent, especially in Croatia, Serbia, and Bulgaria. These legacies continue to shape the mental health landscape, influencing the availability of services, public attitudes toward mental health, and the degree of stigma surrounding mental illness. Acknowledging these historical contexts is essential for designing effective interventions and policies that resonate with national realities.

Stigma surrounding mental health issues remains a pervasive challenge across all countries. Despite varying levels of mental health awareness, there is a widespread reluctance to seek professional help, often due to fear of judgment or exclusion. In Bulgaria and Serbia, stigmatization is particularly pronounced, which exacerbates gaps in mental health care. Reducing stigma through public awareness campaigns, education, and open dialogue is critical for ensuring that young people feel comfortable accessing mental health services.

While Bulgaria and Serbia exhibit fragmented mental health systems, with limited resources, Croatia, Germany, and Spain have more structured approaches to mental health care. These latter countries have comprehensive mental health strategies and frameworks which show more potential to support young people successfully. However, even in these countries, there are significant challenges, including regional disparities in service availability and the ongoing strain caused by recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This contrast emphasizes the importance of building coherent and accessible mental health infrastructures while addressing the unique needs of each country.



Despite differences in mental health systems, all five countries share a pressing need for improved access to services and increased funding for youth-oriented mental health programs. Ensuring that mental health services are affordable, geographically accessible, and tailored to the specific needs of young people is a top priority. Greater investment in youth mental health initiatives, especially in underfunded areas, is necessary to address the growing demand for support.

Final Thought on the Way Forward in Addressing Young People's Mental Health

Looking ahead, it is clear that improving youth mental health will require concerted efforts that embrace innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity. The insights gained from this transnational analysis offer several key pathways for advancing mental health care for young people across Europe:

Comprehensive and coordinated mental health systems: Policymakers must prioritize the creation of comprehensive national mental health strategies that address the specific needs of young people. These strategies should be well-coordinated, with clear pathways to care and integrated support across sectors, including education, healthcare, and social services.

Increased funding and resource allocation: Adequate funding is essential for successfully implementing mental health services. Governments should allocate sufficient resources to expand the availability of mental health programs, especially in underserved regions and among disadvantaged populations. Investment should be directed toward clinical services and community-based initiatives that foster a supportive environment for young people.

Stigma reduction and mental health education: Reducing stigma around mental health remains a critical challenge. There seems to be a prominent need for more informed knowledge on mental health as well as mental illnesses across countries. Public awareness campaigns, mental health education in schools, and community-based programs can play a pivotal role in shifting public perceptions and encouraging young people to seek help when needed. Collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and youth organizations are essential to promoting a culture that prioritizes mental well-being.

Early intervention and preventive care: Early intervention is key to preventing more severe mental health issues from developing. Countries should focus on providing preventive care that addresses the mental health needs of young people at an early stage, whether through school counseling programs, community outreach, or digital platforms that provide accessible mental health resources.



Collaboration across sectors and borders: Mental health is a cross-sectoral issue, and effective solutions will require collaboration between healthcare providers, educators, teachers, policymakers, and civil society organizations. Furthermore, countries should continue to share their experiences and best practices, fostering cross-national cooperation and knowledge exchange. The establishment of a transnational youth mental health network could serve as a valuable platform for ongoing dialogue, research, and advocacy.

Youth participation in policy development: Young people should be actively involved in the design and implementation of mental health policies and programs. By incorporating youth perspectives, stakeholders can ensure that mental health services are responsive to the real needs and experiences of the population they serve. By providing youth the space to be active and create a visible change we are ensuring their involvement in society. Empowering young people as advocates and decision-makers in this process will also help dismantle barriers to accessing care.

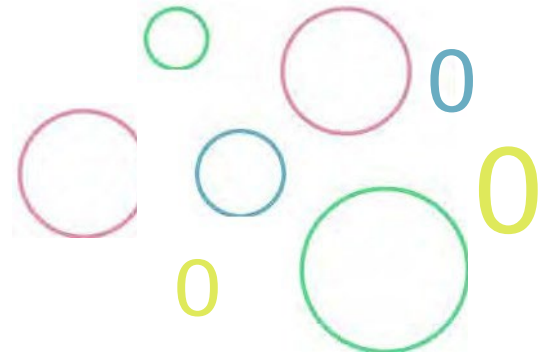
Building a Future of Inclusive and Supportive Mental Health Systems

The path forward in addressing youth mental health requires a long-term commitment to building systems that are inclusive, equitable, and supportive. By leveraging the strengths and insights of each country, stakeholders can develop solutions that not only address the mental health needs of young people but also empower them to thrive in their communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the urgency of investing in mental health care, as it has placed unprecedented stress on young people's well-being.

As we look to the future, the importance of ongoing research, dialogue, and cross-sectoral collaboration cannot be overstated. Creating a culture that values mental well-being, fosters resilience, and promotes inclusivity is a shared responsibility that transcends national borders. The mental health of the youth is the responsibility of all; and the solution can be found in strengthening all the communities, in every sector. By working together, countries can build stronger, more compassionate mental health systems that ensure young people receive the care, support, and opportunities they need to lead fulfilling lives.

In conclusion, addressing the mental health needs of young people is a complex yet attainable goal. The insights from this transnational analysis provide a roadmap for policymakers, NGOs, and youth organizations to forge a path toward more effective and inclusive mental health systems. By prioritizing mental health and fostering collaboration, we can create a world where young people feel supported, valued, and equipped to navigate their mental health journeys with confidence.

What is Metaphor?



METAPHOR is an Erasmus-funded project within the framework of Erasmus+ Key Action 3 and the "European Youth Together" programme.

METAPHOR focuses on the Mental Health of young people. The project aims to promote the Mental Health of young people and encourage them to deal with their own needs in a more self-determined way. Its overall aim is to strengthen young people's activism in the field of Mental Health so that they learn to draw attention to their own needs and create an environment in which they feel safe, valued, and accepted.

METAPHOR aims to support young people between the age of 13 to 30, youth leaders, youth workers, educators, and other social actors working with young people and/or focusing on Mental Health in young people.

METAPHOR uses nonformal education tools and methods, tools of film and video making, and a number of training activities to promote the importance of Mental Health and self-determined action in youth.



Why this Research ?

Research on mental health is critical for understanding the complex factors affecting young people's well-being, such as stigma, access to care, and socio-economic challenges. Our organizations, working with non-formal education methods, emphasize safe spaces where youth feel supported to express their needs and strengths. Our project combines four key themes-mental health, youth activism, multimedia, and transnational cooperation-aiming to amplify young voices in mental health advocacy. Through activities like opinion polls, multimedia training, filmmaking, and advocacy events, we empower young people to campaign for improved mental health services, both locally and transnationally.

By leveraging multimedia tools, youth gain skills to create impactful content for advocacy, while transnational cooperation ensures the connection of young people across borders to address shared mental health concerns. Our project's structure includes research, training, filmmaking, local and international youth exchanges, and advocacy campaigns, all designed to foster active participation and long-term collaboration. This initiative seeks to not only address the immediate needs in mental health but also build a foundation for future youth-led initiatives.

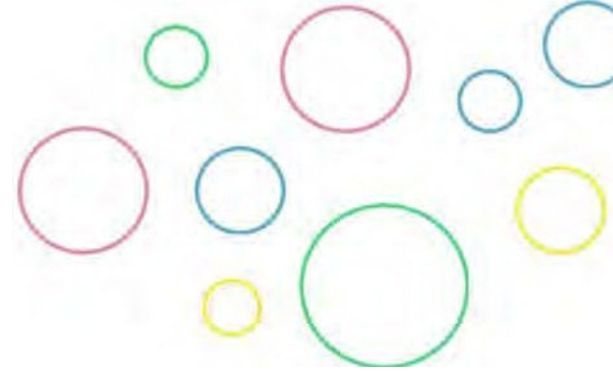
A comprehensive research initiative was conducted across Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, and Spain, focusing on youth perspectives on mental health. Each country gathered primary and secondary data, producing both localized and transnational findings. Local events, such as round tables, were held to discuss and validate these results with stakeholders, including young people and youth workers. The culmination of these discussions led to a transnational seminar in Bulgaria, where new methods and solutions were developed. All findings were systematically compiled into national and transnational reports, aimed at shaping youth mental health advocacy and policies. Their results are summarized here.

This integrated research is part of Project's Working package 2 - Research of the Mental health issues understanding from the youth work perspective within all countries of the consortium.



M TAP, OR

roJec partners



Association Svetlost, Serbia is the leading organization in this project. It is dedicated to the growth of positive and creative capacities of young people. Multimedia, art, and culture are common tools Svetlost use in their activities for communication, education, and action with young people.



Udruga **Studio B**

Studio B, Croatia aims to achieve balanced development of the local community as well as the development of civil society. The association strives to promote and improve the rights of young people as well as increase the quality of activities for young people by increasing their level of information.



Association Europa 2020, Spain works to promote youth participation in youth programs, training, education, culture, sports and participation in the European Union and in the public life of their community.



Mesa Local de la Juventud, Spain works to support, consult, develop and implement social, cultural and educational projects with a national and international dimension, to empower initiatives and organisations, in the local community, mainly addressed to youth.



The main goal of Re-Act, Bulgaria is to qualitatively change the living conditions and the opportunities for professional realization and personal development of the socially disadvantaged children and youth placed under institutional or foster care.

Kulturlife

The mission of the youth NGO Kulturlife, Germany is the facilitation and dissemination of Global Learning as a building block of a peaceful and prosperous living together in a globalized world. Kulturlife specializes in all fields of intercultural communication.



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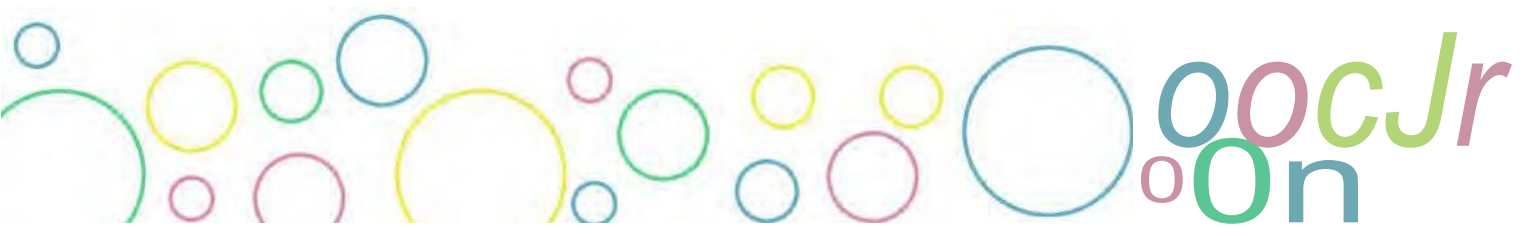
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