

Inequalities in the access of young people to information and support services

Introduction

Young men and women are the future of European societies. However, there are concerns at EU and national levels that the combined stresses from school, expectations from parents, and peer and societal pressures can create challenging transitions to adulthood and have a long-lasting impact. There are also concerns about inequalities of opportunities and resources, including those for coping with social or health problems. To reduce inequalities, ensuring access to key services is vital.

This report sets out to review inequalities in young people's access to information and support services and how these inequalities can be overcome. It focuses on the 12–24 age group; where possible, information is provided separately for ages 12–17 and 18–24.

Policy context

In May 2018 the European Commission proposed a new framework for cooperation on youth for the period 2019–2027, which emphasises partnership and cross-sectoral work. The strategy points to cooperation between schools, youth workers, health professionals and sports organisations to ensure better access to opportunities.

The importance of public services is highlighted in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which includes a focus on using services to support education, training and lifelong learning, equal opportunities, gender equality and active support to employment.

Key findings

Issues around mental well-being affect many young people in Europe. Data for 2016 show that 14% of Europeans aged 18–24 were at risk of depression. Young people in Sweden were most at risk of depression, followed by those in Estonia, Malta, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). The proportion of young people who are chronically depressed is lower, but still of great concern. Data for 2014

show that 4% of Europeans aged 15–24 were chronically depressed. The highest rates were in Ireland (12%), followed by Finland (11%), Sweden (10%) and Germany (9%).

Socioeconomic status has a strong impact on whether young people are at risk of depression. Those living in households in the lowest income quartile are more likely to be at risk. There is also a strong gender dimension to issues of mental health, with young women (15–24 years) being more prone to depression.

The incidence of both bullying and cyberbullying are on the rise in several countries, with the highest prevalence in the Baltic states and the French-speaking community in Belgium.

Given that issues around health and mental well-being are among the most prominent problems affecting young people, access to relevant services is key to addressing associated risks. Yet a significant proportion of young people have difficulties in accessing services. Regarding health care, the most important access issues are delays in getting an appointment and long waiting times on the day.

There are considerable inequalities among young people in Europe in terms of accessing healthcare. The most obvious differences can be seen by country. For example, cost is a problem for nearly three-quarters of those aged 18–24 in Cyprus. In Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Latvia and the UK, deterioration was reported on most dimensions of access between 2011 and 2016, while in Italy and Slovakia some improvements can be seen. Overall, in the EU, young people with disability or chronic illness are more likely to report difficulties in accessing healthcare – especially in terms of delays, waiting time and finding time to get to the doctor.

Some success factors underpinning efforts to reduce inequalities in access include:

- adaptability – services and professionals need to adopt new tools in line with trends among young people
- guidance – some young people may not be in a position to immediately know what type of service they need

- high degree of knowledge of and familiarity with the issues of concern to young people
- empathy with young people and an understanding of their needs, which translates into greater involvement of young people themselves as service providers through, for example, peer-to-peer support

Policy pointers

Policy pointers for service providers

Service providers should:

- respect and protect the privacy of young people needing help (as well as the privacy of parents)
- consider the differences among young people and tailor services to individual situations
- take into account emerging issues such as cyberbullying and rising levels of homelessness
- consider going beyond a simple concept of 'hard to reach' and invest in understanding the causes of inequalities in access to services in order to provide solutions
- be flexible, without putting unnecessary pressure on young people to use certain services for further referrals
- involve young people as a potential gateway to others, particularly those who are more difficult to reach

Policy pointers for policymakers

Policymakers should:

- ensure the availability of a network of services to cater for the social and health needs of young people, with the help of public and non-governmental providers that have the competencies and experience to deliver such services

- examine young people's environments at home and in school so new and emerging risks, such as rising levels of cyberbullying, can be detected early
- promote closer cooperation between mainstream services and schools to provide more school-based interventions: for example, around mental health issues (understanding of mental health disorders, mental health literacy)
- put in place and support initiatives grounded in national programmes to improve the coverage and quality of social and health services for young people
- when establishing eligibility criteria for services and allowances, pay attention to the age range 12–17 (who are covered by child protection policies) without forgetting those aged 18–24 (or even up to age 29)

Policy pointers for the EU

The EU should:

- through its Youth Strategy, explicitly mainstream youth into the European Pillar of Social Rights and related initiatives – in relation to employment and education, and in terms of social protection and access to essential services
- support the provision of more comparative data on access to social and health services in the Member States
- promote and support research on the causes and consequences of inequalities between young people in their experience of health and social problems and access to services as well as on the impact of various initiatives to increase access
- provide budget to organisations that facilitate access to information and support for young people beyond the mainstream environment, especially social enterprises or non-governmental organisations engaged with or providing services

Further information

The report *Inequalities in the access of young people to information and support services* is available at <http://eurofound.link/ef19041>

Research manager: Anna Ludwinek

information@eurofound.europa.eu