

The State of Children in the European Union 2024
Addressing the needs and rights of the EU's youngest generation
POLICY BRIEF 2: Child and adolescent mental health

Summary

- Globally, almost one billion people are living with a mental health condition, including more than one in seven adolescents.
- 48% of all mental health conditions globally manifest by age 18, yet many cases remain undetected and untreated.
- The risk of poor mental health during childhood and adolescence is linked to factors such as exposure to violence, bullying, discrimination, conflict and displacement, and poverty.
- The protracted war in Ukraine and associated displacement has had enormous consequences on the mental health of millions of children and caregivers.
- Poor mental health is hugely damaging and costly for both individuals and societies. Investment in mental health services remains small compared to physical health services.
- There is a need to tackle the root causes of mental health problems through prevention initiatives and the promotion of positive mental health and well-being.
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes children's right to "the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health", including mental health.
- Barriers to access include insufficient availability of services and trained providers, long waiting lists, high costs, poor coordination across sectors, as well as stigma, feelings of fear or shame, and low mental health literacy (among both youth and their caregivers) which may discourage help seeking.

Data

- Data on children's access to services are limited, but evidence indicates that, in 2022, almost half of young adults (18 to 29) had unmet mental health care needs.
- Estimates suggest that around 11.2 million (13%) of children and young people aged 19 and younger in the EU suffer from a mental health condition.
- The rates increase with age from around 2% of children under the age of 5 to around 19% of young people aged 15 to 19.
- In total around 5.9 million males and 5.3 million females up to the age of 19 have mental health conditions. Rates are higher for males than females up to the age of 14 and a little higher for females than males in the 15 to 19 age group.
- Among those aged 15 to 19, approximately 8% suffer from anxiety and 4% from depression. Rates for both conditions are higher in this age group for females (9.6% and 4.6% respectively) than for males (5.5% and 2.6% respectively).
- Multiple studies suggest that mental health problems among European youth increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The longer-term impact of the pandemic on child and adolescent mental health is yet to be determined.

Suicide

- Suicide is the second most common cause of death (after traffic accidents) among young people aged 15 to 19 in the EU, accounting for approximately one in six (17%) of deaths. In 2020, approximately 931 young people died by suicide in the EU, equivalent to the loss of around 18 lives per week.
- The prevalence of suicide has decreased over time in the EU, with 20% fewer suicides in 2020 in comparison with 2011.
- Males are more likely to die by suicide than females. Approximately 70% of young people aged 15 to 19 in the EU who die by suicide are male. However, numbers for suicides of males are falling, while those for females are stable.

Life satisfaction

- Across 25 countries in the EU for which data are available, just under 71% of children aged 15 years old reported high life satisfaction (a self-rated score of more than 5 out of 10) in 2022.
- Rates of high life satisfaction ranged from around 87% in the Netherlands to around 64% in Malta and Poland.
- A higher proportion of males (78%) than females (64%) reported high life satisfaction.
- Levels of high life satisfaction among 15-year-olds fell from around 74% in 2018 to 69% in 2022 across 23 countries for which data are available.
- This equates to over 220,000 fewer children aged 15 in 23 EU countries having high life satisfaction in 2022 than in 2018.

What can the EU do to improve child and adolescent mental health?

UNICEF welcomes the consistent and increasing attention of the EU to the mental health agenda in recent years, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Commission's Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health, adopted in June 2023, is a commendable step in the right direction. But now is the time for the European Commission to build on this work with the creation of a Mental Health Strategy and to allocate associated funding. UNICEF therefore echoes the main calls of the [European Parliament's first ever report on mental health](#), adopted in December 2023. The EU must ensure that the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents remains high on the political agenda in 2024-29.

More specifically, UNICEF is calling for:

1. **A comprehensive, multi-sectoral Mental Health Strategy** from the European Commission, based on socio-ecological, inclusive and human rights approaches which would steer national level work by requiring member States to develop and implement national action plans.
2. **Increased EU funds for actions on mental health**, with a focus on prevention, early intervention and quality, age-appropriate, community-based mental health services for children, adolescents and their caregivers.
3. **The European Child Guarantee must be fully implemented.**
4. **Mainstream mental health in all EU policies** – both internal and external.
5. **Raise awareness and tackle stigma.**
6. **Improve the evidence base.**