

YOUTH WELL-BEING DURING CRISES:

How to Improve Young People's Resilience Through Civic Engagement

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Executive Summary

Civic engagement is a powerful tool boosting youth well-being: it can help protect mental health, decrease vulnerability of disadvantaged youth and reinforce their role in communities in managing and dealing with crisis. Given its key role in ameliorating youth's condition, institutions should be supported in creating or strengthening programmes that encourage young people to take actions related to active citizenship. This becomes particularly important when facing diverse types of crises; such as a pandemic, socio-political insecurity or natural disaster.

Key Messages and Recommendations

Challenge: Dealing with and managing emergency situations require a high level of involvement by and social cohesion of community members. A country's level of democratization and the readiness for participation of its citizens, especially of the youth, can determine the level of response in such crises.


Recommendation 1: Raise awareness on benefits of civic engagement

Recommendation 2: Encourage youth to be civically engaged in crisis situations

Recommendation 3: Promote active citizenship among disadvantaged youth

Recommendation 4: Involve youth in developing equity policies and crisis management

Recommendation 5: Evaluate actions directed to promote civic engagement in crisis situations



New Study: “Academic Student’s Life and Engagement During COVID-19 Outbreak” (Marciniak et al., 2022)

This research aimed at investigating the effects of civic engagement during the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study defines civic engagement as taking action (during the year preceding the survey) in dimensions, such as volunteering, donation, charity, cooperation, activism, and socio-political participation (e.g., voting). The research was conducted in May-July 2021 among Polish (N=596), Croatian (N=386), and Lithuanian (N=379) university students. The study sample (N=1362) reflected the essential demographic characteristics of university students, such as gender (female: N=921; male: N=388) and age (M = 22.2).

Civic Engagement and Youth’s Well-Being

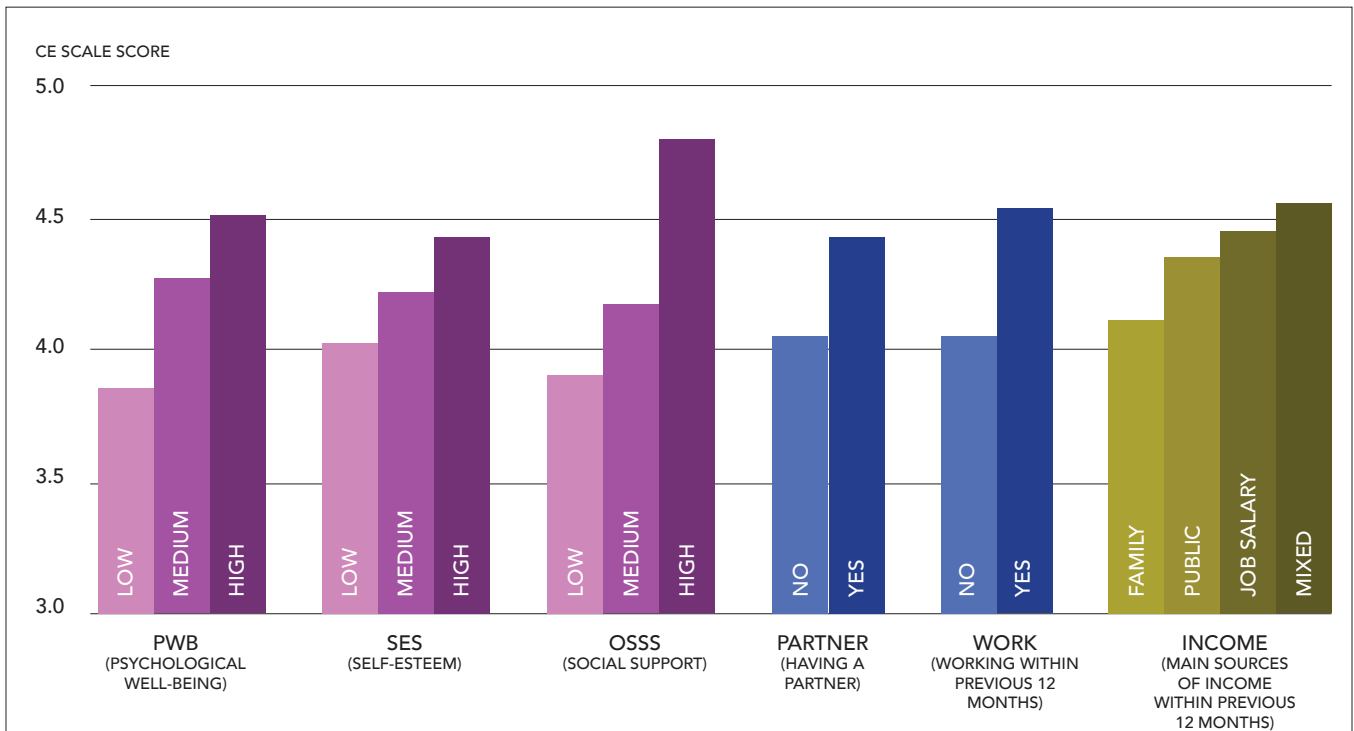
For several decades, socio-cultural researchers have been observing the deterioration of civic engagement in countries worldwide. Extensive studies have confirmed citizens’ apathy and specific democratization processes in post-Communist countries (in comparison to Western Europe countries). Same studies also document discrepancies in civic participation levels between different social groups, such as based on gender, residence, and socioeconomic status. Given the protective role civic engagement plays on youth’s mental health and overall well-being (psychological, social, physical, career etc.), OECD and EU member countries develop programmes to support the development of civil society, democratisation processes and youth’s civic engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that level of civic engagement determines a society’s readiness for action, which informs its ability to deal with a crisis¹.

¹ Denny E., Crisis, Resilience, and Civic Engagement: Pandemic-Era Census Completion, “Perspectives on Politics” 2022, 20(2), 577-594, doi:10.1017/S1537592721002024

“Crisis engagement makes communities feel heard, [...] it helps governments tap into the collective intelligence, [...] it builds buy-in for new policy decisions”

[Ilona Lodewijckx, CitizenLab’s Platform, 2021]

Chart 1: The level of civic engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and chosen characteristics of academic students



Source: Marciniak et al., 2022

CE SCALE SCORE: the Civic Engagement Scale consists of 10 items that students indicated in which of the activities they were involved (min. score = 0, max. = 10, M = 4.2), the bars in figure illustrate the average CE Scale score by students' characteristics

PWB (measured with the PWB Ryff's Scale), **SES** (Rosenberg's Scale), **OSSS** (Oslo Social Support Scale): **LOWs** = scores in the bottom 25%; **HIGHs** = scores in the top 25%; **MEDIUMs** = moderate scores;

PARTNER: **NO** = being single, not having a partner, **YES**= being married, in cohabitation, having partner, boyfriend, girlfriend;

WORK: **NO** = not working, **YES** = working (full time, part time, summer job);

INCOME = main source of income: **FAMILY** (family members, relatives, partner); **PUBLIC** (NGOs, scientific and social scholarships), **JOB SALARY** (current salary or savings from previous salaries), **MIXED** (not possible to indicate main income source)

Results: The university students with highest level of civic engagement during critical situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, were the ones who had the highest level of psychological well-being, self-esteem and social support. The level of civic engagement was higher among young people who were: working (compared to unemployed), having a partner (compared to single), and indicating mixed sources or a job salary as their main source of income (compared to those indicating family). All the relations were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Civic engagement can be considered as having the potential to be a protective factor for youth overall well-being during a pandemic and other crises. Therefore, it is worth encouraging youth, especially the vulnerable group, to take prosocial, civic, and community actions in usual circumstances and even more in times of crisis.

Recommendations

Offer strategies focusing on sustaining and developing the actions already taken by the EU and member countries under normal circumstances. In addition, they might be implemented in crises by varying degrees of government involvement. Education and social institutions could play a crucial role in these processes. Reaching professionals from various occupational (including teachers, educators, healthcare specialists and social workers) is also crucial for success.

Recommendation 1:

Raise awareness on benefits of civic engagement

Raise awareness of the positive relationship between the level of civic engagement of young people, their psychological and social well-being, and their socioeconomic status, with various professionals.

Recommendation 2:

Encourage youth to be civically engaged in crisis situations

Encourage youth to participate in civic and community actions particularly when in emergency situations. The engagement has the potential to prevent the decline in the level of their overall well-being and support social cohesion due to critical life experiences.

Recommendation 3:

Promote active citizenship among disadvantaged youth

Emphasise promoting civic engagement among disadvantaged youth, who are less resistant to the effects of a crisis. Disadvantaged youth, for example, unemployed, with low-level of socioeconomic status, with lower level of social support, can benefit significantly from civic participation and has an impact on their well-being.

Recommendation 4:

Involve youth in developing equity policies and crisis management

Integrate civic engagement into a holistic approach toward youth, equity policies and crisis management. Involve young people in creating programmes and projects addressing engagement to respect youth perspectives and needs of (un)willingness to be active citizens.

Recommendation 5:

Evaluate actions directed to promote civic engagement in crisis situations

Introduce mentoring, monitoring and evaluation into agendas and programmes promoting civic engagement, especially in crises. Provide the research in showing the relationship between youth civic engagement and their well-being and socioeconomic status.

More information

The policy brief is based on the article: Marciniak M., Jaskulska S., Gasparovic S., Janiūnaitė B., Horbačasienė J., Glavak Tkalić R., The Psychological Well-Being and Civic Engagement of Polish, Croatian and Lithuanian Academic Students during COVID-19 Outbreak, "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health" 2022, 19(18), 11202, doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191811202).

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