



Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Study of the impact of Covid-19 on
youth in the Western Balkans

**Study report: Bosnia and
Herzegovina**

November 2021



Acknowledgements

Special thanks to all of the young people who took time to participate in **Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close** study and share their views, opinions, and experience. Above all, thanks to ninety bright-eyed, imaginative and promising young people across the six Western Balkan countries who helped us to shape this research.

Deep Dive: Ana Vlastelica, Dubravka Krstic, Aleksandra Buljugic, Ivan Mehmedovic

Researchers: regional study PhD Marija Babovic; country studies: PhD Marija Topuzovska Latkovikj, PhD Milos Damjanovic, MA Olga Mitrovic, MA Milan Gnjudic

Research advisors: PhD Jasmina Kijevcanin, MA Gramos Surkishi

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the British Council. Any errors and omissions remain our own.

Content

Foreword	5
Report overview	6
Methodology and approach	7
Youth livelihoods and employment during the pandemic	13
Impacts on education	17
Young people's views about impacts on behaviour and mental well-being	21
Young people's views about impacts on society and social relations	25
Trust in and perceptions of media coverage during the crisis	29
Young people's views on government's response to the crisis	32
Future outlook: hopes, concerns, and aspirations	35

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1a: Personal income during the pandemic	14
Figure 1b: Financial abilities during the pandemic	14
Figure 2: Job loss during and due to Covid-19	15
Figure 3: Work-related challenges	16
Figure 4: Education and Covid-19	18
Figure 5: Future skills	19
Figure 6: Impact of Covid 19 on behaviour/practices	22
Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing	23
Figure 8a: Covid-19 infection rate	24
Figure 8a: Covid-19 infection rate	24
Figure 9: Impact of Covid-19 on society	27
Figure 10: Trust in media	30
Figure 11: Assessment of media reporting	31
Figure 12: Attitudes towards the government's crisis response	33
Figure 13: Government measures and youth	34
Figure 14: Impact of Covid-19 over the next three years	36
Figure 15: Impact of Covid 19 on future behaviours/practices	37
Figure 16: Youth-specific measures	38



Foreword

We are delighted to introduce **Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close.**

The world has been a particularly unwelcoming and unfair place for younger generations in 2020-21, with the Covid-19 pandemic interrupting their development, education, employment, and social life at a scale never seen before. Young people in the six Western Balkan countries are not an exception. To protect the most vulnerable segments of societies across the Western Balkan region, we all asked young people to sacrifice their dreams and ambitions. We asked them to give up on gaining new knowledge and skills, advancing their careers, travelling abroad and meeting new cultures, experiencing the dating scene, and seeking lifelong partners. It made their lives sometimes physically painful, and most of all hurtful to the soul: and we need to listen. This collection of reports is the British Council's effort to listen, report young people's thoughts, challenges, concerns, and suggest a call for action.

This research shows the heavy toll that the pandemic has wrought on young people in the Western Balkans. It reports the magnitude of the pandemic's adverse impacts on the youth's access to and quality of education, livelihoods and employment, mental health, social relations, and their future outlook. Additionally, the research found that negative impacts were unevenly distributed across diverse and complex youth populations in the Western Balkans. Those segments of the youth population who had already been disadvantaged before the pandemic were hit even harder by it.

The research findings indicate the strong resilience of youth in the Western Balkan region. Their core personal network consisting of family, friends, and romantic partners has persevered throughout the pandemic, as a significant share of them reported that those relationships have improved. Moreover, most of them managed to adjust to an increasingly online world, and they used the internet not only to keep in touch with people but also to make new acquaintances. One of the young research participants noted that it might be that we were socially distant but digitally close.

A silver lining in the research is youth's attitudes towards the environment. The overwhelming majority of young people across the region said that the pandemic made them more aware of climate change challenges. Moreover, two-thirds of them reported starting to practise environmentally friendly behaviour as a result of the pandemic; this is a great source of hope for the challenges to come.

All these findings are fascinating, and we hope they will be useful to stakeholders across the Western Balkans, the UK and beyond. The research is also vital for the British Council, and it will inform and guide our work for the years ahead.

Our role is to build connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and the Western Balkans through arts and culture, education and the English language. A central objective for us is to design and run programmes that meet the needs and aspirations of young people, and support their personal, social and economic development, and promote open and inclusive societies. The British Council's work in the Western Balkan countries always starts with partnerships and results in mutually beneficial outcomes. This report helps us respond precisely to what we hear from those we want to connect with the most.

The report provides a snapshot of a distinct period of the Covid-19 pandemic through the eyes of young people. It is a testimony to the most extraordinary year most of us will ever live through. I would like to thank the research team, who worked hard to bring this report to you. Above all, I would like to thank ninety bright-eyed, imaginative and promising young people across the six Western Balkan countries who helped us shape this research.

I hope you enjoy this report as much as I have. What it teaches us will echo in our work and lives in the months and years to come.

Milan Gnjidić

Head of Education, Society and Governance Contracts, Western Balkans



Report overview

The pandemic of Covid-19 has profoundly changed realities worldwide, but the ways it has affected various population groups are diverse. It is known that young people (aged 18-29) are in a fragile position in societies as this life stage is marked by multiple transitions in their course of life: from education to the labour market, from living with parents to independent living or starting their own family. Even in pre-Covid-19 social contexts, these transitions were coupled with a less favourable socio-economic position of young people (compared to older age groups), manifested through lower and unsecure or low paid employment.

In order to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced different aspects of life and the socioeconomic position of young people, the British Council conducted a study in six Western Balkan countries. This report is part of this study and presents key findings about the impacts of the pandemic on young people in Montenegro. The report is structured as follows:

The methodology and approach section provides an overview of the study background, its purposes and the study development process. It describes the main quantitative and qualitative methods used in collecting and analysing data.

Section one, **Impacts on youth livelihoods and employment**, examines the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on the economic standing of young people. It starts by exploring the impacts on young people's income and ability to pay for basic expenses during the pandemic. It then examines adverse pandemics' consequences on job loss and labor market opportunities. Finally, it extends the analysis to changes in the "world of work."

Section two, **Impacts on education**, explores students' personal experience of education during the pandemic. It examines four broad thematic areas: access to education, quality of education, social aspects of educational experience, and skills needed for the post-Covid future.

Section three, **Impact on mental wellbeing and behaviours**, looks at mental health and wellbeing dimensions of the young people's experiences of the pandemic. It starts by examining changes in young people's behavioral patterns. It then looks at the pandemic's impacts on young people's feelings.

This is followed by reviewing young people's coping strategies for preserving mental wellbeing and utilizing professional mental health support during the pandemic.

Section four, **Young people's views on society and social relations** explores youth views on social issues of greatest importance to them during the pandemic. It starts with exploring young people's opinions of the pandemic's impact on their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. It then turns to their experience of discrimination and violence during the pandemic. It is followed by exploring young people's views on broader social issues and their social activism.

Section five, **Trust in and perceptions of media coverage during the crisis** examines young people's trust in media and their views about the media coverage of the pandemic. First, it looks at young people's Covid-19 information sources and confidence in specific media sources related to Covid-19 information. It then explores the assessment of media coverage of Covid-19 by young people.

Section six, **Young people's views on the government's response to the crisis** examine the extent to which young people have supported the government's handling of the crisis. It starts by looking at the support of three key policies: lockdown measures, public health guidelines (i.e., wearing masks), and mandatory immunization. It then explores the assessment of government measures from the standpoint of young people's needs, concerns, and interests during the pandemic.

Section seven, **Future outlook: hopes, concerns, and aspirations**, looks at the future. First, it covers youth's expectations on the impact of the pandemic on their long-term and short-term future. Then, it looks at the expected changes in their behavioral patterns/practices. Finally, it concludes with a list of government measures that young people think would benefit them the most to deal with the pandemic's negative impact.



Methodology and approach

Study background

Covid Screenagers: Socially Distant, Digitally Close is a study that amplifies the voices of 7,271 young people between the ages of 18 and 29 who have lived through the Covid-19 pandemic in six countries in the Western Balkan region (Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). The study tells the story of how the pandemic has had an adverse impact on so many aspects of young people's lives—their education, employment and livelihoods, mental well-being, family and partnership relations, broader social relations, and their future. It gives an account of their feelings, their concerns, but also their hopes and aspirations.

The study was conducted through a genuinely youth-inclusive and participatory approach involving young people in the early stages of the study design and later in the validation and analysis phases. It was also inclusive in the survey stage by conducting national representative surveys in all six Western Balkan countries, with diverse ethnic and socioeconomic segments of the young population.

Purpose of the study

The British Council initiated this study based on our belief that it is essential to listen to and engage with young people, particularly in difficult times. The current pandemic is unprecedented in recent history, and young people have clearly been greatly affected by it in areas of education, employment, mobility, mental health, etc.

At the heart of this study is a commitment to exploring the youth voice and choice, with a view to achieving three main aims:

1. Understanding and examining the impact of the Covid-19 on young people's lives, with a focus on livelihoods and employment, education, health and mental health, social relations, trust in media and government, and their future outlook.
2. Amplifying youth voices by putting their views and ideas in the centre.
3. Supporting better youth policymaking during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period.

Covering the whole Western Balkan region, we aimed to develop a comparative approach that would show similarities among youth in the region. Moreover, we hope that the differences and disparities shown in the report will help governments, donors, and NGOs have a more nuanced and tailored approach to the young population, responding effectively to the needs of different subgroups in the post-pandemic period.

Methodology

Our approach was iterative and multimethod, with the research taking place over three key phases:

First phase: Participatory approach to study design

From the very beginning of this study, our idea was to make this research led by youth and for youth. With this in mind, we initiated an online call titled “Share your Covid story” and invited young people aged 18-29 to share video or written submissions by answering the following questions: 1) How has Covid-19 impacted your life? ; 2) How is Covid-19 going to shape your future? ; and 3) How do you see the world after Covid-19?. In total, 455 people responded to the call, out of which 248 answers were eligible. Among the respondents, 71 per cent were female and 29 per cent were male. The youngest respondent was 18 years old and the oldest was 29 years old. The distribution of respondents per country was as follows: Albania (35), BiH (16), Kosovo (25), Montenegro (98), North Macedonia (23), and Serbia (51). Respondents came from 76 different municipalities across the Western Balkans.

Upon submission, a group of researchers carried out an analysis of the qualitative data using grounded theory to identify the main topics of concern for young people. During this stage, we identified 15 young people per country among the respondents (in total 90), with the aim of working with them to design the survey questionnaire. In this regard, during November 2020, the topics of concern for young people identified by the qualitative analysis were discussed in gender-balanced focus groups with selected participants. Two focus groups in each country were conducted by three facilitators (12 focus groups in total). As a result of the great enthusiasm

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, Digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

and devotion of selected participants, a survey questionnaire was designed.

Second phase: Quantitative survey

As a result of Phase 1, the recruited survey agency Deep Dive reviewed the designed survey questionnaire to ensure its accuracy and appropriateness to the specific national contexts of each Western Balkan country. Nationally representative surveys of young people aged 18-29 were conducted in all six Western Balkan countries. The sample collected across the Western Balkan countries was 7,271 persons, with approximately 1,200 interviews each in Albania, BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, with a margin of error ± 3.1 per cent confidence interval level of 95 per cent (Table 1).

Table 1: Achieved sample across the six Western Balkan countries

Albania	1172
Bosnia & Herzegovina	1295
Kosovo	1261
Montenegro	1156
North Macedonia	1155
Serbia	1232
Total sample	7271

The survey represents the views of a diverse range of respondents, gender balanced, living across different geographies (urban and rural) and with varying levels of education and income. The methodology used for the collection of data was in-person Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI), whereby the interviewer used an electronic device to record the responses. Data collection took place between January 8 and February 15, 2021. Having in mind that data collection took place during the pandemic, special attention was given to the survey participants, in line with the national public health guidelines and the British Council best practices.

The sample was created using a standard 3-stage stratified sample (geographical region/settlement type/household). Households were selected by the random route technique starting from the given address and identifying household members aged 18 to 29 years old. In the case of two or more qualified respondents per household, the 'next birthday method' was applied.

One of the main aims of the research project was to understand the challenges experienced by young people who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk: to these ends, the study emphasizes harder-to-reach segments of the population. Where necessary, sample boosts were made to include these groups.

Hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups included in this survey were as follows:

- largest national minorities in each of the countries (up to the sample of a minimum of 100 respondents per ethnic group in each country)
- young people studying abroad (up to the sample of a minimum of 30 respondents in each country)
- young people with disabilities (up to the sample of a minimum of 30 respondents in each country)
- NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Since this group is large enough in all countries, there was no need for additional interviews in any of the countries.

Third phase: Qualitative analysis

The study adopted two qualitative approaches during this phase: focus group discussions with young people selected by the local partner Deep Dive and qualitative follow-ups with young people who participated in the survey design back in October 2020. These approaches allowed the study to have rigorous insight, verify and contextualize the findings from the quantitative phase, and gain a more in-depth understanding of the lives of youth during the pandemic. Both focus groups and qualitative follow-ups were conducted online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and moderated by highly trained moderators with skills in discussing sensitive topics with young people and facilitating group discussions, including in online environments.

Focus groups delivered by Deep Dive were conducted during March 2021. Local partners recruited six young people per country to participate in focus groups that lasted two hours. In total, six focus groups were organized with a total of 36 participants. To obtain insights into different segments of the youth population, the composition of focus groups varied across the countries. In BiH and Albania focus groups' participants were students of the final year of secondary education (high school or vocational school) between the ages of 18 and 20. In Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia, participants of focus groups were between the ages of 18 and 29, and they were all unemployed but looking for a job. Three participants lost their jobs during the pandemic, while the other three lost their jobs before the pandemic. Finally, in the Serbia focus group, participants were between the ages of 23-29 and were students expecting to graduate soon (BA or MA).

Qualitative follow-ups were organized during the first half of March. In total, four focus groups were conducted, each lasting one hour, with a combined total of 24 participants who took part in the survey design.



Screenagers

Bosnia & Herzegovina



To whom we spoke



Main Sample:
1000

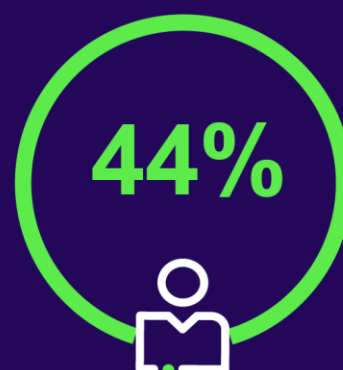
Gender



Age



18 – 24 years old



25 – 29 years old

Settlement type

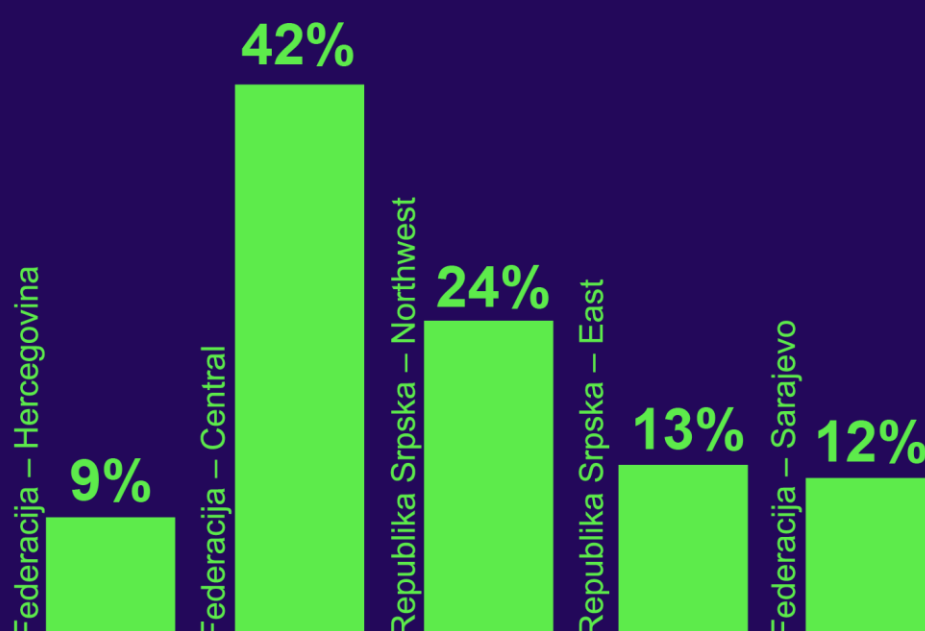


Urban



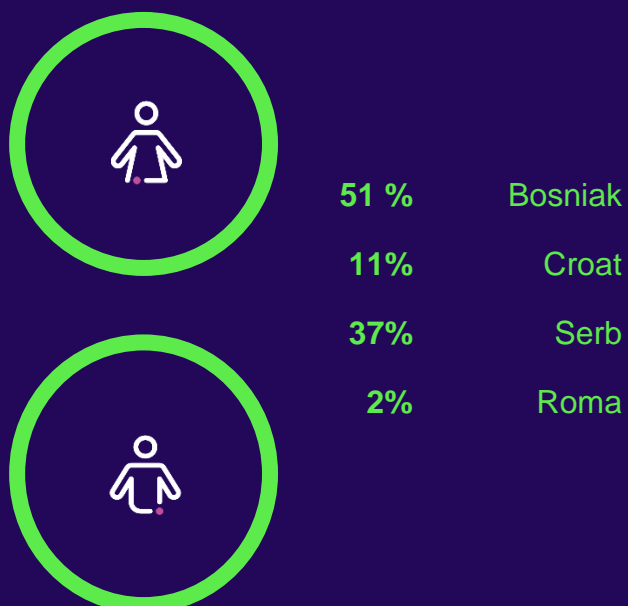
Rural

Region



For the purpose of sample stratification we used five geographical regions as follows:
Federation Sarajevo (Canton Sarajevo); **Federation Central** (Unsko-sanski, Posavski, Tuzlanski, Zenicko-dobojski, Sednjobosanski, Podrnjski, and Canton 10); **Federation Herzegovina** (Hercegovačko-neretvanski, Zapadno-hercegovački Canton); Northwest Republika Srpska (region Banja Luka, Prijedor, Doboj, Brcko District) Northeast Republika Srpska (region Bijeljina, Rogatica, Foca, Trebinje

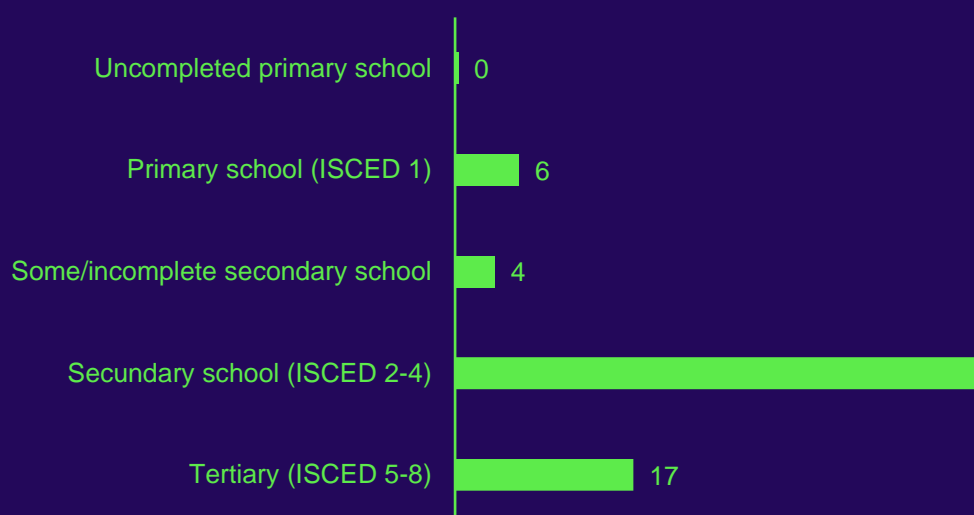
Ethnicity



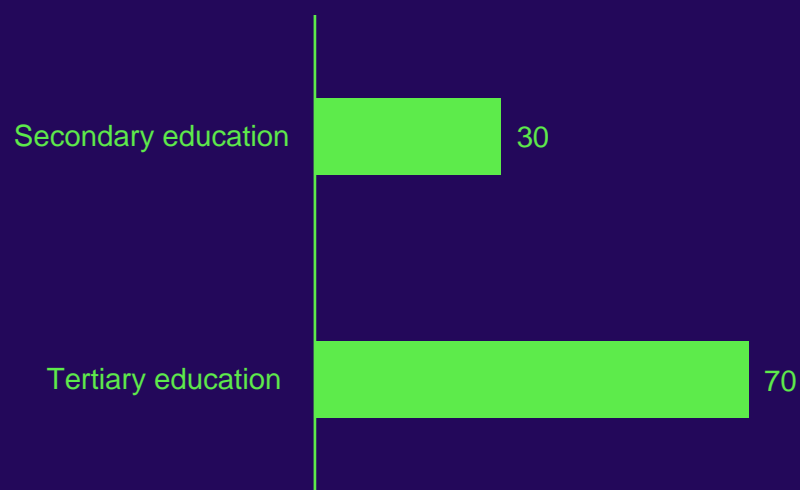
Activity status



Highest completed education



Student status (n=322)



Boost Sample

Roma	100
Bosniaks	55
Serbs	80
Youth study abroad	26
Youth with disabilities	29
NEETS	90



Total Sample

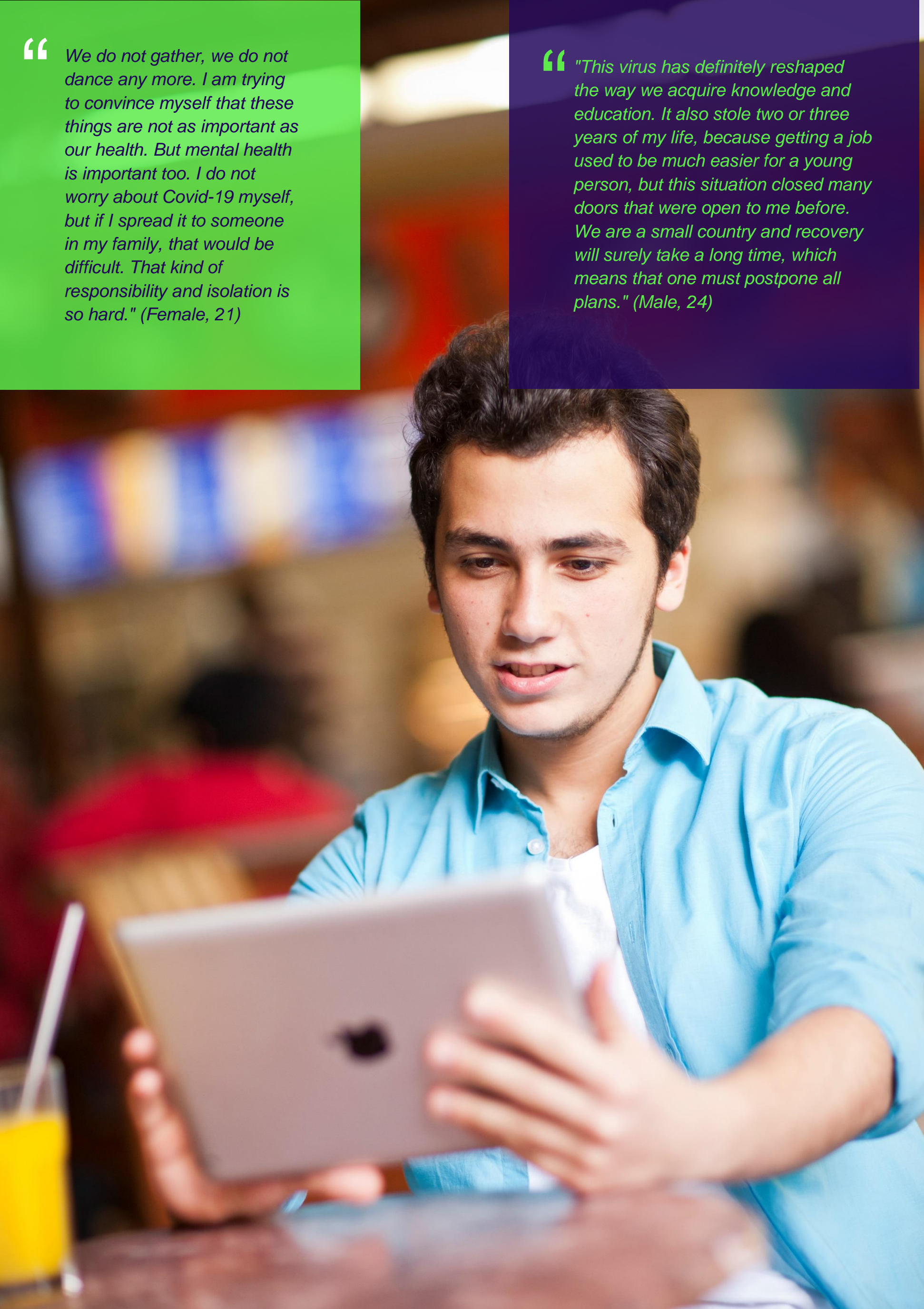
1295

“

We do not gather, we do not dance any more. I am trying to convince myself that these things are not as important as our health. But mental health is important too. I do not worry about Covid-19 myself, but if I spread it to someone in my family, that would be difficult. That kind of responsibility and isolation is so hard." (Female, 21)

“

"This virus has definitely reshaped the way we acquire knowledge and education. It also stole two or three years of my life, because getting a job used to be much easier for a young person, but this situation closed many doors that were open to me before. We are a small country and recovery will surely take a long time, which means that one must postpone all plans." (Male, 24)



YOUTH LIVELIHOODS AND EMPLOYMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

“ Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina have borne off the impacts of Covid-19 containment measures, as they experienced economic hardships. Nearly one in two young people in BiH faced either income decline or struggled to pay for basic goods and services or both. Roughly, one in two unemployed young people with previous work experience lost their jobs during the pandemic, while almost one in three employed respondents reported a salary decrease (28 per cent).

Economic hardships were unevenly distributed across the sociodemographic groups, amplifying further pre-existing inequalities based on education, employment status, and living area. The most vulnerable segments of youth population such as Roma and those not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) were hit even harder by economic hardships brought on by the pandemic.

Backdrop

Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) faced the pandemic as one of the youth populations with the highest unemployment rate worldwide. According to the World Bank data, the unemployment rate of youth aged 18-24 in BiH reached a staggering 63 per cent in 2015; it declined to 34 per cent in the latest recorded period (2019),¹ due to, among other factors, the extremely high emigration rate from the country². Moreover, prior to the pandemic, a higher incidence of in-work poverty was recorded among young workers aged 18–24 (31.4 per cent), compared to other age groups.³ The country's economy is estimated to have shrunk by 4.3 per cent in 2020 due to the pandemic,⁴ while the governmental policy measures aimed at tackling the impact of the crisis differed across the BiH's complex political and administrative structures and were either poorly coordinated or lacking. While some general support was provided for the business sector, including salary subsidy schemes, there were no specific measures to protect youth employment.⁵ As a result, the youth (aged 15-24) unemployment rate has risen from 33.8 per cent in 2019 to 36.6 per cent in 2020,⁶ and international organizations such as The International Labor Organization (ILO) and The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) are warning that the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on youth employment in BiH may lead to scarring throughout the population's working life.⁷

¹ World Bank (2020) “Unemployment, youth total (% of total labour force ages 18-24) (modelled ILO estimate) - Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

² Begovic, S et al. (2020). *An investigation of determinants of youth propensity to emigrate from Bosnia and Herzegovina*; Economic Research, vol. 33.

³ European Social Policy Network (2019). *Thematic Report on In-work poverty Bosnia and Herzegovina*.

⁴ World Bank (2021). “*Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, n 19*”

⁵ Regional Cooperation Council (2021). *Study on youth employment in the Western Balkans*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ International Labor Organization (2021), *Covid-19 and the World of Work: Assessment of Employment Impacts and Policy Responses (Bosnia and Herzegovina)*.

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

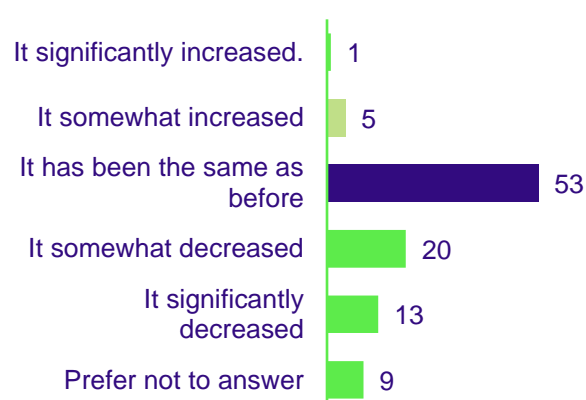
Findings

The pandemic has made youth in BiH poorer disrupting their livelihoods. Nearly one in two young people in BiH (46 per cent) have faced either income⁸ decline or struggled to pay for basic goods and services⁹, or both (**Figure 1a and 1b**). One third of youth (33 per cent) reported income decline, and one fourth reported they found it hard to pay for at least one basic expenses during the pandemic (25 per cent). Furthermore, one in ten young people reported that they were faced with both hardships (11 per cent). This evidence is broadly supported by qualitative data gathered, as focus group participants widely supported the findings and further exemplified them, by stating: *“It was painful watching people around me losing their jobs and struggling to buy food... I was forced to cancel my student apartment due to the lack of funds, which means that I also left some people (landlords) without income. It seemed like everything suddenly stopped.”* (Female, 23)

Economic hardships were unevenly distributed across the subgroups, with a high potential to further deepen pre-existing inequalities based on education, employment status, and living areas. The unemployed and lower educated youth were hit harder by income loss and struggled more to make ends meet, compared to the employed and higher educated segments of the youth population. Rural youth were more likely to experience difficulties financing their studies and paying for medication and healthcare services than urban youth.

Figure 1a: Personal income during Covid-19

How would you describe your personal income during Covid-19 pandemic? Unit: %



⁸ Income sources defined by the survey: salary; alimony; social security benefits; disability income; scholarship; pocket money; something else.

⁹ Basic goods and services: utility bills, medicine and healthcare services, essential food and hygiene products, basic clothes, study.

¹⁰ 199.60 EUR in Obradović, N et al (2019). Thematic Report on In-work poverty Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Figure 1b: Financial consequences of Covid-19

As a result of Covid-19 pandemic, I and my family struggle to? Unit: %



Roma and NEET, who have already suffered from material and social deprivation, were even more adversely impacted by the pandemic. Almost half of Roma and NEETs reported income loss during this period (49 and 44 per cent, respectively). Their average monthly income recorded by this survey was €126 for Roma and €76 for NEETs, which was far below the at-risk of the poverty-risk threshold.¹⁰ This makes them even more deprived of the means for a decent life: over two-thirds of Roma, and over half of NEETs have faced difficulties paying for basic goods and services (67 and 56 per cent, respectively).

Job loss and pay cuts were common occurrences during and due to the pandemic.

More than half of unemployed youth with previous work experience lost their jobs during the pandemic (56 per cent), with 32 percent of them attributing job loss to the pandemic and 24 per cent of them who lost their job during the pandemic but not due to it (**Figure 2**). Geographically speaking, young people in Federation Sarajevo and Federation Herzegovina¹¹ were hit the hardest by employment loss compared to other regions (23 and 29 per cent, respectively). A slightly higher number of unemployed men than women who had previous working experience suffered from job loss due to and during the pandemic (60 vs 51 per cent). This finding was opposed by focus group participants in light of the figures that a greater share of women than men had no work experience (57 vs 43 per cent), as one of them said: *“The finding that women were less affected by Covid-19 workwise is misleading, because they have fewer jobs to start with. The obtained result is a consequence of the traditional roles women still have in our society.”* As for the message this leaves us with, the focus group

¹¹ For the purpose of sample stratification, we used five geographical regions as follows: **Federation Sarajevo** (Canton Sarajevo); **Federation Central** (Unsko-sanski, Posavski, Tuzlanski, Zenicko-dobojski, Sednjobosanski, Podrinski, and Canton 10); **Federation Herzegovina** (Hercegovačko-neretvanski, Zapadno-hercegovački Canton); Northwest Republika Srpska (region Banja Luka, Prijedor, Doboj, Brcko District) Northeast Republika Srpska (region Bijeljina, Rogatica, Foca, Trebinje).

Covid Screenagers

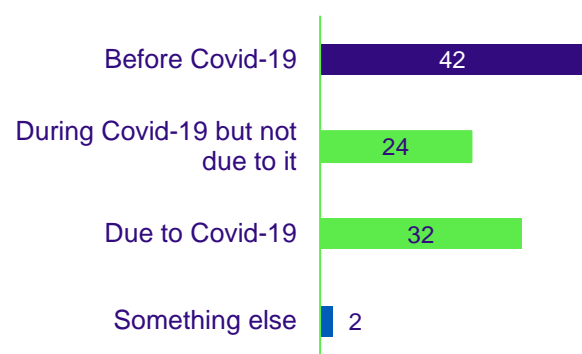
Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

participants were clear: “Something needs to be changed about their [women’s] position in the society.” (Female, 25)

Figure 2: Job loss during and due to Covid-19

You lost your job due to/during a Covid-19 pandemic or before a pandemic? Base: unemployed respondents with previous work experience n=97



Although most of the employed youth stated that their pay stayed unchanged during the pandemic (59 per cent), almost one in three employed respondents reported a salary decrease (28 per cent), while only one in ten reported its increase (9 per cent). Less-educated youth were more likely to be affected by pay cuts than those with higher education. A further examination of pay cuts according to the type of employment shows a strong correlation between seasonal work and pay cuts, suggesting that the youth with the least secure jobs, mostly in informal economy, were most likely to be exposed to pay cuts.

A great number of young people with no job applications imply inactiveness in job seeking and decreased labour market demand. Almost one-third of young people in BiH submitted no job applications in the period of six months prior to the survey (27 per cent), while the rest of respondents applied for a job at least once.¹² In this group, long-term unemployed, female, rural youth and NEETs featured prominently. Four in five young people with no job applications were long-term unemployed (81 per cent), and among them 32 per cent had not applied for a job at all. Twice as many females than males had no job application (34 vs the 18 per cent), while one in four rural young people compared to one in five urban young people experienced the same (31 vs 22 per cent). The situation with zero job applications frequently occurred among the NEET population, too (42 per cent). The comparison among regions indicates a huge difference in job-seeking behaviour, with youth in Federation Sarajevo either being the most active or lucky to be offered more employment opportunities: only 5 per cent of youth in this region had failed to send a single job application. On the other hand, the highest rate of young people

without job applications is found in Federation Herzegovina and Republika Srpska East (43 per cent).

Inactiveness in job seeking due to poor economic prospects recently reported by the World Bank,¹³ coupled with labour market contraction, could explain the great share of youth who did not apply for jobs. The country’s largest job searching portal reported fewer job advertisements in 2020 than in 2019, with the most considerable drop of 72 per cent occurring in April 2020.¹⁴ The sharpest decrease in labour market demand is seen in hospitality and tourism, sales, and manufacturing, while greater demand is recorded in the security sector, non-for-profit organizations, and arts and design.¹⁵ These findings are corroborated by our qualitative research, since the sense of discouragement to actively seek a job was prevalent among focus group participants, particularly those who are still waiting to enter the labour market. They see the labour market situation as very unpromising, characterized by imbalance of supply and demand side, low wages, unfair and non-transparent recruitment practices. Further, they are afraid it will be even more challenging to get first employment in the years to come. Even before the pandemic, young people struggled to get employment without previous work experience or “social connections”, which further perpetuated their unemployment, as described by one focus group participant: “Most employers are looking for 3 years of experience. I recently completed secondary school; I have no experience. I will be doomed to the employment service if I do not have someone to help me with finding a job. Otherwise, I am at risk of being unemployed for years.” (Male, 19)

Widely unchanged work habits during the pandemic have put working youth, particularly those with lower education, at risk of contracting the virus at work. The majority of employed young people were going to the workplace all the time or most of the time (73 and 14 per cent, respectively), while the rest worked remotely all or most of the time (4 and 8 per cent, respectively). More significantly, almost nine out of ten young people with lower education degrees, who are often engaged in client-facing roles, such as hospitality, were continuously going to the workplace, thus being exposed to the risk of infection more than their higher-educated peers. Furthermore, young people in rural areas more commonly went to workplace than those living in urban areas (81 and 67 per cent, respectively).

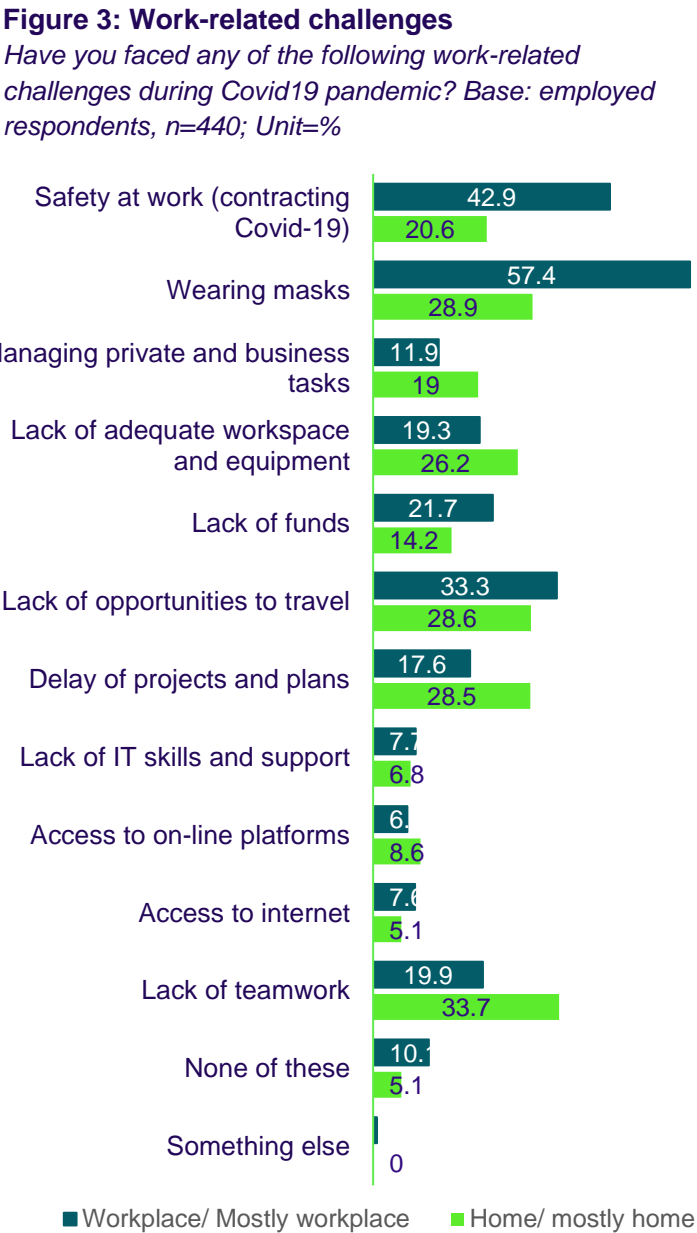
¹² 1 to 3 times (43 per cent), 4 to 10 times (16 per cent) and more than 10 times (14 per cent).

¹³ World Bank (2021). [Western Balkans Regular Economic Report No.19](#).

¹⁴ [Moj posao.ba](#)

¹⁵ Ibid.

Work-related challenges during the pandemic fully reflect the difference in working practices. There is a divergence in the perception of work-related challenges between youth who went to the workplace all or most of the time and those who mostly or constantly worked remotely (**Figure 3**). A twice as many working youth who went to work place all or most of the time compared to those who worked remotely were concerned with wearing masks (57 and 29 per cent, respectively) and safety and work (43 and 21 per cent, respectively). The issues with internet access, online platforms, and lack of IT skills were almost equally reported by both groups. Challenges such as lack of teamwork and adequate workspace and equipment, delay of projects and managing private/business tasks featured more prominently among young people who worked from home than among those who went to the workplace. Those who worked from home pointed at some positive changes, such as the reduced risk of contracting the virus (51 per cent), flexible working hours (34 per cent), and sparing commuting time (26 per cent).



IMPACTS ON EDUCATION

“The pandemic hindered students’ development and learning experience because of the sudden transfer of in-person classes to online learning. Almost two in three students reported they learned less during the pandemic than they would have in regular time. Learning loss is even more widely reported by those who had limited access to online education: three in four students who did not have the required access to the internet and online learning platforms reported that they learned less during the pandemic. Remote learning triggered a widespread sense of alienation among students in BiH, as they claimed they felt more distant from their peers and teachers and felt less part of their school/university.

Backdrop

Among surveyed students, who constitute 32 per cent of the overall sample, 30 per cent are secondary school students and 70 per cent are tertiary education students. The disruption of the education system due to the pandemic, compounded by the fragmented and complex education governance set up in BiH, made students’ educational experience even more different and challenging than it used to be. The closure of secondary schools in March 2020 lasted until the beginning of the next school year (2020/21), when schools in some jurisdictions reopened but with changed schedules, group sizes, or introduction of blended approaches, while schools in some other jurisdictions continued with remote learning.¹⁶ In secondary schools, approaches to distance learning have been diverse, with education content mainly delivered through a combination of different online platforms and smart phone applications, as well as through email communication.¹⁷ Universities were closed from the pandemic outbreak until the beginning of the new academic year (October 2020) with the online learning delivery mode only. In the new academic year, students were taught both online and face to face, depending on the jurisdiction, epidemiological situation, and field of study. It has already been reported that maintaining the continuity of education through remote modalities has presented numerous challenges to student engagement, quality of instructions, and access to learning resources.¹⁸

Findings

A clear majority of students – male more than female – reported learning loss during the pandemic, although they spent more time studying. Changes to education provision introduced due to the pandemic are mostly seen to cause learning loss, since as many as 63 per cent of surveyed students think they have learned less (**Figure 4**). Interestingly, there is a gendered component of this perception, as men were more likely to feel short-changed for learning gains, compared to women (67

¹⁶ UNICEF and UNESCO. (2020). “[Reducing the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children’s And Youth’s Learning in Bosnia And Herzegovina: Rapid Situation And Needs Assessment in Education](#)”

¹⁷ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁸ [Ibid.](#)

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

vs 59 per cent). Furthermore, it should be noted that the perception of learning loss is reported against the increased time spent studying: most students said they spent far more (25 per cent) or somewhat more time (30 per cent) studying than they did prior to pandemic, while 14 per cent claimed they spent less time studying. The increased time spent learning might be explained by the widely reported issues with exams and schoolwork (53 per cent), particularly for rural students who reported the problem considerably more often than urban students (57 vs 48 per cent). The damaging impact of the pandemic on learning was additionally highlighted by our focus group participants, who expressed a sense of frustration and concern over its effect on their future.

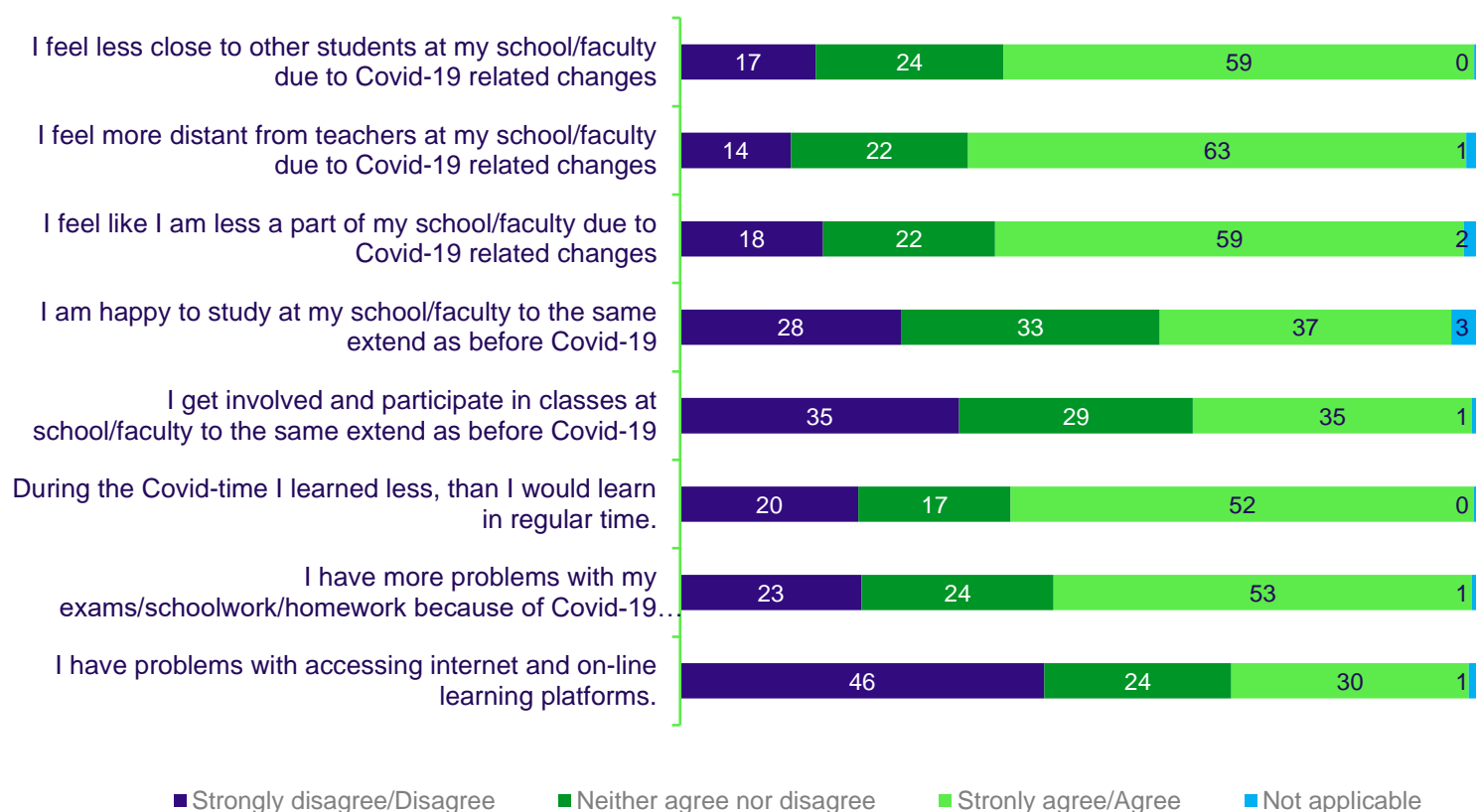
They made comments such as: “The pandemic has influenced everything, especially practical training at school. Nothing can replace it.” (Male, 18)

“I am very attached to school, and I like to learn new things. Now that we are on our own, it is nowhere near to what it is like in the classroom.” (Female, 18)

“I think this has had the worst impact on our education, in the end we will leave school not being able to use our knowledge. That’s the worst consequence.” (Female, 22)

Figure 4: Education and Covid-19

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (score ‘1’ means you strongly disagree and score ‘5’ that you strongly agree with the statement); Base: respondents who are in school/university, n=322; Unit=%



Learning during the pandemic was further disrupted by limited access to the internet, which further widens inequalities in education. Almost one in three students reported issues with accessing the internet and online learning platforms (30 per cent), with this problem being slightly more present among high school students than among university students (34 and 28 per cent, respectively). Furthermore, research reveals that internet access issues were associated with reported learning loss: students who did not have the required access to the internet and online learning platforms more commonly claimed that they had learned less during

the pandemic than those without these issues (73 vs 53 per cent). Additionally, those who had internet issues more commonly than their peers felt more distant from their teachers/professors (72 vs 55 per cent) and thought they were not involved, nor participated in the classes to the same extent as before the pandemic (40 vs 33 per cent).

A widespread sense of alienation is strongly felt by students, particularly by those attending universities. While students are ambivalent about the pandemic’s impact on their involvement and participation in classes, i.e., they equally think that the influence was both positive and negative (35 per

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

cent each), they are clearer about the impact on social aspects of education. Namely, roughly two-thirds of students said they felt less close to their teachers and their peers due to Covid-19 changes (63 and 59 per cent, respectively). A sense of distance to fellow students and teachers was more present among students in rural areas compared to students in urban areas.¹⁹ The majority of students also felt less as a part of their school/faculty compared to the pre-pandemic period (58 per cent). As testified by some focus group participants, young people are left with a void they feel they cannot feel “*They say that university time is the best period in life, and we can't spend that time together and create good memories. We will not have anything to tell our children.*” (Male, 22)

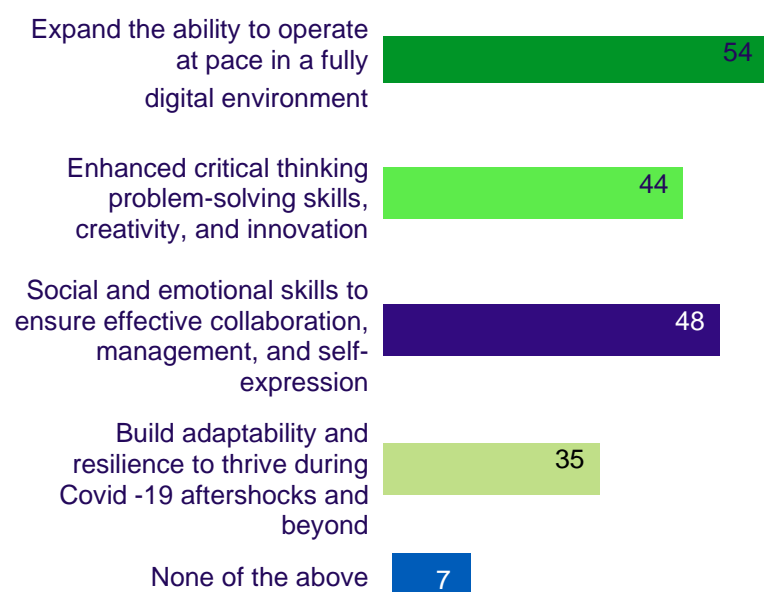
Despite all difficulties, some students felt happy to study at their school/faculty to the same extent as before (36 per cent), while others were not as happy or were not sure about it (28 and 33 per cent, respectively). This suggests that some students got used to remote learning or took advantage of it, as one focus group participant said: “*I can also work and volunteer. I do not mind at all that I am not physically going to school.*” (Female, 20) Another student formulated an important message that should resonate with a wider audience: “*Although everyone complains about online learning, students lost the desire to return to their classrooms. They are in some type of limbo where no reality is either good or bad.*” (Male, 19)

Students in BiH prioritize digital, socio-emotional and soft skills as key skills needed to succeed in future. As the shift to digital education becomes apparent during the pandemic, students see acquiring of digital skills as essential to prosper in the future (54 per cent, **Figure 5**). The other three most sought-after skills needed are as follows: enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, and innovation (44 per cent); developing social and emotional skills to ensure effective collaboration, management, and self-expression (44 per cent); building adaptability and resilience to thrive during Covid-19 aftershocks and beyond (39 per cent).

Commenting on these results, our focus group participants affirm that the focus of a wide range of education providers should be on empowering them with the skills they need to thrive during and after the pandemic: “*Educational institutions need to change curricula to put more focus on digital skills. [...] Our kids still do not engage with computers in schools. They draw a Word sheet instead of opening it on a screen. Formal education has to change at all levels and equip young people with digital skills.*” (Female, 22)

Figure 5: Future skills

What skills will you need the most to thrive in post Covid world? Please select top 2 priorities. Base: respondents attending school/university at the moment; n=322; Unit: %



¹⁹ Urban/rural comparison: students (68 vs 50 per cent); teachers (69 vs 58 per cent).

“

Covid impacted my life in a very positive way. It literally pushed me to focus on myself and let my creativity and spirituality develop. That is very important for me.
(Female, 22)

“

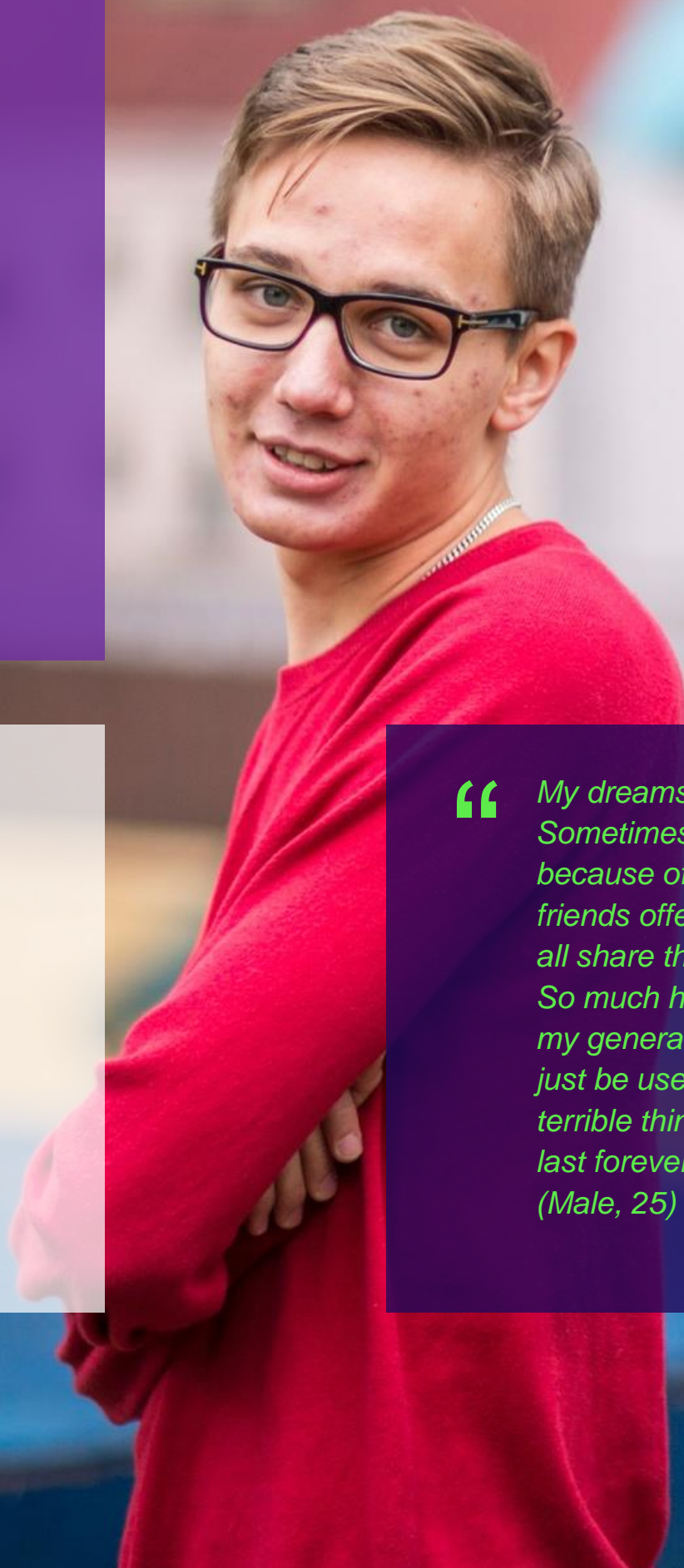
I am a person with a disability, a hearing impairment. When it comes to communication, I mostly rely on lip reading to understand what exactly I am being told, so this period under masks has made it difficult for me to communicate in my daily life, in institutions, in supermarkets, in social situations in general.
(Female, 27)

“

I went into survival mode. I've found that gaming has helped me a lot – it's soothing for my anxiety and mental health. The distraction it provides is so helpful. Some of the games' graphics are so realistic that it's almost like being outside. (Male 22)

“

My dreams are on hold. Sometimes I am sad because of that. But my friends offer support, and we all share the same destiny. So much has happened to my generation that we might just be used to living through terrible things. This will not last forever. We are resilient.
(Male, 25)



YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ABOUT IMPACT ON BEHAVIOURS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

“**Restrictive measures put in place during the pandemic coupled with job and income loss and with other direct or indirect impacts of Covid-19 deteriorated the mental well-being of young people in BiH. The pandemic influenced young people's sense of worry, annoyance, loneliness, tiredness, hopelessness, and sleeping patterns, mainly in a negative way. The pandemic also affected different subgroups of the youth population differently, for example, young females, unemployed individuals, those with higher education, and those living in urban areas. Despite troubles they experienced, youth in BiH have been hesitant to seek mental health support due to, among other reasons, discomfort in admitting mental health issues to others.**

²⁰Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018/2019](#)

²¹ AP News (2020). [Pandemic heaps new fears and trauma on war-scarred Bosnians](#),”

Backdrop

Before the pandemic, young people's leisure activities mostly included shopping, visiting coffee shops, doing nothing, spending time on the computer and on online media, and only rarely doing sports.²⁰ These aspects of their everyday life were strongly restricted by the pandemic and, along with health-related risks, posed a serious challenge for their mental wellbeing. Furthermore, although youth were less exposed to the war trauma compared to the older generation, memories of the war loom over young people and shape their perception of the coronavirus. For this reason, some of them might downplay the threat of the virus, while others may suffer from heightened anxiety because some aspects of living through the pandemic are reminiscent of the war.²¹ A recent UNICEF/UNDP survey found that young people are most likely to experience an increase in stress levels, with half of them (50 per cent) aged 18-30 saying that their levels of stress and fear are “somewhat” to “extremely” increased.²²

Findings

Around two-thirds of youth report a change in their daily behaviours/routine, with youth in urban areas being more affected than youth in rural areas (64 vs 55 per cent). When compared to the time before the pandemic, young people spent more time on the internet (75 per cent), with their family (64 per cent), watching movies (57 per cent), and working on personal development (47 per cent, **Figure 6**). Spending time with friends is not clear-cut in BiH: around one-third of surveyed reported spending less time with friends or more time with friends (36 and 32

²² UNICEF and UNDP (2020). [Impact of Covid-19 on Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina assessment](#).

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

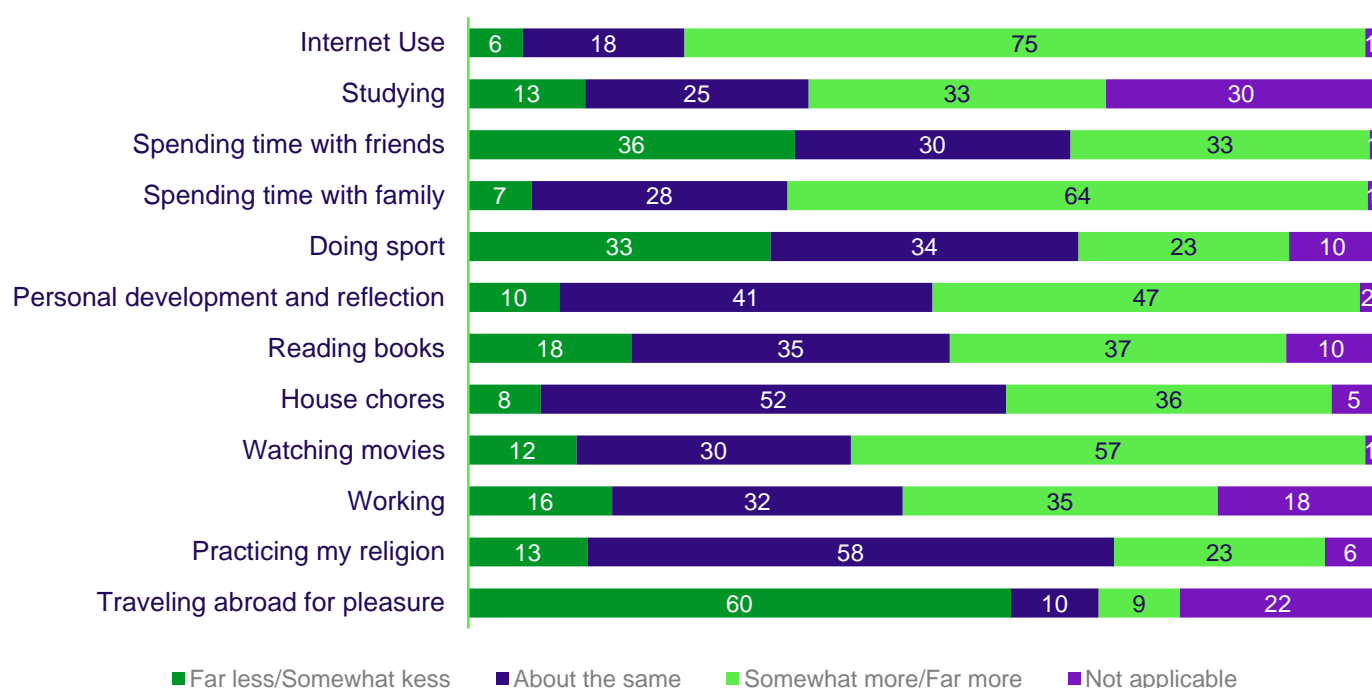
per cent, respectively), with the rest reporting the same as before. Likewise, the time spent doing sports either decreased or remained the same as pre-pandemic by almost the same share of respondents (33 and 34 per cent, respectively), while others report an increased amount of time. The time spent on house chores and practicing religion remained mostly the same as before the pandemic (52 and 58 per cent, respectively). However, looking at these figures, the gender lens suggests that young females spent considerably more time on house chores (43 vs 29 per cent) and practicing religion (29 vs 18 per cent) compared to their male counterparts.

Interpretation of the reported increased time spent on the internet should rely on the Youth Study, which indicates that 70.3 per cent of young people aged 15-29 are connected to the internet practically all the

time.²³ As further explained by the study, young people were not able to specify the exact time spent online because they have their smartphones with them constantly and are always connected to the internet.²⁴ Therefore, any estimation about the increase in the time spent online during the pandemic would be guess-work, even for young people who reported it. However, this survey finds that during the pandemic young people in BiH met more new people online than face to face (41 vs 34 per cent), which demonstrates the breadth and depth of their increasingly more digital lives.

Figure 6: Impact of Covid-19 on behaviours/practices

Compared with the time before Covid-19, how much time you spend in the following activities?



The pandemic has had an adverse impact on young people's mental wellbeing. Almost two-thirds of young people admit that the lack of movement due to the pandemic was a hard pill to swallow (62 per cent). Furthermore, the pandemic influenced young people's sense of worry, annoyance, loneliness, tiredness, hopelessness, and sleeping patterns, mainly in a negative way. Most strikingly, over half of young people felt more worried than before the pandemic (57 per cent). Furthermore,

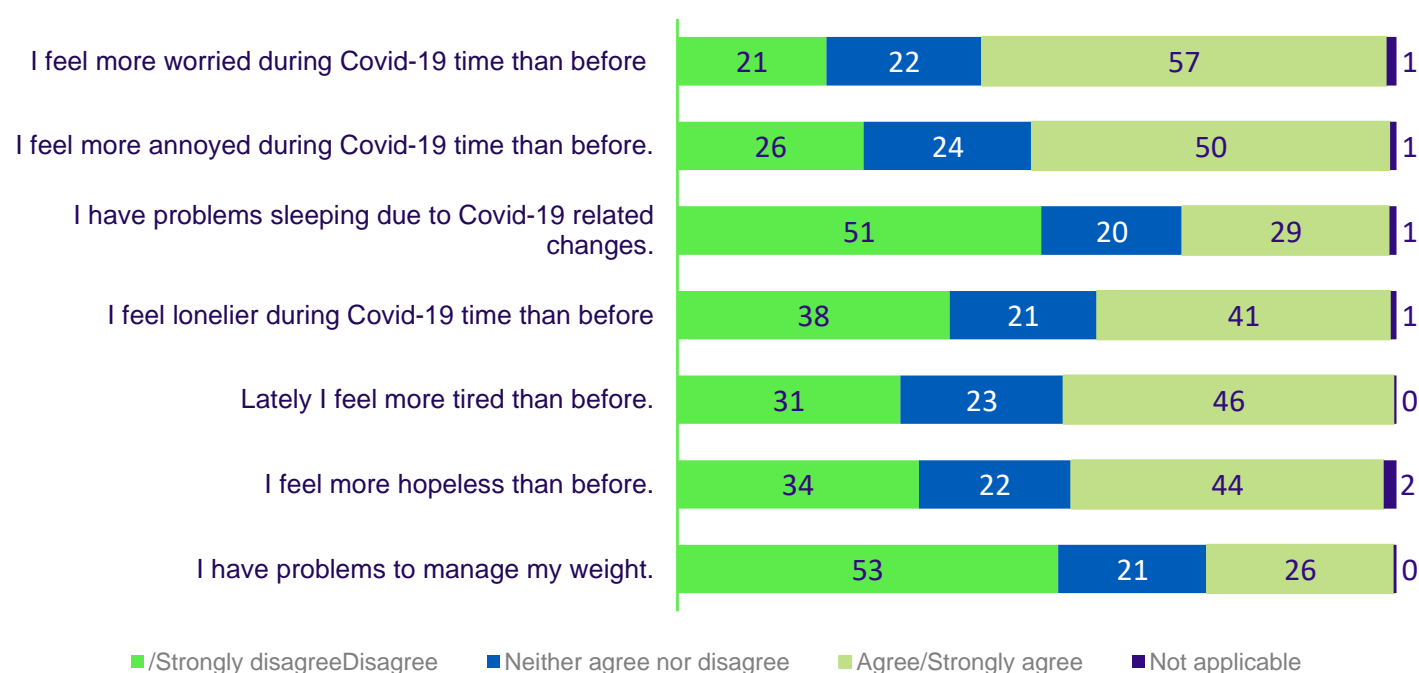
one in two young people felt more annoyed (50 per cent), while one in three developed sleeping problems (29 per cent, **Figure 7**). The pandemic caused young people in BiH to feel lonelier (41 per cent), more hopeless (44 per cent), and more tired (46 per cent). Those feelings were further noted by our focus group participants, as put by one of them: *"I found myself in something totally unknown, which made me feel great panic, fear, frustration, confusion and complete loss of myself."* (Female, 24)

²³ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), (2019). [Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018/2019](#).

²⁴ Ibid

Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 on mental wellbeing

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit=%



The pandemic has affected young people's mental wellbeing differently depending on gender, living area, educational attainment, and ethnicity. Being a young female and living in an urban area were factors associated with a greater likelihood of feeling worried, annoyed, loneliness, tiredness, and hopelessness compared to males and rural youth. Furthermore, higher levels of educational attainment were correlated with a greater prospect of feeling worried, lonely, and developing sleeping problems. In terms of ethnicity, young Bosniaks were more likely to feel worried, hopeless, and suffer from sleeping problems than other ethnic groups. Unemployed youth felt lonelier than working youth, while the latter felt more tired than before the pandemic. Finally, those exposed to the shock of income decrease during the pandemic felt more worried than those with unchanged income or increased income.²⁵

Despite emotional troubles, youth are hesitant to seek mental health support. To maintain their mental well-being throughout the pandemic, youth in BiH mainly refer to self-coping mechanisms such as: improving diet, doing more of the things they enjoy (watching movies, cooking, etc.), exercising or taking up a sport, keeping themselves busy, seeking support from family, not reading the news, etc. Only 14 per cent of respondents felt the need for professional help; this tendency was expressed by females and rural youth slightly more than males and urban youth.²⁶ Only 4 per cent reached out for such support, mainly by seeking individual counselling with

a psychologist, life coach, or psychiatrist from a private or public health practice, faith-based services, internet-based chat, and support groups. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the highest use and need for mental health support services is recorded among youth with disabilities, compared to the main sample (14 and 13 per cent, respectively).

Those who expressed the need for mental health support services listed the following ones: information about emotional or behavioural problems, treatment and available services (7 per cent); counselling or talk therapy (5 per cent); courses or other counselling for life skills, self-esteem or motivation (6 per cent), and medication for emotional or behavioural problems (2 per cent). Among the reasons for not getting support, the most frequently reported were: wish to work out the problem on one's own or with the help from family or friends (34 per cent); lack of funds to afford help (14 per cent); unavailability of mental health services due to the pandemic (9 per cent); lack of knowledge where to get help (9 per cent), and discomfort to admit having mental health issues to others (7 per cent).

While admitting that "it is really shocking that young people do not seek assistance in relation to mental health", focus group participants also commented that this is not such a surprise because of widespread taboo over mental health issues in society, as put by some of them: *"I would not dare tell my parents that I am looking for professional mental health support."*

²⁵ Pearson correlation: .134**; sig <0.05 (0.00).

²⁶ gender: 17 vs 11 per cent; settlement type: 18 vs 10 per cent)

They would get scared and think it is something serious and long-lasting.” (Male, 22)

A large share of youth with Covid-19 disease did not have timely access to health services. As many as 58 per cent of young people infected by the virus say they did not have timely access to Covid-19 diagnostic services (testing), which is a much higher percentage than regional average (39 per cent, **Figure 8a and 8b**). More careful scrutiny of survey results indicates that the problem was substantially more commonly reported by youth in urban than in rural areas (71 vs 38 per cent), and by young females more so than their male peers (62 vs 52 per cent). Regarding regional differences, the issue is most

reported by youth in RS Northwest and Federation Central (82 and 71, respectively), and the least by youth from Federation Sarajevo (4 per cent). Further, one in four of those who contracted the virus say they did not receive timely care once they were diagnosed with Covid-19 diseases (24 per cent), with the number reaching two out of three in Federation (64 per cent). Additionally, one-third of infected young people say that they did not have enough space in their home to self-isolate from other members of the household (28 per cent), and this problem was more widely spread among urban than rural youth (45 vs 15 per cent). And lastly, around two in three surveyed youth with chronic illnesses reported limited access to medical facilities due to Covid-19 (65 per cent).

Figure 8a: Covid-19 infection rate
Have you had Covid-19? Unit=%

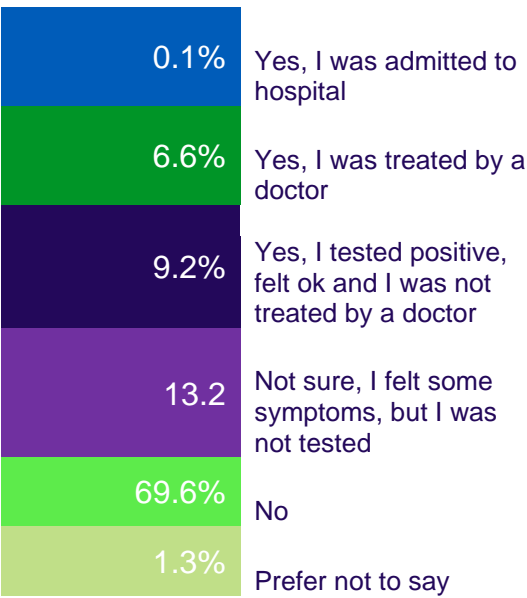
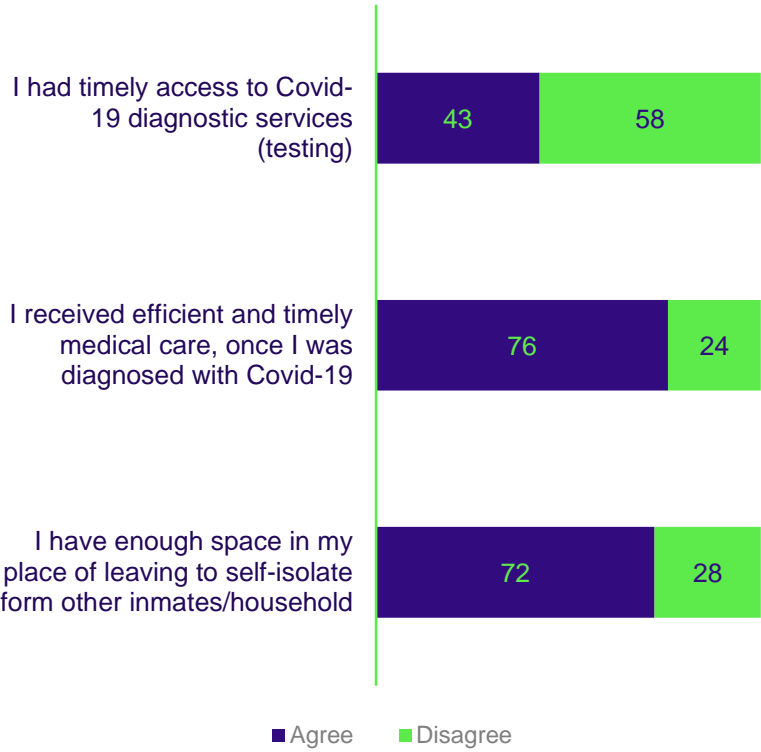


Figure 8b: and access to health care services
Please agree or disagree with the following statements? Base: infected respondents, n=152? Unit: %



YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ABOUT IMPACT ON SOCIETY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

“ *The pandemic has had a great potential to further aggravate the already weak social cohesion in BiH. Most young people in BiH are under the impression that the pandemic has increased economic, generational, political, and ethnic divisions in the country. Furthermore, more than half of young people think they were stigmatized as irresponsible virus spreaders. However, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, the core personal network, involving family, friends, and partners, has endured.*

Backdrop

BiH's mixed ethnic and religious make-up is both its great asset and a sadly renowned bone of contention, which is in the collective memory linked to the war in BiH from 1992 to 1995. Ethnic divisions and their connection to weak social cohesion in BiH have been a serious issue for a longer period, since the ethnic-based political structures created by the Dayton Accord have become a mechanism for increasing isolation among the country's constituent peoples and for separating them into administrative systems and social spaces.²⁷ Therefore, BiH citizens live, work, and create their values not as BiH citizens but as Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, or so-called others.²⁸ Social connections across ethnicities have weakened over the past decade, particularly among those under 40 years. The survey conducted in 2019 revealed that 78 per cent of Bosniaks younger than 40 years reported having no Serb friends, and none of the Croats in the same age group reported having Bosniak friends.²⁹ Additionally, some other individuals and social groups have been deliberately marginalized and segregated. These include Roma, persons who are HIV positive, raped women, street children, LGBTQI persons, and many others.³⁰ All these results imply that young participants in our survey grew up and socialized in a closed and divided society characterized by the tendency not to accept others and different ones.

In the context of BiH, the pandemic has had great potential to spotlight on the already weak social cohesion in BiH and further erode it for young generations through a wide range of events that took place in 2020. In May 2020, the decision of the Catholic Church to hold the Mass in Sarajevo, commemorating the killings of Croatian Ustasa troops and civilians by Yugoslav partisans at the end of World War II, provoked a strong backlash in the

²⁷ UNDP (2020). [Social Inclusion in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 National Human Development Report](#)

²⁸ Bakic, S. (2020). In search of lost social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Technium Social Sciences Journal, vol. 11(1)

²⁹ UNDP (2020). [Social Inclusion in Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 National Human Development Report](#)

³⁰ Ibid.

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

country where the memory of the ethnic war in the 1990s was still fresh.³¹ In response, thousands of Bosnians and Herzegovians protested in Sarajevo. The OSCE mission in BiH recorded 91 hate crimes between January and September 2020, the majority of which targeted victims based on their ethnicity or religion, six of which involved physical violence. Most recently, the brutal police beating of a young man in Mostar who was walking through the streets during curfew sparked local protests against the police abuse of power.³² Finally, the local elections were held in an atmosphere of uncertainty and concern, with high levels of public pessimism and dissatisfaction with the government at all levels upfront the elections.³³ After twenty years, the elections brought a victory of opposition candidates for city mayors in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, which is by some seen as the move to the new political paradigm in BiH towards more transparent, accountable, and responsive local governance.³⁴

Findings

The core personal network, involving family, friends and partners, has endured despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. The core personal network, involving family, friends and partners, has endured despite the challenges posed by the pandemic. Although the pandemic considerably reduced social contacts, the survey reveals that the negative impact on the quality of social relationships of youth with close ones is rather limited. In contrast, young people report an improved relationship with their nearest and dearest. The largest positive influence of the pandemic is measured by the relationship of young people with their family, since as many as 58 per cent of youth report improved relationships. A slightly lower positive impact is recorded on youth's relationship with their friends, with almost half of respondents saying that their relations with friends were on the up (45 per cent). Those who were higher educated rather than lower educated, unemployed rather than employed, and younger rather than older were more likely to develop better relationships with family and friends. Furthermore, 40 per cent of youth state that their relationship with the romantic partner improved during the pandemic, and this expressed more by employed and higher educated young people than by those unemployed and with lower education. These findings were largely supported by our qualitative research, with some focus group participants reporting positive transformative changes in their relationships: *"Because of lock down my girlfriend*

and me started to live together. Therefore, big thanks to Covid-19." (Male, 27)

More than a half of young people think they were stigmatized as irresponsible virus spreaders, which put them at risk of hiding the illness or not seeking healthcare timely. A majority of young people (56 per cent) think that they have been stigmatised as irresponsible virus spreaders during the pandemic, with the opinion being more widely held by those higher rather than lower educated. Widespread media reporting framing young people as being careless, irresponsible, and dismissive of Covid-19 risks and public health guidance measures, has likely played a role in creating a sense of stigmatization among youth.³⁵ Furthermore, this has put young people at risk of hiding the illness or not seeking healthcare in a timely manner. Although a large majority of youth with the coronavirus infection felt supported by friends (87 per cent), nearly one in six (13 per cent) felt unease about it in society: they claim they have felt stigmatized, judged, unsupported or not ready to share this information with friends.³⁶ The presence and intensity of uneasiness differs across the country, with youth in Sarajevo being treated by friends in the most supportive manner (100 per cent), and those in the Federation Herzegovina feeling far less supported by friends (78 per cent). Additionally, there is an ethnic dimension to this, since infected young people declaring themselves as Serbs living in the FBiH felt social discomfort almost two times more frequently than the main sample (26 vs 13 per cent).

While the personal experience of discrimination is rarely reported, the perception of increased discrimination towards specific groups in society is widespread. Although the sense of stigmatisation of youth as irresponsible Covid-19 spreaders was widespread, personal experiences of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or age were very few (2 per cent). Despite this, one-third of young people in BiH think that discrimination towards specific groups increased during the pandemic (33 per cent). When asked towards which group the discrimination increased, they listed the elderly (57 per cent), people with chronic diseases (43 per cent), and people with disabilities (35 per cent). Roma youth and young people declaring themselves as Serbs living in the FBiH perceive it more widely than the sample average (41 and 42 per cent, respectively). Contrasting the regions indicates that youth in Federation Sarajevo and Federation Herzegovina are respectively the most and the least under the impression that there is more discrimination

³¹ Voice of America (2020). [Bosnians Protest Mass in Sarajevo for Nazi-Allied Soldiers](#).

³² Radio Slobodna Evropa (2020), [Nakon premlaćivanja mladića, protest u Mostaru zbog 'policijske brutalnosti.'](#)

³³ NDI. BiH Local Elections (2020) [Tectonic changes or taking positions for the elections at 2022.](#)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Deutsche Welle (2020). [BiH: Ljudska prava u vrijeme pandemije – pala na ispitu](#) (At the time of the pandemic, human rights - failed the exam).

³⁶ Felt stigmatized (6 per cent), judged (4 per cent), unsupported (4 per cent) or not sharing it with friends (3 per cent).

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

towards specific groups (47 per cent and 22 per cent).

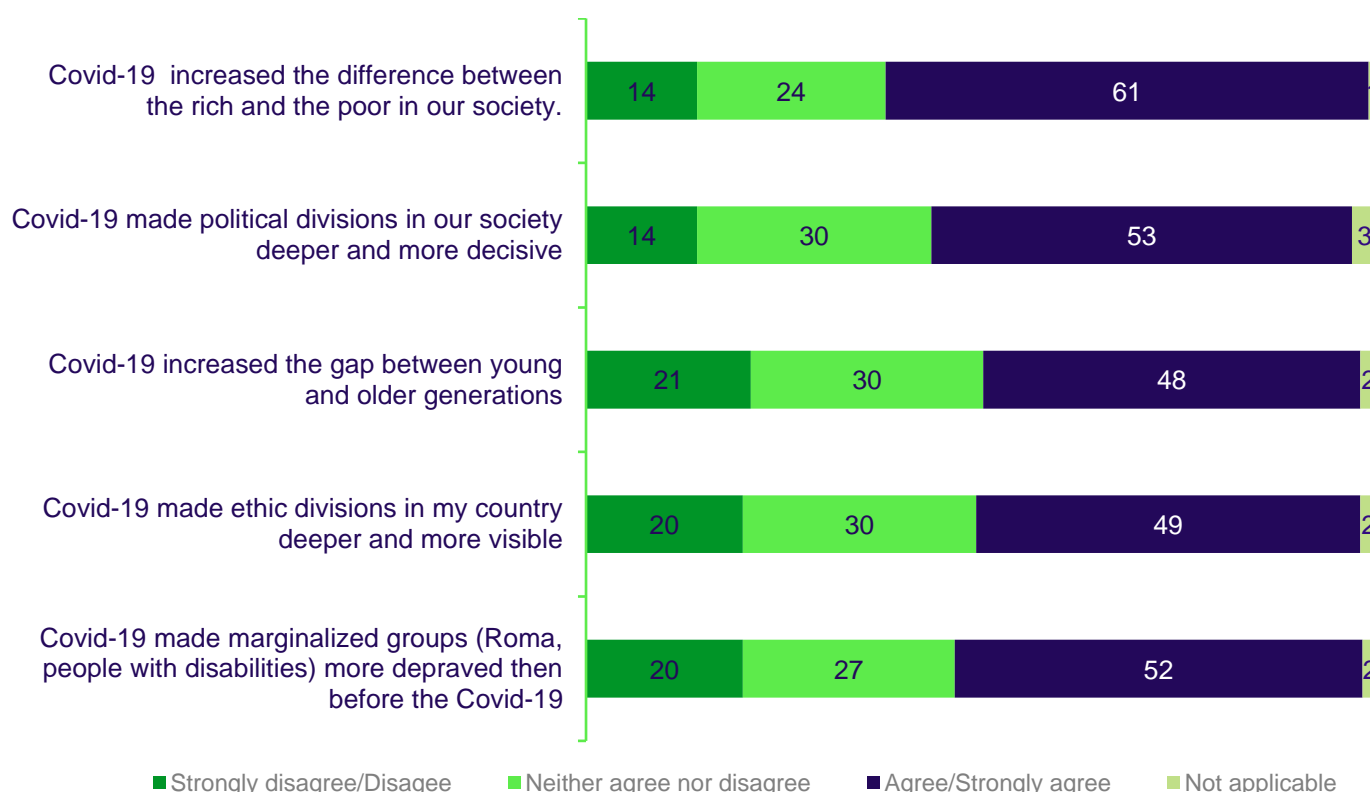
Violence, including gender-based violence, has rarely been reported by young people in BiH. A small share of young people reported being victims or witnessing violence (6 per cent). The highest number of violence cases is reported by Roma youth and young people with disabilities (20 and 14 per cent). In regard to gender-based violence, it is an infrequently reported occurrence, with 1 per cent of young people reporting being a victim and 3 per cent of them reporting having witnessed it in their immediate surroundings. More females than their male peers reported having noticed gender-based violence (5 vs 0 per cent). The highest gender-based violence rate is observed among Bosniak youth in RS and among Roma: 3 percent report being a victim of gender-based violence, with an additional 2 per cent report witnessing it.

Young people are under the impression that the pandemic has increased economic, generational, political and ethnic divisions. Young people believe that the pandemic increased the difference between the rich and the poor (62% of respondents),

political divisions (53% of respondents), ethnic divisions (48 per cent), and the intergenerational gap (49 per cent, **Figure 9**). The perception of increased economic inequalities differs by educational attainment and age, with those with higher education and older than 24 being more likely to observe this gap than those with lower education and younger age. Struggling to pay for basic medicine and health services, as well as basic clothing is associated with higher agreement that the gap between the rich and poor has widened. In addition, perceptions of divisions vary across ethnic lines. Compared to each other, young people declaring themselves as Croats were more likely to see the increased intergenerational gap, while young people declaring themselves as Bosniaks and Serbs were more likely to believe that. Roma youth, more than the sample average, agree that the pandemic increased economic inequalities (75 per cent) and ethnic inequalities (63 per cent). In terms of geography, young people in Federation Herzegovina were the most perceptive of the pandemic's impact on the political and ethnic divisions (65 and 60 per cent, respectively).

Figure 9: Impact of Covid-19 on society

Thinking of the period from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March till present, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit=%



Volunteering was marginally more popular than in other Western Balkan countries. During the pandemic, only 8 per cent of youth in BiH volunteered. While this percentage is not very high in absolute terms, it is still the highest, alongside

Kosovo, of the six countries captured by our survey. The reasons for not volunteering are mainly the lack of time and lack of interest. Among those who would volunteer to help, and support Covid-19 affected people, the main reason is that they genuinely like

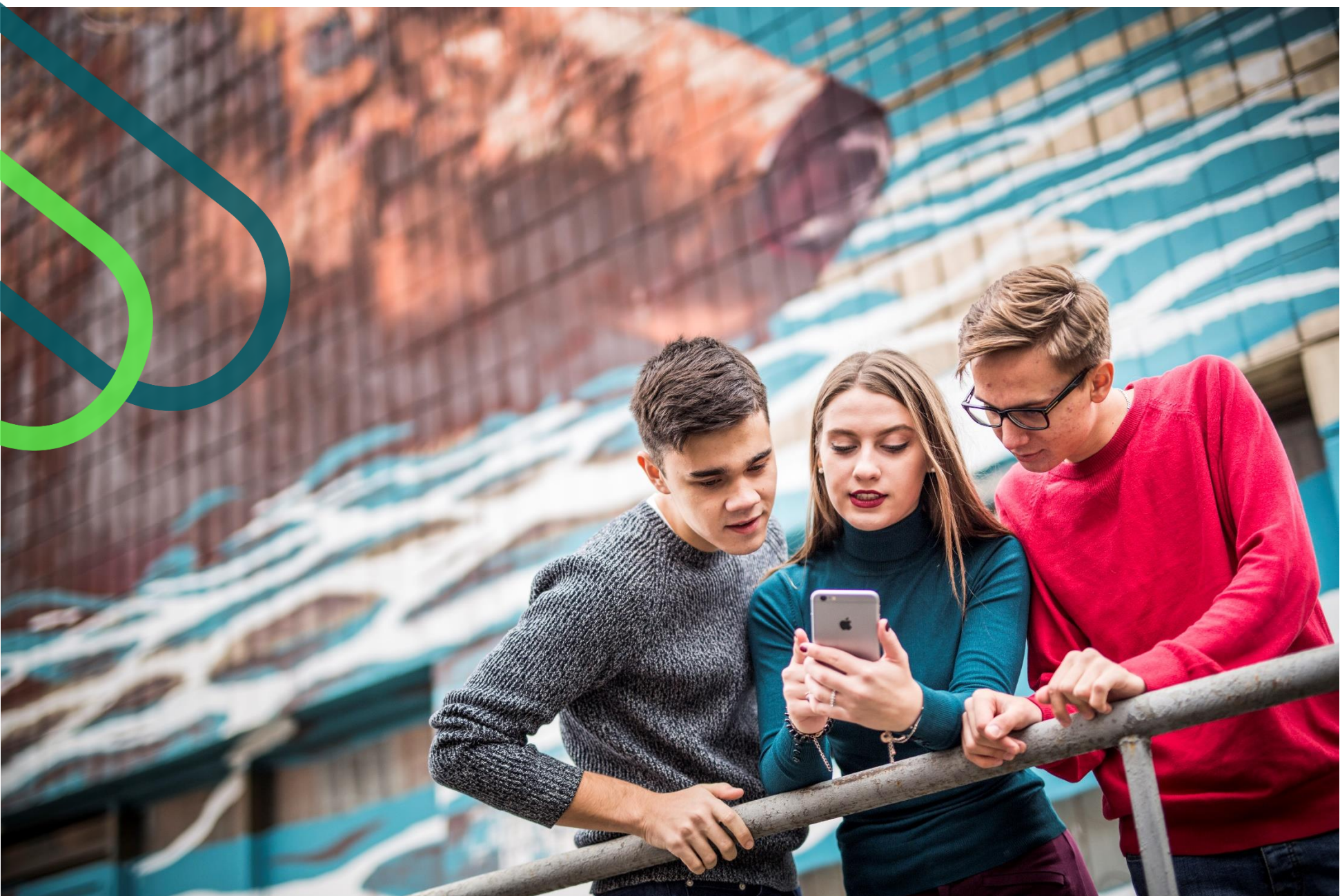
Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close
Bosnia & Herzegovina

helping others. Those who would not volunteer state that the lack of time is the main reason. Focus group participants said that, for those who are willing to look hard enough, there are opportunities: *“Young people need to get active, dig for opportunities. That is how I do it.” (Female, 23)*. Furthermore, It was suggested that youth NGOs should step up spreading more information about available opportunities.

Even though the pandemic isolates young people from the rest of the world, it does not prevent them from feeling more connected to it. Due to difficulties imposed on international travel, opportunities for traveling abroad and hosting foreigners in their home country substantially decreased. However, survey findings suggest that shared problems make people feel closer to each other across borders and intensify their sense of belonging to the world. Namely, 56 per cent of young

people think that global issues, like the Covid-19 pandemic make them feel more connected to the rest of the world. Higher educated and youth belonging to Serb ethnic group were more prone to feel this way, compared to lower educated and young people from other ethnic groups, respectively. Furthermore, although they expect significant decrease in travel abroad over the next three years (58 per cent), similar share of respondents wants to meet more people from other countries after Covid-19. When it comes to the pandemic impact on their opinion about foreigners, it tends to be unchanged, since 38 and 29 per cent of them state it has influenced it both positively and negatively, with further 31 per cent stating its opinion has not been impacted at all. Again, those with a higher level of educational attainment were more likely to claim this, compared to those with a lower educational degree.



TRUST IN AND PERCEPTIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE DURING THE CRISIS

“ Young people in BiH offer a critical evaluation of media reporting on the pandemic. Distrust in media related to Covid-19 news is highest in the region. They trust family, friends, and people with lived Covid-19 experience as a source of information significantly more than the media, government, and health experts. They mostly think that the media did not help them cope with the pandemic, as its reporting has been unclear and confusing, and has made events seem more dramatic and caused more panic.

Backdrop

Younger generations in BiH, (aged 18–29), more often obtain information from social networks (84 per cent) and online media (49 per cent) on a daily basis, compared to those in the age group 60 and above (14 and 12 per cent, respectively).³⁷ Emerging evidence suggests that young people in BiH in the time of crisis such as the current pandemic, turn more to traditional sources of information, such as TV.³⁸ This might be due to unethical and unaccountable media reporting that was widely spread throughout the pandemic³⁹, increasing the level of fear among the general population, and women in particular.⁴⁰ As elsewhere in the Balkans, citizens were exposed to a

series of conspiracy theories during the pandemic, the most popular being the ones saying that the pharmaceutical industry was involved in spreading the virus (55 per cent) and that the Chinese government engineered the coronavirus in a lab (43 per cent).⁴¹ The high take-up indicates that the relationship between the citizens and the media is problematic across age groups.

Findings

In terms of the sources of information related to Covid-19, youth in BiH are more likely to trust no one, compared to other countries in the region. Young people from BiH are most likely to trust family and friends (46 per cent) and people with lived Covid-19 experiences (45 per cent). On the other hand, they were extremely unlikely to trust politicians and the government (1 per cent), online media (2 per cent), and the World Health Organisation (6 per cent). Compared to other youth in the region, youngsters in BiH are the most unlikely to trust scientists: only one in ten would trust health experts in this matter, which is half the regional average. One in five (21 per cent) respondents said they trusted none of these and any other sources of information, which is 6 per cent higher than the regional average and the worst-faring result in the region. These findings corroborate the results of a recent FES Youth survey, which found that “young people place great trust in close family members, and to a lesser extent in relatives and close friends, but are mostly ambiguous towards all other categories such as neighbours, work colleagues, and people of different religion, nationality or political convictions”.⁴²

³⁷ SEENPM (2021). [Resilience: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation: Media Trust in the Western Balkans together apart](#)

³⁸ Hodžić, S. (2020). [Informiranje mladih u Bosni i Hercegovini u kontekstu pandemije Covid-19: Jaz između teorijskih znanja, praktičnih vještina i aktivnog angažmana](#)

³⁹ Vijeće za štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini (Press Council in Bosnia – Herzegovina), (2020), [“Pandemija lažnih vijesti: Dezinformacije u](#)

[vrijeme Korone](#) (Pandemic of Fake News: Misinformation At Corona Time).

⁴⁰ UNICEF and UNDP (2020). [Impact of Covid-19 on Society in Bosnia and Herzegovina assessment](#).

⁴¹ EFB/BiEPAG (2020). [The Western Balkans in times of pandemic: Public opinion survey](#).

⁴² Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). (2020). [Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018/2019](#).

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

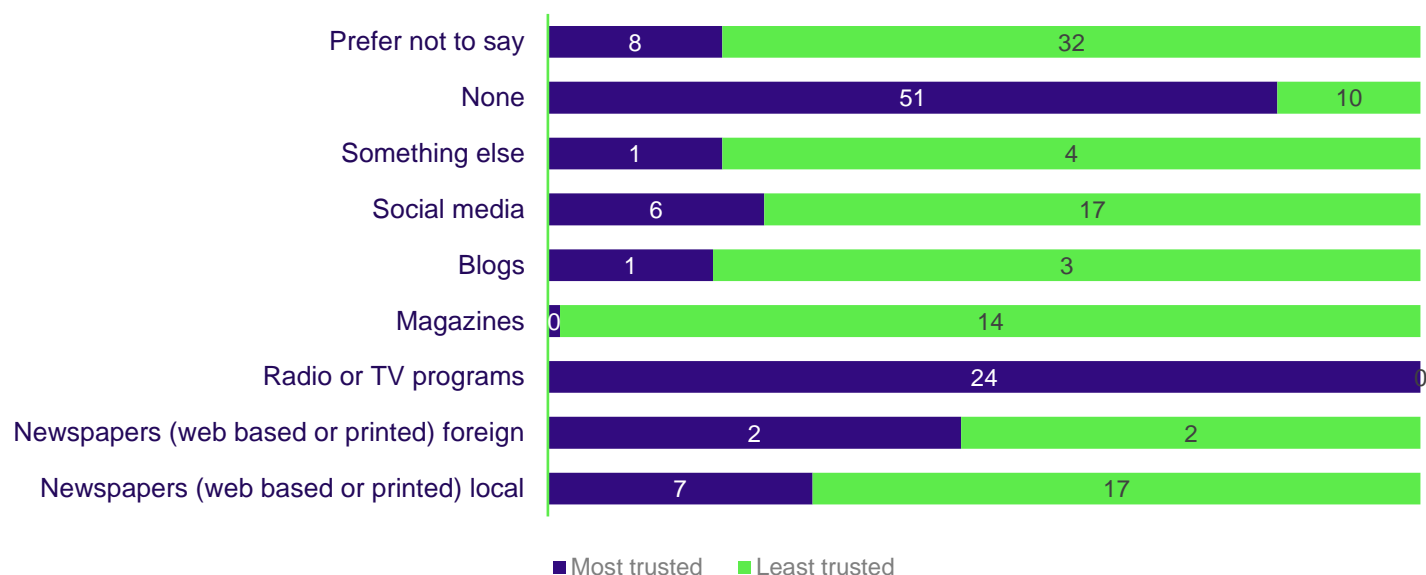
Youth distrust in media is the highest in the region.

Distrust in media related to Covid-19 news is a dominant feeling among young people in BiH (56 per cent) and is more common among men than women. The distrust in media is differently spread across the country, with young people in Northwest (RS) and Federation Hercegovina being at extreme ends: the former being the least and the latter being the most distrustful about media Covid-19 reporting (40 and 78 per cent, respectively). Radio and TV programmes top the list of most trustful media sources (24 per cent), followed by web based or printed newspapers (7 per cent), and social media (6 per cent). The list is slightly different when young

people are asked to identify the least trustworthy media sources: they see web based and printed newspapers, and social media⁴³ as the least reliable media sources (17 per cent each), followed by radio and TV programmes (13 per cent). The comparison between the lists of the most and the least trustworthy media suggests that only radio and TV programmes scored net positive trust (11 per cent).

Figure 10: Trust in media

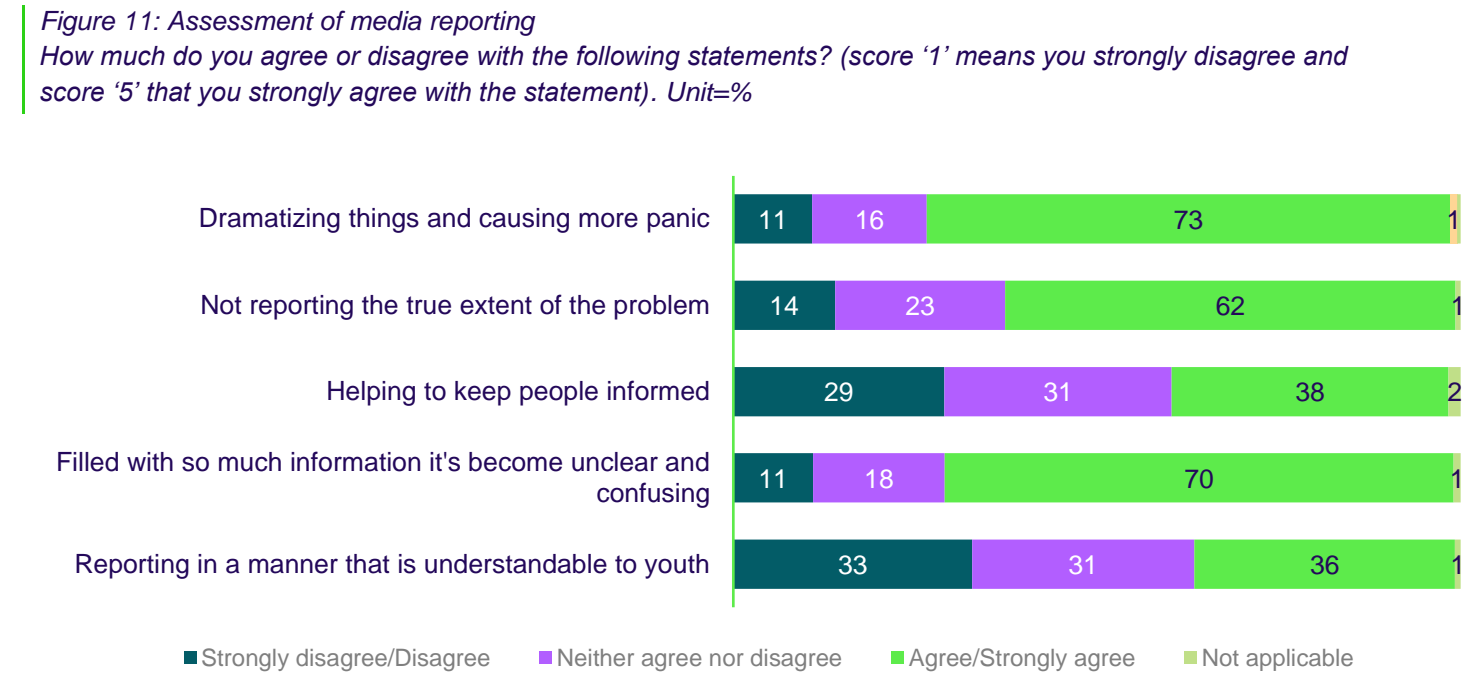
What media sources do you trust the most/least to be well informed on Covid-19 matters? Unit=%



Youth's assessment of media reporting during the pandemic is among the harshest in the region.

Youngsters in BiH mostly think that media reporting during the pandemic has made events seem more dramatic and caused more panic (mean 4.05 on a scale from 1 to 5); they believe that media have not been reporting on the true extent of the problem (mean 3.65) and have been filled with so much information that it has become unclear and confusing (mean 3.85, **Figure 11**). As a result, they think that media did not play a positive role in keeping people informed (mean 3), and even more importantly, that media reported in a manner that is not

understandable to youth (mean 2.97). Our qualitative research broadly supports these findings, emphasising media disconnect to youth throughout the pandemic, as put by one of the focus group participants: "Media outlets failed to reach out to youth during the pandemic, reporting often about us (youth) in negative manner. They (media outlets) know very little about young audience...It is like we speak different languages." (Male, 23)



YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

“ **Trust in government among young people in BiH further diminished during the pandemic. A greater share of young people disapproved than approved lockdown measures that limited freedom of movement. Youth in BiH, compared to their peers across the region, most openly admitted that they have not always followed the rules. They overwhelmingly felt that their government's Covid-19 measures left them with the short end of the stick, regardless of ethnicity.**

Backdrop

While the initial reaction to the beginning of the pandemic, in early to mid-2020, was rather strict, with nonessential shop and (partial) school closures, the reopening in summer 2020 was not followed by adequate monitoring and tightening of measures. By large, the laissez-faire attitude of authorities in autumn 2020 and winter 2020/21 (including keeping the borders open for arrival of tourists during the skiing season) has led to record numbers of infections and deaths.⁴⁴ As often happens in BiH, problems were compounded by the country's highly complex and decentralized governmental structure – comprising two entities and the autonomous Brčko

District, as well as ten cantons within the entity of the FBiH. During the pandemic, state-level institutions only played a coordinating role, while healthcare services and civil protection were under the responsibility of the RS government and cantonal governments in FBiH.⁴⁵ During the pandemic, RS introduced a rather centralized pandemic crisis management structure in its territory, while FBiH had a model of decentralized crisis management structure. All of this resulted in a wide range of measures introduced and applied inconsistently across the country, with different treatments of citizens based on their place of residence. Some measures provoked intense public debates, such as prohibition of movement of persons under 18 and over 65 years in the territory of FBiH, which was later ruled as disproportionate and violation of the right to the liberty of movement by the Constitutional Court.⁴⁶ Furthermore, power was abused by authorities at different levels, resulting in media censorship and restriction of citizens' right to freedom of expression in the RS entity between mid-March and mid-April⁴⁷ or in procurement of medical equipment in FBiH, which raised serious concerns over corruption.⁴⁸

Findings

Young people are critical of the way in which their government acted during the pandemic and admit they have not followed the rules. Perhaps due to the perceived inconsistency of government measures, young people in BiH mostly oppose anti-Covid-19 measures. Namely, a greater share of young people disagreed than agreed with lockdown

⁴⁴ Al Jazeera (2021). [A total collapse': Alarm as Covid-19 deaths mount in Bosnia](#)

⁴⁵ European Western Balkan. (2020). [Democracy and the state of emergency in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

⁴⁶ Kacarska, S., Milacic, F. (2021). [Democracy and the State of Emergency: Democracy and human rights functioning of Institutions in times of crisis](#)

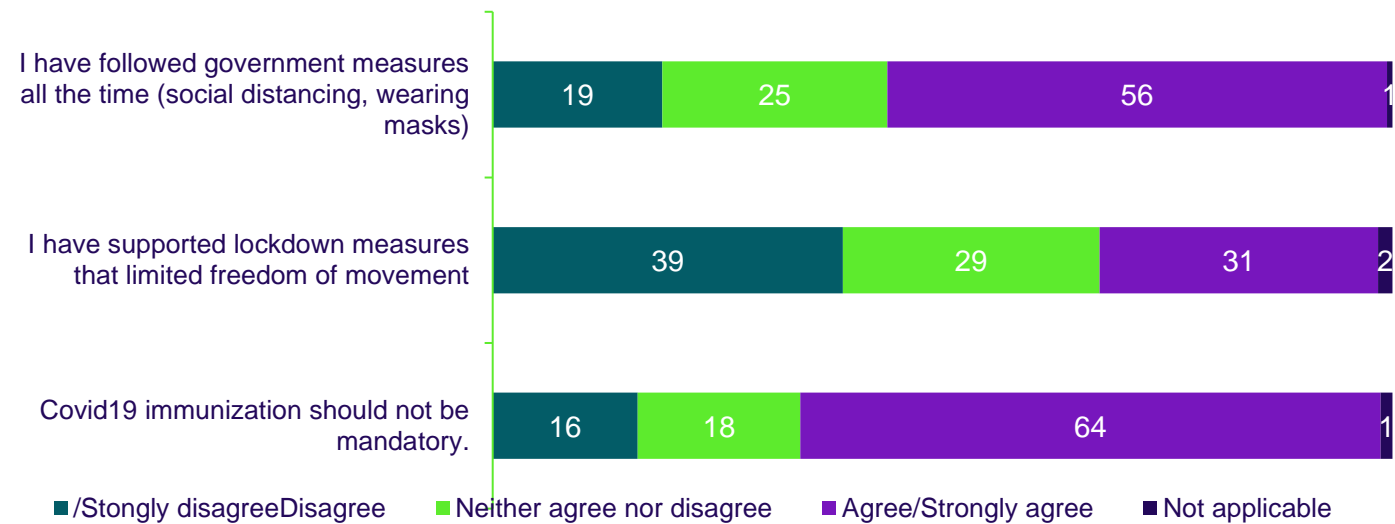
⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

measures that limited the freedom of movement (39 vs 31 per cent). Females were more likely to support lockdown measures compared to males. Youth in BiH, compared to their peers across the region, most openly admit that they have not always followed the rules: 44 per cent of them could not fully confirm that they have followed the rules all the time, which is almost double the regional average (24 per cent). Again, young females were more likely to follow the rules than young males. Urban youth and those with

higher educational attainment claim to be more compliant with the rules, compared to rural youth and those with lower educational attainment. When it comes to attitudes towards vaccination, two in three young people (64 per cent) think that Covid-19 immunization should not be mandatory, while one in six think it should be (16 per cent, **Figure 12**).

Figure 12: Attitudes towards government’s crisis response
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Unit=%



Young people consistently disapprove of their government’s approach to pandemic management. They tend to consider that the government’s Covid-19 related messaging was not clear and consistent (mean 2.84 on a scale from 1 to 5) and that Covid -19 measures were not informed by science (mean 2.84). In addition, they believe that the government measures were not adequate and proportional to the given circumstances (mean 2.97) and that they were not effective in stopping the spread of the virus over time (mean 2.93). Support for the government approach is strongly determined by ethnicity, fully reflecting the ethnic structure of the state organisation. In this regard, members of the Serbian ethnic group, mostly living in RS, were more likely to approve of the government approach across three out of four dimensions, compared to other ethnic groups. To further illustrate this, the highest disapproval rate of the government approach to the pandemic is recorded in Federation Sarajevo where nearly half of young people think that the government’s Covid-19 communication was not clear and consistent, that its measures were not adequate and proportional to the given circumstances, and as a result not effective in stopping the spread of the virus (ranging from 44 to 48 per cent). These figures indicate that instead of assessing the central

government, young people mostly assessed their local governments, which were in charge of crisis management.

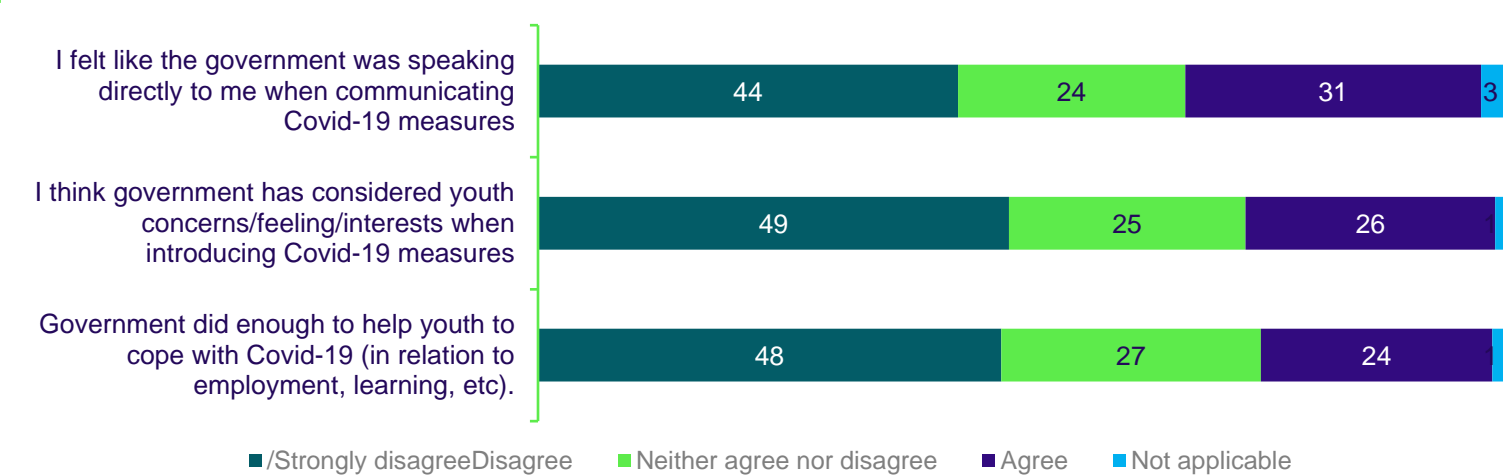
Regardless of their ethnicity, youth felt that their government’s Covid-19 measures left them at the short end of the stick. A sense of government dissociation from young people prevails among youth in BiH. They tended to think that the government was not speaking directly to them when communicating the measures (mean 2.67). Moreover, nearly one in two considered that when introducing new measures, the government did not take into account young people’s concerns, feelings, and interests (48 per cent) and did not do enough to help youth find their way around with employment and education during the pandemic (49 per cent). The sense of government disregard towards young people during the pandemic was unanimously voiced by our focus group participants. One of them said: *“I have not heard of any state (employment) measure. They are not fighting for us; we are literally left to our own means. We have to manage on our own, so if we do, great, if not, no one cares.”* (Male, 23)

Contrary to the assessment of the overall government approach, when asked if the government’s handling of the pandemic was youth-sensitive enough,

ethnicity and its corresponding state structures seem to play a less important role. In terms of regional differences, the largest share of youth who felt neglected by their government is observed in Federation Sarajevo and RS Northwest, where more than half of them consider that the government did not listen to their concerns and interests (62 and 55 per cent, respectively) and did little to help them cope with the pandemic (55 and 54 per cent, respectively). On the other side, young people in Federation Herzegovina and RS Northeast felt neglected by the

government to a lesser extent. This analysis of regional differences in BiH implies that the sense of government disregard towards young people during the pandemic transcends existing ethnic lines and their corresponding state organization. It demonstrates the power of generational issues such as lack of employment or inadequate education and shows that youth are a cohesive demographic subgroup with shared interests and challenges regardless of ethnicity.

Figure 13: Government measures and youth
When you think about impact of Covid-19 pandemic on your future over the next 3 years, what are your expectations of pandemic impact on? Unit=1%



FUTURE OUTLOOK: HOPES, CONCERNS AND ASPIRATIONS

“ **Young people in BiH are particularly gloomy about their own future, as one in two young people think Covid-19 will have a negative impact on their own future. They are concerned that their financial ability, employment opportunities and career prospects will be hindered by the pandemic over the next three years. To help them cope with pandemic-imposed challenges, they ask the government to invest more in subsidized employment, take action to decrease corruption in the employment process, and help them build employability skills.**

Findings

Young people in BiH are distinctly negative about their prospects after the pandemic. Most young people think the pandemic could give them a moment to change the way things work for the better in the country (51 per cent). But this hope is not further extended to their personal future, which is perceived by many to be very negative. One in two young people think Covid-19 will have a negative impact on their own future (53 per cent), while positive influence is seen only by 6 per cent of them. Urban youth and those unemployed outvoiced rural youth and employed in their perception of the pandemic's negative impact on their own future.⁴⁹

These findings clash with the views of young people in BiH before the pandemic: as found by the 2018/2019 FES survey, when young people were optimistic about their own future prospects in 10 years' time, although ambivalent or only cautiously optimistic about the future of their country.⁵⁰ It is therefore possible that the pandemic has severely hit the optimism of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nevertheless, there are still some rare youth voices in BiH that loudly spread the message of hope and encouragement, like our focus group participant who said: “*I don't expect Covid-19 to shape my future. I expect us (youth) to continue to shape our own future.*” (Female, 24)

More specifically, young people are very negative about the impact of Covid-19 on their income and employment over the next three years. Expectedly, traveling abroad is foreseen to be the most affected over the next three years (58 per cent). It is followed by a negative impact on youth income, their chances to join the labour market, and their career prospects (ranging from 41 to 44 per cent). In terms of their family and housing plans, young people think the impact will be more negative than positive, with a further one-third seeing it neutral. They are ambivalent about the impact on their knowledge and skills, as well as their health (including mental health): a similar share of them (one-third) expects either a negative, neutral, or positive impact.

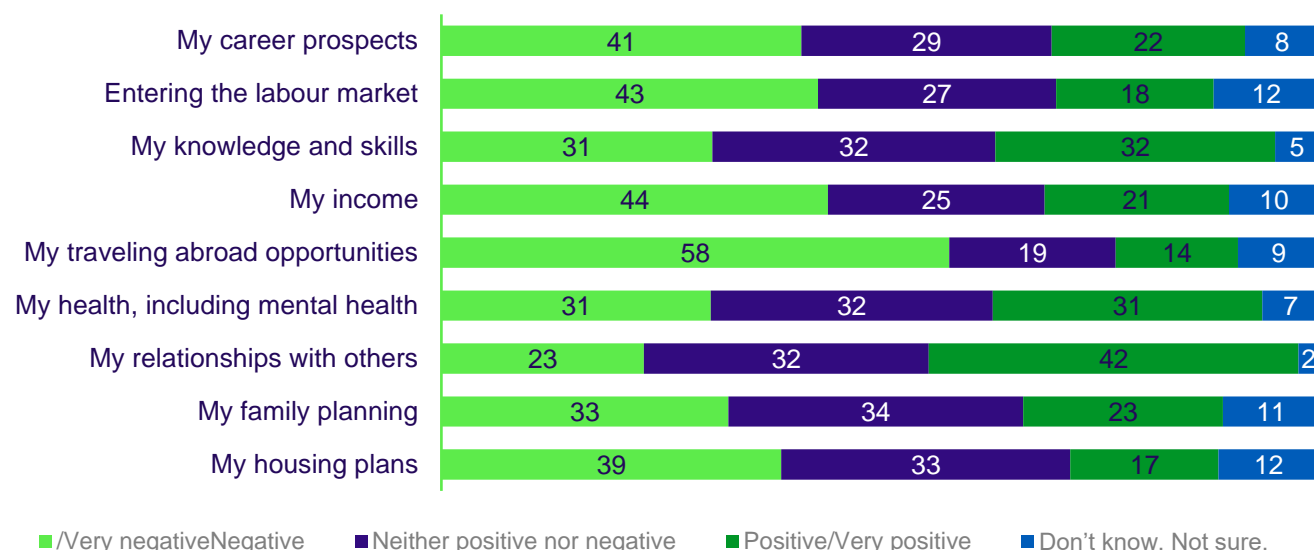
However, they hope that the pandemic will have a positive impact on their relationships with other people (**Figure 14**).

⁴⁹ Urban/rural: 59 vs 46 per cent; unemployed/employed 58 vs 49 per cent).

⁵⁰ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), (2020). [Youth Study Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018/2019](#).

Figure 14: Impact of Covid-19 over the next three years

When you think about impact of Covid-19 pandemic on your future over the next 3 years, what are your expectations of pandemic impact on? Unit=%

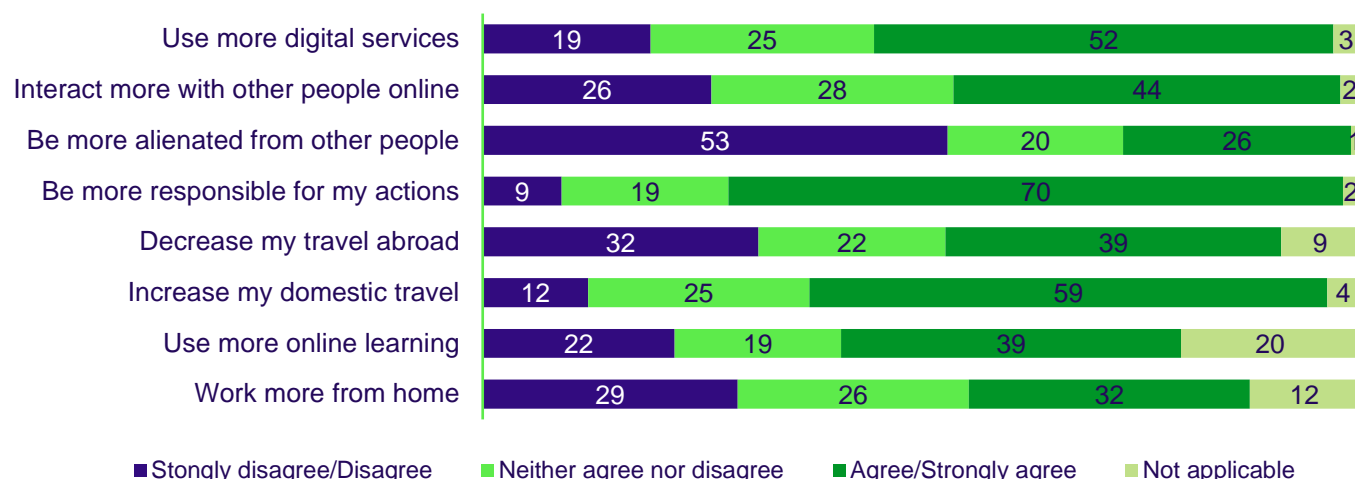


In terms of rural/urban differences, a greater share of urban youth foresees a negative impact on their career prospect (46 vs 37 per cent), and health (38 vs 25 per cent). The unemployed, including NEET, anticipate an adverse effect of the pandemic on their income (65 per cent) career prospects and chances to enter the labour market (55 per cent). Compared to other regions, a much larger portion of young people in Federation Herzegovina foresee a severe impact of the pandemic on their livelihoods and employment: around two in three young people think their income, career prospects, and employment opportunities will deteriorate over the next three years (ranging from 65 to 74 per cent). Roma youth are most concerned about their income: for nearly half of them, they expect it to be negative.

Youth expect profound changes in their behaviour/habits due to the pandemic. Taking more responsibility for their own actions is one of the few silver linings identified by youth in BiH: 71 per cent believe they will be more responsible for their own actions in the future. As for digital prospects they expect to use more digital services in the future (52 per cent), interact more with other people online (44 per cent), and use more online learning (39 per cent). They also expect to be more alienated from other people (51 per cent), which might be due to the expectations that the future will be more digital. Furthermore, most of them think that the pandemic has prompted them to increase domestic travel in the future at the expense of decreased travel abroad (59 and 39 per cent, respectively). Their expectations about changes of future working practices are less clear: 32 per cent of them expect they will work more from home, 29 per cent do not expect it, and the rest are neutral (**Figure 15**).

Figure 15: Impact of Covid-19 on future behaviours/practices

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Covid-19 impact on your future behaviours/practices compared to period before Covid-19? In the future, due to the pandemic I will...? Unit%



The pandemic and the BiH's government's response to it might have compounded the country's youth emigration problem.

Emigration is a well-known problem for the country: official figures indicate that over 56 per cent of BiH citizens live abroad. According to the Balkan Barometer survey, about half of current BiH residents would like to leave the country and work abroad, with the number of young people under 30 who wish to leave increasing over time.⁵¹ Peer-reviewed research has found that persons aged 30 or less are more likely to consider leaving the country than older individuals, pointing at the dissatisfaction with public services and the high levels of corruption as the main drivers of the willingness to emigrate.

Our survey results corroborate these findings. Nearly one in two young people in BiH expresses the wish to leave the country for employment reasons (48 per cent). This is twice as many compared to the number of young people who would like to study abroad. The survey reveals that unemployment is the key push factor, while marriage is the key pull factor for willingness to emigrate.⁵² However, almost four out of ten respondents (39 per cent) think that the pandemic and their government's response made them even more eager to leave the country and live somewhere else, against only 27 per cent who disagree with this statement. Our focus group participants largely supported the survey findings, and further underlined that they see leaving the country only as the last resort, if they fail to establish themselves and find a decent job in the country: *"I think that young people who are leaving the country do it not because they really want to, but because there is no great future for us here. We are not paid as much as we deserve for the knowledge we have. Only if I really had to, I*

would leave, but if I can manage to find a good job with a good salary, I won't leave." (Male, 26)

Government spending priorities should focus on fighting unemployment, improving healthcare, and increasing social benefits.

Our respondents have firmly placed the fight against unemployment caused by the pandemic (particularly in the sectors that were hit the hardest) as number one policy for their government to concentrate on: 78 per cent of youth have indicated it as one out of three main priorities for going forward. The improvement of healthcare services comes second (56 per cent), closely followed by increasing social benefits for those in need, whose situation has worsened during the pandemic (56 and 55 per cent, respectively). Two further policies stressed by our respondents are the need to improve the quality of education (43 per cent) and environmental protection (43 and 33 per cent, respectively). Roma and NEET even more frequently opted for combatting unemployment (82 and 81 per cent), but they also prioritized increasing social benefits for those in need over the improvement of health services which comes third.⁵³

Youth-specific policies to cope with the negative impact of the crisis should focus on subsidies to facilitate entrance into the labour market, decrease corruption, and build skills for employability.

In picking the three most crucial policies their government should implement to help young people, two-thirds of respondents said that they would like to see increased subsidies for companies that provide young people with opportunities for entering the labour market (64 per cent, **Figure 16**). The second highest priority, picked by 59 per cent of surveyed, is decreasing corruption in the employment process. As third, 50 per cent of

⁵¹Regional Cooperation Council. (2019). [Balkan Barometer](#).

⁵³ Roma: social benefits 73 per cent, health 50 per cent; NEET: social benefits 63 per cent, health 48 per cent.

Covid Screenagers

Socially distant, digitally close

Bosnia & Herzegovina

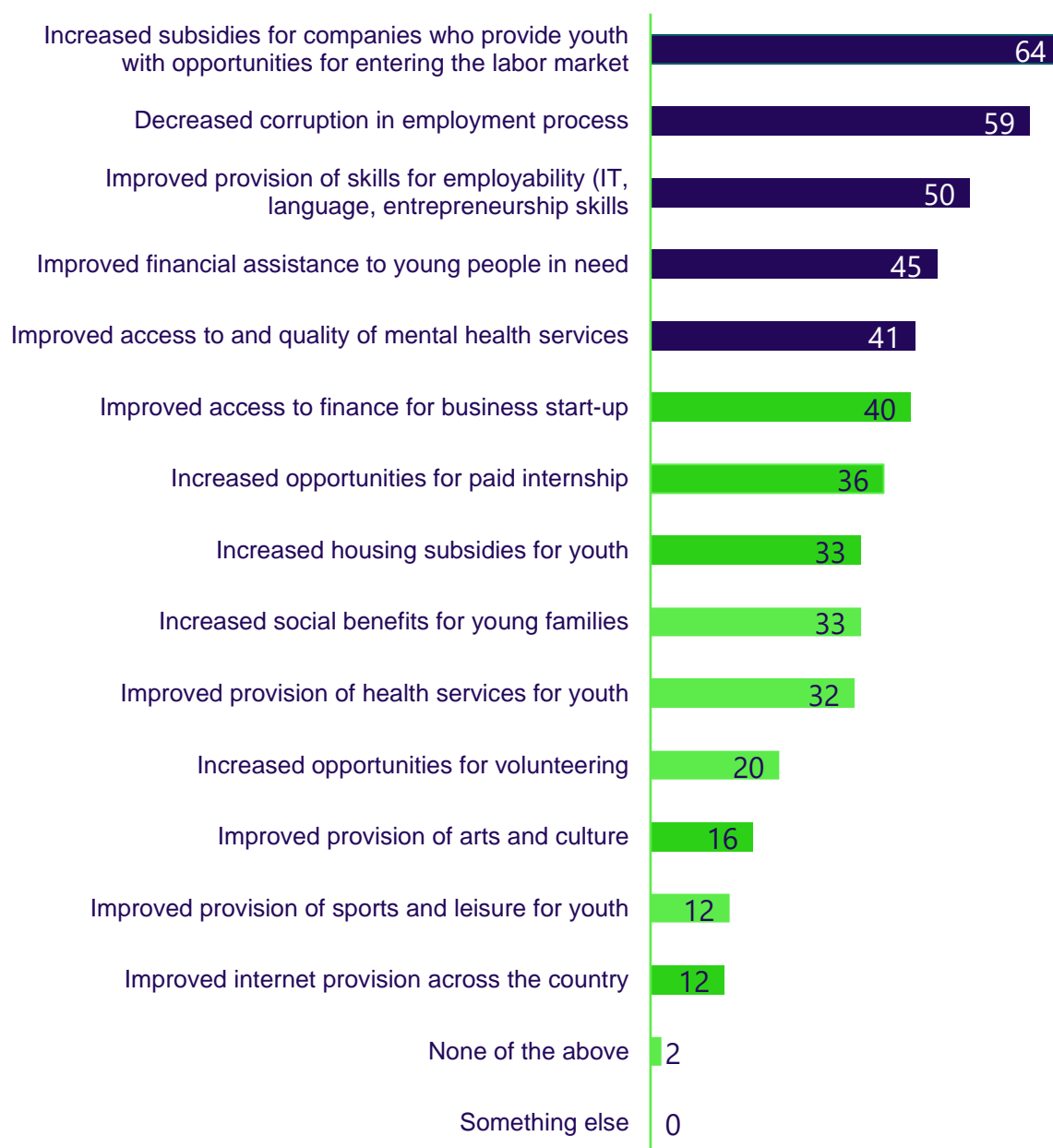
young people would like to see a focus on building skills that would aid employability, such as IT, foreign language, and entrepreneurship skills. This is followed by improved financial assistance to young people in need (44 per cent) and improved access to and quality of mental health services (41 per cent).

Priorities are set differently across the subgroups. The top three policy measures that would help Roma youth to cope with the pandemic's adverse impact are social benefits for young families (64 per cent), financial assistance to young people in need (60 per cent), and subsidies for companies who provide

youth with opportunities for entering the labour market (52 per cent). NEET youth would like to see the government focus on subsidized employment (64 per cent), decreased corruption in the employment process (54 per cent), and improved financial assistance to young people in need and young families (50 per cent each). The priority list of youth with disabilities is slightly different: in addition to prioritizing subsidies to companies providing youth with employment (66 per cent) and improved financial assistance to young people in need (58 per cent), they also highly prioritize improving access to and quality of mental health services (49 per cent).

Figure 16: Youth-specific measures

Which of the following measures would benefit youth the most in dealing with negative impacts of Covid-19? Please select top 5 priorities. Unit=%



GREEN MATTERS

57%

think that the Covid-19 outbreak has had a substantial positive impact on many aspects of the environment

57%

state that Covid-19 outbreak increased their awareness about the importance of the ecology

60%

started to act more responsible towards the environment during the Covid-19 pandemic





The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language. We help young people to gain the skills, confidence and connections they are looking for to realise their potential and to participate in strong and inclusive communities. We support them to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications. Our work in arts and culture stimulates creative expression and exchange and nurtures creative enterprise.

Find out more: britishcouncil.org