



Empowering
young people

A stylized map of Europe is shown in light blue, set against a dark blue background that represents the Earth. A yellow arc is visible at the bottom of the map, suggesting a globe. The map shows the outlines of European countries.

**YOUTH AND SOCIAL WORK
and the COVID-19 pandemic:
Impact and perspectives**

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About the YES Forum

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

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Introduction

COVID-19 Impact on Young People and Youth Organisations

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted various work fields since its beginning in early 2020. The youth sector has also been dramatically affected by the pandemic. While the pandemic has been challenging for all, young people have been disproportionately impacted by it, compared to other social groups. According to a survey commissioned by the European Parliament, compared to other age groups, young people have been impacted financially by the pandemic the most, and “uncertainty” is reported to be the most common emotional state felt by young European citizens (European Parliament, 2020). According to OECD’s latest policy paper, youth organisations surveyed in July–August 2021 have identified the top three concerns regarding the effects of the crisis on young people as follows: mental health (83%), education (64%) and employment (42%) (OECD, 2022).

After almost three years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has grown accustomed to living with the disease with less strict restrictions following the widespread vaccinations. However, the pandemic’s effects are expected to last well beyond it, especially when it comes to young people. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted from being a public health emergency to a crisis of far-reaching impacts, young people’s concerns have also shifted. Various indicators show that young people have been hit hard by the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis, and youth organisations are expressing growing concerns about their long-term implications on young people, especially those with fewer opportunities. The pandemic has hit vulnerable groups disproportionately and is likely to intensify existing inequalities (OECD, 2022). In this regard, the role of youth organisations is crucial to reach young people who are at the margin of society and urge decision-makers to develop recovery plans that fully address long-term impacts of the pandemic.

It is important to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on youth organisations as they foster active youth participation in society. Despite the negative impacts of COVID-19 on youth, new data shows an increased participation and engagement of young people compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. According to the European Commission’s latest Flash Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth, 25% of young people think that the most effective actions to make young people’s voices heard by decision-makers are through participating in student or youth organisations (European Commission, 2022). Further, a majority (58%) of young people report being active in the societies they live in through participation in one or more youth organisations over the past 12 months. This data shows an increase of 17 percentage points since the previous Eurobarometer in 2019.

Nonetheless, the pandemic has intensified inequalities between different age groups and among young people of different backgrounds and identities (OECD, 2020). To that end, there is a need to make a distinction between the general population of young people and those in marginalised situations. Their participation and engagement might not have shown the same increase compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Inequalities in access to internet and digital devices have translated into barriers to learning and working in remote settings. Moreover, young women, young people with lower socio-economic status, and unemployed youth reported higher rates of mental distress. Unemployment rose considerably more

among young women than among young men at the onset of the pandemic. When the latest European Commission survey asked what could be the most effective measures to mitigate the effect of COVID-19 on youth, 20%-23% of respondents selected “support young people's access to culture and culture-related activities”, “improve the quality and accessibility of digital tools” and “social workers and others reaching out to the most marginalised young people” (European Commission, 2022). This report aims to identify the impact of the pandemic on youth organisations, their response to it and perspectives for the future.

Aim of this Report

More frequently young people expect that society and decision-makers listen to their ideas and needs, and make more effort to better integrate them in the job market and to include disadvantaged young people (European Commission, 2022). The way to meet these expectations is to have a stronger youth sector. To that end, the aim of this report is to analyse the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted youth organisations’ daily work and activities, and to gather inspiring practices from youth organisations regarding their response to the pandemic and their newly emerging work methods.

Highlighting YES Forum members’ experiences, this report provides insights on how youth and social work organisations have managed their work since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, what new working methods they have discovered, and how they are planning to continue. It will also reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on the outreach to the target group, as well as the digital transformation of the sector and its activities.

Methodology

This report focuses on the COVID-19 impact on YES Forum members and is composed of:

- secondary research on the topic;
- the information provided by the YES Forum members at on-site events and activities; and
- answers received from YES Forum members to an online survey administered by YES Forum.

In addition to continuous exchanges with the members of the YES Forum, on 25th of May 2022, a “Share & Care” on-site activity (“How did we make it so far”) was organised specifically regarding the COVID-19 impact on youth organisations in the framework of the YES Forum’s Annual Event. Within this activity, 48 participants from 24 youth organisations and 11 European countries discussed the following questions in small groups:

- How did you proceed with your everyday work and the relationship with young people during these two years?
- How did you manage international projects with no travelling?
- What impact do you envision in future international projects?
- How is your organisation getting workers back to the office after promoting working from home?
- Which lessons or working-methods are you maintaining?

After the discussions in small groups, participants shared their responses to be used in this research. This report will share the insights from the described experience-sharing activity and provide examples anonymously.

Furthermore, this report draws on the results from an online survey run by the YES Forum between 25 May and 31 July 2022 with the participation of 20 respondents from 17 youth organisations located in 9 countries (Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom). The survey (in Annex) was disseminated mainly to YES Forum full members, associated members and partner organisations via email, social media, as well as on-site activities, whereby respondents were instructed to answer on behalf of their organisations rather than reflect their individual views. According to the survey results, 60% of the respondent organisations have more than 50 employees, 15% have between 16 and 50 employees, and 20% have between 1 and 15 employees. 20% of the organisations work on an international level, 25% work on a regional level, 35% work on a national level, and 20% work on a local level. Evidently, the sample of the survey is balanced in terms of the scope of the organisations, while more than half of the organisations that answered the survey are rather big in our context (with more than 50 employees).

The survey respondents do not constitute a representative sample and the analysis does not investigate respondents' self-selection biases, hence making statistical inference not possible. Nonetheless, it gives important insights from the perspective of youth organisations regarding the COVID-19 impact.

This report is structured as follows: each chapter will briefly review the research on the topic so far, present the analyses of the responses provided by YES Forum members, and draw conclusions for a wider sample. There are three main chapters: "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic", "Youth Organisations' Response to the Pandemic" and "Perspectives".

YES FORUM members' experiences

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis interrupted many of the activities of youth organisations, affecting the organisations themselves, as well as the participation of the young people they support. One of the biggest challenges for youth organisations was to switch from face-to-face activities to online and digital approaches. Before the pandemic the activities of youth organisations were mainly in-person where young people could meet, co-operate and interact with each other. According to the European Commission's study on youth work in the EU, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic 82% of respondents to the survey reported difficulty in delivering activities, and 61% of youth workers have completely "rethought the way they do things" (European Commission, 2021). While 43% of youth workers have stopped some activities, 48% have extended their digital activities (European Commission, 2021).

The results of the previous research are in line with the experiences shared by the YES Forum members at events and activities. Reduced or cancelled on-site activities was the most often mentioned impact

of COVID-19 on youth organisations. Our member organisations stated that most of the planned activities/workshops/seminars were either cancelled, had to be held online or in a hybrid form during the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, the majority of organisations mentioned the negative impact of online meetings on the quality of interactions with colleagues and target groups. On another hand, some participants stated that meeting with their colleagues was easier and more frequent because of the online activities. These differences in experiences and perspectives might be dependent on the social, digital and financial circumstances different organisations navigate.

Following are some statements from the YES Forum members that participated in the “Share & Care” activity that mirrors these differences in perspectives regarding the impact of online activities:

“Most of our activities were postponed or held online, and digital meetings were key during the lockdown. However, we still could not find any decent replacement for actual travels with our young people.”

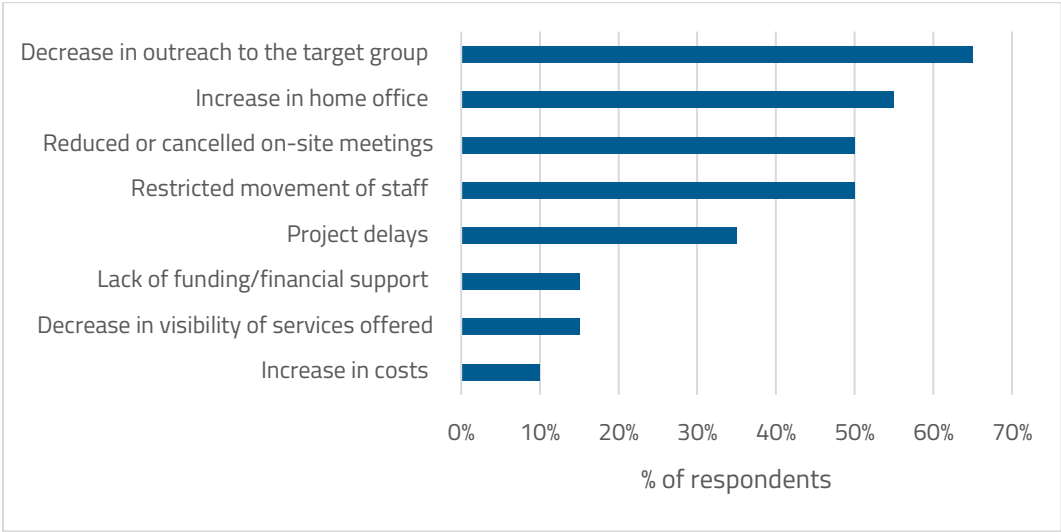
“We were meeting online more frequently than before using Zoom and Teams. It felt like we bonded more in this way. We could have online meetings that included all the staff across the country.”

In the survey targeting YES Forum members, respondents were invited to evaluate the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on their organisations’ daily work and activities, as well as identify the three main manifestations of this impact.

Regarding the extent of the impact, respondents had a five-point scale to answer with “1” indicating that COVID-19 has **not at all** impacted the organisation and “5” indicating that COVID-19 has **strongly** impacted the organisation’s daily work and activities. The majority of survey participants (60%) stated that **COVID-19 strongly impacted** their organisation’s daily work and activities, while no respondent answered with “1” (not at all). The other 40% chose a number between 2-4 indicating a medium impact of COVID-19 on their organisations daily work and activities. According to these results, we can conclude that all of the organisations experienced some kind of impact of COVID-19 and for most of them this impact was rather strong.

When asked about the three main ways in which COVID-19 has impacted their organisations’ daily work and activities, respondents chose from a list with eight different possible answers. Figure 2 shows the available options together with the results of the question. According to these results, “Decrease in outreach to the target group” (65%), “Increase in home office” (55%), “Reduced or cancelled on-site meetings” (50%), and “Restricted movement of staff” (50%) are the most common manifestations of impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on organisations’ daily work and activities. Therefore, we can conclude that COVID-19 had a strong to medium impact on most of the organisations that participated in the survey carried out by YES Forum. Importantly, the survey data demonstrates the alarming impact of the pandemic on the ability of youth organisations to deliver services to young people as “Decrease in outreach to the target group” is the most common impact observed.

Figure 1: What were the three main impacts of COVID-19 on your organisation's daily work and activities?



Youth Organisations’ Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Different studies have underlined that the youth sector quickly adapts and develops their capacity and competences to face new challenges and meet the needs of young people (UK Youth n.d., Esmacilla et al. 2021). Following the extensive COVID-19 impact on youth organisations’ daily work and activities, youth workers and organisations needed to react and find solutions quickly and in a sustainable way. In most cases, “they went back to basics and based their decisions on how to reorganise their work on ethical standards of youth work and the core mission of safeguarding young people and protecting those most vulnerable” (Esmacilla et al. 2021, p.12).

Similar to other work fields, the first response to the pandemic was moving meetings and activities from on-site to online by using digital tools more often than ever. However, in the case of youth social work, this is more challenging as there are also barriers to young people’s digital engagement stemming from digital poverty and limited access to technology (McArdle and McConville 2021, Marshall et al. 2021). Furthermore, as a result of physical distancing young people’s emotional well-being and mental health have been impacted negatively. Therefore, youth organisations faced a specific challenge to discover and develop innovative methods to work with young people. YES Forum members’ experiences are also in line with these observations. Most of the members shared their concerns about young people’s engagement during online activities.

Following are some statements from the YES Forum members that participated in the “Share & Care” activity regarding the engagement of the target group during online activities:

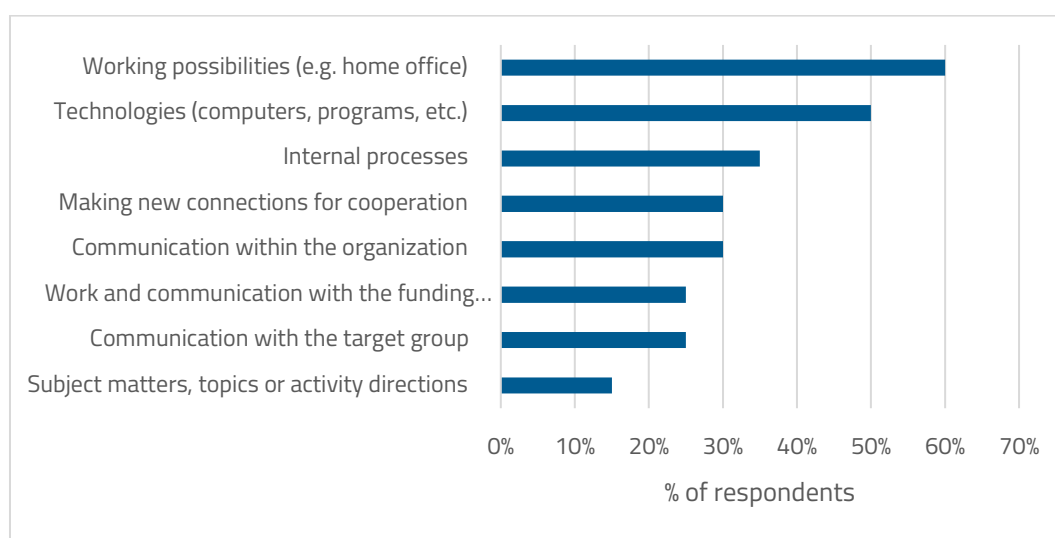
“I was teaching online during several lockdowns, and it was a challenge to get the students involved in the subject matter. But everyone understood the unprecedented situation and we pulled through together.”

“Engaging the audience is the most important part. We should avoid webinars and solo speeches. Create methodologies to engage and interact with the audience. Otherwise, you can just record a video and not have a Zoom meeting!”

"We started online trainings since April 2020, and as soon as it was possible we started workshops in presence. Some students were so happy, others still scared to meet each other. We as staff of Social Work continue to maintain contact with youngsters!"

In our survey respondents were asked to choose three major working areas/methods they have discovered or expanded due to COVID-19 impact out of 8 options given. According to the results, youth organisations had to adapt and change their working methods mostly regarding "Working possibilities (e.g. home office)" (60%), "Technologies (computers, programs, etc.)" (50%) and "internal processes" (35%). Figure 2 summarises the choice options and results of this question.

Figure 2: Due to COVID-19 impact, was it possible for your organisation to discover new opportunities, or to expand existing working methods regarding the following? Please select three major areas:



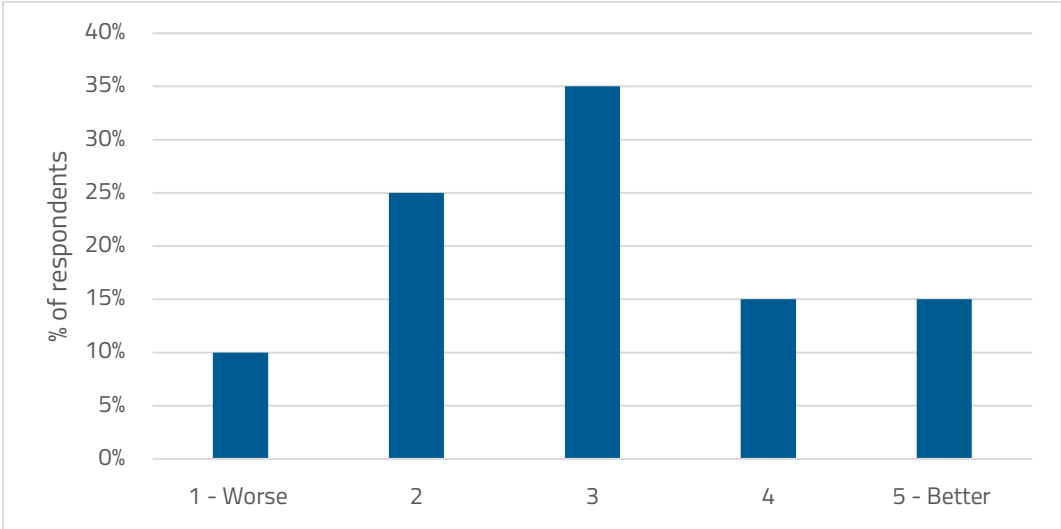
Further, we asked the respondents whether they had the need to use digital tools more often than before. Not surprisingly, all respondents stated that they needed to use digital tools more often than before. More specifically, all have started using "Video conferencing tools" such as Teams, Zoom, WebEx, Google Meet, while 65% of the respondents started to use "Collaborative/ Co-working tools", and 55% started to use "New software" and "Social Media" more often than before. Also, 65% of the respondents stated that they would continue to use these digital tools as often in the future, while 35% stated that they would use them less often.

Additionally, we asked our survey respondents whether they organised online activities instead of the planned on-site activities. Expectedly, all respondents stated that they needed to organise online activities. Subsequently, the respondents were asked to rate the impact of those virtual activities in comparison to in-person activities, and provide explanations. The results of this question demonstrated a variety of perceptions: 30% of the respondents claimed that the virtual activities were better than in-person activities, 35% considered the impact to be the same, and 35% said that the impact of the virtual activities has been worse than the impact of in-person activities. Figure 3 shows these results.

When it comes to the comments of the respondents as to why they chose their preferred answer to this question, most of the respondents stated that there are advantages and disadvantages of both virtual

and in-person activities, and that sometimes they are complementary for one another. On one hand, virtual activities are considered to be more flexible, time efficient, environmental and accessible as they do not require travelling. On the other hand, on-site activities offer important benefits such as interpersonal relationships with the target group and the colleagues, a more sociable environment, and more creative results.

Figure 3: Overall, how would you rate the impact of those virtual activities in comparison to in-person activities? Please explain your answer briefly! (Which aspects were better, which worse? Why?)



Perspectives

While the impact of COVID-19 on youth organisations and their response remains relevant topics, it is crucial to see how youth organizations operate 3 years after the pandemic started. Overcoming diverse new challenges posed by Covid-19, youth organisations have been able to identify what methods they would like to maintain and further develop. In this chapter, we will focus on the current situation of youth organisations’ outreach to the target group and their working methods regarding teleworking. As shown earlier, “decrease in outreach to the target group” (65%) and “increase in home office” (55%) were the most commonly mentioned COVID-19 impacts by our survey respondents.

Following the change from on-site activities to online or hybrid activities, the outreach of youth organisations to their target group has also been strongly affected. This impact has not been fully negative or fully positive. On one hand, as mentioned in the last chapter, limited digital access of vulnerable young people has led to their disengagement in online youth work activities as some youth organisations did not have the capacity to access digital tools and reach their target group with those instruments. In addition to this, most of the engagement methods used in physical spaces (such as informal conversations, body language and group work) are not as effective via online outreach. On the other hand, for some organisations, an increase in online activities and digital methods opened doors to reach even more young people through social platforms. However, this is highly dependent on the capacity and resources different organisations have.

Importantly, YES Forum member organisations emphasised the responsibility of youth organisations to bridge the digital opportunities gap among young people to avoid reinforcing inequalities.

Following are some statements from the YES Forum members that participated in the “Share & Care” activity regarding this:

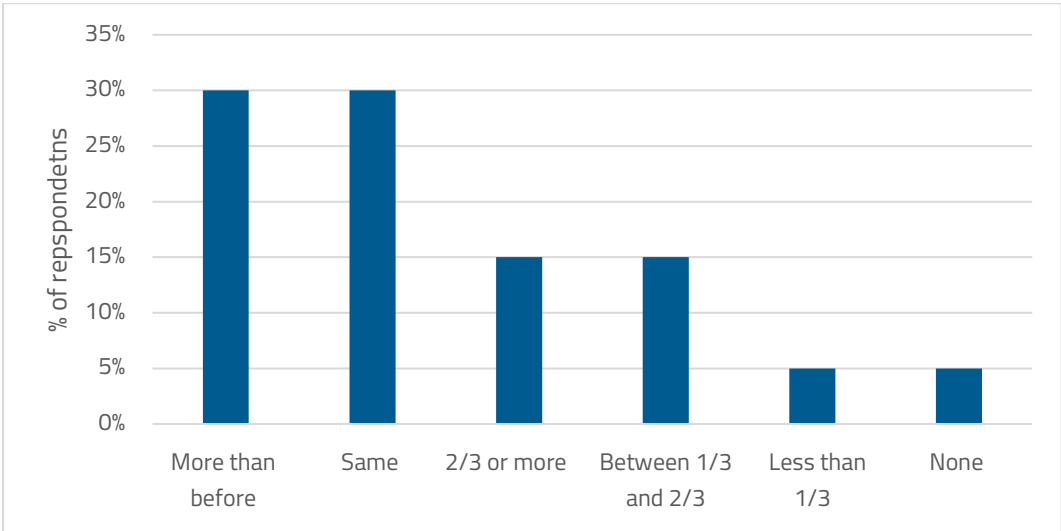
“It took a psychological toll to work in adult education especially with vulnerable groups who do not have access to the internet and have very limited access to online activities.”

“Methods to enable staff to meet with the target group (e.g. online events, outside activities) have been proven to be sustainable for our daily work and will therefore remain a part of what we will be offering in the future.”

“We want to work more on digitalisation from the social policy point of view. We want to continue doing in-person and online services. Actually, we reached new young people in our online platform who we never reached before.”

In our online survey, we asked the respondents about their outreach to the target group and how it was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of represented organizations were reported to have maintained or increased the number of young people they reach: 60% reported that they currently reach more or the same amount of their target group compared to the pre-COVID-19 period; 30% stated that they either reach between 1/3 and 2/3 or more of their target group; 10% reach less than 1/3 or none of their target group compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Figure 4 summarises the results of this question. When asked about what methods they use to reach and reconnect with their target groups, most of the organisations stated that they prefer more blended approaches between online and on-site activities while gradually increasing face-to-face interaction with the young people.

Figure 4: Compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, what proportion of your target group, in your estimate, do you currently still reach with your work?



The pandemic caused an exponential growth in teleworking in the EU. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were only 5% of teleworkers in the EU-28, a figure that increased to 40% in the EU-27 after the start of the pandemic (Esmacilla et al. 2021, López Peláez et al. 2021). In this regard, empirical studies

suggested conflicting implications for employees’ work-life balance, job satisfaction, and well-being. On one hand, telework arrangements offer greater flexibility on where, when, and how to work. On the other, they cause unclear boundaries between work and personal life, increased work demands, and adverse effects on individual well-being. To this end, we asked our members to share more about their experience with teleworking.

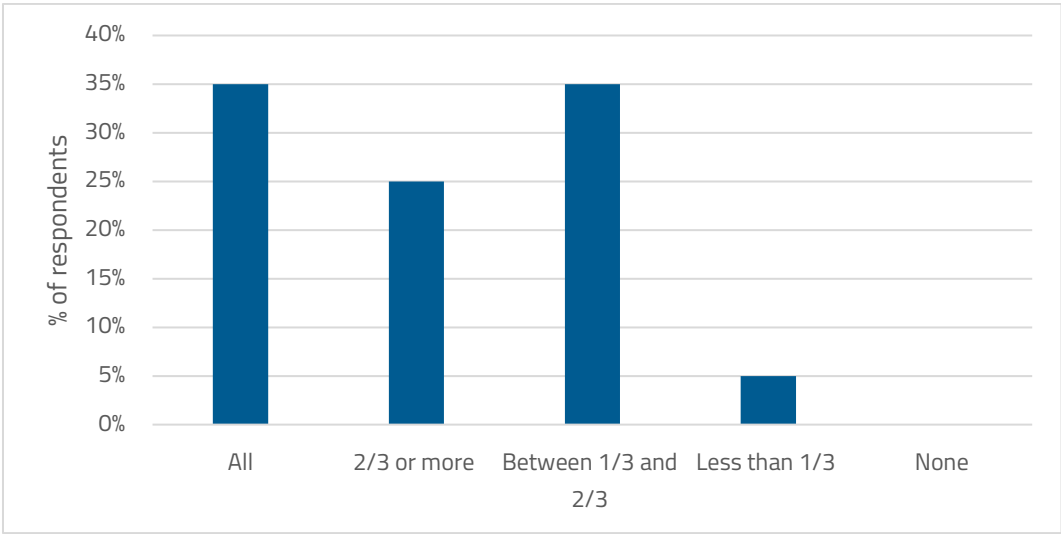
Following are some statements from the YES Forum members who participated in the “Share & Care” activity regarding this topic:

“We are now switching from digital appointments to meetings in presence. Since the start of the pandemic, we have implemented projects digitally, and we really missed the important discussions in presence.”

“We have now a new normal, the challenge is not to go back to the old normal! We need flexible mindsets! Different working methods and approaches should be kept. It is not just about full online or full home-based work, but about adaptability and flexibility.”

We asked our online survey respondents about the proportion of their organisations’ staff currently working from the office or on-site compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. 60% of the respondents reported that all or more than two third of the staff is currently working from the office. 35% stated that between 1/3 and 2/3 of their staff is working from the office or on-site. And, 5% of the organisations reported that less than 1/3 of their staff are currently working from the office compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Figure 5 summarises the results of this question. Evidently, most of the organisations are going back to working from the office. However, it is evident that there is a stronger need for flexibility and openness towards teleworking arrangements.

Figure 5: Compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, what proportion of your organisation's staff, in your estimate, do currently work from the office or on-site?



Lastly, we asked the respondents to share other impact COVID-19 had on their organisations not covered by the survey so far. A respondent brought up the central for many youth organisations issue of funding:

"We realised that the demand for our services has grown, but not necessarily the funding."

Conclusions

All YES Forum members work with and for young people, however their form of action, approach and structure vary greatly between each other. One of the core activities of YES Forum is the capacity building of its members and of the young people they work with. We aim at supporting organisations to discover new practices and methods, recognise which parts of them could be applied in their own context and learn how to adapt them. With this report we aimed to gather and analyse the experiences of YES Forum members regarding COVID-19 impact to identify common challenges, share best practices and inspire our members as well as other social/youth work organisations.

Our exchanges with the organisations through our shared activities and survey made evident that all organisations' daily work and activities had been impacted by the pandemic. For some this impact was experienced stronger than others depending on their type of work, capacities and resources. The most common reported impacts are decrease in outreach to the target group, increase in home office, reduced/cancelled on-site meetings and restricted movement of staff. In one way or another, all of these impacts required digitalisation of activities and interactions with the target group and colleagues. For this reason, in this report, we mainly focused on organisations' experiences with this "forced" digitalisation of their work and their perception of this process of transformation currently.

As demonstrated by our survey data, there are mixed experiences and perspectives regarding the impact of virtual and in-person activities for the engagement of the target group as well as staff. Most organisations think that there are advantages and disadvantages to both virtual and in-person activities, and that sometimes they are complementary for one another. On one hand, virtual activities are more flexible, time efficient, environmental and accessible as they do not require travelling. On the other hand, on-site activities offer a more sociable environment, better quality of interpersonal relationships with the target group and colleagues, as well as more creative collaboration results. These differences in experiences and perspectives might be dependent on the social, digital and financial resources different organisations possess.

We should continue looking for innovative methods working with and for young people! Youth organisations face a specific challenge as they need to continuously develop innovative methods for their work with young people. Most members of the YES Forum shared concerns about young people's engagement during online activities. Yet, while some organizations' outreach capacity was negatively impacted by the need to go online to reach young people, other organizations stated that they could reach young people that they could not reach before thanks to digital outreach. Importantly, our respondents pointed out the responsibility of youth organisations to bridge the digital opportunities gap

among young people to avoid reinforcing inequalities. Currently organisations prefer more blended approaches between online and on-site activities along with gradually increasing the face-to-face interaction with the young people.

In this regard, empirical studies suggest conflicting implications for employees' work-life balance, job satisfaction, and well-being. On one hand, telework arrangements offer greater flexibility on where, when, and how to work. On the other, they cause unclear boundaries between work and personal life, increased work demands, and adverse effects on individual well-being. Thankfully, most organisations among the respondents in our online survey sample are going back to working from the office. However, it is evident that there is a stronger need for more flexibility and openness towards teleworking arrangements.

In addition to its negative impacts, COVID-19 led youth and social work organisations to leave their comfort zone and search for more digital, innovative and flexible methods to enhance their activities. And, for some organisations, this change is here to stay beyond the pandemic.

Looking forward, organisations acknowledge the "new normal", and warn against the risk of going back to the "old normal". With the changing needs of youth amid different crises in the world, youth and social work organisations need to stay up-to-date and improve their activities accordingly with the support of appropriate policy measures.

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