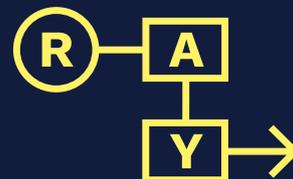


# Policy Brief



Research-based  
analysis of European  
youth programmes

09/  
2020

Written by

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YOUTH  
WORK  
AND THE  
CORONA  
PANDEMIC  
IN  
EUROPE

RAY-  
COR

Key findings

First online  
survey and  
initial review  
of literature

*Erasmus+ Youth in Action* and the *European Solidarity Corps* are the two European youth programmes of the European Union supporting international projects in the youth field. The *Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes (RAY)* is a research programme conducted by the RAY Network, which includes the National Agencies of the European youth programmes and their research partners in currently 34 countries\*.

This policy brief presents key findings from the research project on the impact of the corona pandemic on youth work in Europe (RAY-COR). The project was designed and implemented by the Generation and Educational Science Institute in Austria and

Youth Policy Labs in Germany in cooperation with the RAY Network. It was co-funded through Transnational Cooperation and Network Activities (TCA/NET) of the European youth programmes.

This policy brief reflects the views only of its authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

\* In September 2020: Austria<sup>o</sup>, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia<sup>o</sup>, Finland<sup>o</sup>, France, Germany<sup>o</sup>, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom.

<sup>o</sup> Members of the RAY-COR research project working group



At the time of writing, National Agencies and their research partners were starting to implement national research activities. Reports, once finalised, will be made available on



[www.researchyouth.net/network/](http://www.researchyouth.net/network/)

Further RAY publications can be retrieved from



[www.researchyouth.net/reports/](http://www.researchyouth.net/reports/)

Published by the **Generation and Educational Science Institute, Vienna**

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This policy brief as well as the underlying research reports are available at [researchyouth.net/cor](http://researchyouth.net/cor).

Version 20200915  
September 2020

Quotes of respondents cited in this brief have been fully anonymised on purpose.

Design by Mursal Nasr &



ISBN 978-3-9504853-9-4



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# Policy Brief

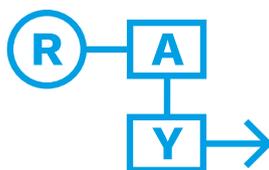


The impact of the  
corona pandemic on  
youth work in Europe

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## Key findings

First online survey \*  
and initial review  
of relevant literature



Research-based  
analysis of European  
youth programmes

\* June 2020, 1.718 responses, 938 full responses  
560 youth workers and youth leaders, 378 young people involved in youth work

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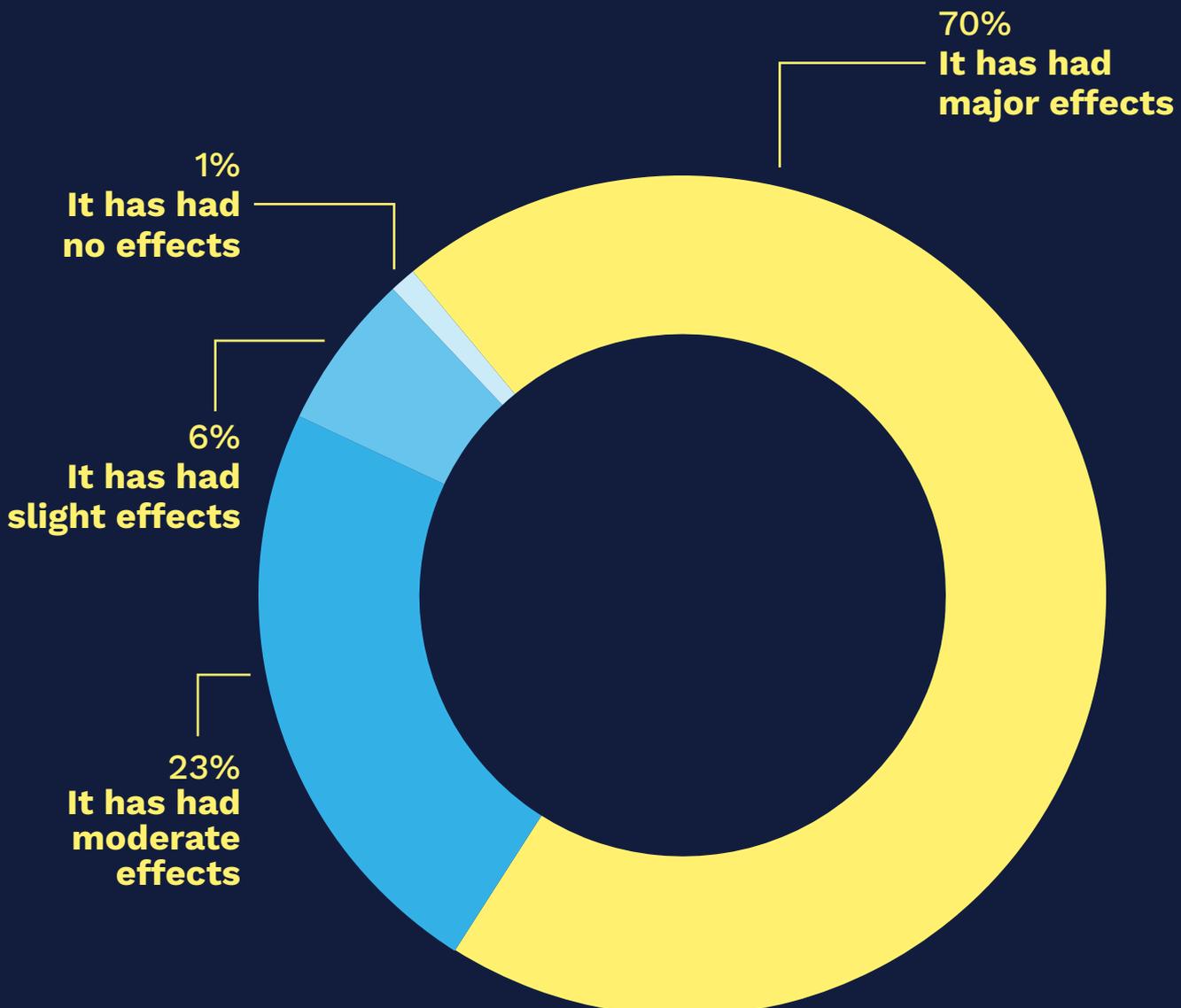
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1/6

# THE PANDEMIC HAS SHAKEN YOUTH WORK TO THE CORE

Q: Has the corona  
pandemic affected  
your youth work?



**1/6**

70% of all online survey respondents say that the coronavirus pandemic has affected their own youth work majorly.

**1.1 EVERY ASPECT OF YOUTH WORK HAS BEEN AFFECTED**

Across all types and sizes of youth work organisation, every aspect of youth work has been affected to some extent.

Most prominently, youth work spaces have changed, not surprisingly, given the lockdown phases in almost all European countries.

Youth work methods, timings and tools have all been majorly affected as well, whereas youth work values have been affected much less.

**1.2 YOUTH WORK ORGANISATIONS STRONGLY AFFECTED**

The pandemic has not only affected youth workers and youth leaders, but also their structural environment,

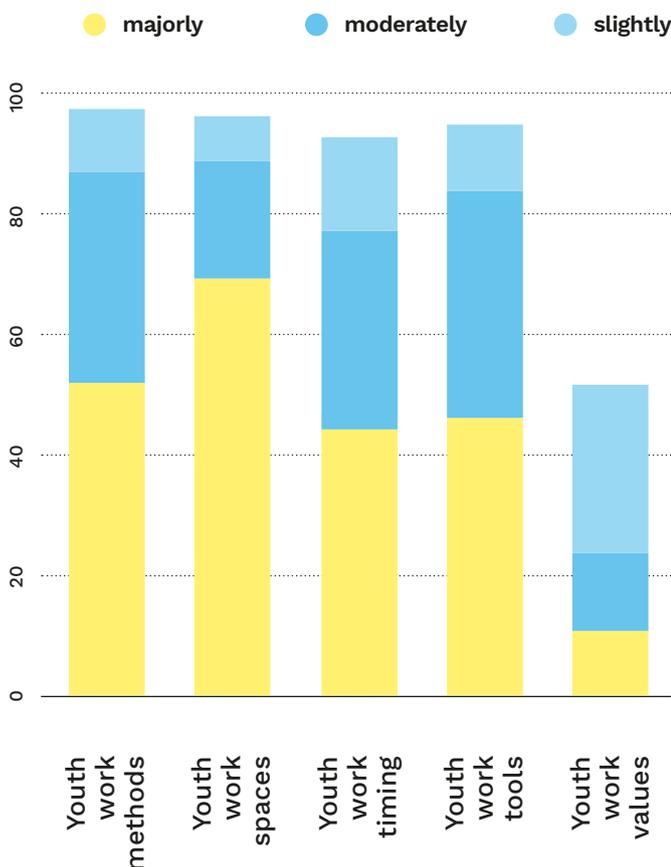
**“Everything has changed. All our structures, our framework, our support environment, our work – everything.”**

Online survey respondent

whether that takes the shape of an organisation, administration, network, department or team.

47% of all online survey respondents state that their youth work structure has been affected majorly by the pandemic, and 33% state their structural environment has experienced moderate effects. On 15% of youth work structures, the pandemic has had slight effects – and just 5% of respondents state there has been no effects at all so far.

**Q: Which aspects of your youth work have been affected?**



**1.3 ALL STRUCTURAL DIMENSIONS HAVE BEEN AFFECTED**

We asked survey respondents which structural aspects of their youth work environment have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Across all aspects we covered in the first online survey – which were:

- collaboration & communication
- coordination & decisionmaking
- leadership and management,
- feedback, mentoring & support,
- volunteering

more than 80% of respondents say that each and every one of these aspects has changed. On average, these aspects changed for the worse (appr. 20%), for the better (also appr. 20%), and most frequently they changed neutrally, at least for now (appr. 40%).

2/6

## THE ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC ARE SEVERE

**“Our budget has been cut in half. New funding is entirely uncertain. The financial impact is hitting us very hard at the moment.”**

Online survey respondent

**“The economic effects of the crisis have undermined our financial stability. We had to cut wages and reduce staff to be able to cope.”**

Online survey respondent

**2/6**

For the vast majority of responding youth workers and youth leaders, the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic on their organisation have been severe.

**2.1 BUDGET CUTS AND OFFICE CLOSURES**

46% of respondents say that, at the time of conducting the survey (June 2020), two thirds or more of their youth work had been delayed or interrupted.

For 49% of organisations, this has led to a decrease in their budget – for half of these organisations, the budget has shrunk by 40% or more.

74% of responding youth workers and youth leaders say their organisations had to close physical spaces temporarily. Permanent closures are not yet widespread (so far, 3%).

**2.2 WORK TIME AND VOLUNTEERING TIME REDUCTIONS**

38% of organisations reported a reduction of work time of paid staff members, and 12% had to let staff members go.

25% of organisations expect that further work time reductions will be

necessary, and 11% expect additional job cuts.

65% of respondents say that the overall volunteering time has been reduced as well, and 49% think that additional reductions of volunteering time are likely.

63% of respondents say that some volunteers suspended their engagement temporarily, and 26% say that some of their volunteers have resigned permanently.

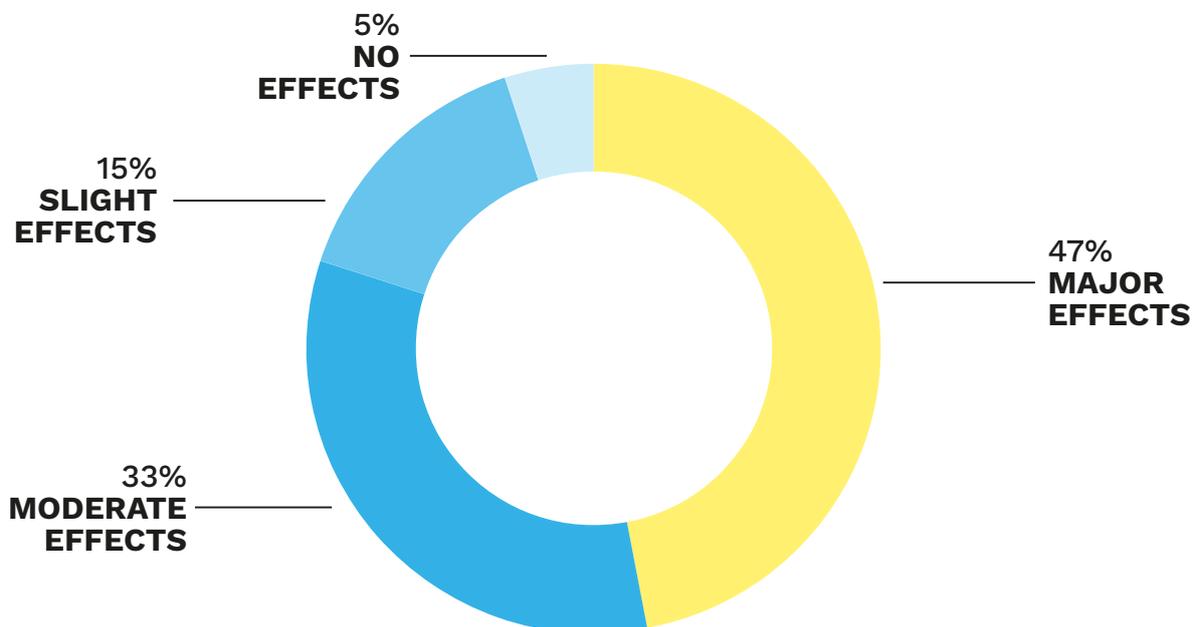
**2.3 CRISIS BENEFICIARIES ARE INSULAR AND RARE**

2% of respondents say that the budget of their organisation increased during the pandemic, 8% say that new staff was hired, and 20% say that new volunteers joined their team.

**“Unless something changes, we are going to loose 9 full months of income this year. We do not have reserves to cover that.”**

Online survey respondent

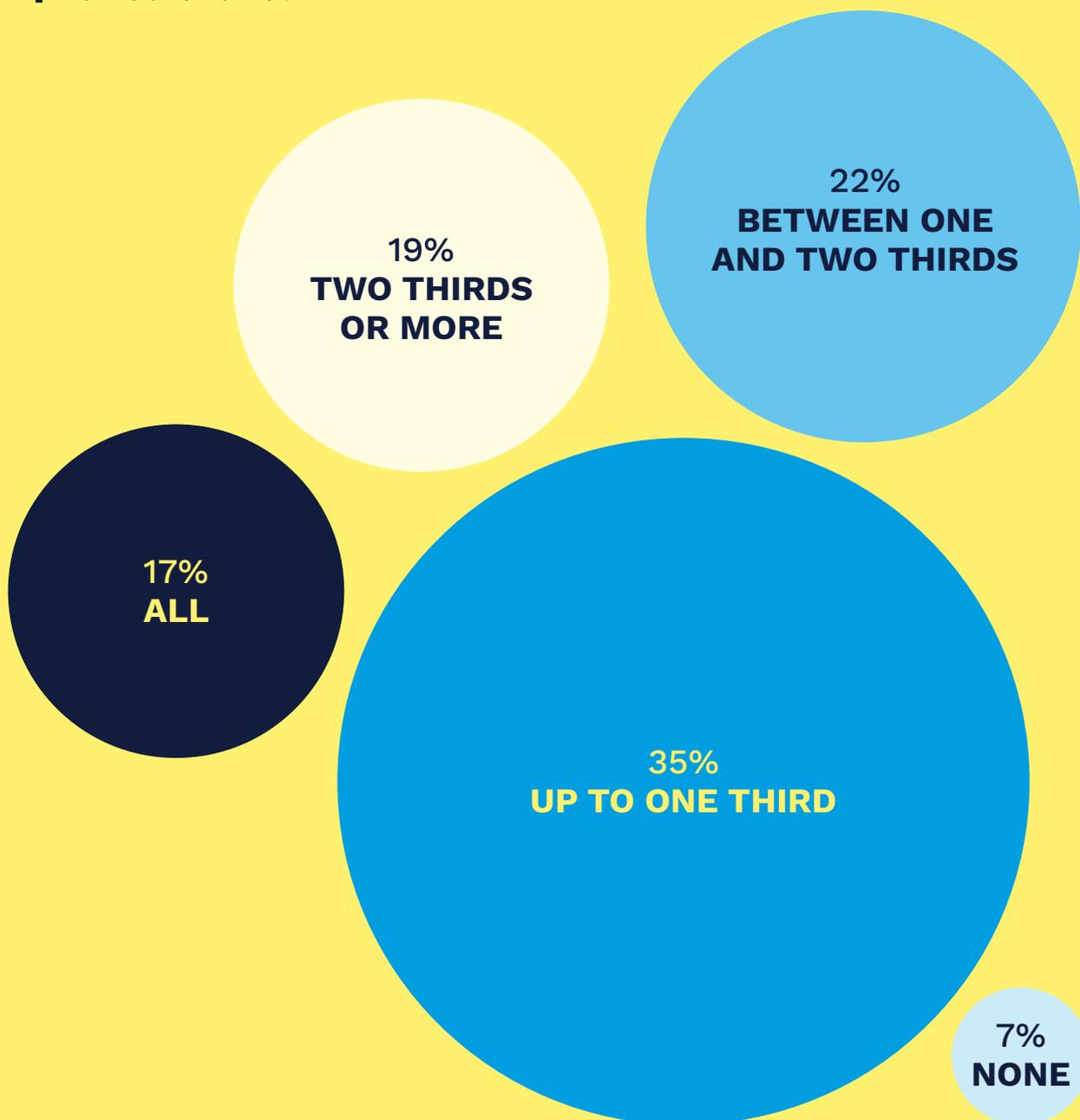
Q. Has the corona pandemic affected your own youth work structure – be that an organisation, an administration, a network, a department, a team?



**3/6**

# YOUTH WORK IS EXPERIMENTING AND ADAPTING QUICKLY

Q. How much of your youth work has been transferred online?



**3/6**

**“Everything now happens on-line. School is online. Parties are online. How do we make *online non-formal learning* different? That is the key question we need to find an answer to.”**

Online survey respondent

84% of respondents say that they are addressing the corona pandemic and its effects in their own youth work, despite the challenging circumstances described in the section above.

**3.1 EXPERIMENTING WITH AND SHAPING NEW YOUTH WORK SPACES AND METHODS**

44% of responding youth workers and youth leaders say that they are offering online group activities frequently, and another 38% do so occasionally. Practical advice is shared with young people frequently by 39% of all respondents, with another 44% doing so occasionally.

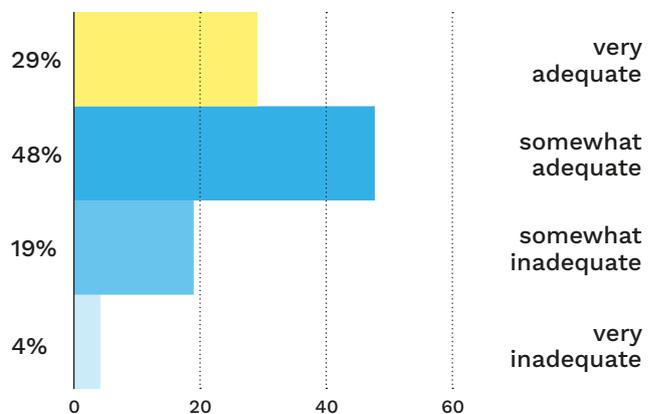
48% of responding young people say that they are joining digital activities more than before. 35% say they are suggesting changes to digital youth work more than before, and 28% say they are helping to improve digital youth work more than before.

**3.2 SEARCHING FOR NEW APPROACHES IN NEW ENVIRONMENTS**

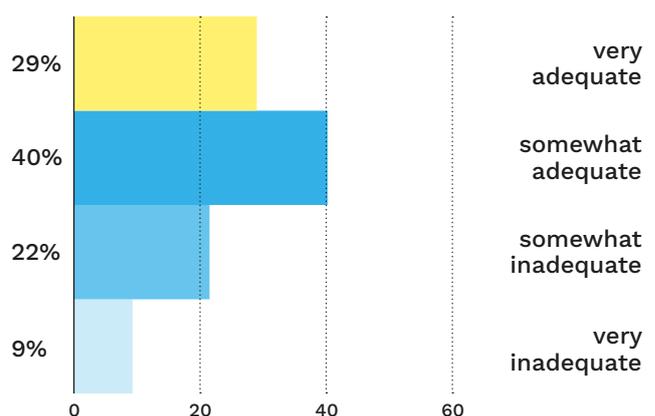
Many respondents have commented on the necessity—and struggle—to find a new distinct voice and approach for youth work and non-formal education in online spaces. *What makes digital youth work different from other online environments?* remains an open and intriguing question.

**Q: In your opinion and context, how well has youth work as a field responded to the crisis so far?**

*Responses of youth workers and youth leaders: 77% say the response has been very or somewhat adequate so far*

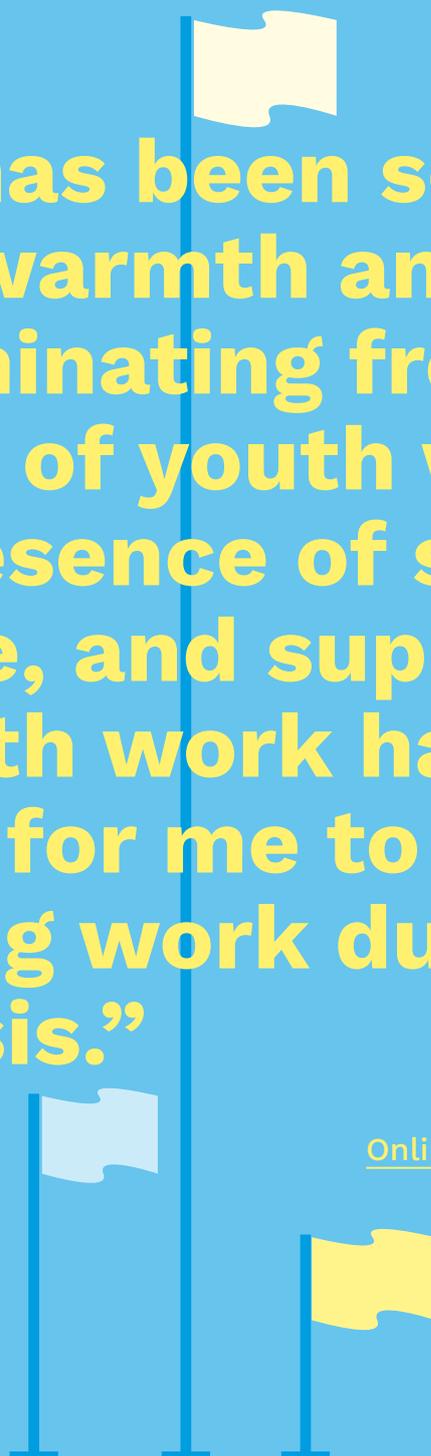


*Responses of young people: 69% say the response has been very or somewhat adequate so far*



4/6

## YOUTH WORK HELPS YOUNG PEOPLE TO NAVIGATE THE CRISIS



“There has been so much heart, warmth and passion emanating from the leaders of youth work. The presence of strong, positive, and supportive youth work has been critical for me to make anything work during the crisis.”

Online survey respondent

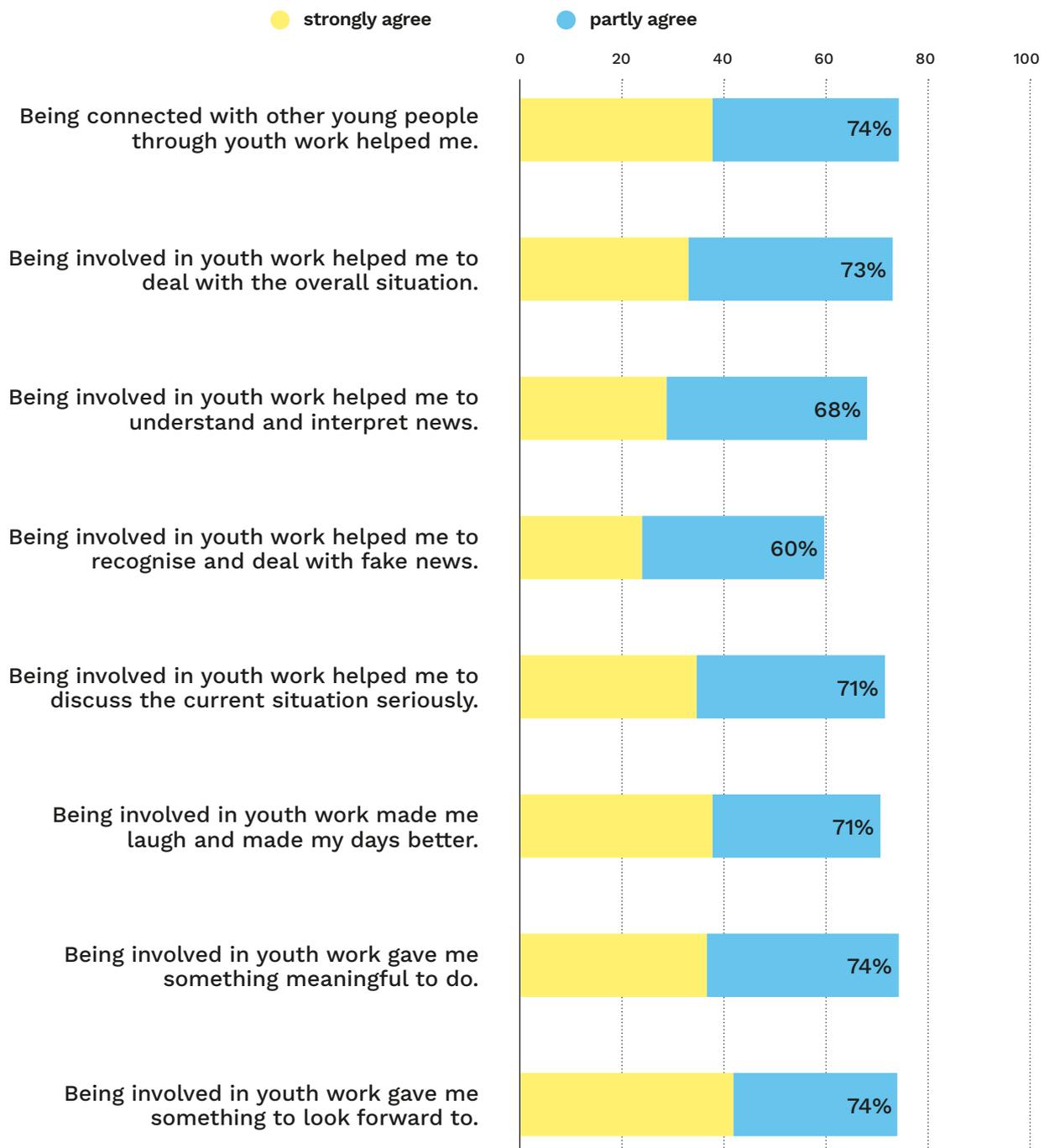
**4/6**

Numerous of the young people responding to our first online survey complimented and thanked their youth workers and youth leaders profoundly for being there for them and with them during the pandemic, while others critiqued youth work for being too slow, too careful, too afraid of digital spaces – and sometimes even entirely absent from those spaces.

**4.1 MENTAL HEALTH EMERGES AS A KEY ISSUE FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE**

Mental health has been mentioned many times by respondents as a key issue, both professionally and personally. Literature shows that this aligns with previous experiences: pandemics tend to effect young people’s mental health more strongly.

**Q: Has your involvement in youth work helped you during these times?**



**5/6**

## **MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FAR TOO OFTEN OUT OF REACH**

**“It is those young  
people we care  
most about in our  
daily work that we  
cannot get in touch  
with anymore. They  
have almost com-  
pletely disap-  
peared from  
our work. I  
am worried.”**

Online survey respondent

**5/6**

Young people with fewer opportunities have become much harder to reach for youth work across Europe, and in many contexts have fallen out of youth work’s reach entirely.

**5.1 THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IS VERY REAL, AND IT’S DEEPLY PROBLEMATIC**

Young people are, as anyone during this pandemic, dependent on having access to a modern computing device—a smartphone, a tablet, a computer—that is reliably connected to a reasonably fast and steady internet connection.

In many countries, however, young people from a diversity of disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to such a device. Many of them share devices in their households; too many don’t have any.

In consequence, they struggle participating in online formats of formal education, and are now at much higher risk than before to become school dropouts.

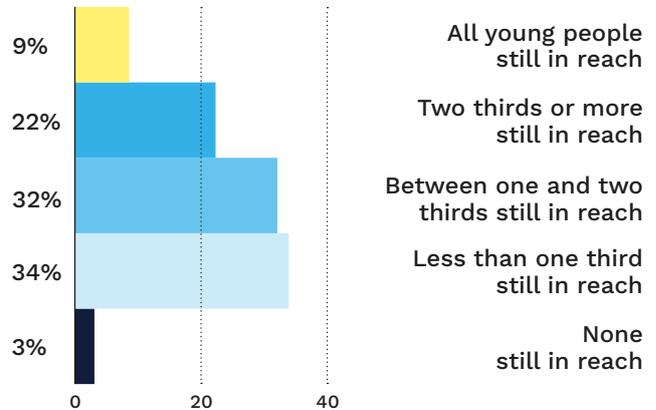
Many of them, our research shows, have also become youth work dropouts. 70% of responding youth workers say they have lost access to more than one third of the young people they normally work with. For 37%, it is more than two thirds.

The responses to our open-ended questions show that the question of technical access is not the only one that matters: Young people also need

**“It is not just about having your own device and internet access. It’s sometimes as simple as having a quiet space to talk.”**

Online survey respondent

**Q. How many of the young people you normally work with do you currently still reach with your youth work?**



to have access to a safe space from which they can join digital youth work activities.

**5.2 YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES OFTEN STRUGGLE TO JOIN DIGITAL ACTIVITIES**

Much of the online world has accessibility issues, which are now being amplified. Too many of the platforms in use are not WCAG-standard-compliant, and too much of the technology in use is not either.

Young people with disabilities therefore often struggle to join online activities in formal as much as non-formal education.

The lack of support for young people with disabilities has been mentioned frequently as a source of disappointment by our respondents.

**5.3 A RETURN OF FACE-TO-FACE ACTIVITIES DOES NOT BRING BACK EVERYONE**

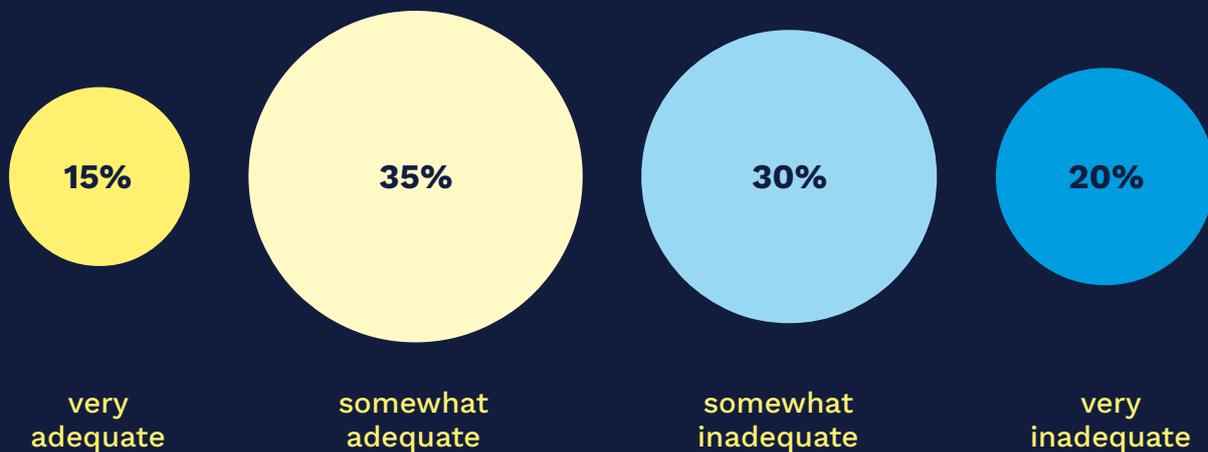
At the time of conducting our first online survey (June 2020), a number of European countries were easing their lockdowns and slowly resuming parts of public life.

Respondents from those countries have commented several times that some of those young people they had lost access to during lockdown, did not return to physical activities once these resumed. While these observations are first and anecdotal impressions, they deserve attention from youth work policy and practice.

6/6

# THE SUPPORT OF YOUTH WORK NEEDS FAST IMPROVEMENTS

Q. In your opinion and context,  
how well has youth work as a  
field been supported during the  
crisis so far?



**6/6**

In many European countries, youth work remains an underfinanced policy area that is heavily reliant on project funding in the absence of sustained structural support. The fragility of this construction is now backfiring.

**6.1 ACCESS TO PUBLIC SUPPORT PROGRAMMES IS NOT A GIVEN**

42% of respondents to our initial online survey say they were eligible to apply for public support programmes set up in response to the corona crisis, whereas 58% say there were not eligible for the programmes in their context.

Of those that were eligible, 31% applied and had their application granted, whereas 41% applied, with their application pending at the time of conducting our survey (June 2020). 7% say their application had been refused, and 21% had not yet applied.

**6.2 EU-LEVEL FUNDING RULES ARE WIDELY CONSIDERED UNHELPFUL**

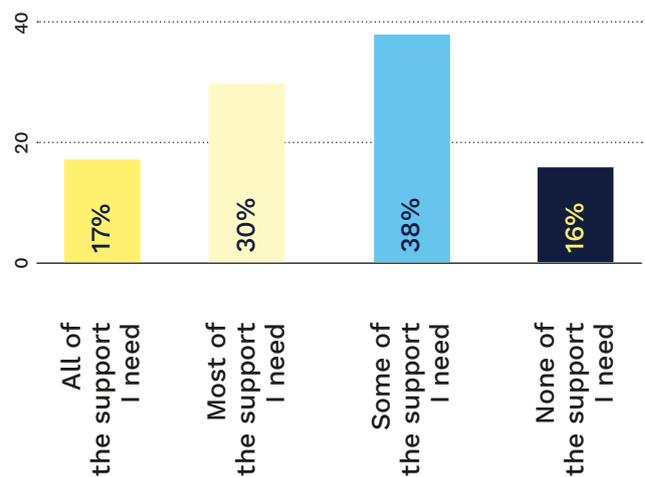
More than half of our respondents made the effort to respond to open-ended questions, where they often commented on the rigidity of funding rules in the context of the European youth programmes. There is a very strong wish for a different approach in supporting youth work

organisations through European funding, and a strong demand to recognise that quality digital youth work needs to be adequately resourced.

**6.3 PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT OF YOUTH WORK STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS IS LACKING**

17% of the respondents to our initial online survey say that they have, so far, received all the professional support they need. More than half state that they have received only some (38%) or even none (16%) of the professional support they need. This gap needs to be addressed decisively.

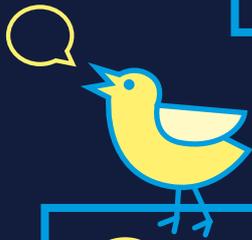
**Q. Do you receive the professional support you need during these times?**



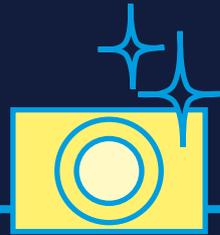
**“In the broader context of the European youth work sector, I feel alone. There is no reliable network at this level which would allow for solidarity or support. Some youth workers I know are considering leaving the field entirely. We should not be forced to decide between doing youth work or a secure future.”**

Online survey respondent

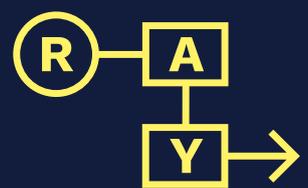
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