



Empowering
young people



Report on the infrastructure of youth (care) and social work in Europe



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About the YES Forum

Established in 2002, the YES Forum is a European network of national youth and social work organisations. We strive for a Europe where every young person, regardless of their background, has the skills and support they need to reach their full potential. We aim to influence relevant EU legislative, political, and funding processes while supporting our member organisations to use policies and funding to benefit disadvantaged young people in EU member states. Our work is rooted in a commitment to ensuring that youth and social policies are prioritised within the European Pillar of Social Rights, contributing to a fairer and more inclusive Europe.

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Introduction

Across the European Union, youth and social workers provide a lifeline to disadvantaged young people and their families. Their work can start at the very beginning, when a young person is first identified as requiring support (for example, early intervention to prevent them from falling into financial hardship), or at the acute end, such as when a young person is removed from their familial environment and requires an alternative, safe living arrangement.

YES Forum is a membership organisation made up of more than fifty youth and social work organisations actively delivering support for disadvantaged young people across more than twenty-two countries in Europe. As such, the organisation is well placed to understand variations in youth and social work across the EU, including the challenges faced by disadvantaged young people and professionals in the field. Beyond that, the YES Forum plays an active role in communicating solutions to those challenges up to policymakers from the grassroots level.

This report aims to explore how youth and social work is organised and delivered across different EU countries by examining key differences in national infrastructure, legal frameworks, and models for delivery. It also serves as an introduction to ensure we are speaking the same language when we talk about youth and social work, establishing a shared understanding of terms, roles, and systems before deeper comparisons can be meaningfully made.

Definition and legal protection of youth and social work

There is no consistently applied definition of social and youth work that is used across EU countries, nor a full summary of the kinds of activities that youth and social work entails (Ord et al, 2018).¹ Whilst social work oftentimes has a protected status in law, meaning that to call oneself a social worker requires a certain set of qualifications, attributes and skills, youth work is often used across Member States as more of a broad umbrella term (Kiilakoski et al, 2025).²

Legal protection of social work

Typically, for someone to call themselves a social worker in countries such as Romania, Poland, Germany, Finland, Italy, Greece and Malta, an undergraduate degree, or an alternative form of higher education training (and licensing with a national registry), is required (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).³ However, this general rule is not applicable across the whole of the EU. The

¹ Ord, J., Carletti, M., Cooper, S., Dansac, C., Morciano, D., Siurala, L. and Taru, M. (2018) *The Impact of Youth Work in Europe: A Study of Five European Countries*. Helsinki: HUMAK University of Applied Sciences. Available at: <https://www.humak.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/The-Impact-Of-Youth-Work.pdf>

² Kiilakoski, T., O'Donovan, J. and Lase, S. (2025) *Youth Work Quality Tools in 15 European Countries*. Edited by T. Basarab. European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) / European Union–Council of Europe Youth Partnership. Available at: <https://pjp.eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261635/Study%20Youth%20Work%20Quality%20Standards.pdf>

³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2020) *Mapping of certification and accreditation procedures for professionals who work with children*. Vienna: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/mapping-certification-and-accreditation-procedures>

term “social worker” is not legally protected in Sweden, though employers may still expect relevant qualifications or have their own standards for regulation (Socialstyrelsen, 2024).⁴ Therefore, the standard credential is still a Bachelor of Social Work, and certain specialist tasks require professionals to have it, though there is no statutory protection of the title Social Worker. Until 2024, this was also the case in Austria (Österreichischer Berufsverband der Sozialen Arbeit, 2024).⁵

National, public, and regulatory bodies may develop ethical codes or guidelines that in day-to-day practice form part of the framework of social work in the respective country. In Sweden, the *Socialstyrelsen* (the National Board of Health and Welfare) issues regulations and general advice for social work practice, which is supplemented by a professional ethics code which is widely recognised within the profession (Socialstyrelsen, 2024).⁶

Legal protection of youth work

On the contrary, only a handful of countries have formal and legal recognition or protection of the youth worker role, including Austria, Germany, Ireland, and Romania, though the extent to which the role is protected differs considerably (Council of Europe, 2025).⁷ In Italy, for example, “youth work” remains undefined and unregulated, meaning that there is no mandatory qualification or licence required to call oneself a youth worker. Broadly, youth work is inclusive of people with diverse backgrounds, skills, and experiences, rather than those who attained a formal educational background in social work (Youth Wiki, European Union, 2024).⁸ Some regions in Italy recognise roles like “community educator” and require certain qualifications and skills to be demonstrated in connection with the role. On the ground, this decentralised approach results in mixed practice. According to the Italian Youth Agency, there are currently twenty regions in Italy that recognise professional figures involved in different forms of youth work, though there is not one consistent title applied by regional authorities (Youth Wiki, European Union, 2024).

⁴ Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Health and Welfare) (2024) *Regulated professions: Authority to perform certain duties in the social services*. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen. Available at: <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/en/apply-and-register/apply-for-authority-to-perform-certain-duties-in-the-social-services-care-services-for-children-and-young-people/>

⁵ Österreichischer Berufsverband der Sozialen Arbeit (OBDS) (2024) *Sozialarbeits-Bezeichnungsgesetz 2024 (SozBezG 2024)*. Vienna: OBDS. Available at: <https://obds.at/sozbezg-2024/>

⁶ Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Health and Welfare) (2024) *Regulated professions: Authority to perform certain duties in the social services*. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen. Available at: <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/en/apply-and-register/apply-for-authority-to-perform-certain-duties-in-the-social-services-care-services-for-children-and-young-people/>

⁷ Council of Europe, Atanasov, D. and Hofmann-van de Poll, F. (2025) *Growing youth work in Europe: A methodology for mapping studies on national youth work ecosystems*. Co-ordinated by L. Milutinovits. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

⁸ European Union (2024) *10. Youth work - Italy - National Policies Platform*. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/italy/10-youth-work>

What is youth and social work in practice?

Social work in practice

There is no common definition of social work among all EU Countries, though there are broad commonalities. The first is that social work is people centred, based on need and general principles of social inclusion and non-discrimination (International Federation of Social Work, 2014).⁹

Social work is more likely to refer to the statutory duties of public authorities, rather than voluntary duties, meaning that authorities have a legal obligation to act. Social work can look like:

- Taking a child at risk of harm or neglect into care
- Providing housing assistance to someone who may become homeless
- Supporting refugee or minority groups to integrate within a new country, society, or the workforce
- Providing care for people with disabilities

Broadly, social work is considered by EU institutions to be a part of the social service and essential services infrastructure (ESN, 2020).¹⁰ Though there remain real difficulties in communicating with accuracy about what social work is given the level of variability between different EU countries.

Youth work in practice

Youth work is often used to define activities which support young people and families in a non-statutory context, meaning that they are considered to be 'additional' to core social services such as child protection (Council of Europe, 2017).¹¹ They can include things like:

- Youth or after school clubs
- Skills development, coaching and mentoring
- Cultural or creative hobbies, including arts and music
- Sports based activities
- Informal education that supports social, emotional, and educational development outside of a formal setting

⁹ International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014) *Global Definition of Social Work*. Rheinfelden: International Federation of Social Workers. Available at: <https://www.ifsow.org/global-definition-of-social-work/>

¹⁰ European Social Network (2020) *Public Social Services are Essential Services*. Barcelona: European Social Network (ESN). Available at: <https://www.esn-eu.org/news/public-social-services-are-essential-services>

¹¹ Council of Europe (2017) Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Who receives youth and social work services?

In general, children, young people, families, the elderly population, and people with disabilities are the usual recipients of social and youth work interventions (ESN, 2020).¹²

Broadly, countries tend to make services either universal or targeted. Universal services refer to those that are open to all, or a broad demographic (for example, young people aged 10-18). This provision is likely to include youth clubs, recreational or informal education activities, and is often subsidised by national, local, or regional authorities. Universal services are often preventative in nature (Vandeberg et al, 2021).¹³

Targeted youth and social work services are more likely to focus on specific demographics of youth at risk of harm, for example, young people with a migration background or those living in low-income families (Vandeberg et al, 2021). Interventions may also be designed to combat a specific challenge, for example, the social exclusion of young people from minority backgrounds. Therefore, the intervention is more likely to come at the acute end. Targeted services include those which primarily support refugees and migrants, Roma youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and care leavers.

Countries across Europe make an assessment as to the balance of universal or targeted support for young people they wish to give. This balance is shaped not only by social policy goals but also by political priorities and financial constraints. Value for money is a critical consideration, especially in contexts where public budgets are tight or under scrutiny. Targeted services, which are usually linked to statutory obligations such as child protection, tend to be prioritised in funding decisions, as governments are often legally required to provide them. In contrast, universal youth services, whilst beneficial for prevention and social cohesion, are often more vulnerable to cuts precisely because they lack a statutory foundation (European Commission, 2014)¹⁴. As a result, investment tends to shift toward reactive, problem-focused interventions, rather than preventive or inclusive approaches that reach a broader youth population (Brady et al, 2022).¹⁵

Germany

Universal services include youth clubs and youth centres. Around 15,000 youth work facilities exist across Germany at present (Youth Wiki, European Union, 2025).¹⁶ Accessing these youth services is free

¹² European Social Network (2020) Public Social Services are Essential Services. Barcelona: European Social Network (ESN). Available at: <https://www.esn-eu.org/news/public-social-services-are-essential-services>

¹³ Vandeberg, T., Delarue, S. and Roose, R. (2021) 'Professional youth work as a preventive service: towards an integrated conceptual framework'. European Journal of Social Work, 25(3), pp. 497-510. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02673843.2021.1942088>

¹⁴ European Commission (2014) *Working with young people: The value of youth work in the European Union*. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf

¹⁵ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) *A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway. Available at: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/unescochildandfamilyresearchcentre/2022/Final-Report.pdf>

¹⁶ Youth Wiki, European Union (2025) *10. Youth Work: Germany - National Policies Platform*. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/germany/10-youth-work>

of charge. In addition, Germany has a strong sector of youth associations (*Verbandliche Jugendarbeit*), including Scouts, faith-based groups and cultural and sports groups. Accessing these groups is also free, though connected with a specific interest.

Targeted services include youth social work (*Jugendsozialarbeit*) and youth welfare interventions to support socially disadvantaged young people, including early school leavers, unemployed youth and young people from migrant backgrounds who need extra support in transitioning to work or further education. Similarly, Germany's Youth Migration Service (*Jugendmigrationsdienste*) provides language and integration support specifically to newcomers and refugees in Germany (JMD, 2025).¹⁷

Germany's youth work system therefore balances universal services with targeted services to assist young people who are at increased risk of experiencing hardship or negative outcomes. It is notable that Germany has a legal framework (Social Code Book VIII) that guarantees youth services up to age 27. This stands in contrast to other European countries, including Greece, which relies heavily on NGO and volunteer-driven initiatives (Youth Wiki, European Union 2025).

Who is involved in the delivery of youth and social work services?

Across Europe, youth work is largely seen as a public or voluntary sector endeavour, with no European country having youth services that are predominantly run for profit. The majority of EU states now permit authorities to subcontract child protection services to private entities, including both for-profit companies and NGOs (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2025).¹⁸ The balance between public responsibility and private participation remains a dynamic policy issue in several European countries.

Generally, across Central and Eastern Europe, youth clubs and programmes are provided either by state-run youth centres or by municipal youth offices. In Central and Eastern Europe, the legacy of centralised welfare systems means the state still leads in service delivery (European Union, 2024).¹⁹ Countries such as Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary historically managed child protection through government-run institutions (orphanages, state foster agencies) and, despite reforms, the public sector remains the main provider. These countries have been transitioning away from large institutions, but new services (like foster care, small group homes, family support centres) are often established by or in partnership with local authorities (Šiška, J. and Beadle-Brown, 2020).²⁰

¹⁷ Jugendmigrationsdienste (JMD) (n.d.) *Jugendmigrationsdienste (JMD) = Youth Migration Services*. Available at: <https://www.jugendmigrationsdienste.de/en/>

¹⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2025) Towards Integrated Child Protection Systems: Challenges, promising practices and ways forward. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

¹⁹ European Union (2024) *National Policies Platform – 10. Youth work: Structures and Public Funding*. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/europe/10-youth-work>

²⁰ Šiška, J. and Beadle-Brown, J. (2020). Transition from Institutional Care to Community-Based Services in 27 EU Member States: Final report. Research report for the European Expert Group on Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care. Available at: eeg-di-report-2020-1.pdf.

The NGO (non-profit) sector also plays a vibrant role in delivering youth services across Europe, and in some countries, they are the principal provider (Koning, 2018).²¹ In Germany, Caritas and Diakonie are two examples of NGOs actively delivering youth work alongside public youth welfare offices, whilst Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands also have traditions of NGOs organising youth and social work activities with significant public funding support. NGOs and charities (often with state subsidies) are essential to delivering services like foster care, family support, and specialised residential care. Italy and Spain, for example, partner extensively with Catholic charities and foundations in running social welfare programmes for children and vulnerable families (Koning, 2018).

However, across Europe there is also a general increase in the number of private companies involved in delivering social work services, especially in residential and foster care, where a child has been removed from their family home (Hessle et al, 2020).²² In England, three quarters of residential homes are privately owned and managed, and one-third of foster care placements are arranged through private agencies (Department for Education, 2024).²³ In particular, the growth of private-equity firms in the provision of children's care is increasingly contested. In addition, roughly half of residential care facilities in Norway are operated by private providers, making it a relative outlier among other European countries (Shanks et al, 2021).²⁴ In summary, the push toward profit-making providers in social services is most pronounced in a handful of countries (UK and parts of Northern Europe), whereas most of continental Europe has so far kept core child welfare services largely in the public or non-profit sector.

What shapes national youth and social work practices?

In reality, youth and social work ecosystems are shaped not only by formal legislation but also by a complex web of voluntary standards, policy frameworks, ethical codes, and institutional practices. Even where legal protection is absent, a mix of employer expectations, professional associations, quality assurance mechanisms, and national guidelines often serve to regulate practice and uphold professional integrity. This reflects the diverse ways in which competence and accountability is maintained across EU countries.

²¹ Koning, R. (2018) 'The Role of Non-State Actors in Welfare Provision' in the book *The Handbook of Social Policy* (edited by Gough, I. and Wood, G.) published by Edward Elgar Publishing.

²² Hessle, S., and Vilar, D. (2020) 'Privatization and the Marketization of Child Protection and Care Services in Europe: The Need for Transnational Research and Regulation'. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(1), pp. 119–132.

²³ Department for Education (2024), Children's social care in England. Available at: [Children's social care in England 2024 - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-in-england-2024)

²⁴ Shanks, E., Backe-Hansen, E., Eriksson, P., Lausten, M., Lundström, T., Ranta, H., and Sallnäs, M. (2021) 'Privatisation of residential care for children and youth in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden'. *Nordic Welfare Research*, 6(3), pp. 128–141. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-4161-2021-03-02>

How does this work at local, regional and national levels?

A general trend is for central government to retain responsibility for creating and passing laws that define which social services are provided to young people, and who should administer them. The relevant ministry is often then responsible for formulating relevant policies and professional codes, whilst regional and local authorities administer the day-to-day provision of social services on the ground. However, each country shares the responsibility for youth and social services differently, and there are great variations when it comes to the model of delivery, as demonstrated by the case studies below.

Netherlands

The national government sets the main laws and funding rules for youth social services. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport oversees youth welfare, whilst the Ministry of Education handles education-related matters (European Commission, 2025).²⁵ These ministries work together where needed. The Child and Youth Act of 2015 gave local municipalities full responsibility for administering and delivering youth related services. Local municipalities now manage a wide range of services from prevention and parenting support to child protection and mental health care with their own local budgets. Although they have freedom to tailor services to local needs, they are still monitored by the central government through data, evaluations, and policy reviews. This decentralised system aims to provide more flexible, locally relevant support for young people and families.

Poland

The national government sets the legal framework for youth social services through various national laws, such as the Act on Family Support and Foster Care (European Commission, 2025).²⁶ These laws define entitlements, standards, and funding mechanisms for child protection and youth welfare. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy leads on social welfare and child protection legislation. Other ministries (like Education or Justice) handle specific areas, but the Ministry of Family and Social Policy is the main authority for drafting laws related to youth care. Local governments are responsible for delivering services, with duties split between municipalities (*gmina*) and counties (*powiat*). Municipalities manage general youth support services such as daycare, community programmes, and early family support. Counties handle more specialised tasks like foster care, adoption services, and child protection interventions through county family support centres.

Germany

The federal government sets the main legal framework for youth social services through the Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII), which guarantees young people's rights to support, care, and protection.²⁷ The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) is responsible for

²⁵ European Commission (2025) 1.2 *National youth law – The Netherlands - National Policies Platform*. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/netherlands/12-national-youth-law>

²⁶ European Commission (2025) 6. *Organisation of the system – Poland - National Policies Platform*. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/poland/6-organisation-of-the-system>

²⁷ Germany (1990) Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII): Child and Youth Services Act (Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz – KJHG).

national youth policy and drafting youth welfare laws (European Commission, 2025).²⁸ It works with the federal states (*Länder*) to ensure consistency across the country. Germany's 16 states (*Länder*) are responsible for implementing and overseeing youth services. Each Land has a State Youth Office (*Landesjugendamt*) that supports and supervises the work of local youth offices and can create additional policies within the national framework. Local authorities (municipalities and districts) deliver youth services through their Youth Welfare Offices (*Jugendämter*). These offices handle day-to-day services such as parenting support, child protection, foster care, and working with local NGOs.

Greece

The central government defines the laws and national policies for youth social services. Key legislation such as Law 4538/2018 on foster care and adoption is passed by the Hellenic Parliament, and national strategy is led by the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family (*Υπουργείο Κοινωνικής Συνοχής και Οικογένειας*). This Ministry oversees the country's child protection system, coordinates national programmes, and regulates providers. It works through key national bodies such as the National Centre for Social Solidarity (Gouva and Doulkeri, 2025).²⁹

Service delivery is shared across different levels (European Union, 2024):³⁰

- Regional Social Welfare Centres (*Κέντρα Κοινωνικής Πρόνοιας Περιφερειών*), public bodies under the Ministry, deliver institutional care, oversee foster care placements, and support vulnerable youth in each of Greece's 13 regions.
- Municipalities (*Δήμοι*) have been given greater responsibility in recent years for local social services, including child and family support through Community Centres (*Κέντρα Κοινότητας*) and municipal childcare. However, they are not formally part of the national social care system, and their role varies by capacity. Whilst municipalities address local needs, the central government remains the main regulator and funder.
- The Regions (*Περιφέρειες*) are responsible for licensing and inspecting social care providers, under the coordination of the Ministry.

²⁸ European Commission (2025) 6. Organisation of the system – Germany - National Policies Platform. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/germany/6-organisation-of-the-system>

²⁹ Gouva, L. and Doulkeri, A. (2025) 'Child protection in Greece: Addressing the national framework, discrepancies and good practices'. *Hungarian Educational Research Journal*, 15(1), pp. [Insert Page Numbers Here]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1556/063.2024.00350>

³⁰ European Union (2024) 6. Organisation of the system – Greece - National Policies Platform. Brussels: European Union. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/greece/6-organisation-of-the-system>

What data and information do we have about the nature of youth and social work in Europe?

European Semester

Every year, we get a snapshot on what challenges young people from Member States are facing from the 'European Semester'.³¹ The Semester is the EU's annual monitoring cycle on Member State's economic, fiscal, social and employment policy, with the main outputs being country reports and country specific recommendations.

Broad trends across 2025 country reports show that disadvantaged young people:

- Have unequal education and training, leading to poorer educational outcomes for vulnerable groups. In Romania for example, there remains a significant gap in the age that young people leave school in urban and rural areas (European Commission, 2025)³², and in Slovakia, access to education and training for Roma youth was significantly worse than for other populations (European Commission, 2025).³³
- Struggle to access employment in parts of the EU, including in several Southern and Eastern Member States. In Spain, the youth unemployment rate stands at around 20.2% (as of 2024), almost twice the EU average (European Commission, 2025)³⁴. Similarly, Italy and Greece have persistently high rates of young people not in work, education, or training.
- Are disproportionately impacted by social inclusion and poverty. In Spain, youth cohorts from migrant or Roma families, and children in single-parent households are particularly at risk, a trend also seen in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy (European Commission, 2025)³⁵.

³¹ European Commission (2025) *2025 European Semester: Country Reports*. Brussels: Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs. Available at: <https://www.quora.com/Do-we-say-in-the-report-or-on-the-report-What-is-the-difference>

³² European Commission. (2025). *Commission Staff Working Document: 2025 Country Report - Romania, Accompanying the document Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Romania* (SWD(2025) 223 final). Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/7cb47fb4-4517-431a-95c8-17cb161d5078_en?filename=RO_CR_SWD_2025_223_1_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v4.pdf

³³ European Commission. (2025). *Commission Staff Working Document: 2025 Country Report - Slovakia, Accompanying the document Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Slovakia* (SWD(2025) 225 final). Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/EU/23007/imfname_11483292.pdf

³⁴ European Commission. (2025). *Commission Staff Working Document: 2025 Country Report - Spain, Accompanying the document Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Spain* (SWD(2025) 209 final). Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a712afe4-d94e-4333-8333-e8bc1ab63f1e_en?filename=ES_CR_SWD_2025_209_1_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v4.pdf

³⁵ European Commission. (2025). *Commission Staff Working Document: 2025 Country Report - Spain, Accompanying the document Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the economic, social, employment, structural and budgetary policies of Spain* (SWD(2025) 209 final). Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a712afe4-d94e-4333-8333-e8bc1ab63f1e_en?filename=ES_CR_SWD_2025_209_1_EN_autre_document_travail_service_part1_v4.pdf

Yet, although the EU Semester provides us with a broad overview of social inclusion across EU Member States, it is worth noting that the Semester remains primarily an economic governance tool. Country Specific Recommendations related to social goals (like reducing the NEET Rate) are non-binding. This stands in contrast to fiscal recommendations (Schreuers, 2025).³⁶

Youth Wiki

Data and information about variances in youth work practice is routinely collected and maintained within a Youth Wiki, co-ordinated by the European Education and Culture Agency under the authority of the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture (Youth Wiki, European Commission, 2025).³⁷ It is updated by national experts (a ministry, national agency, or expert organisation) under a shared framework. The Youth Wiki is a comparative tool which allows users to compare existing data across ten core chapters reflecting EU Youth Strategy themes, including:

- Youth Policy Governance
- Voluntary Activities
- Employment & Entrepreneurship
- Social Inclusion
- Participation
- Education & Training
- Health & Wellbeing
- Creativity & Culture
- Youth & the World (global engagement)
- Youth Work

This comparative analysis provides a valuable starting point for understanding which institutions are responsible for delivering youth and social work across different countries, and how these roles are formalised, or not, within national legislation.

Image 1: Comparison of legal systems for youth work (Youth Wiki, European Commission)



However, as outlined above, significant challenges persist when attempting cross-country comparisons. The term "youth work" is interpreted very differently across contexts; it is often subjective, sometimes overlaps with child protection or social pedagogy, and is deeply shaped by each country's institutional infrastructure.

³⁶ Schreuers, S. (2025). Converging on social investment? Policy entrepreneurship, learning and the social dimension of post-pandemic EU economic governance. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2590534>

³⁷ European Commission, *Youth Wiki: Europe's Encyclopedia of National Youth Policies*. Available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki>

This raises a critical question: how can we be sure we are speaking the same language when we talk about youth and social work? Without shared definitions or conceptual clarity, there is a real risk that we are comparing fundamentally different systems under the same label. In addition, the Youth Wiki describes best what framework, and policies exist in principle for young people, not necessarily how that translates into practice or tangible outcomes.

As a youth and social work membership organisation, we know that grass-roots realities, from the perspectives of professionals and disadvantaged young people often look – which is why the data is only part of the overall picture.

Eurostat

Eurostat is the statistical office of the European Union, maintained by the European Commission. Its role is to collect, harmonise and public data from EU Member States (European Commission, Eurostat, 2025).³⁸ Eurostat holds extensive data on:

- Poverty and social exclusion
 - People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE), by age, including children and young people (18-24)
 - Living conditions by household type
- Education and training
 - Early leavers from education and training (early school leavers, aged 18-24)
 - Participation in early childhood education
 - Basic skills proficiency
- Employment and NEET Rates
 - Youth unemployment rates (15-24 and 25-29 age groups)
 - NEET rates by age and gender
 - Employment and activity rates, by age group
- Social Rights and Wellbeing
 - Indicators from the Social Scoreboard, aligned with the European Pillars of Social Rights, including:
 - Equal opportunities (early childhood care, digital skills)
 - Access to labour markets
 - Fair working conditions
 - Social protection and inclusion

Whilst Eurostat provides strong coverage of quantitative indicators, to gain a balanced understanding it is vital to listen to the experiences of disadvantaged young people and youth and social work professionals on the ground. The YES Forum plays a key role in bridging this gap, bringing insights from the grassroots levels to EU decision-makers to improve the design of social policy.

³⁸ European Commission (Eurostat) *Eurostat Database*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

Conclusion

This report highlights the complex nature of youth and social work infrastructure across Europe. Whilst certain trends and shared challenges are evident, youth and social work systems themselves remain deeply diverse. National differences in legal frameworks, funding structures, and service delivery models make direct comparisons difficult. Although tools like the Youth Wiki, Eurostat, and the European Semester provide useful snapshots of the policy and data landscape, they cannot fully answer a more fundamental question: [when we speak about youth and social work across countries, are we truly talking about the same thing?](#)

The evidence presented here underscores the importance of shared understanding, not just of terminology, but of values, expectations, and lived realities. Legal definitions and data indicators tell part of the story, but they do not capture how support is experienced on the ground by young people and the professionals working with them.

That is why this report must be seen as only the beginning of a longer inquiry. YES Forum will continue to work with its member organisations across 20+ EU countries to deepen this understanding, through collaborative research, policy dialogue, and exchange of practice, ensuring that the diversity of national contexts is a foundation for shared learning and more inclusive policymaking. It is essential that European-level discussion is grounded in both structural evidence and the real-world experiences of those from the grassroots level. YES Forum remains committed to making those voices heard.

Why we believe youth and social work is an investment

"Youth and social work is not just a luxury. It is not just for young people who are in trouble, but for every young person who needs a place to belong, to learn, and to grow. We want them to see our work as an essential public service, just like education or healthcare. By investing in social and youth work, we are not just helping a few individuals; we are strengthening the fabric of our entire community. We are building a more inclusive, prosperous, and healthier society for everyone."

Youth worker, Stichting SCN, Netherlands

"If we want lasting impact, we must invest in the systems that make it happen stable organisations, professional development, and multi-year support. Backing social and youth work is not a cost; it is a commitment to communities where every young person counts."

Youth worker, ipcenter, Austria

"A significant moment for me was when I felt that what we do contributed to a boy's growth: after a year with us, I heard him talk about himself in a completely different way than before. It was in 2023, the vocational training course where I am a tutor had started a few months earlier, and the students were asked to write on a sheet how they imagined themselves in the future. The boy let me read his paper, and the words written were: "Dead or in prison." The following years were not easy: he had several crises, moments when he wanted to give up everything and fall back into deviant and dysfunctional ways of living. At the same time, however, I began to see a new trust and hope in him, as if the small achievements made during the course and the feeling of not being so alone anymore were helping him to move forward with courage. A few days ago, this boy left for an internship in Germany, happy and smiling. I realised how important it is not to feel abandoned, to have a context and someone who believes in you and your potential."

Youth worker, Zefiro, Italy

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