

Life Satisfaction among Young Adults in Europe over the Past 20 Years: Decreases, Rebounds, and Moderators

Ester Rizzi (UCL), Hequn Wang (UCL), Zeynep Zümer Batur (UA), Dimitri Mortelmans (UA)

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between age and subjective well-being, an overarching concept including life satisfaction, showing the higher well-being of younger people compared to older adults or displaying a U-shaped profile (Bartram, 2024; Bartram, 2021; Bittmann, 2021; Blanchflower, 2021; Laaksonen, 2018; Toshkov, 2022). According to the Emerging Adulthood theory, young adults exhibit distinct developmental characteristics compared to other age groups. These include identity exploration, instability in romantic relationships and employment, self-focus, a sense of being in-between adolescence and adulthood, but also a heightened perception of possibilities and optimism (Arnett, 2000; 2014). While the former traits may impact subjective well-being negatively, the last trait is likely to contribute to well-being positively and might explain the age difference.

Little is known about how the link between age and subjective well-being evolves with time, in particular during periods of crisis. Most studies have shown a decrease for different age groups during periods of crisis, such as the Great Recession or the COVID-19 pandemic (Ballas and Thanis, 2022; Bryson and Blanchflower, 2024; Duvar et al. 2025; Guðmundsdóttir, 2013; Kauhanen et al., 2023; Handschuh et al. 2024; Luthra et al., 2023). However, to our knowledge, a systematic comparison across age groups and time is lacking. During periods of crisis, instability related to identity, relationships and employment may intensify more markedly among young adults compared to other age groups, potentially offsetting their characteristic of optimism. Moreover, compared to older adults, younger individuals typically have broader social networks (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Crises, such as economic downturns or, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, periods of confinement, can disrupt these networks by limiting interactions with friends and romantic partners. This can have a significant impact on subjective well-being among young people.

Some factors can mitigate the impact of periods of crisis on well-being of young adults. In this paper we particularly focus on co-residence with the family of origin, trust in institutions, interpersonal trust, and welfare regimes. Regarding co-residence with the family of origin, some qualitative studies have demonstrated the benefits of young people living with parents (Worth, 2021). A time of macro-level crisis might increase the appreciation and benefits of intergenerational solidarity among younger adults. However, other studies showed that prolonged co-residence with parents may be negatively associated with young people's subjective well-being as leaving the parental home might be considered a key marker of the transition to adulthood (Caputo, 2020; Copp et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2023). Challenging times can lead to intergenerational co-residence being prolonged beyond what is desired, which can decrease subjective well-being of young adults.

Trust toward others and trust toward institutions have been shown to be an important component of subjective well-being, especially among young people (Zhao et al., 2024). In challenging periods, individuals who have lower levels of trust in institutions or trust in others might be especially more likely to report

lower life satisfaction, as they may doubt of the institutions' ability to effectively address the situation or because they doubt that other people will support them (Bittmann, 2021). The impact can be stronger for young adults, compared to other age groups.

Welfare regimes, whether social democratic, conservative, southern, eastern or liberal (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999), can also buffer the effect of crises on well-being of young people. This depends on specific policy measures, such as housing policies, implemented to support young people in transition to adulthood (Wang and Rizzi, 2025). In addition, the moderating effect of co-residence with parents on young people's well-being may also vary according to the welfare regime. This depends on the scope of the supporting policy measures in each regime, as well as the cultural acceptance of co-residing with parents (Hank, 2007; Reher, 2004).

Research questions and hypotheses

In this study we operationalize subjective well-being by referring to life satisfaction. We address two research questions: First, what were the effects of previous crises on the life satisfaction of young people relative to other age groups? We focus on the following crises over the past two decades: the 2008 Great Recession, the deepening of the crisis in 2012, the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 and the Russia-Ukraine war since 2022. Second, how did co-residence with parents, interpersonal and institutional trust, and welfare regimes moderate the impact of crises on young people's life satisfaction? To our knowledge, our study is the first to address the relative disadvantage of young people during crises compared to other age groups, while considering the potential moderating effects of co-residence, trust, and welfare regimes.

Our hypotheses are as follows. Because of their specific developmental stage, young people experienced a greater decline in life satisfaction during crises, compared to other age groups (H1). Welfare regimes that are more supportive of transition to adulthood related to a smaller decline in the life satisfaction among young people (H2). During periods of crisis, we expect a positive association between co-residence with parents and life satisfaction among young people ('nest effect') (H3a). However, there could also be a negative association between co-residence and life satisfaction among young people ('cage-like effect'), though we expect such association to be less evident in southern welfare regimes where intergenerational co-residence is more culturally accepted (H3b). Finally, a higher level of trust should lead to less severe impact of crises on life satisfaction among young people (H4).

Data, variables, and methods

At this stage, we use cross-sectional data from the Eurobarometer surveys from 2004 to 2023, including 27 EU member states and the UK. In the next stages of the study, we plan to extend the analysis by using the EU-SILC data for a longitudinal analysis.

Considering the period of the last 20 years allows us to compare the impacts of the following major crises on life satisfaction: the 2008 Great Recession, the deepening of the crisis in 2012, the COVID-19 pandemic starting 2020, and the Russia-Ukraine war starting 2022. Our measure of subjective well-being is life satisfaction from 1 'Not at all satisfied' to 4 'Very satisfied'. Respondents are divided into four age groups: 18–24, 25–39, 40–54 and 55–64 years old. At the individual level, we include occupation, gender, tertiary education, marital status and presence of children under 14 years old as control variables. We classify welfare regimes according to the Esping-Andersen typology: Social democratic, Conservative, Southern European, Central and Eastern European, and Liberal welfare regimes. We employ linear regressions to examine the relation between age and life satisfaction in interaction with time and different moderators (i.e., co-residence with parents, trust, and the welfare regime).

Preliminary results and conclusions

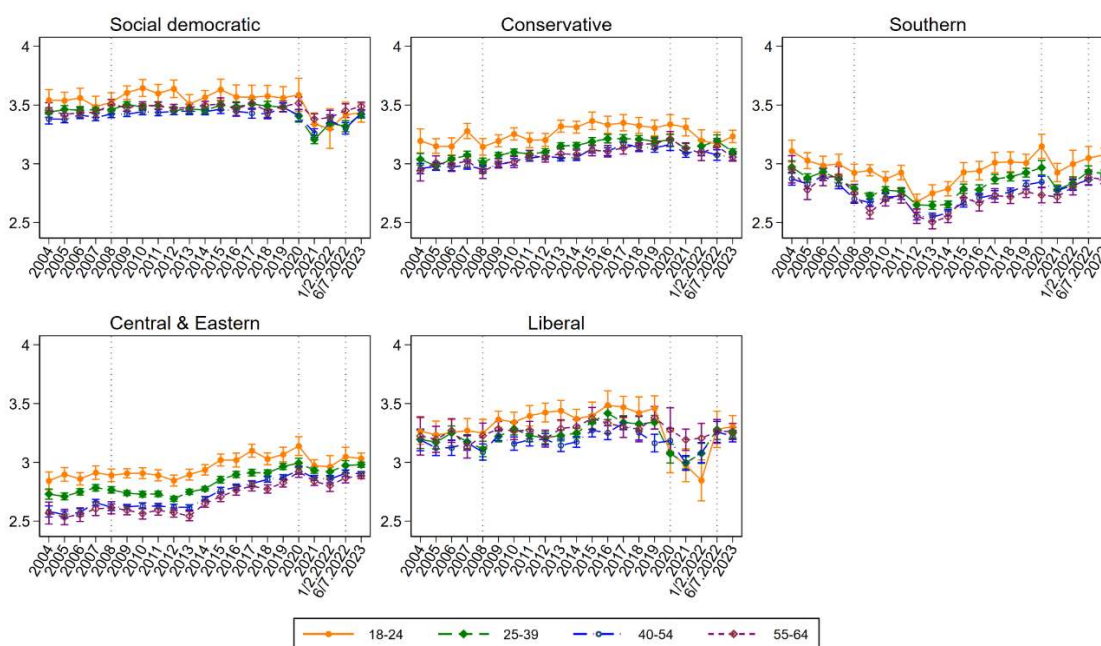
Our preliminary analysis on Eurobarometer data showed that young people had an overall higher level of life satisfaction over the last 20 years, compared to other age groups, but the impact of crises on them was also greater. Figure 1 shows that the crises negatively impacted life satisfaction of all age groups. Younger people aged 18–24 years old were more affected than other age groups, supporting our first hypothesis. The impact of the Great Recession was particularly strong in southern European countries, while the impact of the pandemic was particularly visible in liberal countries. These results relate to the intensity of crises in specific contexts, as well as how these crises were managed. Interestingly, young adults also displayed a significant rebound in life satisfaction in 2023, which was not observed in other age groups. This was especially evident in Southern European and Liberal countries. Therefore, our second hypothesis, suggesting that more generous welfare regimes buffered the decline in young people’s life satisfaction during crises, is not supported. Instead, it appears that the geographic distance from the war zones is more important.

Figure 2 displays the moderating effects of intergenerational co-residence across different welfare regimes. Living with parents buffered the negative impact of crises on life satisfaction among young people aged 18–24 in Social Democratic and Conservative countries, partially supporting our hypothesis of a ‘nest effect’ (H3a). For young adults aged 25–39, living with parents might be related to a lower level of life satisfaction, in line with our hypothesis of a ‘cage-like effect’. We found this negative association particularly in Southern, Central and Eastern European countries. This finding contradicts our hypothesis 3b regarding a less ‘cage-like effect’ in Southern European countries. Future analysis by household income might help to understand this puzzling result.

We also found that trust in institutions mitigated the negative impact of crises on life satisfaction among young adults in most welfare regimes (results not shown), supporting our last hypothesis.

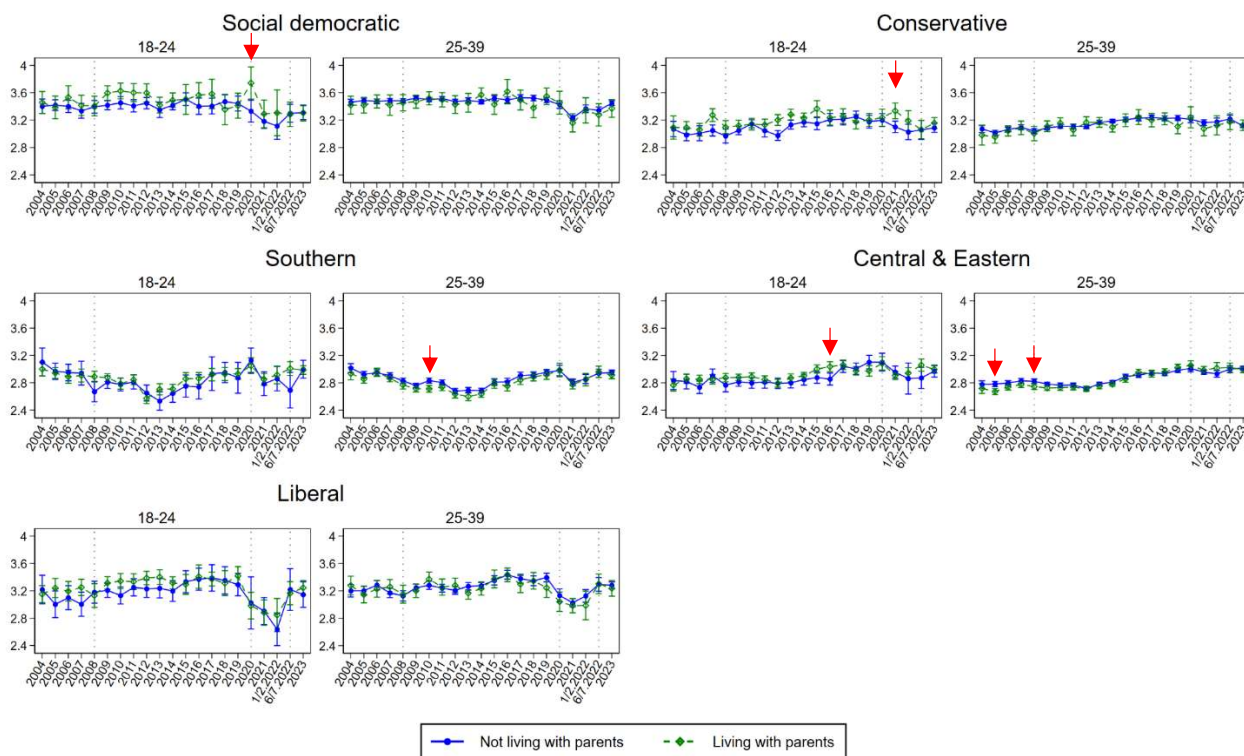
In the further development of this study, we will use the EU-SILC data to additionally consider the role of interpersonal trust and household income in influencing life satisfaction across different age groups and crises. We will conduct a longitudinal analysis that will enable us to account for unobserved heterogeneity.

Figure 1 – Life satisfaction by age groups and welfare regimes, 2004-2023



Note: Linear regression controlling for occupation, gender, tertiary education, marital status and presence of children under 14 years old.

Figure 2 - Life satisfaction of young adults by co-residence with parents and welfare regimes, 2004-2023



Note: Linear regression controlling for occupation, gender, tertiary education, marital status and presence of children under 14 years old.

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