

# RURAL youth

## REPORT 2024

The EYCA Youth Panel's take on harnessing rural youth energy.



European Youth  
Card Association



## CONTEXT

This report is published in the context of the Rural Youth Project, carried out by the EYCA Youth Panel. The Youth Panel is a diverse body of young cardholders that provides feedback to EYCA, helps to steer its projects and organises its own youth-led initiatives, such as the Rural Youth Project.

Rural Youth represent a key demographic in the European landscape. Very diverse and generally less engaged in youth programmes and projects than their urban counterparts, there is a clear need to understand why such engagement is not the norm and how to respond to this. This project aims to answer the question “How can EYCA’s youth services better respond to the needs of rural youth?”. The ultimate purpose is to produce a roadmap for EYCA members (and other youth-focused entities) to better engage with rural youth. The method to reach this? Listening to and engaging with rural youth.

Connecting with the European Youth Goals, the Rural Youth Project is an initiative developed over the course of several mandates of the EYCA Youth Panel. It kicked off in autumn 2023 by gathering information on this topic. It’s followed by the organisation of a Rural Youth Camp in April 2024 in rural Spain, where the EYCA Youth Panel will engage with 50 rural young people all over Europe.

As a voluntary body, the EYCA Youth Panel, conducted this study primarily as a tool to improve the design of the Rural Youth Project, and not purposefully with regard to academic research and methodology. Therefore, some limitations of this study must be taken into consideration. However, the insights can certainly be used as a starting point for further research and initiative-building.

For more information on the Rural Youth Project and its different initiatives: <https://eyca.org/news/rural-youth-project-eyca-youth-panel>

## SUMMARY

The study presents an insightful overview of the rural youth mosaic, priorities, challenges, outlook on rural communities across Europe, and key proposals made by them. As part of this study, 1563 young people were surveyed from 20 countries. The data was gathered through snowball sampling, utilising the dynamic of the network. This was complemented by qualitative data gathered from activities organised by the EYCA Youth Panel in rural areas. The majority of participants are aged 18-21 (36%) and most currently enrolled in education, ranging from lower secondary to doctoral levels. Gender distribution reveals 66% female, 32% male, 1% non-binary, and 1% prefer not to disclose, while participants come from countries all over the EU.

Priorities vary, with a strong emphasis on health care (physical and mental) (70%) and education (75%), whereas challenges include unemployment (52%) and isolation (48%). Motivators for rural youth involve sports or cultural clubs (54%) and rural youth camps (52%). A quarter (26%) of respondents are involved in community-level activities, indicating engagement in cultural events, ecological activities, and educational projects. On the contrary, seven out of ten respondents indicated limited involvement in activities on a community level, mainly due to inadequate information, insufficient initiatives and a lack of accessible spaces for young people in rural settings.

Proposals for improvement include enhancing the educational system, fostering inclusion through network building, providing diverse activities, offering employment opportunities, investing in infrastructure and promoting community engagement. The key aspects that need to be addressed based on the survey are education, employment, infrastructure, and community engagement to create a supportive environment for rural youth.



## KEY RESULTS

- Different priorities among rural youth highlight their commitment to political, economic, social and environmental issues. Physical and mental health care, education, and employment are the key priorities of rural youth.
- Multifaceted challenges faced by young people in rural settings provide valuable insights for policymakers and community stakeholders. Unemployment and isolation due to limited options in terms of venues, transport, and activities pose a significant challenge. Non-participation in public life signals a sense of political under-representation among rural youth, as does social exclusion.
- Community-level involvement: 26% of respondents actively participate in various initiatives, including cultural events, ecological activities, and educational projects. 73% indicate a lack of involvement, suggesting varying levels of interest, awareness, and infrastructure accessibility.
- Spaces for Participation: Sports or cultural clubs (53.5%) and rural youth camps (52%) are spaces that foster participation among young people, followed by public debates and online meetings (23%).
- Proposals and prospects ahead:
  - Prioritise high-quality teachers and improving the educational system is a favoured proposal.
  - Foster social inclusion through network building, youth activism and diverse activities is crucial.
  - Provide employment opportunities, scholarships, and investing in infrastructure are recommended.
  - Enhance the space (physical and legal) and support for the creation of youth organisations, social and sports clubs, and recreational youth activities. Likewise, this space would ideally allow for the engagement of the wider community (including of parents and guardians).
  - Ensure equal opportunities and involve youth in decision-making.
  - Support local initiatives, youth entrepreneurship, and offer financial support for sustainable initiatives are critical proposals.
- To view the full list of proposals collected from rural respondents: <https://eyca.org/news/100-proposals-from-rural-youth>
- Of the 27 EYCA member organisations that responded to the survey, 8 currently have tailored discounts for rural youth. 17 organisations have engaged rural youth in the past through their projects, and 14 currently have active ongoing projects for rural youth.



*That means there's an opportunity for other several organisations to engage with rural youth!*



## INTRODUCTION

This study into rural youth sheds light on the unique challenges, opportunities, and dynamics faced by young individuals residing in rural areas. They often have distinctive characteristics due to their geographical position, but also due to their social and economic settings. Overall, youth is considered to be an understudied social group and, in particular, limited research has been conducted focusing specifically on young people from rural areas. Therefore, this study looks at the specific needs and aspirations of rural youth. It's a crucial step for developing targeted policies and projects that address their concerns, and enhancing their well-being through a peer-to-peer approach.

This report was brought about by the EYCA Youth Panel, in the context of their Rural Youth Project. This project is a year-long initiative aiming to answer the question **“How can EYCA’s youth services (and of other youth-focused entities) better respond to the needs of rural youth?”**. This study ties in well with the project’s overall purpose of building on the existing opportunities and improving local youth services. The quantitative data was collected from 1563 young rural respondents across 20 European countries, as well as qualitative data collected via targeted activities organised in rural areas by the EYCA Youth Panel (five total activities in five EU countries). This was matched with a survey conducted towards EYCA member organisations, to better understand their actions in the rural field.

## What rural activities took place?

### Rural revolt

Art exhibition where the young artists shared their profound works, delving into personal and culture narratives that explore and challenge experiences related to non-urban identity, belonging and divergent needs of rural communities. It featured the art of **13** young people from Malta and Scotland, as well as other countries (USA, India, Australia and Iran).

### Andalusia, Spain

This event brought together **40** young individuals from all eight provinces of Andalusia and experts from academia, think tanks, and public administration. The participants shared a passion for becoming local leaders dedicated to spreading European values and creating opportunities in their respective communities, especially in rural areas.

### Ljubljana, Slovenia

This activity involved **30** rural young people in a quick hike, where the conversation focused on the challenges of living in rural areas, as well as the possible solutions. They were given some tools and advice on how they can contribute to solving the lack of opportunities for young people. A group of them organised a similar event in the village where they live, and they decided to meet regularly to try to organise a gathering for young people.

### Selenicë, Albania

In the “Hajderin Beqari” high school, **25** young people aged 17–19 years old, were engaged in a conversation about the youth card, the discounts it provides and the opportunities. The majority of the students were not familiar with any volunteering activities or European projects. It therefore showed the relevance of improving our communication regarding the experiences of all young people, especially rural youth.

### Guarda, Portugal

This activity involved about **70** young people from Guarda and other regions around the centre interior of Portugal. The participants were aged 16–29 and the activities were held in three different spaces: a school, the university campus and a youth hostel. In these different locations, various forms of engagement were used: from dynamics and games to informal conversations, everyone involved got the opportunity to share their opinions on the specific challenges they face as young people from low populated areas, as well as their priorities and hopes for the future.

The findings of this study will be used in several ways: they will feed into the EYCA Rural Youth Project, with a final roadmap on how EYCA can enhance its initiatives in rural areas; they will be shared with decision-makers to help improve the legal and physical infrastructure for rural action-taking; and they might be useful for future research on the topic.

For more information on the Rural Youth Project, or to access the data sets and surveys, please contact the European Youth Card Association: <https://eyca.org/>

In essence, this participatory research into rural youth aims to be a cornerstone for creating comprehensive strategies that lead to the inclusive and accessible development of both individuals and the communities they inhabit.

## THE MOSAIC OF RURAL YOUTH

The study reveals a **diverse demographic profile** of rural youth. The respondents come from all over Europe, with a small share residing in EU countries but originally from outside the EU. In terms of age, the majority of respondents fall within the 18-21 age group (36%), followed by the 22-25 age bracket (28%). The 15-17 age group comprises 23%, while the 26-29 age range accounts for 25%. When it comes to gender, 66% identify as female (1030), 32% as male (504), 1% as non-binary (17), and 1% prefer not to disclose (12). Concerning minority status, one out of ten individuals identify as belonging to a minority. Educational pursuits vary, with 10% of participants classified as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), 60% currently studying, 29% employed, and only a small share (1%) juggling both work and studies. Educational levels range from 8% of participants in lower secondary education, 41% in upper secondary education, 33% with a bachelor's degree or equivalent, 16% with a master's degree or equivalent, and 3% holding a Doctoral degree or equivalent.

## PRIORITIES & CHALLENGES

*Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth, 2022, European Commission*

The survey reflects the diverse priorities of rural youth. Seven out of ten participants prioritise physical and mental health care, underscoring a significant concern for well-being. This was also underscored as the top priority of the 2022 Eurobarometer, thereby showcasing the overlap between all youth, and in particular rural youth, on this matter.

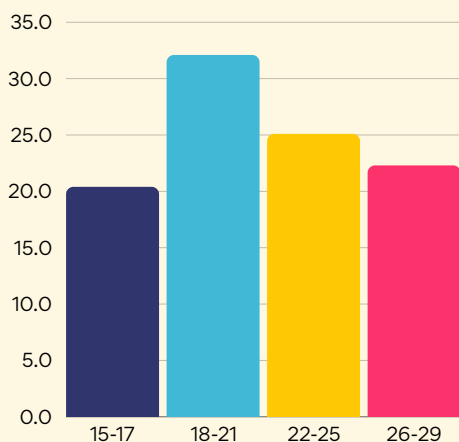
**Democracy and the rule of law is only important to four out of ten respondents**

Education also emerges as a top priority for 75% of respondents, while employment and workplace conditions also garner substantial attention, with 70% expressing their priority in this area. Democracy and the rule of law is only important to four of ten respondents, while 22% of respondents emphasise the need for stronger solidarity between EU member states.

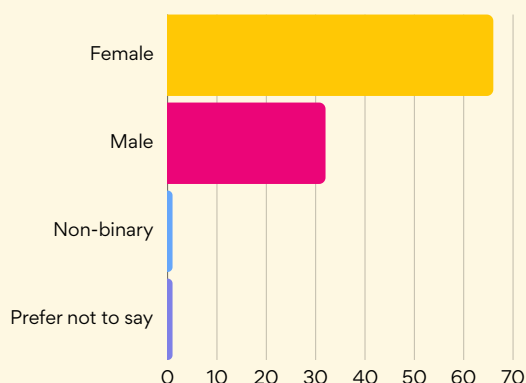
## A quick look at our sample

1563 rural young people

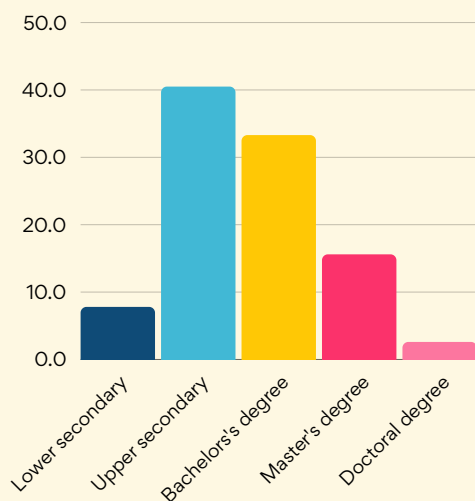
### AGE



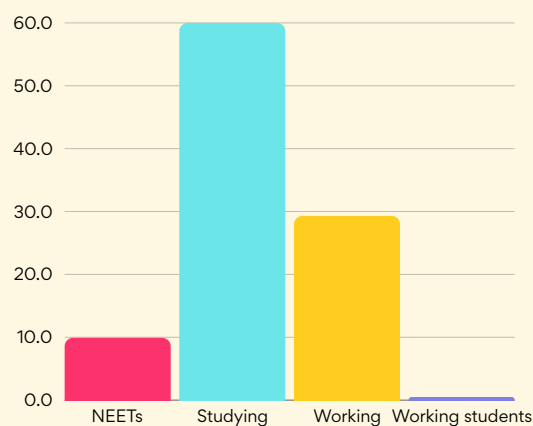
### GENDER



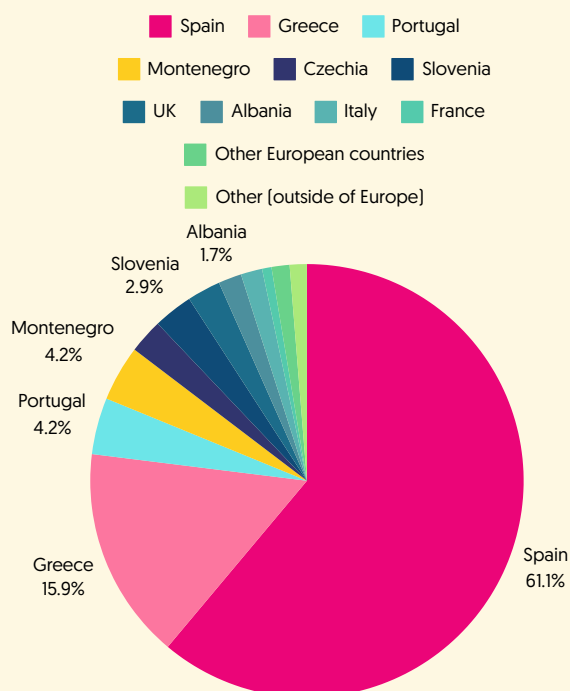
### LEVEL OF EDUCATION



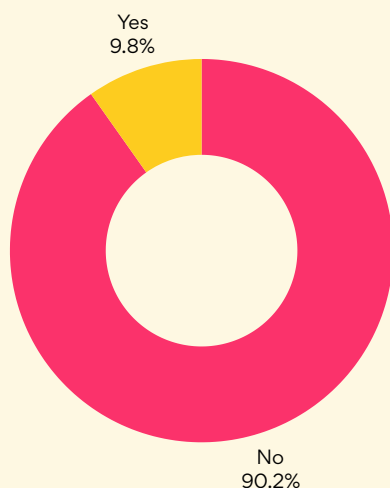
### CURRENT STATUS



### COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE



### BELONGS TO A MINORITY





The majority (51%) of participants express a commitment to social justice, mirroring a collective call for fairness and equity. The environment and climate change concerns 48% of respondents, reflecting a slightly lower focus on sustainability consciousness among rural youth compared to the higher priority position recorded in the 2022 Eurobarometer. Interestingly, stronger economies and digital transformation receive lower priority percentages at 44% and 22% respectively.

*Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth, 2022, European Commission*

## PRIORITIES



*Bigger words represent the most important priorities for rural youth!*

As regards the perceived challenges, the survey data highlights an array of obstacles confronting young people in rural settings. Unemployment emerges as a significant concern, with 52% of respondents acknowledging its impact, reflecting the economic challenges faced by rural youth. Isolation, due to the limited availability of venues, transport, and activities, is identified as a challenge by 48% of participants. Non-participation, indicating a sense of political under-representation, is acknowledged by 36 % of respondents, suggesting a need for greater engagement and inclusion in decision-making processes.

## CHALLENGES



*Bigger words represent the hardest challenges for rural youth!*

Housing prices and accessibility concern 27% of participants, indicating the strain on rural youth in securing suitable housing. Social exclusion, encompassing the lack of diversity and inclusion, affects 31% of respondents, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive communities.

## **Unemployment and isolation emerge as the most common perceived challenges amongst rural youth**

The lack of accessible and affordable healthcare is a concern for 30 % of participants. Digital exclusion, involving limited access to digital platforms and tools, affects 17% of respondents, highlighting the importance of bridging the digital divide in rural areas.

## **WHAT ARE THE CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE?**

What are the catalysts for young people in rural areas, and which spaces offer the best energy for community engagement? Sports or cultural clubs emerge as key spaces for participation, with 54% expressing their interest, a reflection of the importance of community engagement and shared interests. Rural youth camps are also a significant motivator, with 52% expressing enthusiasm, highlighting the appeal of immersive and communal experiences. Public debates and/or online meetings are embraced by 23% of respondents, underscoring the importance of active civic participation and discussions. Voluntary work in community projects is identified as a catalyst by 22%, indicating a desire for hands-on involvement in initiatives that contribute to the local community.

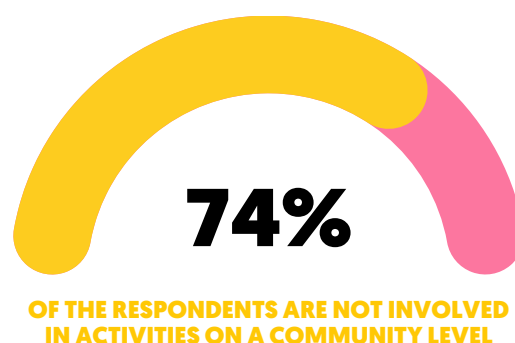
## **Local government meetings and voting have a lower appeal, which suggests a gap in engaging rural youth in formal political processes.**

*Eurobarometer on the European Year of Youth, 2022, European Commission*

Local government meetings and/or voting, however, appear to have a lower appeal, with only 14% expressing motivation. This is seconded by the results of the 2022 Eurobarometer, which states that involvement in a political organisation or a political party is one of the lowest form of participation amongst youth (both urban and rural). This suggests an overall gap in engaging youth in formal political processes, including the involvement of rural youth. The data suggests that community-oriented and recreational activities play a crucial role in motivating young people in rural settings, emphasising the need for tailored approaches to foster active participation and a sense of belonging.

As regards local-level engagement, 26% of respondents actively participate in community-level activities. This suggests a non-negligible portion of the surveyed rural youth is engaged in local initiatives, contributing to various actions including but not limited to cultural events, ecological activities, and educational projects. However, a much larger proportion (74%) indicated a lack of involvement in such activities.

This, according to their assessment, is due to varying levels of interest, availability and awareness on an individual level; but also reflects the insufficiency of information, understanding and availability of such initiatives on a local level; and the general lack of suitable infrastructure. Specifically, the absence of available, accessible and open spaces for young people on a community level, thereby directly affecting the activities organised.



## THROUGH THE EYES OF THE EYCA YOUTH PANEL

As part of the study, the EYCA Youth Panel reflected on the experience of organising activities for young people on a local rural level and facilitating the sharing of ideas and perspectives. One prominent theme was the difficulty in reaching out to rural youth populations, indicating potential barriers in communication and engagement across all different countries involved in the project. Also highlighted were obstacles to establishing contact with local authorities and organisations working in rural regions. These challenges underline a need for improved mechanisms to bridge the gap between rural youth and local institutions. This is supported by concerns related to limited infrastructure for the organisation of such localised, spontaneous initiatives.

The Panellists also reflected on the results of the report, and noted the gap between the initial expectations and the actual results. This study showed that common European trends of generalised youth do not always match the desires and opinions of young people living in rural areas. Youth is a diverse group and young people from rural areas have their own needs and priorities that have to be taken into consideration and that should not be dissolved into the mainstream voice of generalised European youth. That same can be said for rural youth, the needs and challenges of which significantly differ based on where they live. Through this study, recognising the differences that make the livelihoods of rural youth so unique was essential to improving the design of the Rural Youth Project. The results will be incorporated into the planning of the Rural Youth Camp, and used towards a suitable programme to equip the participants with the tools, skills, and motivation to address the main challenges identified. The goal is for them to be active in their own communities.

What is abundantly clear, is the need to further listen to and involve rural young people.



## THE PERSPECTIVE OF EYCA MEMBERS

The EYCA member organisations played an important role in this study. By sharing the survey with relevant rural youth and organisations, and filling in a separate survey dedicated for EYCA members, useful information was gathered on rural youth trends. Among the 27 organisations that responded, eight offer discounts tailored for rural young people and 17 of the organisations have engaged with rural youth through their past projects, with 14 of them currently focusing on this demographic through various current projects.

Interestingly, the main priorities identified by these organisations do not always align with the broader trends observed through the rural youth responses, as they mainly focus on digital transformation and economy-related aspects for young people. Furthermore, a nuanced difference emerges in the challenges identified, with a specific emphasis on digital exclusion being highlighted by the EYCA member organisations, contrary to the lower score for this factor received from the rural youth. This highlights the diversity of rural youth and the need for tailored initiative that respond to local challenges.

EYCA members were also asked for their feedback on this report. They noted several opportunities to use this report's insights, such as through localised projects in rural areas and more policy-focused discussions with European institutions to compare the realities of different countries. For both suggestions, EYCA's existing programmes could be utilised.

They also remarked on several areas that should be further explored, to gain more focused insights on how to shape youth services in rural areas. For instance, access to housing is seen as a key challenge to most demographics of young people. With rural areas holding a sizeable portion of second dwellings, thus limiting the living opportunities for local youth, it would be interesting to understand how this is affecting the well-being of rural youth. Likewise, a growing proportion of rural inhabitants are digital nomads. Understanding how they integrate with local communities and involve themselves in rural initiatives would be an interesting angle for further study.

Finally, as noted at the onset of this report, rural youth is to be understood as a very diverse group. Different definitions of this demographic can be seen depending on the country in question, as is the case for the challenges and opportunities identified in each region. As such, localised information and/or theme-specific research is needed for more effective initiatives to take place.

## PROPOSALS

In line with EYCA's focus on listening to young people, this survey offered rural youth the opportunity to express their own proposals for improving their local communities. The focus should be on a comprehensive approach that addresses education, employment, infrastructure, and community engagement to create a youth-friendly environment for rural residents. **These are only some of the 100 proposals young people suggested!**



### CULTURE & MUSIC EVENTS

to provide recreational and social opportunities for young people in rural areas



### ENHANCED PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

to reduce isolation and enable rural youth to participate in community events in neighbouring areas



### ACCESS TO HOUSING

to solve problems related to heavy taxation and low family income



### YOUTH BUDGET & PUBLIC AID

to support the opening of new businesses, sustainable rural tourism, and programmes that contribute to local economic improvement



### REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS

to provide rural youth with the right to participate in decision-making processes in their communities



### LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES & PROGRAMS

for young people to broaden their perspectives and skills



### INTERNET ACCESS & COMMUNICATIONS

to facilitate information access and learning



### EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND SCHOLARSHIPS

to improve the economic prospects of rural youth and to facilitate their entry into the job market



### YOUTH ORGANISATIONS

to foster a sense of community and provide a platform for collective action

To view the full list of 100 suggestions made by rural youth:

<https://eyca.org/news/100-proposals-from-rural-youth>

Data collected and analysed in autumn 2023 by the EYCA Youth Panel.  
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