

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ALBANIA

A CALL FOR ACTION BY YOUNG PEOPLE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



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DISCLAIMER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people's mental health is a growing concern globally, with young people facing heightened vulnerability during this transitional stage of life. In Albania, these challenges are compounded by cultural attitudes, persistent stigma, academic pressures, family stressors, and high digital exposure. Young people affected by poverty, social exclusion, trauma, or limited access to support are particularly at risk, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

Despite the implementation of national strategies like the National Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) and alignment with EU frameworks such as EU4Health, significant implementation gaps persist. These include limited school-based counseling, insufficient integration of mental health into primary care, fragmented service provision, workforce shortages, and underdeveloped youth-friendly programs. These gaps constrain the ability of young people to access timely, comprehensive, and culturally appropriate support.

The analysis results reveal that many young people frequently experience emotional strain, with stress, anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed among the most commonly reported challenges. Key risk factors include socio-economic pressures, parental style, lack of mental wellbeing services, academic demands, life transitions, peer and romantic relationship dynamics, and heavy social media use. Conversely, protective factors such as strong friendships, community engagement, creative outlets and peer support networks help build resilience and buffer the impact of stressors.

Improving young people's mental wellbeing in Albania requires accessible, youth-friendly services, stronger school-based support, and coordinated action across sectors. Civil society and youth-led groups should expand peer networks and awareness initiatives, while families and schools foster open dialogue and resilience. Ultimately cross-sectoral collaboration and youth friendly mental health services are crucial to ensure young people in Albania are supported.

INTRODUCTION

Young people's mental health is a growing concern globally, with many of them facing several challenges related to their mental wellbeing. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a fundamental and integral component of overall health. The WHO Constitution defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” This highlights that mental health goes beyond the absence of disorders, reflecting a state of balance in which individuals can realize their abilities, cope with everyday stresses, work productively, and contribute to their communities (WHO, 2022).

Globally, young people are in critical periods, as nearly 75% of mental health conditions emerge before the age of 25 (McGorry & Mei, 2018). When it comes to the Western Balkan countries, young people face increasing mental health challenges, with risks amplified by poverty, social exclusion, academic pressures, family dynamics and digital exposure (Eurofound, 2023; WHO Europe, 2022). Current estimates suggest that over half of Albanian youth aged 15–29 report depressive symptoms or feel socially excluded, while factors such as digital overexposure and sedentary lifestyles further heighten mental health risks (GBD, 2019; Eurofound, 2023).

Mental health experiences differ between males and females, influenced by both social and biological factors. Socially constructed gender roles, expectations, and power dynamics shape both the risks of developing mental health conditions and how individuals perceive and cope with them, as well as patterns of help-seeking and the responsiveness of health and social systems. In Albania, stigma surrounding mental health remains pervasive, discouraging young people from accessing support and creating a gap between needs and available services (UNICEF, 2021).

Institutional Framework

At the national level, the main responsible institution for youth mental health in Albania is the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP). Its work focuses on offering the necessary support system for ensuring mental health of young people by offering community-based services, integration with primary care and specialized programs for children and adolescents. The Ministry of Education complements this by promoting mental health awareness and supporting initiatives in schools and universities. Municipalities, NGOs, youth-led initiatives, and the Order of Psychologists contribute through advocacy, service provision, and regulation, while families and young people themselves are central partners, benefiting from services and participating in their design and implementation.

Among these actors, The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is one of the most important actors in supporting government institutions and civil society through a range of initiatives, including public awareness campaigns targeting young people and parents, teacher training programs to identify early signs of distress, and community-based psychosocial support integrated into broader youth development initiatives (UNICEF, 2023).

Legal Framework

Albania's National Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) and the National Youth Strategy establish a comprehensive framework for promoting community-based, youth-friendly mental health services. In theory, these policies aim to provide early detection, integration into primary health care, and specialized programs tailored for children and young people. In practice, however, implementation is inconsistent and not fully developed. Policies formally prioritize community-based care and youth-friendly services; however, implementation is impeded by insufficient funding, a shortage of trained professionals, and a continued reliance on psychiatric hospitals. Weak coordination between the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Ministry of Education, municipalities, and civil society actors contributes to overlaps, duplication, and persistent gaps in school- and community-based mental health support. The harmonisation of the national policies with the European Union (EU) frameworks is one of the main goals of the public institutions, however when it comes to mental health challenges persist. At the EU level, regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) provide frameworks for ensuring online safety, transparency, and accountability of digital platforms, which are increasingly relevant to young people's

well-being (European Commission, 2024). Similarly, the EU4Health Programme 2021–2027 supports mental health promotion, literacy, and the integration of digital tools into health systems across member and candidate states (European Commission, 2021). However, translating these frameworks into practical measures in Albania remains limited due to structural weaknesses in the health system, insufficient administrative capacity, and a lack of mechanisms to localize best practices. This gap underscores the urgent need for coordinated, multi-sectoral strategies that align national policies, international guidance, and community realities, to ensure that young people have access to timely, equitable, and high-quality mental health support.

Current Initiatives

Several initiatives are already underway in Albania to promote young people's mental well-being. Training programs for primary care providers aim to enhance early detection of psychological distress among young people (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2023). School-based workshops focused on fostering emotional well-being and teaching coping strategies are being supported by international donors (UNICEF Albania, 2023). Awareness campaigns targeting young people and parents seek to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behaviors (UNICEF Albania, 2023). Also, peer-support networks and youth-led advocacy platforms provide opportunities for youth participation and community engagement (Eurochild, 2022). Digital platforms and online resources are increasingly used to deliver mental health information and support, particularly in remote or underserved areas (World Health Organization, 2022).

Problem Statement

Young people in Albania face several challenges related to their mental health wellbeing due to low self-awareness among young people, limited professional capacity, and fragmented institutional responses. Many young people struggle to recognize signs of poor mental health, leading to delays in seeking help and increased vulnerability to stigma, social dismissal, and digital risks. While Albania has adopted policies such as the National Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) and the National Youth Strategy, gaps remain in integrating services into primary care, expanding school-based counseling, and ensuring adequate community programs.

Structural weaknesses, underfunding, and lack of local adaptation to EU initiatives further limit progress. These shortcomings, combined with cultural barriers and insufficient regulation of digital environments, create a disconnection between policies and the lived realities of young people. Addressing this problem requires coordinated, multi-sectoral action across health, education, social protection, and digital governance to provide young people with timely, equitable and sustainable mental health support.

This policy document aims to provide evidence based policy recommendations on supporting young people's mental wellbeing in Albania by identifying key risk factors, protective mechanisms and concrete recommendations.

It seeks to inform policymakers and other relevant stakeholders on evidence-based, youth-friendly and multi-sectoral interventions that can enhance resilience, reduce vulnerabilities and ensure equitable access to mental health support. By aligning recommendations with national priorities and international standards, the document provides guidance for policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders to implement coordinated strategies that effectively address the mental health needs of young people.

METHODOLOGY

This policy paper is based on a mixed-methods approach, combining primary and secondary data to examine factors influencing youth mental health in Albania. The aim was to capture both institutional gaps as well as include the needs and priorities of young people to shape evidence based policy recommendations.

Primary Data

A quantitative survey was conducted with 170 respondents, providing insights into the current emotional and mental situation of the responders and the main factors that influence their mental wellbeing. The survey was designed based on the classification of Stubbing, J., Rihari, T., Bardsley, A., & Gluckman, P. (2023), that identifies contextual, digital, economic, education, family, peer and personal factors as the main determinants of the young people's wellbeing. The survey was divided in two parts. The first part included questions related to demographic data and the current emotional and mental situation of young people, while the second part included questions for each subcategory of the factors (contextual, digital, economic, education, family, peer and personal factors) by using Likert scales. Survey responses were collected online via Google Forms, as the most suitable approach to reach young people.

Furthermore, a participatory workshop was held with 20 participants, including mental health professionals, educators, local governance, young leaders and youth workers. This interactive session offered a space to discuss current service gaps, challenges in policy implementation, and potential strategies for improving young people's mental health support. Participants shared firsthand insights and innovative ideas for community-based interventions, highlighting structural constraints as well as opportunities to improve coordination, foster youth engagement, and integrate programs into schools and local communities.

Secondary Data

A literature review was conducted, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, international reports (WHO, UNICEF, EuroHealthNet), and national policy documents, including the National Mental Health Action Plan (2023–2026) and the National Youth Strategy. The review focused on prevalence data, determinants (e.g., COVID-19, digital exposure, lifestyle factors), and evidence-based interventions. Desk research mapped EU and international policy options based on relevance to youth, feasibility in Albania’s institutional and fiscal context, and alignment with national and EU strategies (e.g., EU4Health, Council Conclusions on youth mental health).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including percentages and frequencies, to identify key trends, patterns, and distributions across different variables. In parallel, insights from secondary research were systematically reviewed and triangulated with the primary data, enabling validation of findings and providing a deeper understanding of the results. This combined approach not only captured overall tendencies but also highlighted the nuanced contextual realities, variations among subgroups, and potential underlying factors influencing the observed outcomes.

Limitations

The survey sample may not fully represent the diversity of Albanian youth, as participants could be more engaged, digitally connected, or already aware of mental health situations. The relatively small sample size also constrains the statistical depth and limits generalizability. Similarly, qualitative insights from the stakeholder workshop are context-specific and cannot be assumed to reflect the wider youth population. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design enhances the study’s robustness by integrating multiple sources of evidence, combining broad patterns with lived experiences, and ensuring that the resulting recommendations are both relevant and actionable.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

This chapter analyzes the factors influencing the mental health of young people, highlighting both the challenges they face and the strategies they use to cope. It explores how emotional, social, familial, educational, economic, and digital influences, as well as access to support systems, provide a comprehensive understanding of well-being during adolescence and early adulthood.

Respondent Demographics

Survey results show (refer to Annex for the analysis) that the majority of respondents (57.6%) were aged 18–24, followed by those under 18 (35.9%), and a smaller proportion (6.5%) aged 25–29. This indicates that most respondents fall within the critical age range for adolescence and early adulthood, a period of heightened vulnerability to stress and mental health challenges.

Female participants comprised 76.5% of the sample, males 22.4% and 1.2% preferred not to disclose their gender. This indicates a stronger representation of females; reflecting young women's greater willingness to engage in discussions about mental health, which itself is an important social factor influencing help-seeking behaviors.

In terms of educational attainment, over half of respondents (50.6%) held a Bachelor's degree, 38.8% had completed or were completing secondary education, 10% had completed nine years of schooling, and a small minority (0.6%) were pursuing or had completed a Master's or PhD degree. While higher educational attainment may enhance awareness of mental health issues and access to resources, it can also contribute to academic pressures that increase the risk of stress and anxiety.

Most respondents (84.7%) resided in urban areas, with only 15.3% living in rural settings. Urban youth encounter stressors such as competitive educational environments and higher digital exposure, whereas rural youth face limited access to mental health services, underscoring disparities in risk and support factors.

Current Emotional & Mental Situation of the Respondents

When asked about their emotional experiences over the past month, a significant proportion of respondents reported feeling overwhelmed, with 38.8% experiencing it often and 19.4% very often.

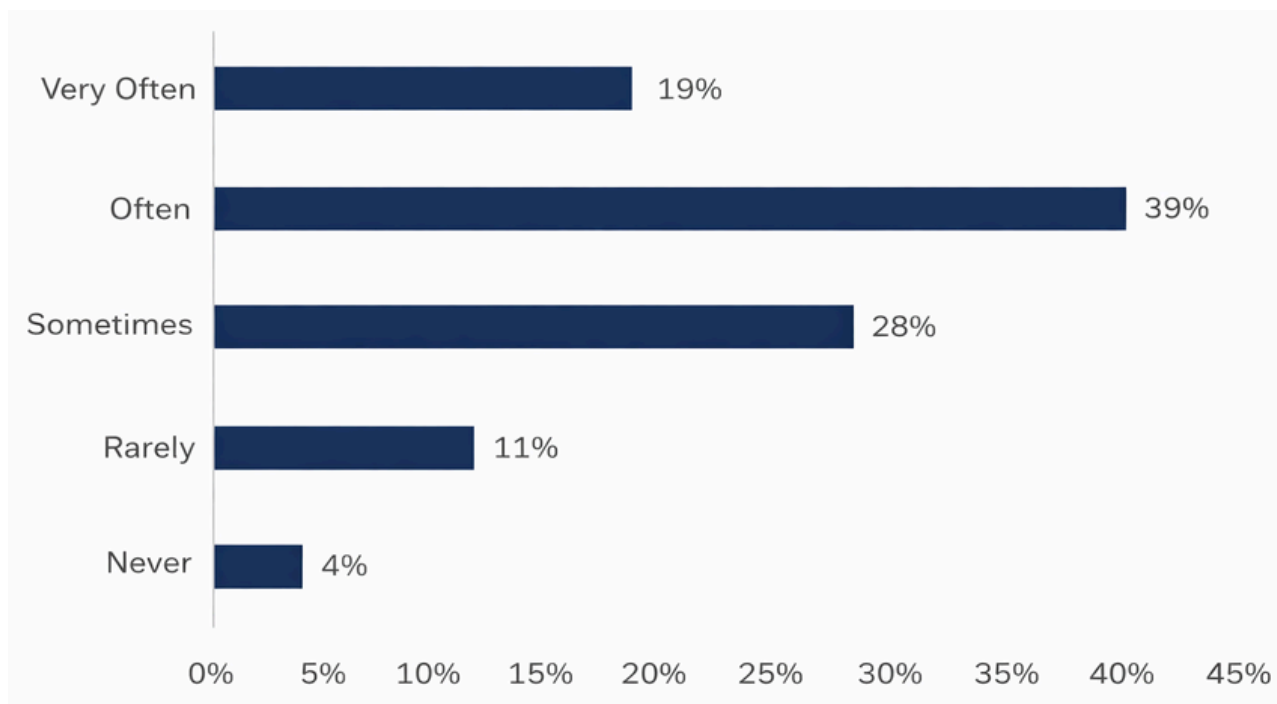


Figure 1: Answer to question: How often have you felt overwhelmed in the past month?

Source: Authors based on the survey

Stress emerged as the most commonly reported symptom, affecting 70% of participants, followed by anxiety or excessive worry (42.9%) and persistent sadness or depression (32.9%).

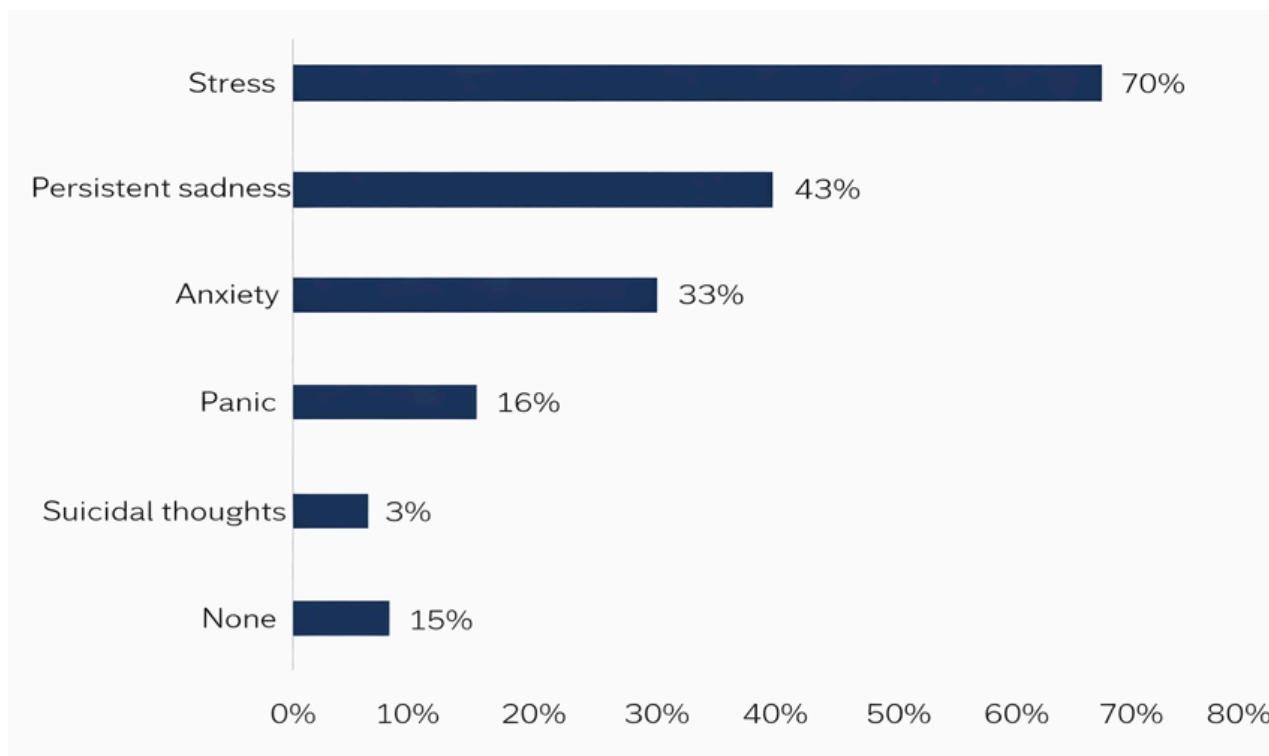


Figure 2: Answer to question: In the past month, have you experienced any of the following symptoms?
Source: Authors based on the survey

Panic attacks were reported by 15.9% of respondents, while 2.9% indicated experiencing suicidal thoughts. Only 15.3% of participants reported none of the listed symptoms.

Main Factors Influencing Mental Health of Young People

While over half of respondents (51%) report not having experienced traumatic or harmful events in childhood, nearly a quarter (24%) acknowledge such experiences. Feelings of uncertainty or hopelessness about the future are more evenly distributed, with 44% disagreeing but 32% agreeing, pointing to a significant share who struggle with optimism and stability. Experiences of discrimination are less common, as two-thirds (66%) deny it, though almost one in five (18%) report having faced it. Justice system involvement appears rare, with 89% indicating no such history and only 5% confirming it.

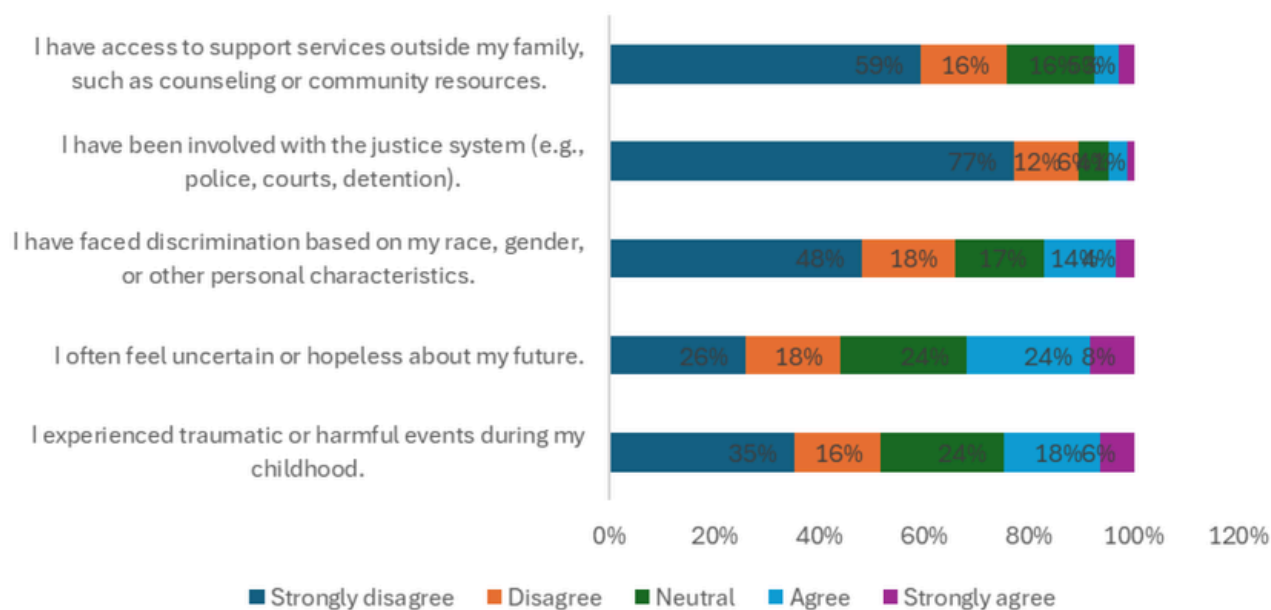


Figure 3: Influence of contextual factors in young people mental health

Source: Authors based on the survey

The most critical finding concerns access to support services, where three-quarters (75%) report a lack of external support beyond the family, and only 8% confirm access.

The results highlight resilience in terms of trauma, discrimination, and justice involvement for most respondents, but they reveal two pressing vulnerabilities: widespread absence of support systems and a substantial proportion feeling uncertain about their future.

Most respondents do not feel heavily pressured by advertising or social media, though about one in four do, and a third remain neutral. Online bullying and harassment are uncommon; with nearly 70% denying such experiences, while stress from the digital environment is also limited, though a large share (35%) are undecided.

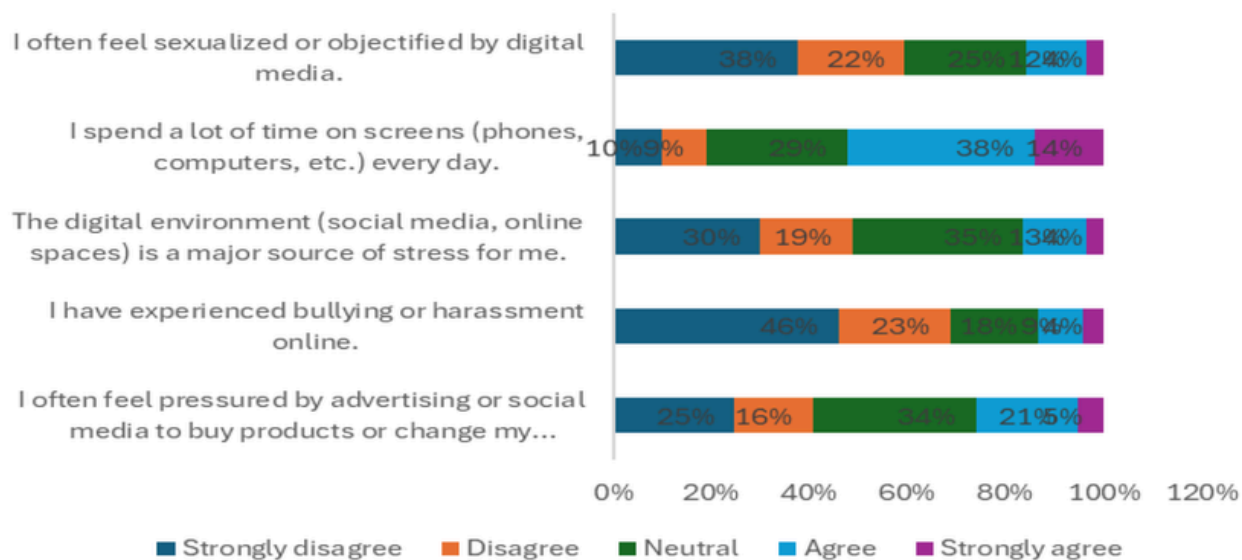


Figure 4: Influence of digital environments in young people mental health
Source: Authors based on the survey

Screen use is the clearest trend, with over half reporting significant daily use. Feelings of sexualization by digital media are rejected by most, though a minority (16%) reports such experiences.

Direct harms appear limited, but heavy screen use and ambivalence about digital stressors stand out.

Concerns about housing, finances, and socioeconomic status are quite prevalent among respondents. More than two in five (42%) are worrying about stable housing, highlighting housing insecurity as a significant issue. Perceptions of socioeconomic status are more divided, with 41% disagreeing that it impacts mental well-being but a notable 37% agreeing, showing its clear influence for many. Around 41% of the respondents disagree with feeling anxious about their financial situation, yet 33% agree, and more than a quarter (26%) remains neutral.

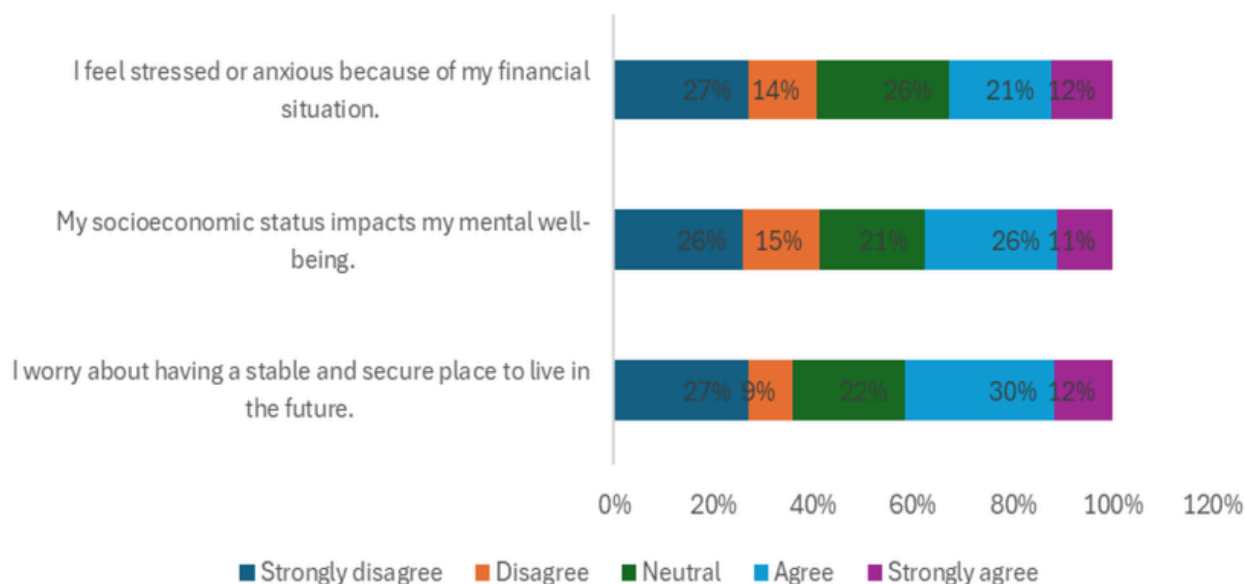


Figure 5: Influence of economic factors in young people mental health
Source: Authors based on the survey

Respondents consistently reported worries about housing, finances, and socioeconomic status, indicating these are meaningful sources of pressure for young people.

Almost 30% of the respondents agree to some extent that they feel pressured by academic performance. On a more positive note, nearly half (46%) report having creative outlets that support their mental well-being, with only 22% disagreeing, suggesting creativity serves as an important protective factor.

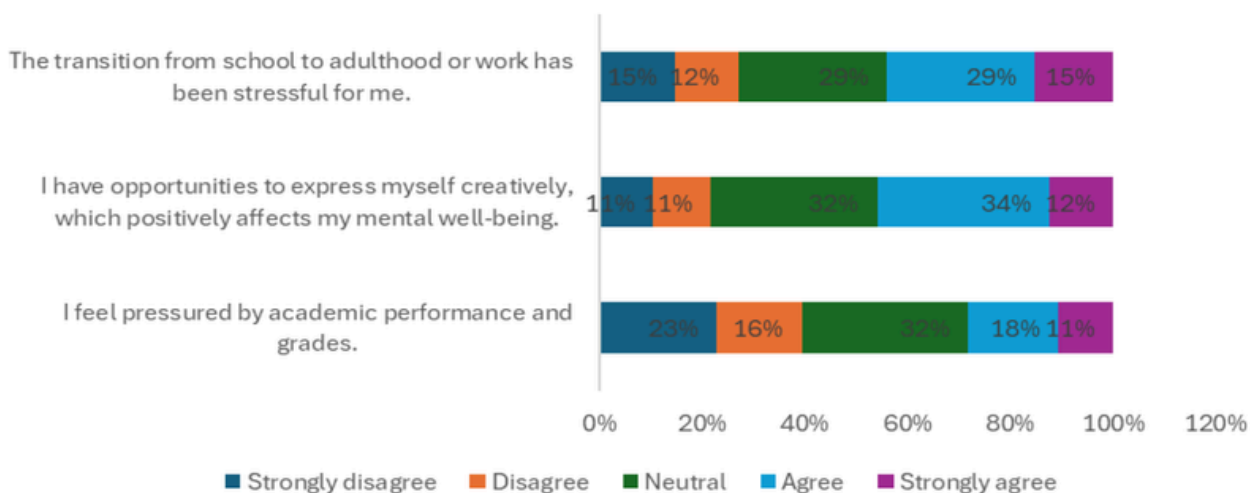


Figure 6: Influence of education in young people mental health
Source: Authors based on the survey

The transition from school to adulthood or work also emerges as a challenge, with 44% agreeing it has been stressful, while only 27% disagree.

The data shows that academic pressure and life transitions are key stressors, while access to creative expression offers a valuable source of resilience.

When it comes to family interactions, most respondents strongly disagree that drug or alcohol use (76%) or changes in family structure (72%) affected their mental health, though some remain neutral (10–15%). Parental mental health struggles have a more noticeable impact, with 24% agreeing and 9% strongly agreeing that it affects their emotional state.

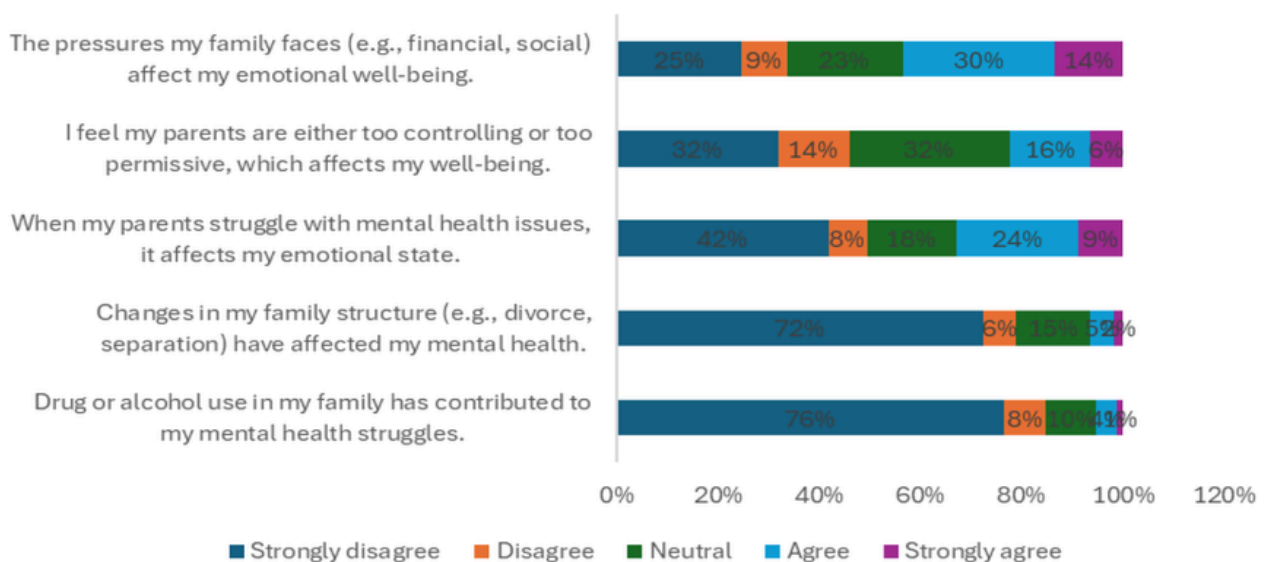


Figure 7: Influence of family support or challenges in young people mental health
Source: Authors based on the survey

Parenting style shows mixed effects, with 32% neutral, 32% disagreeing, and 22% agreeing it influences well-being. Family pressures, such as financial or social stress, are seen as impactful by many, with 30% agreeing and 14% strongly agreeing.

The external pressures and parental mental health and parental style appear more influential than substance use or family changes.

The findings suggest that peer and relationship dynamics play a nuanced role in respondents' mental health. Most do not feel pressured by friends to conform, with 65% disagreeing and only 12% agreeing, indicating limited peer pressure. Romantic relationships are more influential, as one-third (33%) report an impact on their mental health, though 42% disagree, showing divided experiences.

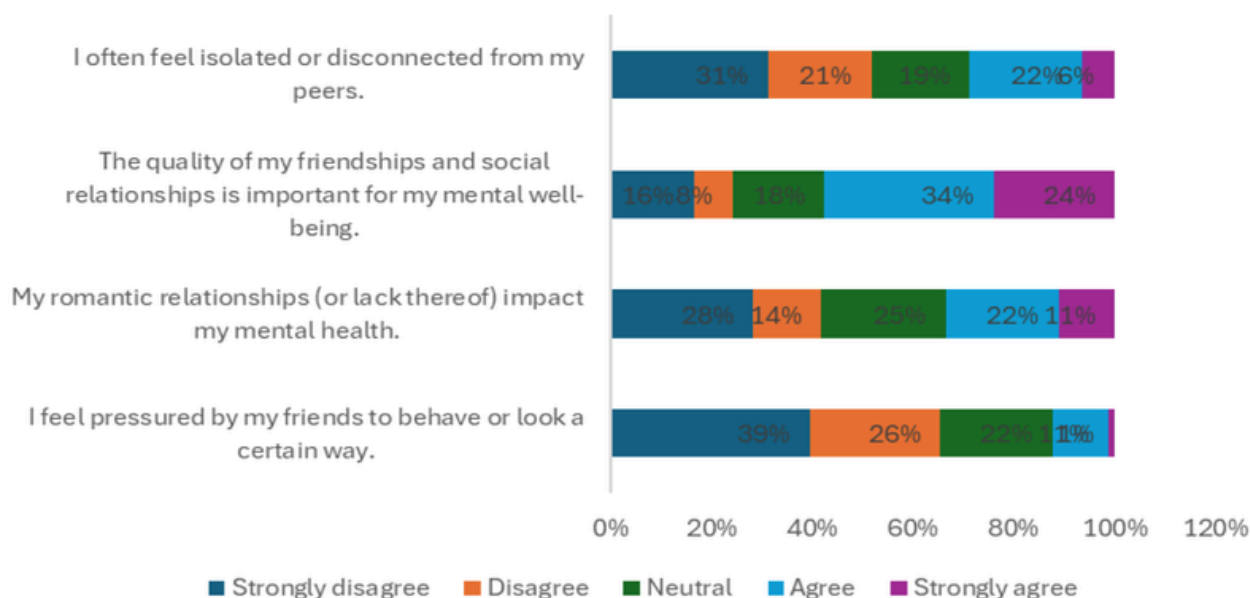


Figure 8: Influence of social and romantic relationships in young people mental health
Source: Authors based on the survey

Feelings of isolation are present but not dominant, as 52% disagree while 28% agree, suggesting that while many feel connected, a notable minority still struggles with disconnection.

Friendships emerge as central to positive mental health, while romantic relationships and isolation represent areas of vulnerability for some.

The results highlight both strengths and vulnerabilities in identity, emotional regulation, and coping. Cultural identity conflicts are not widespread, with 63% rejecting this struggle and only 17% agreeing. Emotional challenges, however, are more common: 35% report struggling to understand and manage emotions, while another 31% remain neutral, indicating uncertainty.

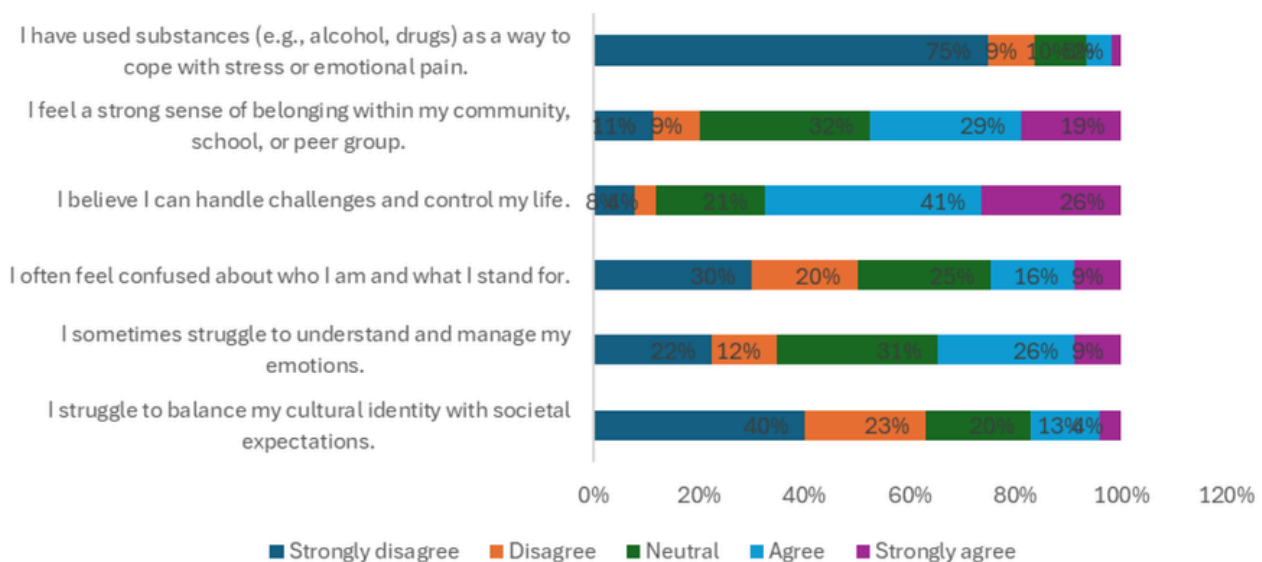


Figure 9: Influence of personal experiences in young people mental health

Source: Authors based on the survey

Similarly, identity confusion affects a quarter of respondents, though half disagree, suggesting it is significant for a minority. A sense of belonging is also present for nearly half (48%), though 32% remain neutral. Substance use as a coping strategy is rare, with 84% rejecting it.

The results point to resilience through self-belief and community ties, balanced against notable challenges in emotional regulation and identity clarity for some respondents.

The findings highlight a balance of resilience and vulnerability among young people. Many demonstrate strong coping skills, self-efficacy, and supportive social connections, yet challenges persist in areas such as emotional regulation, identity development and access to external support. Insights from the participatory workshop reinforced these conclusions, with stakeholders noting that, despite national strategies and EU-aligned frameworks, significant implementation gaps remain. These gaps are driven by workforce shortages, limited youth-friendly mental health services, poor integration across support systems, and underdeveloped school-based counseling programs. While policy ambitions are commendable, stakeholders emphasized that they often fail to translate into practical, accessible support, leaving critical needs of young people unmet.

CONCLUSIONS

The following section presents a synthesis of the key findings, highlighting the main challenges and protective factors influencing young people's mental health. It provides an integrated overview of the emotional, social, familial, educational, and systemic influences shaping well-being among young people:

01

Despite existing national strategies and alignment with EU frameworks, gaps in policy implementation limit the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support for young people. Stakeholders highlighted that workforce shortages, fragmented service provision, limited youth-friendly programs, and underdeveloped school-based counseling contribute to persistent unmet needs.

02

Stress, anxiety and persistent sadness are widespread among young people in Albania, with a majority of the respondents feeling overwhelmed regularly. While severe outcomes such as panic attacks and suicidal thoughts are less common, their presence indicates that a significant minority faces serious mental health challenges. Nonetheless, most young people manage day-to-day emotional strain, highlighting their capacity for resilience.

03

Many young people experience vulnerabilities such as difficulty with emotional regulation, identity development, and uncertainty about the future. Despite these challenges, a substantial proportion demonstrates resilience through strong coping skills, self-efficacy, and supportive social connections, with friendships and creative outlets providing important protective effects.

04

Limited access to support services beyond the family represents a significant vulnerability for young people. Three-quarters of respondents reported having little or no external support, highlighting a widespread gap in mental health provision. Participatory workshops confirmed that these gaps are compounded by workforce shortages, underdeveloped school-based counseling, and fragmented integration across health, education, and social services, and the limited availability of youth-friendly programs. This situation is further exacerbated in rural areas where there is a limited or missing mental health services.

05

Academic pressure, transitions from school to adulthood and socioeconomic concerns create persistent stress for many young people. Digital environments contribute some ambivalence, with heavy screen use common but direct harms relatively limited. While experiences of discrimination, online harassment, and substance use are uncommon, they still affect a meaningful minority. Despite these stressors, young people demonstrate adaptive responses that support their mental health.

06

Parental mental health struggles, family pressures and parenting styles exert a notable impact on emotional well-being. While some family-related factors such as substance use or structural changes are less influential, external pressures within the household contribute to vulnerability. Positive social relationships, particularly friendships, serve as crucial protective factors, and romantic relationships have a mixed influence, reflecting diverse experiences.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving adolescent mental health in Albania requires a coordinated response that brings together government institutions, schools, communities, civil society organizations and families. While stigma, rural-urban disparities, and digital pressures remain major challenges, there is growing momentum to strengthen support systems and create environments where young people can thrive. Below are presented the recommendations on fostering young people wellbeing in Albania, as follows:



Accessible & youth-friendly services should be available for young people beside their local contexts. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection should ensure that young people's mental health care is available in both urban and rural areas, integrated into primary care, and supported by trained professionals. Crisis services such as help lines and online counseling platforms are essential so that young people can seek help when they need it most.



The education system should play a central supportive and proactive role to ensure the mental wellbeing of young people. By embedding emotional literacy, stress management, and coping skills into curricula, the Ministry of Education can make mental health promotion part of everyday learning. Counseling services in schools, staffed by professionals, should be widely available. Teacher training and regular screenings will make it easier to detect problems early, while extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and volunteering can foster resilience and belonging. Also, the education system should ensure a smooth transition between school and the job market.



Municipalities and local governments should be well-placed to coordinate services at the community level. They should allocate resources for youth-friendly mental health programs, establish safe youth centers, and ensure cooperation between schools, health providers and NGOs. Young people should be included in the process of drafting the programs and projects related to their wellbeing, to ensure that their perspectives are included in those programs. Also, there is a need for a stronger monitoring system at the local level to ensure accountability and improve implementation, especially in underserved areas.



Civil society and youth-led organizations' role should be strengthened in ensuring young people's mental wellbeing. These actors should extend peer support networks, mentoring and awareness campaigns that resonate with young people's needs and priorities. Also, they should take a more active role in advocating for digital protections, preventing cyber bullying and online harassment, & promoting responsible online behavior. Establishing 24/7 help lines and digital platforms in partnership with CSOs can significantly increase access to support.



Parents and caregivers should be supported to talk openly about their parental style and mental health of young people at home. Young people themselves should be encouraged to take an active role in community programs, peer networks, and campaigns, building their own resilience and capacity to support one another. National digital literacy programs can reinforce these efforts by giving both young people and parents the tools to navigate online risks safely.

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