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Motion

A Future in Every Community

Guaranteeing Young People the Right to Thrive, Participate and Build a Future Where They Live

Signed by: European Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA Europe)

Co-signed by: Forum des Jeunes (FJ), International Federation of Catholic Parochial Youth Movements (FIMCAP), Portuguese National Youth Council (CNJ), Rural Youth Europe (RYE), Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)

Introduction

Young people's wellbeing in Europe's communities is shaped by territorial inequality. Rural areas offer belonging, social ties and strong community knowledge, and cities concentrate opportunities, services, education, culture and civic life. Yet, too often both fail to provide the material conditions young people need for a dignified, autonomous and secure transition to adulthood. In rural areas, young people face longer distances, fewer local services, weaker transport connections and a persistent pressure to leave in order to study, work or access support. In urban and highly populated areas, high housing costs, precarious work, fragmented services, weak access to decision-making and the uneven distribution of youth-friendly spaces can prevent young people from fully participating in community life.

These pressures do not affect all young people in the same way. Between rural and urban areas, and within cities and towns, inequalities between central and peripheral neighbourhoods and between young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds shape access to housing, transport, mental health support, community infrastructure and civic participation. Where employment, tertiary education, youth infrastructure and specialised support are concentrated in larger urban centres, rural young people face a narrower set of choices. Migration is then often presented as an individual solution to structural exclusion, even though the departure of young people can weaken local social fabric and limit the long-term sustainability of rural communities. Likewise, young people in outlying or less well-connected urban areas also face greater obstacles in reaching employment, youth-oriented services, cultural spaces and formal participation structures, even when these formally exist within the same municipality.

Housing, services and mobility are at the centre of this challenge. In cities, rising rents, insecure rental arrangements and the shortage of affordable homes delay independent living and reduce young people's autonomy and sense of belonging. In rural and smaller communities, formal rights may exist on paper, but in practice access is shaped by distance, weak outreach, fragmented institutions, limited youth-specific support and weak referral pathways between education, employment, social services and mental health provision. In both settings, weak transport links and uneven infrastructure restrict young people's ability to benefit from the opportunities around them. For young people facing poverty, discrimination, disability, displacement or insecure family situations, these barriers can become cumulative.

Youth wellbeing cannot be understood only through deficits or in economic terms. Mental health pressures are closely linked to housing stress, insecure futures, isolation and the absence of safe, accessible and non-commercial spaces where young people can gather, create, organise and participate. Where such spaces are lacking, many young people withdraw into digital environments. Formal participation mechanisms often remain consultative, inconsistent or inaccessible, leaving young people unheard in the decisions that shape their communities. Both rural and urban communities also have major strengths: solidarity, community-based organisations, schools, local initiatives and networks that provide stability, trust and belonging when properly supported. Young people are not disengaged or lacking in potential, but they are too often expected to adapt individually to structural neglect, rather than being met with sustained public investment, accessible services and meaningful influence over local development.

This motion is grounded in a clear principle: no young person should be forced to leave their community because rights, services and opportunities are territorially concentrated elsewhere. Community development must be measured not only by growth or infrastructure expansion, but by whether it enables young people to live well, participate meaningfully and build their futures where they live. It therefore calls for a youth-centred approach to rural and urban community development. This approach makes affordability, inclusion, accessible services, safe third spaces and meaningful participation core standards of democratic, social and territorial cohesion, so that young people can remain, return or move by choice, with dignity, support and real prospects for flourishing.

Aligned with European institutional commitments such as the Recommendation on the Social, Economic, and Political Participation of Rural Youth, the Recommendation on Access of Young People from Disadvantaged Neighborhoods to Social Rights, European Youth Goal 6 and the Charter for the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, this motion claims the right of youth to live and be in their communities with dignity and opportunity.

Challenges faced by youth in rural areas

Young people in rural communities face a structural disadvantage in access to rights, services and opportunities, even where these rights formally exist on paper. European policy work on rural youth increasingly recognises that poorer access to education, healthcare, transport, youth services, decent housing, connectivity and participation continues to shape rural young people's life chances and ability to remain active in their communities.[1]

In many rural areas across Europe, the distance to schools, healthcare, social services, youth work, cultural infrastructure and administrative support makes access more difficult, especially for young people without independent mobility or strong family resources. The Council of Europe has explicitly identified equitable access to essential services as a core rural-youth priority and has called for tailored responses, including mobile and place-based services, to close this gap.[2]

Rural young people are more likely to face weak public transport, limited safe and affordable mobility options, and reduced access to information and digital connectivity, all of which constrain education, employment, participation and leisure. These barriers do not only make it harder to reach opportunities; they also shape whether young people can participate in civic life, sustain social ties and imagine a future in their own community.[3]

When employment, tertiary education, youth infrastructure and specialised support are clustered in larger urban centres, rural young people are often incentivized to leave their communities. European rural youth policy debates increasingly frame this not only as a mobility question, but as a question of the right to stay, meaning that young people should be able to remain, return or move on the basis of choice rather than territorial neglect.[4]

1 Council of Europe, 2025, CM/Rec(2025)3, https://rm.coe.int/cm-rec-2025-3-rural-youth-english/1680b607c9

2 Youth Partnership, 2026, "Here to Stay?", https://edoc.coe.int/en/youth-in-europe/12546-here-to-stay-the-transitions-of-rural-youth-before-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic.html

3 YMCA Europe, 2026, "Youth Wellbeing Report" https://www.ymcaeurope.com/ymca-europes-first-youth-wellbeing-report-has-been-released/

4 Idem

Rural young people are often underrepresented in decision-making,[5] and many communities lack stable youth structures, regular consultation channels or adequately resourced spaces through which young people can shape local development.

Mental health strain, housing insecurity and material deprivation are deeply interconnected in rural communities, where limited access to safe spaces, youth-friendly and psychosocial support, decent housing, secure employment, mobility and essential services can intensify stress, isolation and uncertainty about the future.6[6] Yet rural communities are not defined only by absence: solidarity, knowledge, community organisation, local initiative and a strong sense of belonging provide important foundations for youth wellbeing when supported with sustained public investment and youth influence. Rural community development must be understood as a matter of youth wellbeing, social rights and territorial justice. This requires coordinated investment in housing, services, connectivity, participation, mobility and local opportunities, so that young people can stay, return or move by choice, and rural life remains a viable future across Europe.

Challenges faced by youth in urban environments

Young people's wellbeing in urban communities is being undermined by a combination of material insecurity, unequal access to rights and weak influence over the decisions that shape daily life. At European level, recent policy monitoring has identified mental health and wellbeing, youth participation and the cost of living as the three main challenges affecting young people, while youth organisations and social-rights monitoring bodies have also highlighted the interdependence of housing, participation and access to services.[7]

Young people are disproportionately exposed to unaffordable housing, overcrowding and delayed independence, especially in cities where demand is high and the gap between wages and rents is most acute. In 2025, 26.9% of young people aged 15–29 in the EU lived in overcrowded households, and Eurofound finds that young adults are more likely than older groups to be overburdened by housing costs, to live in poorer-quality dwellings and to remain in unwanted living arrangements because urban housing is out of reach.[8] This matters for urban community development because housing is not only a private issue: it shapes whether young people can stay in their communities, take up work or study opportunities, and participate in local social and democratic life.

Even where education, health and social services formally exist, young people often face long waiting times, weak coordination between sectors and limited youth-specific provision, with access further shaped by neighbourhood, income, migration background and transport connectivity. The challenge is whether support is accessible and reachable in practice for young people living in peripheral neighbourhoods or facing multiple disadvantages.

5 Council of Europe, 2025, CM/Rec(2025)3, https://rm.coe.int/cm-rec-2025-3-rural-youth-english/1680b607c9

6 YMCA Europe, 2026, "Youth Wellbeing Report" https://www.ymcaeurope.com/ymca-europes-first-youth-wellbeing-report-has-been-released/

7 Council of Europe, 2026, Second Review of the Implementation of the "Enter!" Recommendation https://rm.coe.int/enter-recommendation-second-review-2025-26-eng-web/48802d3eef

8 Eurofound, 2025, "Foundational Challenges: The Housing Struggles of Europe's Youth", https://assets.eurofound.europa.eu/f/279033/x/90266aeaab/ef25052en-1.pdf

Youth mental health pressures are closely connected to housing stress, insecure employment, high living costs, uncertainty about the future and the erosion of safe spaces for connection and belonging. The Second Review of the Implementation of the "Enter!" Recommendation underlines that mental health has become more visible in public debate, but access to appropriate and affordable support remains uneven, while the broader European evidence base links young people's wellbeing directly to socioeconomic insecurity and exclusion from supportive environments.[9]

Across many urban settings, youth-friendly physical spaces are unevenly distributed, difficult to access from peripheral areas, or not designed with young people's realities in mind. When those spaces are missing, community participation becomes narrower, more unequal and more dependent on individual resources, while social isolation and retreat into exclusively digital spaces become more likely.[10]

Young people often have formal channels through which they can be heard, but these are too inconsistent or disconnected from actual decision-making on housing, mobility, urban planning, public space and local services.[11] The European Commission's review of the EU Youth Strategy,[12] confirms that participation remains one of the main challenges identified by young people.

These challenges are intensified by territorial and social inequalities within cities. Young people do not experience "the urban" in the same way: those living in peripheral neighbourhoods, those with lower incomes, migrant and refugee youth, young people with disabilities, Roma youth, LGBTQI+ youth and those in insecure employment are more likely to encounter compounded barriers in housing, mobility, mental health support and participation. Urban development that fails to address these unequal starting points risks reinforcing exclusion, even where investment and regeneration are taking place.[13]

For these reasons, urban community development must be approached as a youth wellbeing issue and not only as a question of infrastructure, competitiveness or land use. A youth-centred urban approach requires affordable and secure housing, integrated and youth-friendly services, accessible third spaces, equitable mobility, and governance arrangements in which young people can shape the communities they live in.

9 Youth Partnership, 2025, "Advancing youth mental health and wellbeing", https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/290712120/Advancing+Youth+Mental+Health+and+Well-Being.pdf/cc0ce4de-9702-01f2-ece6-604a76529f11?t=1759409672757#:~:text=This%20study%20builds%20on%20the,and%20well%2Dbeing%2C%20which%20started%20in

10 YMCA Europe, 2026, "Youth Wellbeing Report" https://www.ymcaeurope.com/ymca-europes-first-youth-wellbeing-report-has-been-released/

11 Idem

12 European Commission, 2025, "REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2022-2024)" https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0117&utm_source=perpl exity

13 Council of Europe, 2026, Second Review of the Implementation of the "Enter!" Recommendation https://rm.coe.int/enter-recommendation-second-review-2025-26-eng-web/48802d3eef

Call to action

Territorial policy must address the interconnected realities of housing insecurity, mental health pressures, unequal access to services, exclusion from participation and the shrinking availability of safe and affordable community spaces for young people. It must move beyond seeing young people only as beneficiaries of territorial policy or as a demographic concern. Instead, it must guarantee the social, economic and political conditions that allow them to remain, return or move by choice, with dignity and equal access to rights.

To this end, the European Youth Forum calls on European, national, regional and local decision-makers to:

- Ensure equal access to essential services and rights for young people in rural and urban areas, including quality education, healthcare, social protection and youth services. This should happen through tailored, place-based policies that reflect the realities of rural life and of peripheral neighbourhoods. It should also include developing and sustaining local youth wellbeing ecosystems that bring together young people, public services, youth organisations, schools, health providers, employers and other community actors around shared goals. These ecosystems should combine expertise and resources to provide accessible, integrated and lasting support, with clear responsibilities and accountability to young people.

- Ensure access to affordable, adequate and secure housing for young people in rural and urban areas, including through stronger investment in social and affordable housing, effective protection against discrimination and exploitation, accessible tenancy advice, and prevention of youth homelessness.

- Invest in physical and digital infrastructure, including affordable, reliable and accessible mobility between neighbourhoods, villages and youth opportunities. Recognise it as a precondition for access to education, employment, health care, participation, leisure and independent living. Guarantee adequate digital connectivity and internet access in all rural areas, so that young people are not excluded from learning, work, information, public services, participation opportunities and social connection. Pair this with clear, multilingual youth information and outreach through trusted community organisations, with both digital and face-to-face access.

- Guarantee meaningful and inclusive participation of young people in local, regional, national and European decision-making by establishing permanent, independent and adequately resourced participation structures. Through these, young people can shape agendas, decisions, implementation and evaluation, with clear links to municipal decisions and budgets, co-creation mechanisms, accessible participation support, and public feedback explaining how young people's proposals have influenced final decisions.

- Invest in safe, accessible and non-commercial third spaces and youth structures for young people in all communities, especially in rural, peripheral and underserved areas. These include youth centres, clubs, self-managed spaces, cultural spaces, community hubs, outdoor meeting spaces and places for non-formal education.

- Invest in and protect cultural initiatives at the local level, preserving and revitalising local cultural traditions and engaging youth as active co-creators of culture.

- Recognise youth work, non-formal education and youth organisations, including mobile youth work in rural communities, as essential community infrastructure for wellbeing, participation and belonging. Support them through predictable multi-year funding, trained youth workers, volunteer development and accessible premises.

- Employ a territorially sensitive approach to policymaking on European and, national and regional levels, such as rural proofing, in order to make sure policies reflect the needs

and characteristics of all territories and their communities.

- Address territorial inequalities between and within rural areas, cities and towns, with targeted action for peripheral neighbourhoods and remote or underserved communities. Target support to young people facing intersectional exclusion and compounded barriers, including young people in poverty, Roma youth, migrant and refugee youth, LGBTQI+ young people, young people with disabilities and NEETs.

- Expand access to decent and fairly paid employment and strengthen local pathways into it. This means accessible career guidance, quality paid traineeships, apprenticeships and work experience, recognition of skills gained through non-formal learning, and accessible vocational and lifelong learning. It also means stronger cooperation between education providers, employers, public employment services and youth organisations, and coordinated outreach to young people facing exclusion from education and employment.

- Ensure timely access to affordable, confidential and youth-friendly mental health and psychosocial support in rural communities, including outreach and mobile provision, alongside preventive action addressing isolation, discrimination and economic insecurity, with dedicated funding for youth workers and specialists.

- Embed a youth perspective in urban planning and territorial development, so that regeneration, mobility planning, neighbourhood investment and public-space design are assessed according to their impact on young people's wellbeing, inclusion and access to rights.

- Adopt and fund local youth wellbeing action plans, co-designed with young people, with named responsibilities, implementation timelines and publicly reported indicators that track outcomes and inequalities between neighbourhoods.







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