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Motion

Climate change and young people´s health and wellbeing

Signed by: International Federation of Catholic Parochial Youth Movements (FIMCAP), World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS)

Co-signed by: Youth and Environment Europe (YEE)

Background and Context

Nowadays, climate change is not only an environmental challenge, but it has increasingly become a wellbeing challenge: it affects how young people live, how safe they are during climate-related events, and how physical and mental health systems are expected to respond. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projects that extreme heat could cause around 30,000 deaths a year in Europe at 1.5°C of global warming, and up to three times as many at 3°C.[1] The 2026 Europe report of the Lancet Countdown found that heat-related mortality has risen in 99.6% of monitored European regions, with roughly 63,000 heat deaths in 2024 alone.[2] Heat is only one pathway. The World Health Organization (WHO) explains that climate change affects health and wellbeing through extreme weather, air pollution, food and water insecurity, infectious disease and growing pressure on health systems, with vulnerable populations affected first and most severely.[3]

The consequences for mental wellbeing extend well beyond eco-anxiety. According to the European Climate and Health Observatory, extreme weather events are causing post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression; extreme temperatures affect mood, worsen behavioural disorders and increase suicide risk; and changing livelihoods and social cohesion affect entire communities.[4] Symptoms can persist for several years after events such as wildfires, and the mental-health effects of climate change remain largely unexplored compared with the effects on physical health.[5] The European Environment Agency (EEA) notes that children, youth and young adults are particularly prone to climate-related mental-health problems.[6]

These risks, however, are not shared equally. The EEA finds that, despite efforts to adapt, the most vulnerable groups in society are still the most affected: older people, children, groups of low socio-economic status and people with health problems tend to be more vulnerable than the general population.[7] Low-income households often live in poor-quality housing with limited protection from heat, and people with disabilities face barriers to evacuation and recovery during climate emergencies.[8] For young people, these factors combine with distinct physiological, psychological and socioeconomic circumstances. Poor housing can make extreme heat more dangerous, poverty can limit access to cooling, healthcare or safe transport, and young people in rural areas can have less access to health and public services. The places where young people learn and receive care are also exposed: about 43% of schools and 46% of hospitals are located in areas at least 2°C warmer than their surroundings.[9]

Preparedness remains uneven. In a 2024 survey of national public health institutes, 20 of the EEA's 38 member and cooperating countries reported monitoring the health impacts of heat and 21 had heat-health action plans in place, with progress largely

1 IPCC (2022). Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Chapter 13: Europe. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-13/

2 Planetary Health Alliance, European Regional Hub (2026). European Declaration on Heat and Health, drawing on the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change: 2026 Europe report. August 2026. https://planetaryhealthalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/European_Declaration_on_Heat_and_Health_final.pdf

3 WHO (2023). Climate change and health [fact sheet]. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health

4 European Climate and Health Observatory (n.d.). Mental health effects. European Environment Agency. https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/observatory/topics/health-impacts/mental-health-effects

5 European Climate and Health Observatory (n.d.), Mental health effects.

6 EEA (2022). Towards 'just resilience': leaving no one behind when adapting to climate change. European Environment Agency. https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/towards-just-resilience-leaving-no-one-behind-when-adapting-to-climate-change

7 EEA (2022).

8 EEA (2025). Social fairness in preparing for climate change: how just resilience can benefit communities across Europe. European Environment Agency. https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/social-fairness-in-preparing-for-climate-change-how-resilience-can-benefit-communities-across-europe

9 European Climate and Health Observatory (2022). Exposure of vulnerable groups. European Environment Agency. https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/observatory/topics/other-topics/exposure-of-vulnerable-groups

limited to southern and western Europe.[10] Mental wellbeing is even more neglected: a 2021 WHO survey of 95 countries found that only nine had included mental health and psychosocial support in their national health and climate change plans.[11] The EEA also observes that EU and national climate policies emphasise equitable solutions, but their practical implementation remains scarce.[12]

Impact climate change has on wellbeing of young people

The impacts of climate change on wellbeing are wide-ranging, interconnected and unequally distributed. This motion concentrates on four areas where existing European Youth Forum policy leaves room for added value:

- **Physical wellbeing:** extreme heat can cause dehydration and heatstroke and can worsen existing cardiovascular, kidney, respiratory and mental-health conditions, with children among the groups identified as particularly vulnerable; worsening air quality, climate-sensitive diseases, floods, wildfires and the disruption of essential services add further risks.

- **Mental health beyond eco-anxiety:** trauma, anxiety, depression and reduced wellbeing linked with direct exposure to disasters, extreme temperatures, displacement and loss of livelihoods.

- **Unequal vulnerability:** income, housing, location, disability, health status and access to healthcare and public services shape exposure to risk and the capacity to adapt.

- **Public-health preparedness:** the monitoring, early warning, heat-health planning, resilient services and accessible support needed to anticipate and respond to climate-related health and wellbeing risks.

- **Occupational safety and health:** exposure to extreme temperatures and weather events can increase the risk of occupational diseases, fatal and non-fatal accidents at work that are already disproportionately affecting young workers, apprentices or trainees – or deepen further psychosocial risks at work which may again affect young workers more extensively.

10 EEA (2024). The impacts of heat on health: surveillance and preparedness in Europe. European Environment Agency. https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/the-impacts-of-heat-on-health

11 WHO (2022). Why mental health is a priority for action on climate change. World Health Organization, 3 June 2022. https://www.who.int/news/item/03-06-2022-why-mental-health-is-a-priority-for-action-on-climate-change

12 EEA (2022).

Public authorities at European, national, regional and local level bear the primary responsibility for anticipating and responding to these risks. Key measures include:

- Heat-health action plans and early-warning systems that reach everyone, including young people.
- Systematic monitoring of the health and well-being impacts of climate change, in order to identify vulnerable groups and assess whether measures are working.
- Resilient healthcare, mental-health and other essential services that continue to function during climate-related emergencies.
- Accessible, age-appropriate mental-health and psychosocial support, integrated into climate adaptation and disaster response.[13]
- Targeted protection for young people facing poverty, inadequate housing, rural isolation, disability or limited access to healthcare.
- Involvement of public-health authorities in climate adaptation planning, to assess health risks and develop prevention and preparedness measures.

Particular attention should be paid to young people, whose physiological, psychological and socioeconomic circumstances can create distinct forms of vulnerability, and who must be involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of climate-health measures. Legitimate concern about climate change is a reasonable response to a real threat and should not be framed as an individual problem.

The political and legal landscape

Climate-related wellbeing risks are increasingly recognised in international and European policy, but implementation falls short. At the international level, the WHO has urged governments to integrate climate considerations into mental-health programmes, to integrate mental-health support into climate action, to develop community-based approaches that reduce vulnerability, and to close the funding gap for psychosocial support.[14]

At the EU level, there is progress, but it is not yet sufficient:

- The European Climate Risk Assessment (2024) identified 36 major climate risks for Europe, named heat as the gravest and most urgent risk to human health, and concluded that policies and adaptation actions are not keeping pace with growing risks.[15]
- The 2021 EU Adaptation Strategy sets the goal of a climate-resilient Europe but contains no binding targets. More than 80 organisations have called, through the European Declaration on Heat and Health, for legally binding adaptation obligations, measurable health targets and a European Heat-Health Action Plan.[16]
- On 27 October 2026, the European Commission presented its EU Framework for Climate Resilience, including a proposal for a European Climate Resilience Law. The proposal would introduce EU and national climate risk assessments and national strategic plans on climate resilience.[17] The Commission has also announced a European heatwave plan for better early warning and health preparedness.[18]

13 WHO (2022). Mental health and climate change: policy brief. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240045125

14 WHO (2022), Why mental health is a priority for action on climate change. https://www.who.int/news/item/03-06-2022-why-mental-health-is-a-priority-for-action-on-climate-change

15 EEA (2024). European Climate Risk Assessment (EEA Report 01/2024). European Environment Agency. https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment

16 Planetary Health Alliance (2026).

17 European Commission (2026). proposal (COM(2026) 730). 27th October 2026. https://climate.ec.europa.eu/document/download/dc70f56e-0b44-4a7a-b3ba-5cda2d378016_en?filename=com_2026_730_en.pdf

These initiatives create a window of opportunity. As the proposed Climate Resilience Law moves through the European Parliament and the Council, and the heatwave plan is developed, it must ensure that the physical and mental wellbeing of young people, and the inequalities that shape their exposure, are explicitly addressed, and that young people have a voice in shaping the response. The aim is to move from a fragmented recognition of climate-related health and well-being concerns towards an integrated, people-centred approach in which young people's physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, unequal exposure to risk and access to protection are considered together.

Recommendations

Therefore, the European Youth Forum calls on:

The European Union to:

- Ensure that the physical and mental health risks faced by young people are explicitly addressed in the proposed European Climate Resilience Law (COM(2026) 730) throughout the legislative process, including in the EU and national climate risk assessments and strategic plans, and in the European heatwave plan.

- Support Member States in monitoring climate-related health impacts.

The Council of Europe to:

- Encourage Member States to integrate mental health and psychosocial support into national health and climate change adaptation plans.

National, Regional and Local Governments to:

- Develop, fund, and implement Heat-Health Action Plans (HHAPs) and early-warning systems that reach young people and address their specific physical and mental health risks.

- Ensure resilient, uninterrupted healthcare and mental-health services during climate-related emergencies.

- Prioritise targeted protection and adaptation measures for young people facing socioeconomic hardship, inadequate housing, rural isolation, disability, or limited access to healthcare, as well as other marginalised young people, such as young women and racialised, migrant, and LGBTQI+ youth.

- Meaningfully involve young people and youth organisations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of climate-health adaptation

18 European Commission (2026). State of the Union 2026: main initiatives. 16 September 2026. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/state-union/main-initiatives-2026_en

measures, in line with Recommendation CM/Rec(2024)6.

- Ensure the sound and timely implementation of existing climate commitments as a complement to adaptation and as the most effective way to limit long-term risks to young people's physical and mental wellbeing.

The European Youth Forum and its Member Organisations to:

- Promote accessible, age-appropriate awareness on the physical and mental wellbeing impacts of climate change without individualising structural climate concerns.

- Provide safe, inclusive spaces during events and activities to ensure their members' mental and physical wellbeing.

- Actively advocate for the physical and mental health impacts of climate change on young people to be integrated into climate policy at national and European level.

- Make climate education a priority across formal and non-formal education.







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