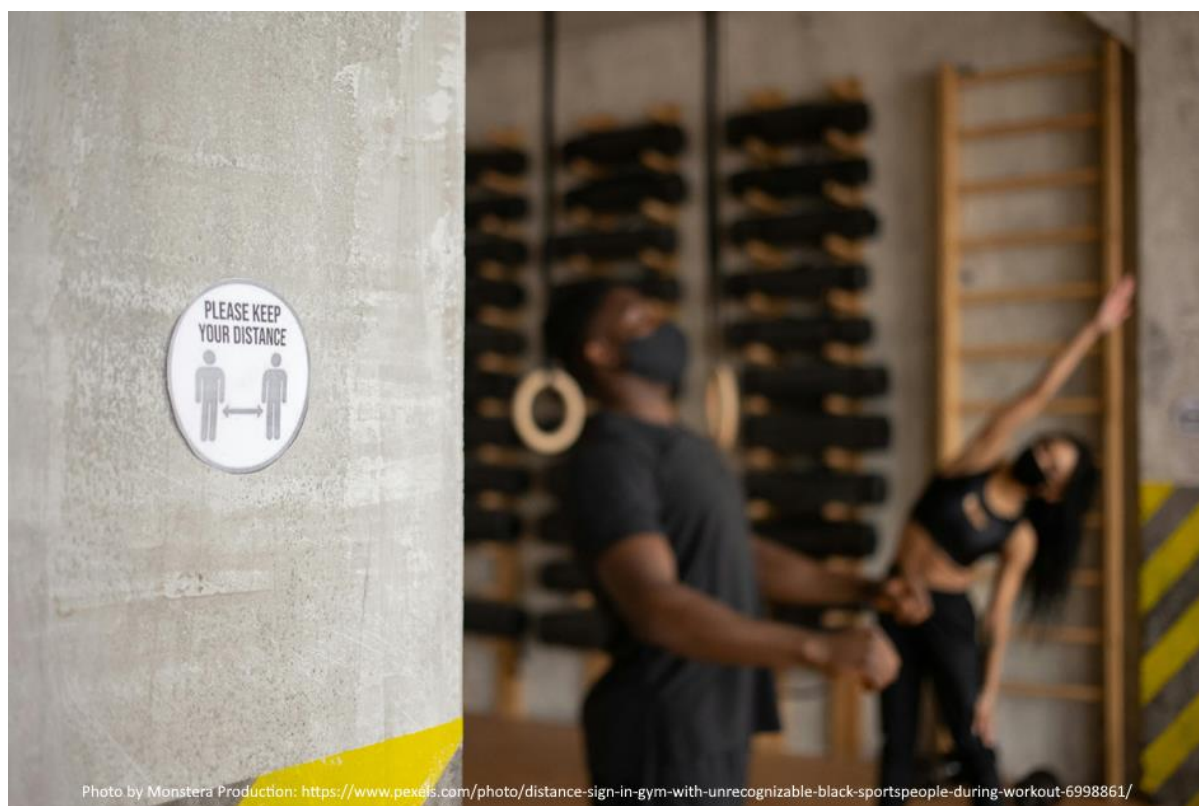

Holistic sport-based Rehabilitation programmes to support youth Impacted by Covid-19

HRIC

D2.1- European Research Report





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HRIC is an Erasmus+ funded project aimed at encouraging the participation of vulnerable groups to practice sports activities.

HRIC Partnership: The project partnership is led by the [Italian Volleyball Federation - FIPAV](#) (Italy).

The HRIC partners are:

- [Mine Vaganti - MVNGO](#) (Italy)
- [Zajednica sportskih udruga grada Rijeke Riječki sportski savez](#) (Croatia)
- [Sport Evolution Alliance \(SEA\)](#) (Portugal)
- [University Rehabilitation Institute Republic of Slovenia Soča \(URI Soča\)](#) (Slovenia)

More info on the project is available here: <https://hricerasmus.eu/>.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Intro and presentation of the project

Holistic sport-based Rehabilitation programmes to support youth impacted by Covid-19 (HRIC) focuses on employing the methodology of Education Through Sport (ETS) to help youth people affected by the Covid-19 period and who could suffer from anxiety, depression, PTSD or breakdown. The project aims to encourage the participation of this vulnerable target group in practising sports activities, create synergy between sports and social services sectors, and elaborate policy recommendations to decision-makers and stakeholders.

To reach these objectives, HRIC involves Sports Coaches and social operators in supporting persons who were already suffering from depression, anxiety and mental breakdown for whom the pandemic period has increased and worsened their state.

The HRIC project is in line with the European Union's declaration of mental health as a fundamental right and the development of an EU action plan on mental health. In addition, the EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-2024 promotes sport and sport participation as a tool to improve mental health.

Finally, the HRIC project addresses the Erasmus+ horizontal priority of inclusion and diversity, combating the effects of mental health problems such as isolation and stigmatisation. In addition, the project responds to the sports sector's priority of "Encouraging a healthy lifestyle for all" by promoting sport and physical activity as a tool for health.



According to 2020 data, young people (16-30) are among those most affected by the Covid-19 crisis. For example, **32%** of young people with a history of mental health needs living in the UK said that the pandemic had worsened their mental health.

According to Bartko and Eccles, young people who are heavily involved in sports are more 'psychologically resilient' or able to bounce back from problems. Sport also helps to reduce depressive mood and protect against social isolation. Therefore, sport is a powerful tool for helping young people suffering from depression and anxiety after Covid-19.

The activities implemented within HRIC are the following:

- A research phase to collect the best practices of ETS and psychological support for young people suffering from depression, anxiety and psychological breakdown across the different partners' countries. The results are collected using a training format for sports and social operators.
- Each partner organisation carries out local training with 2 social operators per local training. It lasts 5 days, and the results will be added to the Training Format.



- Co-design sessions of the handbook will be organised with sports coaches, social operators, and trainers who have experience working with young people suffering from mental breakdowns. The co-designed activities will be tested at the local level involving 10 young people aged 16-30 years old.
- Each partner will conduct specific research on existing policies at the Local, Regional, and National levels regarding the use of sport to improve mental health. Then, based on the results of the sports programs and the research on existing policies, they will create policy paper recommendations to be spread to stakeholders.

1.2. Methodology of the research

In order to achieve the various objectives, set out by the project, research was carried out by the various partners in their own countries. This research was divided into several stages:

- **Best Practice research:** each partner has collected best practices of ETS and psychological support for young people suffering from depression, anxiety and psychological breakdown.
- **Desk Research:** Desk research was carried out to gain a better understanding of the different contexts in the partner countries. By setting common research themes, the consortium is able to compare the data collected between countries.
- **Field Research:** thanks to a survey, the partners understand better the needs and the situation of the Target Group (TG) in each country. The survey helps to give a general overview across all the countries as well.

To create consistency among the various partners, a template has been developed for collecting best practices for desk research and field research. The first one includes the target group, the project objective, a brief description, the results obtained, and a link to the best practice.

For Desk Research, key information was gathered:

- An overview of mental health in the country and the impact of Covid-19 on it;
- National legislation regarding provisions aimed at using ETS as tools to prevent mental breakdown;
- The main conclusions on the use of ETS;
- National, regional and local policies which promote sport as a tool to prevent psychological breakdown and support young persons through sport;
- Review of academic literature.

Various tools have been produced for field research. Firstly, a Google form document was produced and then distributed to project partners. This tool is particularly interesting because it makes it easier to respond to and analyse data. As mentioned above, the desk research also aims to produce a national report.

REPORT FOR EACH COUNTRY

2. Portugal

2.1. Desk Research

2.1.1. Global overview

Research on the Portuguese context has highlighted a number of key elements:

- In 2021, **14% of the Portuguese youth between 13 and 16 years old showed symptoms of high depression during the pandemic**. In 2014, this percentage was 8%
- In 2021, **1 in every 5 young** people between 15 and 24 years old said they frequently felt depressed or had low interest in doing something. During the confinement periods, the same number of young people admitted that they felt fear, frustration, anxiety and stress regarding their future.

These figures show that young people have a major need for support with their mental health. The impact of Covid-19 is also clearly established. Indeed, experts say that the pandemic brought tremendous challenges and made all people, especially children and youth, develop extraordinary capacities to adapt to the new daily routines. The mental issues diagnosed during the pandemic, like anxiety, autism, depression, etc., will harm the health, education, and evolution survival capacity of children and youth. Experts consider that the lost contributions to the economies due to mental issues, which lead to handicaps or death among youth, may rise to almost 335 billion euros per year.

Image by Marcel Elia from Pivabay

2.1.2. Legislative framework

In Portugal, the legislative framework is provided by the basic law of Physical Activity and Sport with regard to sporting activities. For issues relating to mental health, it is the Basic Law for the Prevention and Rehabilitation and Integration of People with Disabilities.

Regarding the policies, we can mention the following:

- At a national level:
 - o National Sports Policy: Portugal has a National Sports Policy that recognises the importance of sports for physical, mental, and social well-being. It aims to promote sports participation among all age groups, including young people and highlights the positive impact of sports on mental health.
 - o National Program for Physical Activity: The National Program for Physical Activity (Programa Nacional para a Promoção da Atividade Física) encourages regular physical activity for all individuals, including young people. It promotes the use of sports and physical activities to improve mental health and prevent psychological breakdown.



- At a regional level:
 - o Regional Sports Strategies: Regional governments and sports authorities in Portugal develop regional sports strategies that focus on promoting sports and physical activities as tools for well-being. These strategies often include specific actions targeting young people, such as the provision of sports facilities, the organisation of youth sports events, and the support of local sports clubs and associations.
 - o Regional Youth Support Programs: Some regions in Portugal implement youth support programs that utilise sports to promote mental well-being. These programs may offer subsidised or free sports activities, training opportunities, and workshops that address mental health topics and teach coping skills through sports participation.
- At a local level:
 - o Municipal Sports Programs: Many municipalities in Portugal have sports programs that target young people. These programs provide opportunities for sports participation, organise local sports events and tournaments, and collaborate with schools and community organisations to promote sports as a means of supporting mental health.
 - o Community Sports Clubs and Associations: Local sports clubs and associations play a crucial role in providing sports activities for young people. These organisations often have initiatives focused on youth development, where sports are used as a tool to promote mental well-being, resilience, and social integration.

2.1.3. Review of academic literature

“Mental Health and Sports in Youth¹” is an academic paper about Portuguese young people between 13 and 19 years old. The article aims to analyse the psychological benefits of sports among youth. For that, 528 students from the city of Évora were selected, to whom a Sociodemographic Questionnaire, a Psychological Well-Being Scale and the Anxiety Depression and Stress Scale were applied.

It appears that 63% of the inquiries practice some sort of sport, more frequently among boys. Girls showed signs of being the group with more risks in terms of mental health as they presented lower levels of well-being and higher levels of psychopathological symptoms. Students who practice sports regularly also present higher levels of psychological well-being and satisfaction in life and school, as well as lower levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.

¹ [http://rdpc.uevora.pt/bitstream/10174/23989/1/Mestrado-Psicologia_Psicologia_Cl%C3%ADnica-Francisco dos Santos Alves do Ros%C3%A1rio-Sa%C3%BAdede mental e pr%C3%A1tica desportiva na adolesc%C3%Aancia...%20.pdf](http://rdpc.uevora.pt/bitstream/10174/23989/1/Mestrado-Psicologia_Psicologia_Cl%C3%ADnica-Francisco%20dos%20Santos%20Alves%20do%20Ros%C3%A1rio-Sa%C3%BAdede%20mental%20e%20pr%C3%A1tica%20desportiva%20na%20adolesc%C3%Aancia...%20.pdf)

2.1.4. The value of sport

Portugal is a country with a strong sporting component. Football is particularly popular with its inhabitants and is the most popular sport. The enthusiasm and participation in sports provide a conducive environment for implementing education through sports programs and leveraging its benefits for mental health.

The Portuguese government recognises the importance of sports in promoting mental well-being. Various initiatives have been implemented to promote sports participation among different age groups, including youth.

Portugal has a robust network of community-based sports clubs and associations. These organisations play a crucial role in providing opportunities for education through sport. They often offer a range of activities and programs that cater to diverse populations, including children, adolescents, and adults.

2.1.5. Conclusion

The HRIC project in Portugal follows on from a series of measures taken at both national and local levels. It also takes place in a context where young people have been particularly affected by Covid-19. Experts have already begun to assess this impact and are seeking to contrast it. To do this, the use of tools such as ETS seems appropriate. In a country where the state and various initiatives support the sporting culture, the HRIC project is a relevant complement. Both in response to the needs demonstrated and in the use of an innovative methodology that corresponds to the country's cultural and political identity.

2.2. Best practices

2.2.1. Surf Social Wave

Surf Social Wave is a project that promotes well-being and social integration through the practice of surfing. The aim is to provide young individuals (16 to 30 years old) with a unique opportunity for growth and personal development.

The program started in 2018 and operates on the belief that the ocean has a remarkable ability to heal and

empower. Through structured surf sessions, participants are not only taught the fundamentals of surfing but also provided with a supportive and nurturing environment where they can explore their potential, build resilience, and develop a sense of self-confidence. Surfing becomes a powerful vehicle for personal growth, allowing participants to push their boundaries, overcome fears, and discover their own strengths.



Photo by Daniel Torobekov: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/female-surfer-doing-trick-on-board-in-powerful-sea-4628398/>

Surf Social Wave also integrates elements of psychological support into its program. Experienced surf instructors and mentors are trained to create a safe and inclusive space, offering guidance and encouragement to participants. They foster a sense of community, promoting positive relationships and facilitating open dialogue about personal experiences and challenges. Through these interactions, young people can share their stories, gain perspective, and receive valuable emotional support.

At the end of the project, more than 200 Portuguese young people were helped.

For further information: <https://www.surfsocialwave.org/>.

2.2.2. Street Football CAIS: Building Lives through the Beautiful Game

The project aimed at promoting personal development, social integration, and empowerment among young people (15-30 years old) through the beautiful game of football.

Street football, with its roots in improvisation and inclusivity, offers a unique platform for individuals facing adversity to come together, connect, and find joy in playing the sport they love. Street Football CAIS recognises that football has the power to transcend social barriers and provide a sense of belonging and purpose to those who participate.



The program started in 2004 and operates on the belief that everyone deserves a chance to thrive, regardless of their circumstances. Street Football CAIS enables participants to rediscover their passion for the game, build self-confidence, and develop valuable life skills by providing a safe and inclusive environment. Football becomes a means of fostering personal growth, resilience, teamwork, and leadership.

The program offers not only regular football sessions but also provides access to a range of support services. These services can include access to housing assistance, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. By addressing the underlying needs of individuals, the program aims to break the cycle of homelessness and empower participants to rebuild their lives.

At the end of the project, more than 2000 participants from around the country were helped.

For further information: <https://www.cais.pt/futebol-de-rua/>.

2.2.3. WellBeing Uma: Nurturing Mental Health and Well-Being in Higher Education

The project aimed at prioritising and supporting the mental health and well-being of students (between 18 and 30 years old) at the University of Madeira (Uma) in Portugal. The first edition of the project had 70 participants.



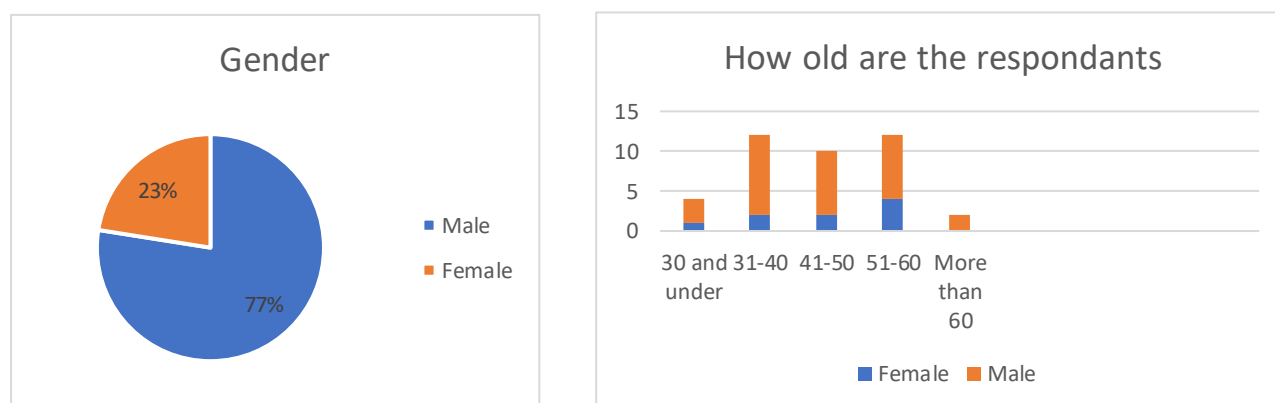
The transition to university life can be both exciting and overwhelming for students. WellBeing Uma started in 2023 and recognises the importance of proactively addressing mental health concerns and fostering a supportive culture that enables students to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. The project operates on the understanding that mental well-being is integral to student success and overall quality of life.

WellBeing Uma takes a proactive approach to mental health by organising preventative initiatives and activities. These include stress reduction workshops, mindfulness sessions, physical activity and sports programs, and campaigns promoting self-care and healthy lifestyles. By equipping students with coping strategies, stress management techniques, and self-care practices, the project empowers them to care for their mental well-being proactively.

For further information: <https://www.uma.pt/noticias/projeto-wellbeing-uma-wellbeing-spots/?contentid=117423>.

2.3. Results of the survey

Around 41 people responded to the survey carried out by the consortium partners. With regard to the socio-demographic data of the respondents, we can consider that:

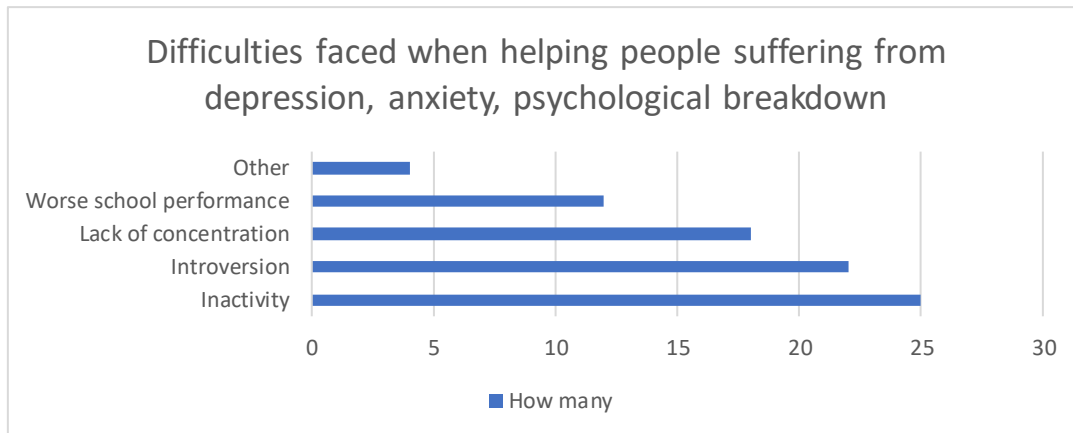


The vast majority of respondents were men (77%). The most common age groups were 31-40 and 51-60.

- 19,51% are teachers/professors
- 9,75% are Professional experts (psychologist/psychotherapist/doctor etc.)
- 46,34% are sports expert/trainer/coach
- 17,07% are "others".

One of the most important data is that more than 75% of the respondents (75,60%) think that the number of young people with psychological problems has increased during Covid-19. This data could be related because 34,14% of the respondents declared they were very familiar with mental health awareness, especially regarding teenagers. Only one person who declared to be very familiar with the issues considers that the number of young people with psychological problems has increased partially during Covid-19.

Among the difficulties encountered when helping those who suffer from depression, anxiety, and psychological breakdown, we can establish the following graph:



As we can see, inactivity and introversion are among the most important difficulties that professionals encounter when helping people with mental problems. Furthermore, **all of the respondents** declare that sports can help to overcome the psychological problems of young people. This data is very important because it implies that sports experts can recognise and help solve the psychological problems of young people thanks to the following:

- A conversation: 78%
- Offer a choice/help for exercises: 68,29%
- Coaching: 2,43%
- Specialist support: 2,43%

Most of the respondents answer the question “*What preventive measures should schools have for mental health for youth?*”. By using a “Word Cloud” (as seen below), it is possible to report and visualise the main ideas that emerge from their proposals:



3. Italy

3.1. Desk Research

3.1.1. *Global overview*

In Italy, relatively high rates of depression, anxiety or psychological distress have been observed since the start of the Covid-19 lockdown (Fiorillo et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Amerio et al., 2021). While the average response to the pandemic was one of resilience over time, women and younger individuals were found to be particularly prone to the risk of depressive symptoms because of the pandemic.

The study conducted by ISS and published in the article “Depressive symptoms among adults in 2018-2019 and during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic in Italy” assessed depressive symptom levels before the Covid-19 pandemic, from January 2018 to December 2019, and during the pandemic in Italy in 2020. The study shows that in Italy, depressive symptoms increased from March to April 2020 during the lockdown. In particular, **the prevalence of depressive symptoms increased from 6.1% in 2018–2019 to 7.1% in March–April 2020. In July–August, it once again increased to 8.2%.** ISS also shows that during the pandemic lockdown, 88.6% of people over 16 suffered from psychological stress and almost 50% from symptoms of depression.

3.1.2. *Legislative framework*

The general framework can be differentiated into different areas. Firstly, there is the PANSM (National Action Plan for Mental Health). This programme sets priorities for action, such as mental health care for adults and children/adolescents.

Moreover, the ministerial circular of 31st July 1997 sets out the motor, physical and sporting activities to be developed in schools of all levels. This was an important piece of legislation, as it enabled the sport to be introduced as a discipline in its own right in state schools. Sport is now seen as a tool not only for health but also for inclusion and personal achievement. Furthermore, Italy also signed the International Charter for Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, reminding us of the importance of sports as a beneficial tool for individuals and society.

At a national level, the YES program (Youth&Education+Sport) promotes access to sport for children under the age of 18. Sport is seen as a political priority for young people, whether to improve their physical or mental health or to develop civic skills (e.g., tolerance, respect, active role).

The National Prevention Plan (PNP) implemented between 2020 and 2025 takes into consideration the effects of Covid-19 on national health. Furthermore, sport is quoted several times as a tool to increase the global health of Italians.

Actions are less homogeneous at the regional level. This is because each region can draw up their own mental health action plan. This action plan may differ from the national plan, but it must comply with it. Some regions may, therefore, implement different measures, but always in line with the guidelines and objectives set out in the PANSM. For example, the Lazio region is making sport a central part of its efforts to promote health among young people. To achieve this, the authorities want to open a dialogue with the players in this sector.



At a local level, there is great diversity too between Italian towns and regions when it comes to sporting activities. While the government determines sport in schools and, therefore, on a national scale, the same cannot be said for free time. Part of the budget of towns and provinces is allocated to "sport and free time". This takes the form of contributions to sports societies or the organisation of events. This is the case, for example, of the city of Padova, which in 2021 created a competition "to promote sporting activities in neighbourhoods for citizens of all ages".

3.1.3. Review of academic literature

Several scientific studies show the benefits of physical activity in the treatment of anxiety and depression. In this regard, exercise can be considered a therapy for the mental and physical health of patients who are already undergoing drug treatment; in addition, it may also have a preventive effect on mental illness.

The effects of physical activity include:

- Enhancement of social and cultural integration: Sports also help to fight social isolation and create communities.
- Formation of new friendships: Sports stimulates knowledge of oneself and other people, thus increasing the possibility of expanding one's social network.
- Maintaining roles and acquiring new ones allows one to remain active in one's private life and also play an active role in society.
- Reducing daily stress: Physical activity helps to release endorphins, often known as 'feel-good' hormones, which can improve mood and reduce feelings of stress.
- Getting out of the home: whether it is a solitary or group practice, sport involves, most of the time, being in a place and, therefore, getting out of the home.

3.1.4. The value of sport

Through the paper "Sport e Salute mentale nei sistemi educativi", the author wishes to discuss the numerous challenges to the normal conduct of physical education in schools, taking into consideration the fact that physical activity at school preserves students' mental health.

The author focuses on students from 6 to 16 years old who attend Italian schools. The author sets a few questions:

- How is physical education structured in the European Union's school system?
- What are the main differences between countries within the European Union?
- How is physical education organised from a methodological point of view?
- What are the different characteristics of physical education programmes?
- What are the main problems in relation to Physical Education (PE) in European Schools?



- What makes a PE programme at school effective?
- How can sport and health promotion at school be combined in a comprehensive overall educational approach?
- What actions are recommended by the European Union, and what has been undertaken so far?

At the end of the paper, the author declares that sport today is no longer considered simply part of the curriculum but a unique contribution to lifelong learning and education. Given this importance, the author provides some recommendations:

- Promote the practice of sport within school systems with a central role in the prevention of mental illness;
- Define the differences better between national objectives and learning outcomes to create more precise and effective action plans;
- Continuously train pedagogical professionals also through a harmonisation of pathways in Europe;
- Encourage cross-sectoral collaboration to define successful sports promotion strategies;
- Include all pupils and work on the issues of gender diversity, disability, inclusion...

3.1.5. Conclusion

Italy is a country where sport and sport in general are particularly important. Although sports education is part of the public-school curriculum, sport has yet to acquire the status of a training and education tool (ETS). Despite the various projects that have already been set up in the area, the HRIC project will enable the links between sport and mental health to be taken into account better, as well as foster the importance of ETS.

3.2. Best practices

3.2.1. Focus Mind

Focus Mind is a project that aims to spread the culture of health promotion and the study of good practices in terms of psychological and psychosocial well-being. Focus Mind is an extremely recent project launched by the cultural association ReStart and is, therefore, a work in progress that has not yet produced tangible results.

Indeed, Focus Mind is a project launched in February 2023. What makes it interesting to consider as best practice, however, is the fact that the association carrying it forward is ReStart, in force in Bari since 2014, and its work is still a work in progress. There are, therefore, no tangible results. However, the project is very active and has already managed to build an important network that, in addition to sport, works with theatre and peer-to-peer. It has, therefore, set in motion a series of pathways with the aim of increasing psychological well-being.

For further information: [ReStart sport & benessere: gli effetti positivi dell'attività fisica – Restart Promozione Salute](#).

3.2.2. *Stile di vita e salute*



The project focuses on the promotion of healthy living in the context of eating disorders and unhealthy everyday behaviour. The integration and maintenance of physical activity, combined with a correct diet, promotes mental well-being by preventing the onset of psycho-physical problems. The aim is to promote movement and the rediscovery of the pleasure of motor activity, counteracting pathological drifts that compromise the balance between body and mind to all those who wish to embark on a targeted path to regain a body-mind-nutrition balance.

The Medical Campus uses a team composed not only of specialists, such as internal medicine doctors specialising in food science, sports medicine doctors, and experts in psychotherapy, but also external collaborators, such as psychiatrists, nutritionists, acupuncture doctors, physiotherapists, gynaecologists, and other medical specialists, to work on various aspects of dysfunctional behaviour.

The intervention includes an initial cognitive interview with a psychologist, with the aim of accepting the request for help and understanding the patient's needs. Thereafter, an interview with the sports physician is arranged, with the aim of collecting functional parameters and designing a physical activity plan. Both specialists accompany the individual through the different stages of the process. A targeted visit with a nutrition expert is then scheduled for the creation of a customised diet plan.

The results indicated that moderate physical activity enhances the functioning of the immune system and improves metabolism. The Medical Campus has therefore proposed that the maintenance of specific types of physical activity during the re-feeding of patients with eating disorders has brought and is bringing benefits to the recovery of body composition, the maintenance of bone mineral density and the management of emotional experience and anxiety.

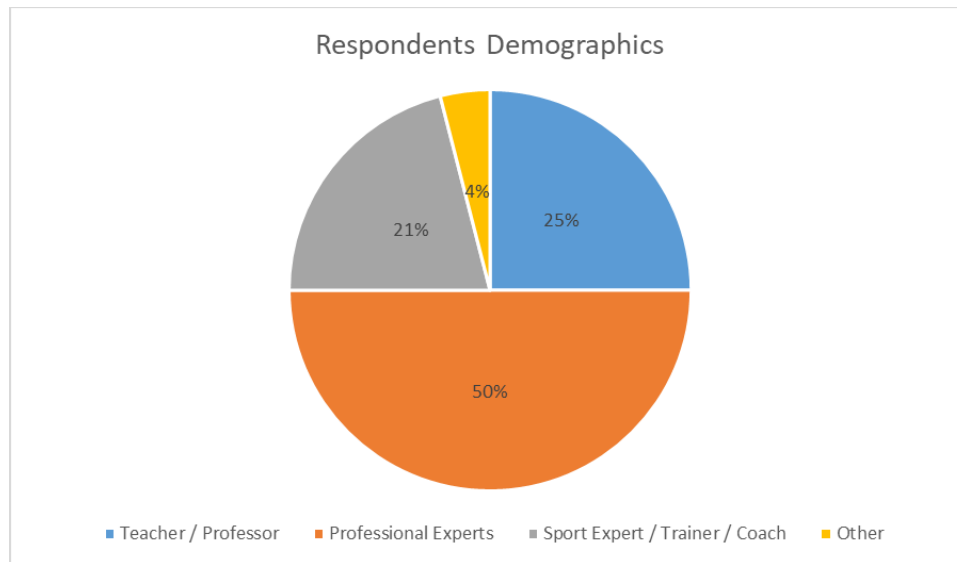
For further information:

[Progetto "Stile di Vita e Salute" - Campus Medico](#).



3.3. Results of the survey

In total, 28 respondents filled in the online survey. With regard to the socio-demographic data of the respondents, we can consider that:



Familiarity with Mental Health:

- A significant proportion, 29%, of the respondents indicated that they are very familiar with mental health issues. Notably, a majority of this group, 50%, identified as Professional Experts, suggesting a strong understanding of mental health within this demographic.
- 32% of the respondents expressed a medium level of familiarity with mental health issues, indicating that a substantial portion of the participants possess a basic understanding of these concerns.
- On the other hand, 21% of the respondents admitted to having a little bit of knowledge or no knowledge at all about mental health problems.

Approaches to Dealing with Youth Mental Health Issues:

- When asked about their preferred methods for addressing youth mental health conditions, the responses were diverse. 36% of the respondents advocated for therapy as a recommended method, while an even higher percentage, 39%, endorsed sport activities as a means of support. This indicates a strong belief in the therapeutic potential of physical activities.
- Regarding how sports experts recognise and address psychological problems in young people, 29% suggested that a conversation alone is sufficient. 46% emphasised using a combination of conversation and other methods, such as assisting with exercises and providing exercise options. This multifaceted approach demonstrates an understanding of the need for comprehensive support.

Challenges in Assisting Individuals with Mental Health Problems:

- The survey revealed that 61% of respondents consider introversion a significant challenge when assisting someone with mental health problems. However, only 14% of the respondents identified

introversion as the **sole** challenge. This insight underscores the complexity of addressing mental health issues, as various factors can come into play.

The Role of Sports in Overcoming Psychological Problems:

- A notable 68% of respondents believe that sports can be highly beneficial for young people in overcoming psychological problems. This perspective highlights the potential therapeutic value of physical activities in promoting mental well-being.

Overall, most respondents proposed that prevention and support for mental health issues among young people could be enhanced through education, open communication, and dialogue. They emphasised the importance of reducing stigmatisation and creating non-judgmental environments.

Respondents suggested practical measures, such as discussion groups, "listening-desks," and educational classes in schools, as effective ways to improve inclusivity and foster positive attitudes and awareness regarding mental health.

In conclusion, the research findings suggest that a combination of sports, education, and communication approaches would be recommendable for targeting and preventing mental health issues among young people. The results underscore the significance of recognising diverse approaches to mental health support and the need for continued efforts to raise awareness and understanding of youth mental health concerns.

4. Slovenia

4.1. Desk Research

4.1.1. Global overview

In 2021, children's psychiatry recorded a **250- to 280-percent increase in services** provided compared to 2019, as children's needs for mental help increased. The reasons lie in the epidemic, which has changed the lives of families, especially children. They struggled with breaking routines, which was a big challenge for some. The number of children with anorexia, depression and anxiety disorders has increased.

In the 2022-2023 action plan for the mental health of children and young people, **more than half** of the funds are for identifying problems and helping children. An important part of the action plan program is also aimed at strengthening non-governmental organisations because of the lack of staff in psychiatry.

A particular challenge is the lack of mental health staff. There is a shortage of clinical psychologists in the country who work not only in health promotion centres. There are currently 100 of them, but we would need at least three times as many.

According to a mental health expert, mental health problems are underestimated. Questions often arise as to why people today need the help of psychologists and psychiatrists and they did not in the past. The answer can be found in the ever-increasing mental burdens and pressures on people.



Likewise, schools and other systems are designed to “weed out” individuals who cannot cope with the workload imposed.

The entire area of children's physical and movement development was analysed. Below, we present key findings that provide insight into the extremely negative impact of limiting physical activity and a different way of education on children's development.

There was a decline in overall motor skills in both boys and girls. The general movement efficiency of the average Slovenian child dropped by more than 13% after two months of movement restriction during the Covid-19 pandemic. General endurance declined the most, and a very large decline also occurred in the coordination of movement of the whole body. These are the key movement skills that are systematically developed in sports lessons at school and in community exercises, and in which the effects of restricting movement have proven to be the most devastating. The smallest decline occurred in explosive power, but even this was several times greater than we have witnessed in previous years.

4.1.2. Legislative framework

Regarding the legislative framework, the Resolution on the National Mental Health Program (2018-2028) and the Action Plan (which is focused on supporting the mental health of children and young people) can be mentioned. Lastly, the National Institute of Public Health carried out actions on adolescent mental health in Slovenia.

At a national level, different actors or actions are implemented, such as the National Mental Health Program (MIRA). Centres for children's mental health with appropriately trained people in institutions dedicated to this are among the main actions taking place in this field. Child psychiatrists, psychologists, paediatrics psychiatrists, and counselling services for children and adolescents constituted some of the actors defined to help young people deal with their mental health. They are completed by some online counselling centres and websites (e.g., Tosemjaz) or anonymous helplines (e.g., Tom).

Several examples could be given of promoting sport for youths on a national, regional, and local level:

- The Youth Sports Festival (June 7, 2023, in Slovenska Bistrica): In addition to the final competition in athletics for elementary schools, this day, Slovenska Bistrica will turn into a real sports town of a non-competitive character. Sports and animation points will be set up in the green areas in front of the elementary school of Slovenska Bistrica, where children will be able to try themselves at many sports challenges and experience sports and movement in all its breadth. In addition to a climbing wall, pool for water sports (e.g. swimming, kayaking), archery, and slackline range, we will also present the renewed Golden Sun program (for the youngest).
- In Slovenia, the European Day of School Sports takes place every year on the national holiday Slovenian Sports Day - September 23.



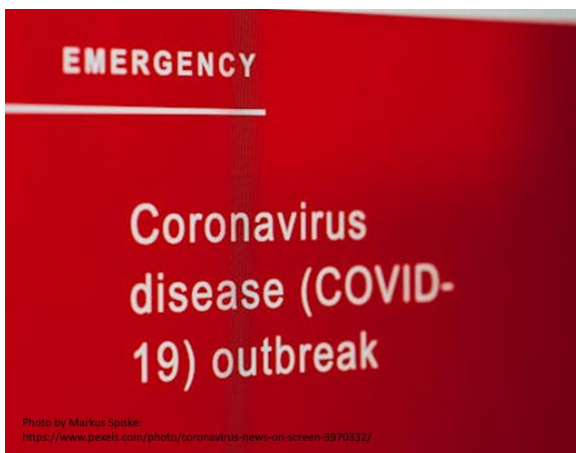
- European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), in July in Maribor, concerns 49 countries of the European continent, which meet every two years at the summer festival (about 2,500 participants) and the winter festival (about 1,300 participants). The festival is the largest sporting event for young athletes between the ages of 15 and 18, who gain experience in other competitions and, at the same time, meet Olympism for the first time and connect through fair play and new friendships.

4.1.3. Review of academic literature

“Re-envisioning Post-pandemic Youth Sport to Meet Young People’s Mental, Emotional, and Social Needs” is one of the most relevant papers written about sport and mental health. It is focused on young people.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, young people were experiencing significant mental, emotional and social health problems. These concerns have been compounded by the pandemic and the lockdowns, social isolation and economic disruptions it has caused. The imprint of these times will remain long-lasting, and deliberate efforts are needed to address the broad impact on young people's well-being. Youth sport is a context for promoting mental, emotional and social health, yet it is not reaching its full potential.

The purpose of this article is to re-examine youth sport in relation to the mental, emotional and social health of children and young people, using the National Youth Sport Strategy as an organisational framework. Therefore, 10 recommendations are outlined for youth sport, together with 10 practical conclusions relating to the mental, emotional and social health of young people.



Some youth sports programs have offered a modified experience at various points during the pandemic, including many innovative approaches to address mental, emotional and social health challenges faced by youth. During the strictest lockdowns, sports for some young people turned into recorded virtual workouts, home fitness challenges and activities. Special emphasis was placed on training staff to work in a virtual environment and helping young people face the challenges of the global pandemic, social isolation, virtual learning and economic uncertainty.

About the results, the paper sets 10 recommendations which represent extensive benefits for the mental, emotional and social health of young people:

1. **Increase access.** Long-standing disparities in youth sports participation (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, rural youth, gender nonconforming youth, and youth with disabilities) widened during the pandemic, with these participation disparities widening.
2. **Train trainers in trauma-informed practices.** In this way, coaches can meaningfully extend their reach in efforts to promote the psychological well-being of young people. To realise this potential, coaches need to be properly trained and receive ongoing professional development, perhaps in the form of

mandatory continuing education. In the post-pandemic era, perhaps the most pressing need for coach training related to youth mental, emotional, and social health is the use of trauma-informed practices.

3. **Check for signs and symptoms of need.** Ongoing monitoring and screening of young people's psychosocial well-being have been disrupted during the pandemic; common checkpoints have been missed as doctor appointments have been postponed, classes have gone virtual and extracurricular activities have been cancelled. This highlights the need for all adults in young people's lives to learn to check for signs and symptoms of need, including coaches, mentors and others involved in youth sport.
4. **Get active.** Many youths have been less active during the pandemic due to various restrictions and lockdowns combined with increased virtual learning and other screen-based activities. This is concerning since physical activity provides physical health benefits, promotes an adaptive response to stress, and reduces anxiety and depression. Although physical activity appears to be an integral part of youth sports, research suggests that sometimes sports skill development, life skill development, or even behaviour management take precedence. We need to help youth meet daily physical activity guidelines. One specific conclusion related to youth mental, emotional, and physical health is this: Use creative and evidence-based strategies: encourage free play, create stations, provide equipment for each participant, practice in small-sided games and empower young people for leadership.
5. **Have fun.** Fun is a primary motive for sport participation. Still, an environment filled with fun and laughter also decreases stress hormones, increases health-enhancing hormones (e.g., endorphins), increases relaxation, elevates mood, self-esteem, and hope, and reduces feelings of stress, anxiety, and tension.
6. **Empower the youth.** Power sharing and control are two evidence-based strategies for nurturing resilience in response to challenging or threatening situations such as a pandemic. With many of these qualities being stripped away from young people through pandemic closures, incarceration and elsewhere, thoughtful efforts to empower youth in youth sports could be transformative.

7. **Emphasize social connections.**

Social isolation resulting from pandemic incarceration, school closures, virtual learning, and limited social contact has negatively impacted the mental, emotional, and social health of young people. We need to help young people re-establish social ties that can help them feel a sense of belonging and cohesion. Relationships, belonging,



and cohesion are determinants of resilience and are fundamental elements of effective youth sport settings. One specific conclusion to support the development of social connections is the following:

Organize sport-based mentoring programs in a variety of formats, including youth-adult, peer-to-peer, group-based, distance, and intergenerational.

8. **Teach coping skills.** Young people do not have the advanced emotional development of adults and can struggle to process difficult circumstances. Ineffective coping skills put young people at risk for depression, stress, and trauma. Therefore, building self-regulation capacity (i.e., positive coping skills) can be quite impactful because it is a fundamental protective factor that promotes resilience and well-being. There is a growing body of research on the potential for sport-based settings to build young people's self-regulation capacity, given the natural ups and downs of sport (e.g., competitive environment and performing in front of others) and the focus on skill building.
9. **Promote collaborative support of young people.** It is unrealistic to expect youth sport, or any singular entity, to meet all of the mental, emotional, and social needs of young people across. Those working in sport settings must collaborate with others in youth-centred environments (e.g., schools, after-school programs, community centres, and churches) and with families to jointly support young people's positive mental, emotional, and social health. In addition, youth sport stakeholders should seek out opportunities to extend family engagement beyond spectating, with events such as family fun days/nights offering opportunities to cultivate more meaningful relationships and collaboration with families.
10. **Cultivate healing spaces for all.** The Covid-19 pandemic has affected mental, emotional and social health, with higher levels of stress, insomnia, substance use, anxiety-related behaviours and depressive symptoms. Without an explicit focus on treatment, any gains in sport settings related to the mental, emotional and social health of young people will be limited. Reuniting families, (re)building social support networks and promoting attachment to the neighbourhoods is one example. Re-examining youth sport after the pandemic to meet the mental, emotional and social needs of young people.



4.1.4. The value of sport

Hundreds of studies have been compiled, and convened panels of experts have gathered to explain what the data shows. Three initial reports assess what we know to date about the effects of the pandemic on students' academic progress, its effects on their mental health and social-emotional well-being, and the impact on students with special needs. We will update these estimates and add more topics over the coming year as new data becomes available.

Our goal is to present a coherent framework of what we know, what we do not know, and what we need to know at this stage of the pandemic. These reports are designed to help system leaders, community leaders, policymakers, researchers, charities, the media and others set ambitious goals and clear metrics to ensure our education system meets the needs of every student for years to come.

The report will provide an accurate and nuanced assessment of 1) how broad student needs and inequities are across dimensions, 2) how student needs vary across dimensions and what this means for policy and practice, and 3) which promising solutions and emerging innovations are meeting student needs.

In the years to come, these reports will track progress in repaying each student for the educational opportunities available to them after this traumatic and disruptive period. Our aim is to provide an ongoing assessment of pupils' needs and look forward to refunds and recoveries.

4.1.5. Conclusion

Sport in Slovenia is an integral part of people's lives. As such, it is widely recognised as a tool for education and training. However, as in the rest of Europe, the Covid-19 epidemic has had serious consequences for the mental health of young people. For this reason, the HRIC project is ideally suited to the Slovenian context. It is part of the continuity of policies being implemented locally, regionally and nationally and reinforces existing dynamics.

4.2. Best Practices

4.2.1. The Covid-19 Generation: The effects of the pandemic on youth mental health (UPRIGHT)

The project focused on children and adolescents through an examination of the teaching of resilience, including the roles of families and schools. Not surprisingly, the study concluded that families or primary caregivers play the main role in emotional education. Families that provide a safe and nurturing environment are best for developing confidence, inner strength, and self-esteem. Yet schools play a vital role too, especially since the ages of schooling are the ideal developmental period to acquire such important life skills. The UPRIGHT team designed an intervention programme where the entire community consisting of 17 schools from five different countries were trained in both personal and community resilience skills. Also, 22 school communities served as a control group to compare the effectiveness of the intervention. Together, these communities taught 18 mental health skills across four broad categories (e.g. coping, efficacy, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning) as a subject separate from the normal school curriculum.



The group that participated in the programme reversed the trend of deteriorating youth mental health observed during the pandemic, improving almost to pre-pandemic levels. A downward trend in youth mental health is not hopeless. Although young people generally have little control over their situation, many have nevertheless stepped up to the challenge, coping with Covid-19 themselves by helping others cope. This, combined with making resilience training a normal part of school life and providing opportunities to



contribute, can bring significant developmental changes that protect against mental illness. Supporting young people helps everyone. The European Union funded the research in this article. Children and adolescents tend to have milder disease symptoms than adults if they catch the coronavirus that causes Covid-19, but they are still struggling to cope with the pandemic. Curfews, closures, and lockdowns are taking their toll on their emotional well-being.

Before the pandemic, we had about 10-20% of children suffering from mental illness problems, not all of whom progressed to an impairment. Now, from the last two years, it looks like it'll go up to 20-25%. Yet most youngsters do not show this and instead hide their feelings. Internalised feelings, such as those that worsened during the pandemic, can be difficult to observe and are easily overlooked. This means the reported rates of mental health problems among European young people are probably an estimate. People need support to cope with stressful times. The right support for young people and their families can make a huge difference.

As a result, it appears that Dr Jamie Lachman, senior researcher and teaching fellow at Oxford University, co-led the collaboration with Prof. Cluver. "Funding from the European Research Council and other partners was essential in allowing us to rapidly respond to the situation and build an interagency collaboration that endorsed and supported the dissemination of parenting resources on a global level", said Lachman. The results formed the basis for the advice given to families. The advice has been delivered to 210 million people in 198 countries and territories worldwide, has been used by 33 national governments, including many in Europe, and has even been adapted into a song by a team of Broadway composers and producers. The advice covers spending quality time with children, praising them for behaving well, parents saying what behaviour they want, creating routines, sensitively handling misbehaviour and supporting families experiencing illness and bereavement from Covid-19. The tips also help parents take care of themselves. Prof. Cluver summarised one of the simplest and most useful parenting tactics: "When you want to scream or throw something, try to take a moment and count to 10, breathing in and out slowly. If you can get into a different room, great; if not, look away for a moment. Just give yourself a chance to calm down before you say or do anything. It can really help".

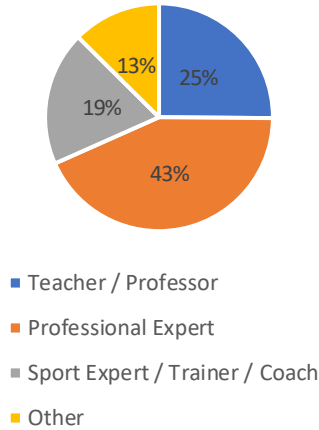
For further information: <https://ec.europa.eu/research-and-innovation/en/horizon-magazine/covid-generation-effects-pandemic-youth-mental-health>.

4.3. Results of the survey

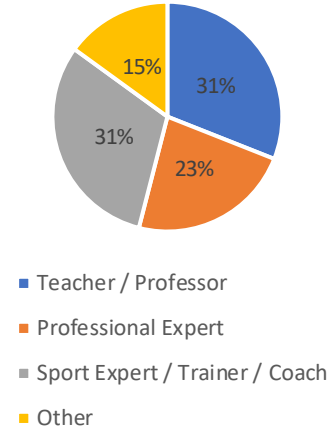
29 respondents have filled in the online survey. The respondents have the following demographics:

- 55% of the respondents are female, of which 44% are between the age of 31-40.
- 45% of the respondents are male, of which 39% are between the age of 41-50, and 31% are between the age of 31-40.

Female Respondents



Male Respondents



Of the respondents, 7 people indicated being a little familiar with mental health issues concerning youth, 8 were very family, and the majority of 14 people indicated being medium familiar with mental health issues.

- Of the 8 teachers within the overall respondents, 38% were very familiar, 38% were medium familiar, and 25% were little familiar.
- Of the 10 professional experts among the overall respondents, only 20% were very familiar, 50% were medium familiar, and 30% said to be little familiar.
- Of the 7 sport experts/trainers/coaches in the group, 43% were very familiar with mental health issues and mediumly familiar with them, whilst 14% were little familiar.
- Of the remaining 4 "other" occupations in the group, 75% indicated to be medium familiar with mental health issues whilst the remaining 25% mentioned to be little familiar with mental health issues concerning youth.

A notable finding in the survey was that 18 respondents expressed that sport experts can recognise and solve the psychological problems of young people by having open conversations while also helping/offering sport exercises. This suggests that a significant portion of the respondents value both communication and physical activities as means to address or become aware of mental health issues.

This preference aligns with the growing awareness of exercise's positive impact on mental health. Engaging in physical activities can release endorphins, reduce stress, and promote a sense of well-being. Combining exercise with open conversations can create a holistic approach to mental health support, emphasising the importance of both the mind and body in achieving overall wellness.



These survey results highlight the importance of providing accessible platforms for individuals to engage in meaningful conversations about mental health while also encouraging young people to incorporate exercise as a complementary strategy for better mental well-being.

5. Croatia

5.1. Desk Research

5.1.1. *Global overview*

Isolation due to Covid-19 has reduced the level of physical activity, which is considered extremely important during growth and development. Exposure to screens and electronic devices increased, sleep time tended to increase with changes in sleep patterns and quality of sleep, and fruit and vegetable consumption decreased, which had a negative impact on the physical and mental health of children and young people. Social isolation, loneliness, lack of physical activity and family stress during the pandemic have brought increased anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. Parental stress and mental health problems put children at increased risk of abuse.

The estimated percentage of **mental disorders among adolescents** aged 10–19 in Croatia is 11.5%.

It was also established that during the pandemic, children have a greater sense of insecurity, fear and isolation. Moreover, there is a higher probability of disturbed sleep, nightmares, poor appetite, agitation, poor focus on the task and separation anxiety. Lack of hanging out with friends and outdoor games, as well as inclusion in school activities, led to the expression of a lower level of effect in a certain number of children.

In addition, measures of isolation and the increased probability of parental unemployment during the pandemic can be an additional risk for child abuse and neglect, and social isolation in itself increases the number of domestic violence cases.

Pandemic living conditions have led to an additional deterioration of the mental health of younger people. According to meta-analytic studies published during the pandemic, there is a twofold higher incidence of mental disorders among children and young people. It is because of all the mentioned above that necessary care of the entire community is taken in order to prevent the occurrence of more serious mental illnesses.

5.1.2. *Legislative framework*

In Croatia, the legislative framework for mental health, provided by the Ministry of Health, is established by the Strategic Development Framework for mental health until 2030. Also, the National Health Development Plan for the period of 2021 to 2027 gives guidelines in terms of public health in the country. Furthermore, the National Sports Strategy (Nacionalni program športa 2019.-2026.) emphasises the importance of sports for physical and mental well-being. The strategy aims to promote participation in sport among all age groups, including young people and recognises the psychological benefits of playing sport.

Regarding sports in education, the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia encourages the integration of sports activities into the education system. Physical education classes and extracurricular sports programs are promoted to support students' physical health and mental well-being. These initiatives often include elements of teamwork, resilience building, and stress management.

Local municipalities and communities in Croatia often establish and support sports clubs and associations that deal with young people. These organisations provide opportunities for young people to engage in a variety of sporting activities, encouraging physical fitness and social interaction.

Concerning mental health support programs, some regions and cities in Croatia implement mental health support programs that use sports as a means of prevention and intervention. These programs may include initiatives such as sports-based therapy, recreational sports activities, and counselling services integrated into sports clubs or community centres.

Local and regional authorities cooperate with non-governmental organisations aimed at promoting sports and welfare among young people. These partnerships often include organising sporting events, providing resources for sporting equipment and holding educational workshops on mental health awareness through sport. Some examples of these sporting events could be:

- Festival sportske rekreacije 3th June 2023 in Platak and
- Olimpijski festival dječijih vrtića 2023, Rijeka.

Croatia organises various sports competitions and events for young people at a regional and national level. These events aim to foster a sense of community, teamwork and healthy competition among young individuals. Participating in such activities can have positive psychological effects, promoting self-esteem and resilience.



Certain regions or municipalities offer sports scholarships and grants to support talented young athletes. These initiatives not only provide financial assistance but also recognise the importance of sport in promoting discipline, goal setting, and mental well-being.

5.1.3. Review of academic literature

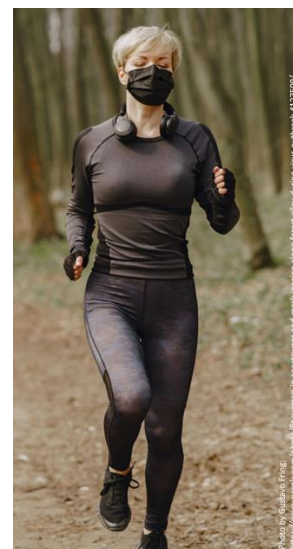
The paper “Physical Activity Protects Against the Negative Impact of Coronavirus Fear on Adolescent Mental Health and Well-Being During the Covid-19 Pandemic” is about adolescents and is looking to examine the effects of adolescent perceived Coronavirus prevalence and fear on mental health and well-being and investigating the extent to which physical activity can be a protective factor against these concerns.

The background of the paper is the following: the severity of the Coronavirus pandemic has led to lockdowns in different countries to reduce the spread of the infection. These lockdown restrictions are likely to be detrimental to mental health and well-being in adolescents. Physical activity can be beneficial for mental

health and well-being; however, research has yet to examine associations between adolescent physical activity and mental health and well-being during lockdown.

During the United Kingdom lockdown restrictions, 165 participants (100 female, aged 13–19) completed an online questionnaire assessing perceived Coronavirus prevalence and fear, physical activity, and indicators of mental health and well-being (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, vitality, and perceived health). Separate hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses (with age, gender, perceived Coronavirus prevalence, and fear entered in step 1, and physical activity in step 2) were run to predict each well-being outcome.

As a result, it appears that, in general, while Coronavirus fear was a negative predictor, physical activity was a positive and stronger predictor of enhanced mental health and well-being outcomes. The author suggests that physical activity during the Coronavirus pandemic can counteract the negative effects of Coronavirus fear on adolescent mental health and well-being. Therefore, physical activity should be promoted during lockdown to support good mental health and well-being.



5.1.4. The value of sport

There is growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of Education Through Sport (ETS) in preventing and addressing mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, among young people. Numerous studies and expert opinions suggest that ETS can play a valuable role in promoting mental well-being and social-emotional development.

The Ministry responsible for health affairs will continuously improve interdepartmental cooperation and monitor implementation and evaluation to ensure the quality of the implementation of policies aimed at mental health. Not all data has been taken into account and analysed yet. Still, the situation in this area of mental health will be monitored, and the focus will be on obtaining results and developing a framework.

Action Plans are available for improving mental health, preventing early weaning, and treating mental disorders in children and young people. These plans are also tools for monitoring the achievement indicators of results in connection with the implementation of measures.

The success of the implementation of special goals and measures will be continuously monitored for their realisation. For this purpose, data on performance will be collected, analysed, and processed, and predetermined outcome indicators will be processed to monitor progress in the achievement of specific goals.

5.1.5. Conclusion

Thanks to this research, it appears that the Covid-19 epidemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of young Croatians. In addition, the country has a range of measures in place to improve sporting

activities and support people with mental health problems (anxiety, depression, mental breakdown, etc.). However, these measures do not fully combat the increase in mental health problems among young people due to Covid-19. Finally, the dissemination of ETS methodologies has created a favourable environment for the development of the HRIC project.

5.2. Best Practices

5.2.1. *Intervention of Physical Activity for University Students with Anxiety and Depression during the Covid-19 Pandemic Prevention and Control Period: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*

The project aims to systematically analyse how physical activity impacts improving anxiety and depression in college students during Covid-19.

Indeed, the spread of Covid-19 has had serious negative impacts on the global economy and society. The most prominent aspects have been population mental health (such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and anger). Although government efforts have largely relied on physical space interventions such as social separation and self-isolation to control Covid-19, aiding the prevention of the spread of Covid-19, they have undoubtedly resulted in a reduction in face-to-face interactions. Consequently, Covid-19 has drastically decreased the population's time and spatial range of physical exercise, and most sports events have been cancelled or postponed.



During the long-term prevention and control of the Covid-19 pandemic, university students' lifestyles and behavioural characteristics have undergone tremendous changes due to such factors as the reduction of time for sports activities, the limitation of sports activities, an increase in sedentary time and the deterioration of mental health. Surveys of university students from several countries during the Covid-19 pandemic indicate a high percentage of moderate to severe anxiety, depressive symptoms, an increase in clinical cases of depression and poor mental health status.

There is a significant bond between physical activity and emotion regulation. Comparing two groups of college students, those who met the minimum level of physical activity showed higher levels of emotion regulation and a lower incidence of mental health illness than those who did not.

Therefore, a meta-analysis was conducted to evaluate the effects of physical activity. Participants were divided into four subgroups according to the intensity, the number of physical activity sessions per week, the duration of physical activity, and the number of weeks of physical activity in all the included literature, considering the differences in the research characteristics of each experiment.

The results of the subgroup analysis are as follows regarding anxiety disorder and depression:

- (1) Physical activity of different intensity can help improve anxiety and depression symptoms;
- (2) In terms of the duration of physical activity per week, the effect of interventions with physical activity less than four times per week on anxiety and depression is greater than that for more than four times per week;
- (3) For the duration of physical activity per day, physical activity for or less than 30 minutes for university students with anxiety disorders can bring more significant effects than that for 30-60 minutes or that for over 60 minutes, and the single intervention times of 30 min and less and more than 60 min have significant effects for depression;
- (4) Interventions lasting less than eight weeks and more than eight weeks can significantly improve anxiety and depression. Still, the intervention effects of less than eight weeks are better.

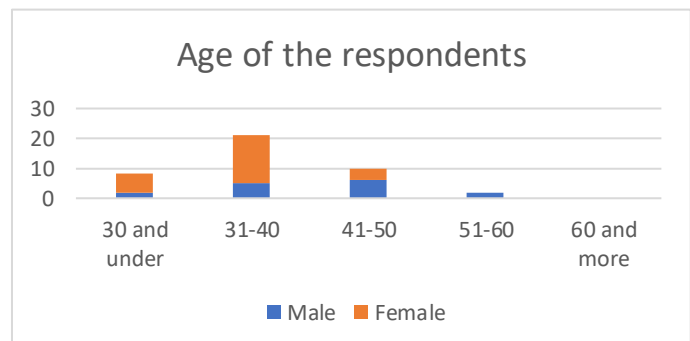
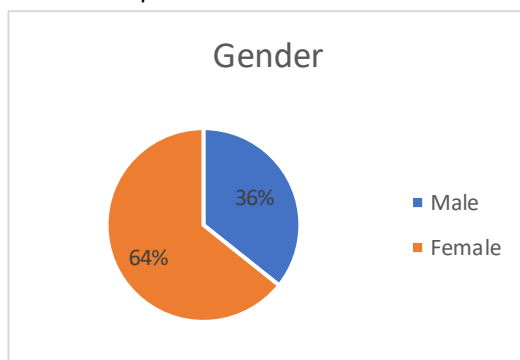
The results show that physical activity is beneficial to decrease the mental health disorders of university students during the Covid-19 prevention and control period, and physical activity of different intensities can improve the mental illness of university students to varying degrees. This study also confirmed the improvement effect of physical activity on university students' specific dimensions of mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression) during the prevention and control period of Covid-19.

For further information: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36430056/>.

5.3. Results of the survey

Around 41 people responded to the survey carried out by the consortium partners. With regard to the socio-demographic data of the respondents, we can consider that:

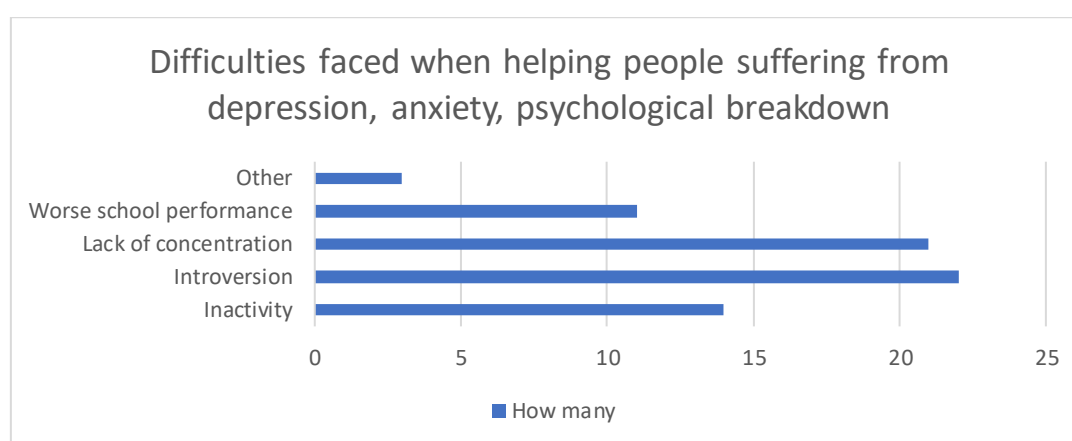
The vast majority of respondents were women (64%). The most represented age group was between 31-40, with 21 respondents in total.



- 7,31% are teachers/professors,
- 4,87% are professional experts (psychologist/psychotherapist/doctor/etc.),
- 29,29% are sport expert/trainer/coach,
- 58,54% are "others".

As in the case of other countries, 60,98% of respondents think that the number of young people with psychological problems has increased during Covid-19. Another interesting finding is that 17% of the respondents declared to be very familiar with mental health awareness concerning teens, 51% to be moderately familiar, 29,27% a little bit familiar, and 2,43% not familiar at all. The fact that they declare that the number of young people with psychological issues increased during the Covid-19 pandemic may be more related to a personal opinion rather than a professional one.

Among the difficulties encountered when helping those who suffer from depression, anxiety, and psychological breakdown, we can establish the following graph:



As we can see from the graph above, introversion and lack of concentration are among the most important difficulties that professionals encounter in helping people who are suffering from mental health issues. Of course, we have to remember that without knowing the professional background of the sample, it is difficult to ensure the reliability of responses.

Furthermore, like other countries, **all of the Croatian respondents declare that sport can help to overcome the psychological problems of young people.** This is a data very important because it follows that sport experts can recognise and help solve the psychological problems of young people thanks to the following:

- A conversation: 60,78% of the respondents consider that it could be a way to act,
- Offer a choice/help for exercises: 58,54%,
- Socialize: 2,43%,
- Talk with their peer and sports team: 2,43%.

The respondents replied with a variety of answers to the question, “What preventive measures should schools have for mental health for youth?”. Thanks to the “Word Cloud” (see below), it is possible to report and visualise the main ideas that emerge from their responses.



6. Comparison of data and research results

Summary of the results of the research in the partner countries **Portugal, Italy, Slovenia and Croatia** show that young people are in great need of support in their mental health. This is also affected by Covid-19. The pandemic was a challenge for all people, especially children and adolescents, as it encouraged them to develop exceptional abilities to adapt to new daily routines. Mental problems identified during the pandemic, such as anxiety, autism, depression, etc., harmed young people both in terms of health and education and certainly affected their development.

Respondents in all countries state that sports can help overcome the psychological problems of young people. This is very important information, as it means that sports workers can identify and help solve the psychological problems of young people.

Several scientific studies show the benefits of physical activity in the treatment of anxiety and depression. In this respect, exercise can be considered a therapy for the mental and physical health of persons, and it can also act as a preventive measure against mental illness.

The results show that physical activity was beneficial for reducing mental health disorders in young people during the Covid-19 period, and physical activity of different intensities also improved their mental health to varying degrees. This study also confirmed the effect of improving physical activity on specific dimensions of students' mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression) during the period of prevention and control of Covid-19.

The spread of Covid-19 has had a serious negative impact on the global economy and society. The most important aspects were the mental health of the population (such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and anger). Although government efforts have relied heavily on interventions in physical space, such as social distancing and self-isolation, to control Covid-19, which have helped prevent the spread of Covid-19, they have undoubtedly led to a reduction in face-to-face interactions. As a result, Covid-19 has drastically reduced

the time and space of the population's physical exercise, and most sporting events have been cancelled or postponed.

This preference coincides with a growing awareness of the positive impact of exercise on mental health. Engaging in physical activity can release endorphins, reduce stress and promote a sense of well-being. Combining exercise with open conversations can create a holistic approach to mental health support, emphasising the importance of mind and body in achieving overall well-being.

These research results highlight the importance of providing accessible platforms for individuals to engage in important conversations about mental health while encouraging young people to incorporate exercise as a complementary strategy for better mental well-being.

The project partners emphasised the **importance of project HRIC to include sport in the fight against the increase in mental health diseases** among young people, **using tools like ETS:**

In **Portugal**, Covid-19 has particularly affected young people. Experts are trying to mitigate the consequences using tools like ETS. The HRIC project is a suitable complement in a country where the state and various initiatives support sports culture. Both as a response to demonstrated needs and by using an innovative methodology that corresponds to the country's cultural and political identity.

Italy is a country where sports and sports in general are particularly important. Although physical education is part of the public school curriculum, sport has not yet acquired the status of a training and education tool (ETS). Despite the various projects already established in this area, the HRIC project will allow better consideration of the links between sport and mental health and reinforce the importance of ETS.

Sport is an integral part of people's lives in **Slovenia**. As such, it is widely recognised as a tool for education and training. The Covid-19 epidemic, like elsewhere in Europe, had serious consequences for the mental health of young people. This makes the HRIC project ideal for the Slovenian context. It is part of a continuum of policies implemented locally, regionally and nationally and reinforces existing dynamics.

Thanks to this research, it seems that the Covid-19 epidemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of young **Croatian** people. They have a range of measures to improve sports activities and support people with mental health problems (anxiety, depression, mental breakdown, etc.). However, these measures do not fully combat the rise in mental health problems among young people due to Covid-19. Therefore, the HRIC project focuses on the dissemination of ETS methodologies.

The report is designed to help system leaders, community leaders, policymakers, researchers, charities, the media, and others set ambitious targets and clear metrics to ensure our education system meets the needs of every student for years to come, including sports activities, and that students are mentally and physically prepared for future challenges.

The presented good practices in the partner countries regarding the use of sports to overcome mental illnesses in young people also help a lot in this regard.