

Stacked Disadvantage Among Young Europeans

A multi-dimensional and structured reality

Young Europeans often face more than one difficulty at the same time. Instead of looking at these issues separately, this brief considers how they overlap and affect different groups. It focuses on two questions:

1. How common is it for young people to experience multiple forms of disadvantage?
2. Are some groups more exposed than others?

Executive summary

- Around **46.6%** of young Europeans experience multiple forms of disadvantage at the same time.
- Financial stress, social isolation, and negative views about equality often overlap.
- Disadvantage is not evenly distributed across the population.
- Some groups are more exposed to high-risk profiles than others.
- Differences across countries suggest that context also plays a role.

Analytical note

This brief uses data from CRONOS-3 Wave 5 and combines two approaches in order to describe youth disadvantage from different angles.

First, a stacked disadvantage indicator identifies whether a person experiences multiple forms of vulnerability at the same time. Three dimensions are considered:

- financial stress (difficulty paying rent or mortgage)
- social isolation (feeling lonely and lacking support)
- pessimism about equality (beliefs about fairness and opportunities)

Each dimension is measured separately. A person is considered to experience stacked disadvantage when they show high vulnerability in at least two of the three dimensions. This allows us to capture situations where different problems overlap.

Secondly, we conducted a cluster analysis, which categorises individuals into profiles based on how their vulnerabilities co-occur. This makes it possible to identify patterns, such as groups that are mainly financially stressed or groups that experience several types of disadvantage at once.

In addition, descriptive comparisons across education and gender groups are used to show how exposure to high-risk profiles varies across the population.

Data: CRONOS-3 Wave 5. Youth sample (18–35): $N = 1,382$.

A widespread but layered problem

Youth disadvantage is often described through single indicators such as income or employment. This can give the impression that problems are isolated, when in practice they often occur together. In this analysis, almost half of young people experience at least two forms of vulnerability at the same time, which shows that disadvantage is not limited to a small group.

Looking more closely at the data, financial stress appears most frequently, followed by negative views about equality and social isolation. These dimensions often reinforce each other. Financial difficulties can affect social life, while a lack of support can make economic challenges harder to manage.

How vulnerabilities combine

The comparison across dimensions shows that financial stress and social isolation create the strongest differences between groups. Pessimism about equality is more evenly distributed, which suggests that concerns about fairness and future opportunities are shared by a wider group of young people.

Taken together, these patterns show that disadvantage is not only about material conditions. It also involves social relationships and expectations about the future.

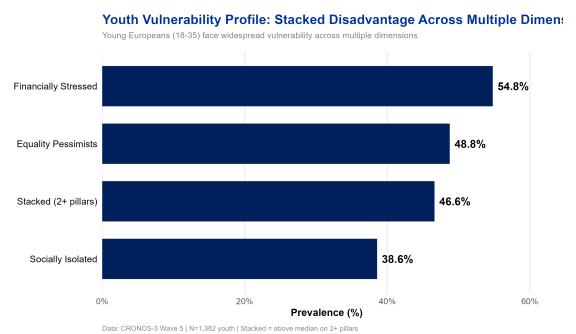


Figure 1: Youth vulnerability profile

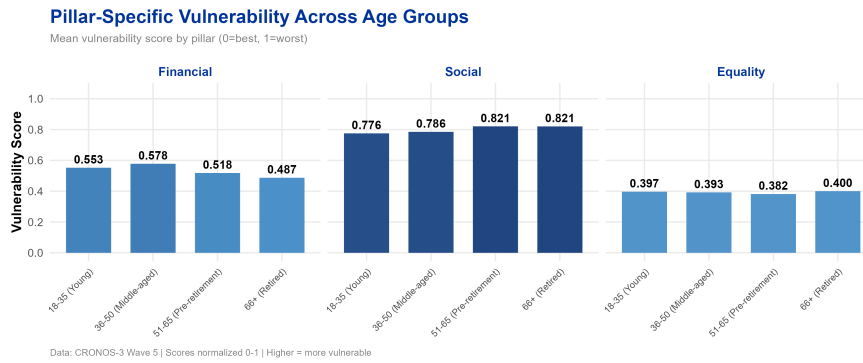


Figure 2: Vulnerability across key dimensions

Not everyone is affected in the same way

Although many young people experience multiple forms of disadvantage, the data also show clear differences between groups. The cluster analysis highlights how vulnerabilities are combined and shows that young people are more likely to belong to profiles where several problems overlap.

This indicates that disadvantage tends to concentrate in specific segments of the population rather than being randomly distributed.

Looking more closely at the composition of the most vulnerable group, differences across social characteristics become clearer. Young people with lower levels of education are more frequently represented in the highest-risk profiles. Women also appear more exposed than men, suggesting that disadvantage is shaped not only by economic conditions but also by social position.

These patterns do not establish causal relationships, but they show that exposure to multiple forms of disadvantage is not evenly distributed across the population.

Differences across countries

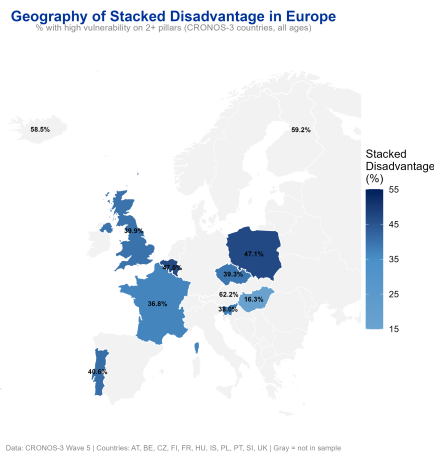


Figure 4: Geographical variation

Marta Caserio and Michele Martinelli

This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

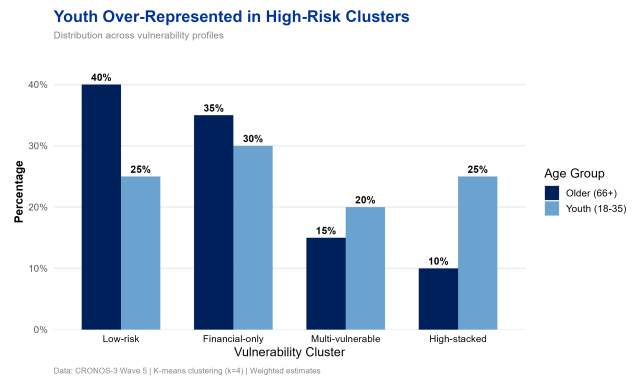


Figure 3: Vulnerability profiles

The map shows that the prevalence of stacked disadvantage varies across countries, which suggests that broader conditions play a role in shaping how young people experience vulnerability.

While the data do not allow us to identify clear causes, they show that the situation is not the same everywhere. This means that policies addressing youth disadvantage may need to take national contexts into account.

What this means for policy

These results suggest that focusing on a single issue is unlikely to be sufficient. Addressing youth disadvantage requires taking into account how different factors interact.

At the same time, differences between groups indicate that a uniform approach may not be effective. Some young people face more complex situations and may require more targeted support. A combination of broader measures and more focused interventions is therefore needed.