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► **To cite this version:**

Alessandro Arrigoni, Emanuele Ferragina. Are young people outsiders and does it matter?. Mark Smith; Tiziana Nazio; Clémentine, European Youth Forum) Moyart. Youth employment, Policy Press, pp.30 - 32, 2018, 9781910172179. hal-03393829

HAL Id: hal-03393829

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-03393829>

Submitted on 22 Oct 2021

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Are young people outsiders and does it matter?

Alessandro Arrigoni and Emanuele Ferragina

A lot of young Europeans struggle to find a job in a market that does not guarantee stable forms of employment. How does the experience of insecure labour market trajectories affect their social and political participation, or their sense of social exclusion and alienation from mainstream politics?

What is YLMO?

Youth Labour Market Outsiderness (YLMO) is a concept that allows us to go beyond conventional measures such as unemployment. This is because it also includes those who are inactive (NEETs) as well as those in part-time or temporary jobs that do not allow them to be financially independent.

We examined how the characteristics and composition of youth outsiders vary across Europe, and how this has changed during the economic crisis. Finally, we explored the consequences of YLMO for social and political participation and how different institutions mediate this behaviour.

Methodology

The study built on a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) approach. The quantitative analysis was conducted employing data from the EU-SILC data set for 30 European countries at two points in time – 2006 and 2012, in order to provide insights on pre- and post-crisis levels of YLMO.

In addition, we conducted more than one hundred semi-structured individual and group interviews with young outsiders and experts in five countries (Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK). These five case studies were selected with the objective of maximising institutional variation concerning education-to-employment transition, labour markets and welfare systems.

Main findings

Our research shows that YLMO is a significant phenomenon across Europe. In countries like Slovenia, which was less affected by the crisis, around a quarter of 15-29 years-olds were YLMO; in Mediterranean countries, like Italy and Spain, nearly half the young people were in this category.

Being YLMO is also a long-standing structural phenomenon: the economic crisis overall did not 'create' youth outsiderness, rather worsened already existing patterns.

Institutional arrangements can significantly impact on the prevalence of YLMO and the support available for young outsiders. Finally, our analysis confirms that there is a negative relation between being young and an outsider and participation in formal political activities. There are three aspects of this research that we consider particularly significant:

Levels of YLMO varies between countries

First, the level of YLMO varies significantly between countries. Looking at our five case studies, we observe that Italy and Spain have the highest proportions of YLMO with relatively larger proportions of young people in unemployment or inactivity. The UK has an intermediate level of YLMO, with relatively large proportions of inactivity or part-time employment. Instead, Austria and Germany have comparatively lower levels of outsidership, with relatively high levels of part-time employment.

YLMO networks vary

Second, the effects of these cross-national differences are reinforced by national institutional constellations. For example, in Austria and Germany, low levels of youth outsidership are associated with a relatively dense network of youth-related institutions and strong coordination among them.

In Southern European countries, the high level of youth outsidership and the lack of strong formal institutions is only partially compensated by family networks.

In the UK, the labour market works as an effective mechanism of integration for a large proportion of young people in their transition from education to work. State institutions and policies tend to focus on disadvantaged young people, while families play a less prominent role.

Young people are involved, but not in formal channels

The low participation we observe in formal political activities does not mean young people are not at all involved in politics. Young people perceived formal mainstream politics as distant, difficult to understand and unresponsive to young people's needs. The message for traditional political parties and institutions is loud and clear: they need to engage with this constituency of young people.

However, young people are responsive to anti-establishment movements and parties willing to challenge the status quo. It is therefore not surprising that movements and parties like the Five Stars Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain or Corbyn's brand of the Labour Party in the UK are attracting many young people, including labour market outsiders.

Using heterodox platforms and targeting specific policies, there are significant attempts to get young people's voices heard through conventional channels by proposing to expand and/or universalize social assistance, improve public health care services or ditch university fees (in the UK).

Consequences

A significant part of the young European population can be considered YLMO. Although the composition of this group is different across countries and the harshness of youth conditions is dependent upon the ability of institutions to protect and support them, our analysis of their numerical strength and personal perceptions indicates that they are a central social group, potentially able to influence and define the future of our societies. As recent upheavals in the political life of certain European countries seem to suggest, these young people can become an engine for social change.

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