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Youth protests across Europe: the overlapping crises facing gen Z

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European youth are taking to the streets as Generation Z faces compounding pressures. Compounded by climate anxieties, soaring living costs, housing insecurity, and mental health challenges, young citizens are demanding systemic change.

Alina Cosma, Trinity College Dublin

Young people are facing a future that feels increasingly uncertain. Although every generation experiences turbulence while navigating adolescence, the pressures experienced by gen Z – those born between 1997 and 2012 – are different and seem more pervasive.

From climate change and mental health concerns to academic pressure, housing costs, and job and economic insecurity, today's young people are navigating a complex set of expectations. Understanding their frustrations, including those expressed through protests across Europe, requires looking beyond individual experiences to the social conditions shaping their lives.

Adolescence has long been seen as a period of "storm and stress". This reflects a belief that is a universal and inevitable period of emotional turmoil, behavioural conflict and identity crisis. However, this has been increasingly challenged.

Rather than being defined solely by difficulty and disruption, adolescence is increasingly viewed as a period of possibility, opportunity and growth. Yet realising that potential depends heavily on the social environments in which young people grow up.

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A growing body of evidence highlights adolescence as a critical developmental period with profound implications for future health and wellbeing. There is also increasing recognition that adolescence extends well beyond the teenage years and well into the twenties.

Growing up under pressure

Young people nowadays grow up under intense and often overlapping pressure, and today this is to a higher extent than generations before.

Evidence from the World Health Organization's Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study suggests that school-related pressure increased between 2002 and 2022 across many countries.

In 2022, among 15-year-old girls, almost two-thirds reported feeling pressured by schoolwork, compared with less than half of boys. The same research documented declines in perceived family and peer support. In other words, young people appear to be facing increasing demands while some of the social resources that help them cope with those demands are weakening.
Young people are feeling educational pressure.
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Parental expectations and criticism have also intensified in many contexts. Success is increasingly framed as an individual responsibility, while educational pathways have become more competitive. At the same time, social media can amplify processes of social comparison, putting young people's achievements, appearance and lifestyles under constant public scrutiny. For many, there is little respite from the pressure to perform.

Economic concerns add another level of pressure. Rising living costs, high tertiary education expenses and uncertainty about future employment rank among young people's greatest worries
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Across the EU, 40% are highly concerned by rising prices and the cost of living. In 2026, national surveys show that around 70% of Irish adolescents consider emigration for better life conditions. Over 20% of Dutch secondary school students are concerned whether they will ever be able to afford a home.

A warming planet and an uncertain future

Today's young people are growing up amid an increasingly

visible climate crisis. They hear repeated warnings about the short- and long-term consequences of climate change. Their generation will be disproportionally affected, and they know it.

For some, this contributes to feelings of anxiety, worry, sadness, anger and helplessness about environmental degradation and the future. Concerns like this about a genuine global threat can be a rational and entirely understandable response.

What can make these concerns particularly difficult is the perception that the decisions affecting young people's future are often made without their meaningful involvement or consideration of their needs. This cycle of intergenerational injustice needs to be acknowledged and addressed. When people feel they have little influence on issues that will meaningfully shape their lives, this can lead to frustration.

Evidence from many countries suggests that Gen Z are experiencing poorer mental health than previous generations. Although patterns vary across cultures and contexts, large scale studies point to increasing levels of emotional distress and psychological difficulties among young people.

Public discussions often focus on explanations at an individual level: excessive screen time, reduced resilience and difficulties coping with everyday challenges. While these factors may play a role, they do not account for the whole story.

Mental health is shaped by the interaction between individual experiences and wider social, economic and cultural environments in which people live. As such, the current rise in mental health difficulties should not be understood as a solely individual problem. Rather, it reflects a response to broader societal pressures that young people face as they move towards adulthood.

Despite these challenges, it would be wrong to portray gen Z as a generation defined only by anxiety or pessimism. Protests concerning housing, education, climate policy and economic inequality can express frustration, but they also demonstrate agency and a desire to influence decisions about the future.

A 2025 survey of 6,703 young people across Europe found that 80% of young respondents in Germany considered EU membership a good thing, up from 65% in 2024. In France, the figure rose from 53% to 60%. The study also highlighted the importance young people attach to making the cost of living affordable.

These findings challenge the assumption that today's young

generation is simply disengaged from society. Young people are not passive recipients of social pressures. They organise, question existing arrangements and seek alternatives.

The difficulties facing gen Z are not entirely new. What makes their experience distinctive is the combination of pressures and the uncertainty surrounding the transition to adulthood. Rather than asking whether today's young people have it harder than previous generations, we should ask more productive questions: what kind of society are we asking them to navigate? And what can be done to make it healthier, fairer and more hopeful?

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Students protest in Place de la Bastille, Paris, in October 2026. davidezambon/Shutterstock
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