

Age heavily impacting quality of life for older people in Eastern Europe

Age plays an important role in life: whether it's starting school, taking that first alcoholic drink, voting in elections or drawing the pension. Such milestones are grounded in policy that is developed and operationalised through the prism of age. However, quality of life across age groups in Europe is showing both an east-west and north-south divide, with social exclusion reaching worrying levels in the Balkan countries.

This Policy Brief looks at age-related inequalities in the quality of life, examining differences across six age groups, seven EU country clusters and in five dimensions of quality of life namely difficulties making ends meet, political participation in society, perceived social exclusion, mental well-being and life satisfaction. Based on data from Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), the Brief examines change between 2011 – 2016 thereby capturing the impact of the recession, effects on different age groups and the way labour markets and the welfare state have mitigated the effects of the crisis.

In general, the older generations enjoy better quality of life than younger age groups in western Europe, while the younger generations are better off in eastern Europe. Looking more closely, however, it becomes apparent that the differences between the Member States run deep and wide.

Many older people in eastern Europe, who spent most of their lives under communist rule, are not doing well and the situation of the oldest old, especially in Bulgaria and Romania, seems particularly disadvantaged in terms of social exclusion and mental health. Equally, the cost of housing in many Member States is proving especially hard on young people who are struggling to even get a foot on the property ladder.

The EU has sought to address inequalities through such initiatives as the European Pillar of Social Rights and, more recently, by highlighting the need for intergenerational fairness in its annual report on Employment and Social Development in Europe. The renewal of a generational contract together with welfare systems that focus on both traditional life stages as well as new social risks could help to put the EU back on a path towards greater social solidarity.