

WELLBEING OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM SERBIA: THE ROLE OF GENDER, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND

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Abstract

All countries complying with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are committed to reducing poverty and socioeconomic disparities, ensuring inclusion, and improving health and wellbeing of its citizens. However, it is known that the odds for youth to thrive are significantly affected by their gender, socioeconomic and ethnic groups' positions within society. To explore the impact of these variables on the wellbeing of youth in Serbia, we conducted a study recruiting students from 20 secondary schools from different regions of the country. Participants were 1846 students ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.26$; 52.6% female, 69.9% identified as Serbian (ethnic majority), 10.8% Hungarian, 11.1% Bosniak, and 8.2% Roma). We applied the scale *Personal Wellbeing Index* and we used one five-point Likert type item to assess depression. SES was measured through one question with five categories. Results indicate that students are relatively satisfied with their life ($M = 7.4$, $SD = 2.7$), with highest satisfaction with health and lowest satisfaction with financial status and achievements, while the scores for depression slightly surpass theoretical mean ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.39$). Students of different SES statistically significantly differ on all aspects of wellbeing and on depression, with wellbeing consistently increasing and depression decreasing with the rise of SES. When students of different ethnic backgrounds are compared, significant differences appear only for satisfaction with financial status, but the effect size is small. Female students have significantly lower scores for overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with relationships and safety, and higher scores on depression, but effect sizes are small. A regression analysis revealed that gender, SES and ethnic background can predict depression and wellbeing, but that only students' SES proved to be a significant predictor.

Keywords: *Life satisfaction, depression, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, secondary school students.*

1. Introduction

All countries complying with the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are committed to reducing poverty and socioeconomic disparities, ensuring inclusion, and improving health and wellbeing of its citizens. Nevertheless, in the world of rapid and unpredictable changes many adolescents are facing severe mental health challenges. WHO* states that 14% of 10-19-year-olds experience mental health conditions which often remain unrecognised and untreated.

Through its *Strategy for development of education until 2030*[†], *Programme on mental health protection for the period 2019-2026*[‡] and other policies, Serbia has also committed to these global goals: however, there have been many challenges in practices, in both the educational and mental health sectors, which together with unstable sociopolitical situation and high levels of unemployment jeopardise wellbeing of youth.

* Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/key-messages#:~:text=Globally%2C%20one%20in%20seven%2010,100%20deaths%20is%20by%20suicide>

† For more, see: https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/1-SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf

‡ For more, see: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/drugiakt/2019/84/1>

1.1. Youth wellbeing – the roles of gender, SES and ethnicity

In this study we define wellbeing as a multidimensional construct that encompasses various aspects of an individual's life satisfaction, such as physical health, emotional well-being, material well-being, and social connectedness (Cummins, 1997).

Studies show that females have lower scores on wellbeing/ life satisfaction than males (e.g., Chen et al., 2020). A large study with 11–18-year-old students from Hungary showed that boys scored higher on life satisfaction and lower on depression, compared to their female counterparts (Piko, 2023). A cross-national investigation with 15-year-olds confirmed that girls have worse mental health across different indicators (Campbell et al., 2021). On the other hand, some studies show the opposite results, pointing to the need for discussing wellbeing in a highly contextualised way (e.g. Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020).

Poverty is a risk factor for mental health (Elgar et al., 2015; Graham & Chattopadhyay, 2013). On the individual level most studies showed that a persons' socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with wellbeing, meaning that persons from low SES families tend to have worse wellbeing (Erdem & Kaya, 2021; Kivimäki et al., 2020). In a study with 7-17 years-olds from Germany various indicators of SES separately predicted mental health problems at the 2-year follow-up (Reiss et al., 2019).

Finally, marginalised youth, that is, young people with disabilities, (undocumented) immigrants, and sexual and other minorities, are at an even higher risk of mental health issues (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). Ethnic minority status exposes people to discrimination and social marginalisation which leads towards mental health issues (Priest et al., 2013). There have been fewer studies of minority students' wellbeing in European context, but studies in Italy and Israel, for example, showed that immigrant adolescents report lower life satisfaction than their native peers (Vieno et al., 2009; Ullman & Tatar, 2001). However, in the UK and Island mixed findings of distress by ethnic background were reported (Khatib et al., 2013; Runarsdottir & Vilhjalmsón, 2019), suggesting that the family SES and support may play a more important role. There are indications that Roma youth tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower levels of life satisfaction (Cvjetković et al., 2017; Dimitrova et al., 2012; Pereira et al., 2016). In most countries Roma students, unlike some other minority groups, face segregation, social exclusion and discrimination in the fields of housing, education, and employment (Cvejić, 2019; Simić & Vranješević, 2022), making them even more vulnerable than many other ethnic minority groups globally.

Abundance of literature pointed to the relevance of gender, SES and one's ethnic groups' positions within society for wellbeing, but the findings are not always unambiguous. In addition, there is a limited number of studies addressing the wellbeing of Roma students, and specifically – wellbeing of ethnic minorities, including Roma in Serbia. Therefore, our study aimed at filling this gap, as well as providing recommendations for specialists in the fields of education and youth mental health.

2. Methodological framework

2.1. Variables and instruments

We relied on Cummins (1997) definition of wellbeing and applied the translated and adjusted *Personal Wellbeing Index*, a version for school children (PWI-SC, Cummins & Lau, 2005). This 11-point Likert type scale consists of one item addressing the overall life satisfaction and seven items referring to following aspects of life: standard of living, personal health, achievement in life, personal relationships, personal safety, being part of community and future prospects. In addition, we used one five-point Likert type item ("I often feel sad") to assess depression.

Students reported their SES on a multiple-choice question (1 standing for „We barely cover expenses for food”, and 6 – „We have enough money for a luxurious life, including travelling to exotic destinations and investing”). Due to the low frequency of participants, we merged the two lowest categories into one for further analyses, so the variable we used had five categories (1 indicating the lowest and 5 - the highest SES). We asked about participants' gender through a multiple-choice question with categories: Male, Female, and Other. For the sake of this paper, we only used the first two categories. Participants reported their ethnic background on a multiple-choice question, but for this paper we categorised participants into four categories which referred to the majority (Serbian) and three most represented minorities in Serbia (Hungarian, Bosniak, and Roma).

2.2. Procedure and participants

We selected schools from multiethnic regions paying attention to the geographical distribution of schools, school size and educational profile, to ensure sample diversity. Twenty schools (six high schools and 14 vocational schools) participate in research. In schools with students of Hungarian background questionnaires were translated to Hungarian so students could answer in their native language. All

students were thoroughly informed about the research and after providing informed consents they filled out the questionnaires. Their participation was on a voluntary basis.

Final sample consisted of 1846 students, $M_{age} = 16.26$, $SD = 1.07$, with 52.6% female students. More than two thirds (69.9%) reported being Serbian (ethnic majority), 10.8% Hungarian, 11.1% Bosniak, and 8.2% Roma.

2.3. Data analysis

After performing descriptive statistics, we compared different groups of participants using either an independent sample t-test (for gender differences) or one-way ANOVA (for differences in SES and ethnic status). For multiple comparisons the Scheffe *post-hoc* test was applied. Finally, a linear regression analysis with gender, SES, and ethnic background as predictors, and wellbeing and depression as criterion variables, was performed.

3. Results

Secondary school students in Serbia reported being relatively satisfied with their lives ($M_{tot} = 7.76$, $SD = 3.17$). The highest scores were determined on satisfaction with health ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 2.49$) and future ($M = 7.90$, $SD = 2.55$), while the lowest scores appeared on satisfaction with financial status ($M = 7.44$, $SD = 2.76$) and achievements ($M = 7.52$, $SD = 2.62$). Participants assessed their level of depressive mood as fair ($M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.39$).

Comparison of female and male students showed that females have significantly lower scores for overall life satisfaction ($t(1573) = 3.355$, $p = .001$), however the effect size proved to be small (Cohen's $d = .17$). Similar results were determined for satisfaction with relationships ($t(1571) = 2.064$, $p = .039$, $d = .12$) and safety ($t(1574) = 3.511$, $p = .000$, $d = .18$), while for other aspects of wellbeing there were no significant differences. Female students also scored higher on depression, but again the effect size was small ($t(1577) = -3.645$, $p = .000$, $d = .18$).

When students of different ethnic backgrounds were compared, it was determined that differences between groups were recorded only on satisfaction with financial status ($F(3,899) = 4.321$, $p = .005$). More specifically, Roma students reported statistically significantly lower scores on satisfaction with financial status than students of Serbian ethnic background ($p = .007$, 95% C.I. = [.22, 2.0]).

Finally, one-way ANOVA revealed that there were statistically significant differences in mean scores on depression and all aspects of wellbeing between students of different SES (see Table 1). Our results suggest that with the rise of financial status students tend to be more satisfied with different aspects of life and less depressed.

Table 1. ANOVA for SES-based differences in wellbeing and depression.

Variables	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	η^2	<i>p</i>
Overall life satisfaction	4	12.858	.028	.000
Satisfaction with standard of living	4	53.732	.107	.000
Satisfaction with personal health	4	26.502	.056	.000
Satisfaction with achievements	4	19.133	.041	.000
Satisfaction with personal relationships	4	13.930	.030	.000
Satisfaction with personal safety	4	19.631	.042	.000
Satisfaction with being part of community	4	20.019	.043	.000
Satisfaction with future prospects	4	14.987	.033	.000
Depression	4	9.557	.021	.000

A regression analysis revealed that gender, SES, and ethnic background can predict depression ($R^2 = .018$, $F(3, 767) = 4.716$, $p = .003$), but that only student's financial status was a significant predictor ($B = -.171$, $\beta = -.120$, $p = .001$). The same was determined for the overall wellbeing ($R^2 = .017$, $F(3, 765) = 4.293$, $p = .005$; $B_{SES} = .490$, $\beta_{SES} = .116$, $p = .001$), as well as single aspects of wellbeing.

4. Discussion

In this study we explored the wellbeing of secondary school students from Serbia of different gender, ethnic backgrounds and SES. Results showed that students from Serbia demonstrate somewhat lower levels of satisfaction with life in comparison to their peers from other countries, where the same scale was applied (see, for example, Tomy & Cummins, 2010), which might be explained by

unfavourable sociopolitical and economic situation in Serbia. Females reported lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of depression, but the effect sizes were small, suggesting that statistically significant differences appeared due to the sample size and that real differences are trivial. Similarly, there were no significant and meaningful effects of ethnic background; only differences between Roma students and students of Serbian ethnicity with regard to satisfaction with standard of living deemed significant and relevant. Our results, however, suggest that low SES stands out as a significant factor that shapes the wellbeing of high-school students, which is in line with previous studies (e.g., Erdem & Kaya, 2021; Kivimäki et al., 2020). While gender and ethnic background cannot predict satisfaction with various aspects of life and depression, SES is a significant predictor.

Although the finding that minority students assess their wellbeing in a similar way to students from the culturally dominant group contradicts findings from other contexts (e.g., Vieno et al., 2009; Ullman & Tatar, 2001), it is, on the other hand, in line with other findings (e.g., Runarsdottir & Vilhjalmsón, 2019), suggesting that the relationship between ethnic background and wellbeing is more complex, depending on many family, neighbourhood, and wider social factors. We assume that this finding in our case reflects well the status of investigated minorities (at least, Bosniak and Hungarian) in their local communities. Study was conducted in schools located in multiethnic communities where minority groups (Bosniak and Hungarian) form half of or even majority of inhabitants. Therefore, in future studies more attention should be paid not solely on the minority/majority status at the country level, but on the ethnic structure and social climate in the local contexts (local communities and schools) where students live.

Lack of relevant difference between male and female students can be interpreted by sociopolitical context and specific life stage of our participants. Sociologists have already recognized that professional and personal lives of women in Serbia have been under the influence of socialist values and that they earned economic autonomy and gender awareness, much before women in other countries (Galić 2011). On the other hand, patriarchy, familiarity, and traditions put a great pressure on females in the private sphere (Hugson, 2018). Therefore, we believe that females face more challenges, and therefore risks for their wellbeing, in later stages of their life, when they need to navigate “traditional” and “modern” society values (Blagojević Hjuston, 2012) and meet expectations related to household and family obligations.

5. Conclusions and implications

Despite certain limitations of the study such as somewhat simplified measures of SES and depression and small number of Roma students in the sample, we believe it can contribute to international discussion about the factors that impact youth wellbeing. It demonstrates a significant effect of family SES on adolescents’ wellbeing. It asserts that we cannot discuss the effects of gender and ethnic background without taking into account local context where adolescents live (neighbourhood and school) and wider social, political, economic and historical context. We should also beware that age, that is, specific life stage, plays a role in interpreting results related to complex phenomena such as wellbeing.

Besides systemic measures aimed at reducing poverty and disparities, our findings call for reducing socioeconomic disparities in education policies and practices to ensure equal access and opportunities to learn and thrive for all students. Implementing targeted (educational and psychological) support mechanisms, such as peer support, networking and mentoring programs can help bridge the gap in wellbeing levels between different SES groups. More attention to students’ wellbeing in local communities should be paid as well, which can be done through more awareness raising events, project-based activities in local communities or formally through interdisciplinary local teams that would provide medical, psychosocial and educational support to youth and families.

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