

Book review

Report on the state of young people's health in the European Union

European Commission, Directorate-General Health and Consumer Protection, Unit F3 — Health promotion, health monitoring, and injury prevention, February 2000, pp. 56, available from: URL:http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_information/reporting/ke01_en.pdf

The report belongs to a series of reports on the state of health of the population in the European Union. This particular report focuses on the health status of young people and aims to provide a mixed target group—Member States, policy makers, analysts and researchers—with a comparative overview. The comparison concerns several countries of the European Union, with a special emphasis on trends from the mid-1980s to the mid- and late 1990s.

A comparative longitudinal overview of the health status of young people is very welcome. The overview underlines the incorrectness of the traditional assumption that being young and being healthy are synonymous. The evidence of health problems in young people accumulates from a number of studies. Another reason why a comparison between countries over several years is welcome is that it adds information to the existing reports and books on the health of youth.

Taking a quick look at the contents of the report, the long list of topics illustrates the aim of giving an overview. All topics concerning health in youth are included. Besides, the social context of growing up in the European Union is described, by means of influential factors like education, social inequalities and gender differences. So, this report promises a wide range of topics, which may provide an overview, but may also prove superficial.

The main conclusions

The main conclusions are sorted in the executive summary into general trends, more specific results, and priority issues for the future. Here, I shall repeat the general trends and the priority issues.

Three general trends are revealed. There is a marked diversity within the EU both in the status of young people's health and in health trends. The vast majority of young people enjoy good health, and the trends of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s suggest that the situation is set to improve further when it comes to life expectancy, mortality, and major chronic diseases. This pic-

ture is marred by the growth of certain chronic disorders: the rising trend in asthma and allergic disorders, as well as in diabetes and obesity.

The marked differences both between and within the Member States in social and cultural determinants of health are bound to lead to increasing inequalities in young people's health between population subgroups and countries.

And three priority issues for future activity are mentioned. The quality and comparability of data should be improved. So, EU-wide comparative studies are needed, including health, well-being, and mental, social and cultural aspects of health. The major challenges with respect to improving young people's health in the EU are linked to social and regional inequalities in health that are caused by economic, social and cultural determinants of ill-health. Preventive actions should be focused on lifestyles, mental health, premature deaths, accidents, and suicides.

A missed opportunity?

The report presents a lot of information, valuable information about health status issues for young people in various countries of the EU, over several years. The authors, however, did not handle this information in the most appropriate way. On the one hand they miss an opportunity when they conclude very generally "there is marked diversity within the European Union in terms of both the status of young people's health and health trends." The most interesting part of this report, in my opinion, would have been an answer on the questions: what are these marked differences? What countries show generally worse healthy youth and what countries show most healthy youth? Are the patterns constant or are there exceptions for some measures? It is a pity that the authors did not make this step with their collected information.

On the other hand the authors draw conclusions and suggest activities that are not directly based on the data presented in the report. For example, they suggest that "the major challenges with respect to improving young people's health in the EU are linked to the social and regional inequalities in health." However, I can find no underpinning for this conclusion in the report. Besides, several researchers in the EU showed

that youth is characterised by the absence of socio-economic health differences!

Information sources

The authors also mention the information sources as one of the priority issues for future activities. The coverage, content and reliability of data vary considerably

between countries. Therefore, comparisons are sometimes hardly to make.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of information sources, much valuable and interesting information is collected and sorted. One more step, in the direction of analysing differences between countries as mentioned before would be recommendable.

Jolanda Tuinstra