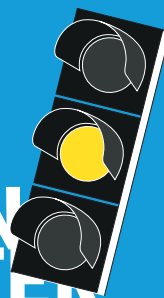


HOPE

HOPE

ITINERA NEXT GEN LONGER BAROMETER



HOW HOPEFULL
SHOULD THE NEXT
GENERATION
OF BELGIANS BE?

20 25



ITINERA
unchaining ways of progress

HOPE
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Itinera NextGen Barometer

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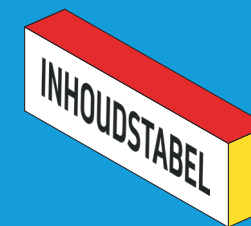
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YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT A SIDE ISSUE IN POLICY THEY ARE THE FUTURE – AND DESERVE POLICIES THAT TREAT THEM AS SUCH

In times of growing societal uncertainty, geopolitical instability and social pressure, young people increasingly feel that their future is under threat. Climate anxiety, mental health problems, social inequality and economic uncertainty are not abstract concepts for many, but everyday realities. To the average young person, it can feel as though they are constantly being bombarded with so-called MOPs – seemingly intractable societal problems.

Belief in social progress is visibly fading, not least among younger generations. Despite this urgency, policy often lacks a structural focus on young people's lived experiences and needs.

With the Itinera NextGen Barometer, we want to change that.

The Itinera NextGen Barometer is more than a monitoring tool:

it is a strategic compass that enables policymakers, youth organisations and society to understand the position of young people today, and to build their future together. Based on the mission 'With the new generation, for the new generation', this barometer measures what it means to be young in Belgium – objectively, thematically and through an intergenerational lens.

Our central message is clear: the coming generations must not only participate in the debate; they must help determine its direction. Their voice, experience and perspective are crucial to developing policies that are sustainable, fair and forward-looking. That is why this barometer is not the endpoint of an analysis, but the starting point of a movement: a catalyst for change within the broader framework of Project HOPE, Itinera's intergenerational innovation programme focused on co-creation, policy participation and resilience.

The barometer is structured around four fundamental children's rights clusters – Survival, Development, Participation and Protection – and comprises dozens of indicators on well-being, health, education, work, housing, democratic engagement and social protection. Each domain is underpinned by data from reliable sources such as Statbel, Eurostat, the Sciensano Health Interview Survey, the JOP Monitor and specialised youth studies. These indicators are analysed in terms of their evolution, policy context and international comparison, resulting in standardised scores per domain and cluster.

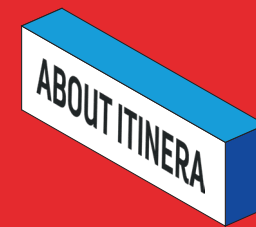
But these scores do not tell the whole story. The strength of the barometer lies in the combination of figures and reflection: what do these figures say about how young people feel today? What structural barriers hinder their development? Where are the opportunities, and where is there a lack of vision? The barometer asks tough questions – about the direction of our society, about the choices we make, and about the role that young people do or do not play in this.

With this tool, we give young people and policymakers a shared language to talk about the future.

The future does not begin tomorrow. It begins today – with the courage to measure what matters, and the ambition to act on what we see.

The Itinera NextGen Barometer is our invitation to policymakers, young people, civil society and wider society to shape that future together:

WITH
CONFIDENCE,
WITH INSIGHT,
WITH HOPE



INDEPENDENT. EVIDENCE-BASED. FUTURE-FOCUSED.

Itinera is an independent think tank that, since 2006, has been challenging policymakers, government and society to think beyond the issues of the day. Through evidence-based research and a keen eye for social transformation, Itinera translates complex challenges into concrete solutions. Our mission is clear: to build a sustainable, resilient and just society – for today and tomorrow.

In an era of political fragmentation, economic pressure and growing distrust in institutions, Itinera acts as a bridge between vision and decisive action. We are a home for leading experts, academics, entrepreneurs and innovators who fuel public debate and inspire policymakers. Based on the conviction that good governance and long-term thinking are the keys to real progress, Itinera focuses on three strategic pillars:

- 1. Wealth creation**
with a focus on the budget, investment and strategic economic policy.
- 2. A simpler Belgium**
with a focus on more efficient structures, governance and regulation.
- 3. A resilient society**
where well-being, education, care and social cohesion are central.

Through projects such as **HOPE** and the **NextGen Barometer**, Itinera is strengthening its role as a catalyst for intergenerational dialogue, justice and responsibility. Young people should not only participate in the debate about their future – they must be at the helm. That is why Itinera is launching initiatives in which young people, together with experts, co-create policy on well-being, democracy, education and economic opportunities. The Barometer is a crucial starting point in this regard: both a measuring tool and a lever for change.

WE BELIEVE THAT SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS BEGINS WITH BOLD IDEAS AND CONCRETE ACTION.

That is why Itinera invites citizens, policymakers and partners to work together to build a shared vision for the future. On the road to 2030 – the year of Belgium's bicentenary – we are mobilising insights, networks and commitment for policies that protect, empower and represent future generations.

More info: www.itinera.team





BRIEF INTRODUCTIONS

Ank De Wilde is co-CEO of Itinera. She built her career as a driven entrepreneur and changemaker with a strong focus on sustainable innovation and social value creation. As co-CEO and chair of the independent think tank Itinera and former CEO of Absolem Engineers, she combines strategic leadership with a distinctly people-centred vision. Within Itinera, she focuses on strengthening good governance and societal resilience, with the aim of helping shape a society that is sustainable, inclusive and future-oriented.

Julien De Wit is an author, columnist and policy adviser with expertise in international relations, national security and strategic communication. As a Fellow at Itinera, he contributes to the reform of political decision-making and the promotion of sustainable social development. With an academic background in international diplomacy (specialising in national security) and law, he combines in-depth substantive knowledge with practical insight into strategy, communication and policy advice. He is also an entrepreneur, the author of non-fiction books including *Ge(e)neratie* (2023) and *(On)zeker* (2024), and a regular columnist for leading media.

Professor **Marc De Vos** is a prominent Belgian policy expert, thinker and author with a sharp perspective on law, economics and society. As co-CEO of the independent Itinera Institute, which he also founded, and as a professor at Ghent University, he combines academic depth with policy-relevant insight.

Driven by a passion for geopolitics, European integration and social progress, Marc combines strategic thinking with practical impact. His work is dedicated to renewal and to building bridges between policy and society. As a prolific author of works including *Superpower Europe: the European Union's Silent Revolution* (2024) and *Beter is niet genoeg* (2020), and as a valued columnist for leading media, he challenges dominant frameworks and stimulates progress through incisive analysis and innovative insights.



The Itinera NextGen Barometer is a measurement tool that systematically and robustly maps the position of young people in Belgium. The barometer is based on **a combination of quantitative indicators, international benchmarking and qualitative reflection**. The aim is not only to describe a situation, but to inform policy, provide direction and spur structural change. The barometer is structured around four fundamental clusters based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- Survival (health, basic needs, safety)
- Development (education, work, economic opportunities)
- Participation (democratic engagement, citizenship)
- Protection (against poverty, violence, social exclusion)

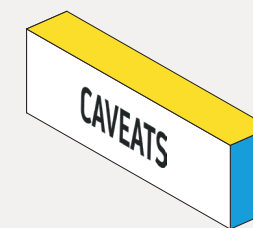
Within each cluster, several domains and sub-domains are defined, each of which is measured using specific indicators. The barometer uses only reliable, official and scientifically substantiated sources. Examples include:

- Statbel
- Statistics Flanders
- Eurostat
- Sciensano Health Interview Survey
- JOP Monitor
- Solidaris Youth Barometer
- Febelfin/Wikifin surveys

Where possible, sources that are available annually are selected. For more structural social phenomena (such as mental well-being or political engagement), periodic surveys (conducted every two to five years) are used.

An important caveat is that the scores in this barometer are assigned through informed judgement rather than by a purely mechanical formula, but are nevertheless evidence-informed. Itinera reviews the current situation and the literature for each indicator and assigns a score. The score is represented by a colour: Red, Orange, Yellow, Light Green, Dark Green. The table below explains what each score means.





SCORE	EXPLANATION
RED	An alarming situation that must be resolved as soon as possible. Represents a serious and immediate threat to the prosperity and well-being of future generations.
ORANGE	Alarming situation.
YELLOW	Average score. Room for improvement.
LIGHT GREEN	The country is on the right track. However, there is room for improvement.
DARK GREEN	The situation is good.

The analysis section of this report provides a detailed explanation of why each score is used.

The **scores for each indicator** are first examined collectively at domain level (e.g. ‘mental health’ or ‘housing’). Each domain is then assigned a **domain score**.

The domain scores are then combined to form a cluster score. Finally, the four clusters are combined to form a single overall barometer score, which reflects the general situation of young people in Belgium.

Each score is accompanied by:

- **Policy analysis:** What policy measures are in place? Where are the gaps?
- **International comparison:** How does Belgium compare with neighbouring countries and EU averages?
- **Trends over time:** Is the situation improving or deteriorating?
- **Strategic reflection:** What is missing in terms of vision or long-term thinking?

This qualitative analysis enhances the interpretation of the figures and makes the barometer a tool for policy reflection, not just for monitoring.



Although the Itinera NextGen Barometer offers a broad and thematically layered picture of the state of youth in Belgium, it is important to set out a few caveats for interpreting the results.

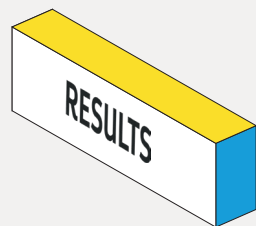
Firstly, **demographics** play a crucial role. The Belgian youth population is not a homogeneous group, but highly diverse in terms of background, educational attainment, family situation, region and gender identity. Differences in quality of life and opportunities are often smoothed out in national averages, making internal inequalities less visible. The barometer attempts to partially address this through stratification and interpretation, but further analysis remains desirable.

Secondly, positive well-being scores, such as life satisfaction, must be treated with caution. As the HBSC study also shows, satisfaction is strongly influenced by **underlying factors** such as family structure, socio-economic status and resilience. Young people who feel good tend to feel increasingly better (“those who are happy become happier”), whilst young people in vulnerable situations are often structurally left behind. This compound vulnerability is insufficiently reflected in averages.

The **family situation** deserves particular attention in this regard. International comparisons, such as those within HBSC and JOP, consistently show that young people growing up in non-traditional or financially precarious family structures are more likely to experience stress, delayed school progression and reduced mental health. Although the barometer addresses this dimension, the impact of family structure and home circumstances on young people’s experiences remains an underestimated factor in policy statistics.

Finally, we emphasise the need to address **polarisation within generations**. It is a misconception that all young people share the same experiences or perspectives. Just as with older generations, the social divide is widening among young people between those who are highly educated and have good prospects, and those who grow up in structural exclusion. The barometer highlights this growing internal divide, which presents a challenge for policymakers to do more than simply score well on average. Targeted differentiation – without stigmatising – is becoming a necessary condition for effective youth-focused policy reform.





Below you will find the results and the barometer score. Each score is explained in detail in the analysis.

CLUSTER I: SURVIVAL

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN	SCORE
Well-being and mental health care	Life satisfaction among young people	LIGHT GREEN
	Psychological well-being	RED
	Use of mental health services	YELLOW
	Prevention in mental health care	RED
	SUBSCORE	ORANGE
Physical health	General health	LIGHT GREEN
	Access to healthcare	DONKER GROEN
	Access to sport	LIGHT GREEN
	Access to healthy food	YELLOW
	SUBSCORE	LIGHT GREEN
Housing conditions	N/A	ORANGE



CLUSTER SCORE: YELLOW



CLUSTER II: DEVELOPMENT

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN	SCORE
Education	Early school leavers	LIGHT GREEN
	Educational participation and attainment	LIGHT GREEN
	Delayed school progression and dropout	YELLOW
	SUBSCORE	LIGHT GREEN
Economic development – financial literacy	Youth unemployment and NEET rate	YELLOW
	Income position and risk of poverty	YELLOW
	Job security and precarious employment	YELLOW
	Financial literacy and saving behaviour	YELLOW
	SUBSCORE	YELLOW
Economic outlook	State of public finances	RED
	Belgium's competitive position	YELLOW
	Parafiscal burden	RED
	Business confidence	ORANGE
	Pensions	RED
	SUBSCORE	39
Youth employment	Employment rate	YELLOW
	Internship opportunities	LIGHT GREEN
	Job quality	LIGHT GREEN
	Labour market mismatch	YELLOW
	SUBSCORE	YELLOW



CLUSTER SCORE: YELLOW



CLUSTER III: PARTICIPATION

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN	SCORE
Democratic engagement	Trust in democracy	RED
	Satisfaction with democracy	RED
	Voter turnout and voting behaviour	LIGHT GREEN
	Political literacy	YELLOW
	SUBSCORE	LIGHT GREEN
Sense of belonging	N/A	LIGHT GREEN
Belief in democracy, the rule of law and the political system	N/A	YELLOW



CLUSTER SCORE: YELLOW

CLUSTER IV: PROTECTION

DOMAIN	SUBDOMAIN	SCORE
Bescherming tegen armoede en sociale uitsluiting	NVT	YELLOW
Bescherming tegen huiselijk geweld en partnergeweld	NVT	ORANGE
Bescherming van de seksuele integriteit	NVT	ORANGE
Harde veiligheid	NVT	LIGHT GREEN



CLUSTER SCORE: YELLOW



OVERALL BAROMETER SCORE

This overall score across all clusters indicates a partially positive but fundamentally vulnerable situation for young people in Belgium. This suggests that young people’s basic rights and opportunities for development are largely safeguarded, but that serious structural shortcomings and inequalities remain, putting pressure on young people’s living conditions and future prospects.

What does this score mean in concrete terms?

A score in the yellow zone means that Belgium is not failing in its duty to protect young people and support their development. The foundations are in place: there is high-quality education, protection against violence is enshrined in law, young people participate formally in democracy, and there is a well-developed youth sector. The rule of law functions and basic services are relatively accessible.

At the same time, the score shows that Belgium is failing to realise its full potential when it comes to youth rights and opportunities. In several areas (such as poverty, mental health, political representation, or housing security), young people are structurally not being heard or protected sufficiently. There are significant differences between young people, depending on where they live, their level of education, family situation or background. This inequality pushes the average down.

There is no acute crisis, but the system is not robust enough to protect young people sustainably against risks such as social polarisation, economic uncertainty or climate change. Without corrective measures, the situation could deteriorate, particularly in the event of new external shocks (e.g. geopolitical crises or social unrest). In particular, when it comes to future prospects for public finances, social security and related areas, Belgium is missing serious opportunities to safeguard the future of a new generation of Belgians.

The score also reflects the cumulative disappointment felt by young people: trust in politics is low, satisfaction with democracy is falling, and young people feel they are not being heard or supported enough. This undermines their faith in the system, despite formal opportunities for participation. The score therefore reflects not only policy reality but also lived reality.

On a positive note, this score is not a ceiling, but a starting point. It means that the conditions for improvement are in place: Belgium has the infrastructure, legislation and an active youth sector. Provided there is sufficient political will, structural investment and genuine youth participation, this score can rise in the coming years.

A yellow score is an important wake-up call: Belgium is certainly not doing badly as a country for young people, but it is underperforming. The score is not a sign of failure, but of missed opportunities. Policymakers must now make choices: will they invest in young people as a fully-fledged generation with a right to well-being, a say and protection? Or will they stick to ad-hoc measures without a long-term vision?

Below you will find a detailed analysis of how Itinera arrived at this score.



CLUSTER I. SURVIVAL

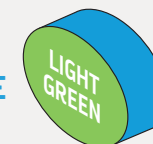


ACCORDING TO THE WORLD
HAPPINESS REPORT,
YOUNG PEOPLE IN BELGIUM
RANK IN EUROPE'S UPPER TIER
IN TERMS OF SATISFACTION

Well-being and mental health care

LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

SCORE



Although concerns about young people's well-being are frequently raised in public and policy debates, recent large-scale studies show that the majority of young people in Belgium feel predominantly positive about their lives. Various indicators paint a hopeful picture of general satisfaction among young people, despite the complex social context in which they are growing up.

For instance, the JOP Monitor 2023 – a representative survey of young people aged between 12 and 25 in Flanders and Brussels – shows that 80-90% of respondents usually experience positive emotions. Overall life satisfaction is notably high. More than half of Flemish young people say they are 'happy' with their lives, and over a third even rate their lives as 'excellent'. International data also confirm this pattern. In the HBSC study (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children), conducted in 2022, approximately 90.6% of Belgian schoolchildren stated that they were satisfied with their lives. These figures are only slightly lower than the 92.8% reported in 2018 – indicating a limited, but not alarming, decline, possibly related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compared to other European countries, Belgium scores quite well. According to the World Happiness Report, young people in Belgium rank in Europe's upper tier in terms of satisfaction, which suggests that the basic conditions for young people's well-being are relatively well met here. Factors such as education, healthcare, safety, and access to leisure activities and social networks undoubtedly contribute to this.



Nevertheless, there is cause for concern and nuance. Around one in ten young people say they are not satisfied with their lives. Within this group, girls, non-binary young people, young people from migrant backgrounds and those from financially vulnerable families stand out in particular. They report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction and mental well-being. These inequalities point to structural differences in opportunities, support and perceptions of the world around them. Young people also indicate that pressure to perform, social media and uncertainty about the future are stress factors that can weigh on their state of mind.

At the regional level, differences in overall satisfaction are relatively limited, although local factors such as the availability of youth facilities, mental health support at school and social cohesion in the neighbourhood can play a role in how young people evaluate their lives. The slight overall decline in satisfaction since 2018 highlights the importance of ongoing monitoring and support, particularly in light of societal crises such as COVID-19 and the increasing economic pressure on families.

From a policy perspective, this means that, on the one hand, there should be recognition of the positive overall satisfaction among young people, and on the other hand, targeted efforts remain necessary to support vulnerable subgroups. Eliminating inequalities in young people's experiences – including through tackling disadvantage, accessible and low-threshold mental health care, and inclusive school environments – must remain a priority.

In summary, we can state that the majority of Belgian young people consider themselves happy with the lives they lead. This positive underlying attitude forms a solid foundation for this sub-indicator in a youth well-being monitor. At the same time, it remains essential to remain attentive to the minority groups being left behind, and to continue investing structurally in a society in which every young person is able to fulfil their potential.

An important caveat regarding this section is that life satisfaction scores are often very closely linked to having a stable, socially connected home environment and family situation. Averages may not adequately reflect the internal disparities within a generation of young people.



MENTAL WELL-BEING



This score reflects the structurally deteriorating state of mental well-being among young people in Belgium. In recent years, the number of young people struggling with anxiety, stress, low mood and other mental health issues has clearly increased. This trend is evident from a growing body of research data, which points in the same direction in both Flanders and Wallonia.

Between 2018 and 2022, the proportion of young people regularly experiencing negative feelings rose sharply. Figures show that in 2022, nearly one in three young people felt anxious several times a week, whereas in 2018 this was one in five. The percentage of young people who often feel unhappy has also increased: from 14% in 2018 to nearly 20% four years later. At the same time, 32% of young people report difficulties falling asleep – a clear indication of heightened stress levels and mental distress. More recent figures offer no consolation either. In 2024, KU Leuven reported that one in five adolescents struggles with moderate to severe mental health issues.

Perhaps the most alarming figure is the rise in the number of young people experiencing suicidal thoughts. According to various sources, this figure rose from 17.6% in 2018 to 22.3% in 2022. This means that nearly a quarter of young people experience such thoughts – an unprecedented increase. In 2023, more than one in six young people aged between 18 and 29 reported that they

**PERHAPS THE MOST ALARMING
FIGURE IS THE RISE IN THE NUMBER
OF YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING
SUICIDAL THOUGHTS**



had thought about suicide in the past 12 months. Meanwhile, in Europe, an average of 4.3 per 100,000 adolescents aged 15–19 die by suicide (Eurostat, 2023). In Belgium, according to figures from Zelfmoord 1813, the figure is 6.6 per 100,000 adolescents on average.

The health insurance fund Solidaris also warned in a report that 40% of young people show signs of depression and more than half say they feel severely stressed. In 2024, Sciensano reported that 6.1% of participants in the health survey aged between 15 and 24 reported a generalised anxiety disorder. This is distressing and brings us to the important distinction between mental well-being and mental health. Mental health refers to the absence or presence of mental disorders such as depression or anxiety disorders. Mental well-being is broader and concerns how a person feels, experiences resilience and functions in daily life. Whereas mental health is often used in a healthcare context, mental well-being revolves around prevention, meaning and quality of life.

Both concepts are under pressure today.

This trend is not limited to Flanders. Signs of increasing psychological distress are also visible in Wallonia. At the same time, international comparisons point to a structural problem: for years, Flanders has had one of the highest youth suicide rates in Europe, with a historical average that is approximately 1.3 times the European average.

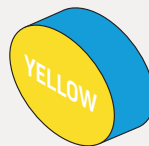
Experts and researchers view the COVID-19 pandemic as a clear accelerator of this negative trend. Young people, at a vulnerable stage in their lives, were confronted with social isolation, uncertainty about the future, experiences of loss and limited access to support. The literature emphasises how the lockdowns and the disruption to daily routines took a heavy mental toll, particularly on young people.

Given this worrying development, a low score is justified. From a policy perspective, there is a need for an accelerated, structural approach. This means strengthening primary care through psychological support in schools, accessible local support services and mobile teams. Active efforts must be made to break down stigma around mental vulnerability, with a focus on boys, LGBTQ+ young people and young people from families living in poverty. Prevention must be rolled out on a broad scale, including through relationship education, emotional resilience training and the inclusion of mental health in the curriculum.

Flanders has taken an important first step with the Youth Mental Health Action Plan. In Wallonia, pilot projects are underway offering accessible support in youth centres. Nevertheless, it is clear that the current provision does not adequately meet the high demand. There is much to learn from international best practices. For instance, Finland actively integrates mental health into the school curriculum, with tangible results in terms of early detection and stigma reduction. In short, the mental well-being of young people in Belgium is under pressure. The figures are not a temporary spike, but indicate a trend that has been ongoing for some time and has become more clearly visible due to the pandemic. If we want to avoid this crisis leaving deep scars on an entire generation, mental well-being must become a lasting policy priority – with vision, resources and action.

USE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

SCORE



The yellow score reflects a nuanced picture: whilst the accessibility and use of mental health care for young people in Belgium have improved in recent years, they remain insufficient in relation to growing needs.

One positive development is that an increasing number of young people with mental health issues are seeking professional help. According to figures from Solidaris, around one in three young people now turn to a psychologist or other care provider when experiencing mental distress. Ten years ago, this figure was just 5%. This increase points to growing awareness of mental health and a decline in the stigma surrounding seeking help.

Policy measures have also played a role in this. Since 2021–2022, primary psychological care for young people up to and including the age of 23 has been almost free of charge through NIHDI/RIZIV conventions. The aim of this scheme is to significantly lower the financial barrier to care. In practice, this translates into greater accessibility, although the reach remains limited.

At the same time, the gap between need and effective care is widening. Research by Solidaris shows that mental distress among young people has doubled over the past ten years, yet the number of reimbursed psychological treatments has remained virtually unchanged. Many young people in need of professional help therefore remain off the radar of the healthcare system.

In addition, there are signs that young people are coming into contact with the healthcare system more frequently through medication. De Morgen reported that the use of antidepressants among young people rose sharply between 2018 and 2022: +60% among 12–18-year-olds, and +40% among young adults. In 2022, 1.65% of teenagers and 4.4% of young adults were taking an antidepressant. This increase suggests that GPs are prescribing medication more frequently for mental health issues, but this does not necessarily mean that young people are also receiving psychotherapeutic support. Medication use is therefore primarily an indirect indicator that more young people are coming into contact with the healthcare system, albeit not always via the most appropriate route. Most indications in the literature suggest that this increase is continuing. The broader picture is particularly important: antidepressant use among children and young people under the age of 18 has risen by 43% over the past 10 years.

Despite these developments, support services remain insufficiently tailored to actual needs.

More than 15% of Belgian young people with severe mental health issues still do not receive professional help. Waiting lists in youth mental health care remain a structural bottleneck, particularly for specialised care such as inpatient beds or long-term support. The supply of qualified child and adolescent psychologists also remains limited. In addition to the limitations of the provision, there is still a stigma surrounding mental health. 35% of young people who reported having mental health problems in a survey by the independent health insurance funds admit that they find it difficult to seek (professional) help.

Internationally, Belgium scores around average in terms of mental-health service use. Young people here are more likely to seek help than in southern European countries, where care is often less accessible or stigmatised. At the same time, Belgium lags behind countries such as the Netherlands or the Scandinavian region, where school psychologists and multidisciplinary youth teams are well-established within the education and welfare landscape.

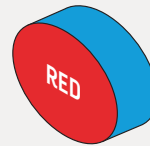
Regional differences are limited but striking: in Flanders, a slightly higher proportion of young people make use of the reimbursed psychological care scheme than in Wallonia, which may be explained by differences in provision and the level of organisation.

Strategically, there is a clear task here: further lowering barriers is essential. This means, among other things, better informing young people and their parents about the existing free services, expanding capacity by training more psychologists, and focusing on outreach to vulnerable groups – such as young people living in poverty, those from migrant backgrounds or in unstable home situations – who often remain under the radar today.

The recent reforms are an important step in the right direction. But if we want the score to improve further, the coverage and effective use of mental health care by young people must improve significantly. Only in this way can we guarantee that mental health care is not only available, but actually reaches those who need it.

PREVENTION IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

SCORE



This alarming score reflects a mental health prevention policy that is still in its infancy. **Despite some encouraging initiatives, the approach in Belgium remains largely reactive: mental health issues among young people are often only addressed after they have escalated, whilst systematic and structural prevention is lacking.** This low score highlights the absence of a broadly supported strategy focused on early detection, general resilience-building and education on mental well-being. Furthermore, the average age of onset for mental health problems is very early, at a stage when children are often not given sufficient preventive support.

Nevertheless, there are bright spots. In education and the youth sector, there is growing attention to mental well-being. Flanders has projects such as 'Well-being in the Classroom', the broad awareness campaigns by Te Gek!? and Warm Vlaanderen, and accessible support channels such as WatWat and Awel, which provide information and a listening ear for young people facing emotional difficulties. In addition, there is investment in monitoring and awareness-raising: Sciensano launched the Mental Health Prevention Barometer, and through the Flemish Suicide Prevention Action Plan, schools and professionals are being trained to recognise warning signs and make mental distress a topic of discussion. Similar initiatives exist in French-speaking Belgium too, for example through Promo Santé Jeunes, which focuses on health education in schools and youth organisations.

Nevertheless, the landscape remains fragmented. Preventive initiatives are often project-based or dependent on the enthusiasm of individual teachers or school management. A structural, mandatory framework is lacking: mental health is not yet a fixed part of the school curriculum, unlike topics such as nutrition or physical education. Furthermore, cooperation between education and mental health services could be improved. Although teachers are increasingly identifying mental health issues, there is a lack of systematic follow-up. Group sessions on stress management, resilience or self-care are rarely rolled out across the whole school. According to Gezond Leven, only a fraction of the health budget is allocated to prevention, both mental and physical. Belgium spends around 2% of its health budget on preventive care – a

proportion that falls short of actual societal needs. International examples show that alternative approaches are possible: Finland and Australia have incorporated compulsory mental health skills lessons into the curriculum. This kind of structural integration appears to be more effective than isolated initiatives.

Belgian youth organisations such as De Ambrassade and the Kies Kleur tegen Pesten network emphasise the importance of early detection of psychosocial distress. They invest in programmes focusing on social skills and resilience among young people. Despite these efforts, it remains difficult to achieve a significant impact at population level as long as the policy is not structurally embedded.

The current score therefore mainly reflects the fact that preventive efforts are fragmented and inadequate. There is, however, potential.

Only when mental health care is treated on an equal footing with physical health, and when prevention is no longer an add-on but a core pillar, will this score be able to rise to a higher level.

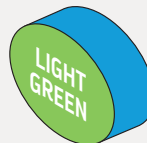
Prevention deserves a central place in youth policy – not only to limit future care needs, but also to give young people today more breathing space, self-insight and resilience.

Here too, Itinera wishes to stress the need to pay sufficient attention to the vulnerability of certain subgroups in society.

Physical health of young people in Belgium

GENERAL HEALTH OF BELGIAN YOUNG PEOPLE

SCORE



The light green score reflects a predominantly positive health pattern among Belgian young people. The vast majority of young people rate their health as good to very good, and this picture is confirmed by various national and international health indicators. **Belgium has a well-developed health system, which translates into favourable outcomes in terms of child and youth health.**

According to Sciensano's federal health survey, as many as 95% of 15–24-year-olds reported a (very) good state of health in 2023. In other surveys too, 90% or more of young people generally report being satisfied with their physical health. This can largely be explained by the relatively low prevalence of chronic conditions at a young age and widespread access to high-quality care.

Belgium also scores highly on traditional health indicators. For instance, vaccination rates for basic vaccines among children remain around 95% – a high figure that helps prevent epidemics and contributes to herd immunity. In addition, both infant mortality and child mortality are particularly low. Infant mortality hovers around 3 per 1,000 births, which is an excellent score by international standards.

Nevertheless, there are areas of concern that temper this high score. A primary concern is the gradual rise in overweight and obesity among young people. According to various international and national sources, the number of young people with weight problems has increased systematically over the past decade, partly due to a sedentary lifestyle, screen time and an unbalanced diet. The number of reports of physical complaints such as headaches, chronic fatigue and stomach ache has also risen compared to a decade ago.

A PRIMARY CONCERN IS
THE GRADUAL RISE IN
OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

A second major concern is accidents, which are often overlooked in general health statistics but have a significant impact. Among late teenagers and young adults in particular, road traffic accidents, drowning and other external causes, together with suicide, are the leading causes of death. Every year, several hundred young people aged between 15 and 25 die from such causes. Prevention campaigns focusing on road safety, fall prevention and risky behaviour therefore remain essential.

Furthermore, general health is unevenly distributed. Young people in vulnerable socio-economic circumstances consistently report poorer health. Around 20% of the Belgian population – including children and young people – live in a home with structural problems such as damp, mould or inadequate heating. These living conditions have demonstrable negative effects on health, including respiratory conditions and reduced sleep quality.

Regional differences confirm this gap. In Brussels, young people report, on average, a slightly lower self-perception of their health than in Flanders, which is linked to socio-economic inequalities and differences in housing and living conditions. These differences highlight the importance of area-based health interventions.

Nevertheless, Belgium performs strongly internationally. According to EU health indicators, we rank in the top half of Europe in terms of youth health. This is partly due to structural investments in the early years of life: antenatal care, follow-up via Kind & Gezin (Flanders) and ONE (Wallonia and Brussels), and broad access to basic medical care are clearly bearing fruit.

The task for the future is twofold: on the one hand, the high general standard must be maintained; on the other, there must be a more targeted focus on supporting vulnerable subgroups. New challenges, such as the long-term effects of COVID-19 on physical and mental health, or the impact of climate change on air quality and allergies, require proactive monitoring.

In short, Belgian young people are generally physically healthy. This sub-indicator therefore rightly scores highly. But to maintain this level and do justice to those who are currently not being adequately reached, constant attention is needed for structural inequality, prevention and early intervention.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

SCORE



With a very good score, Belgium is among the frontrunners in Europe in terms of access to healthcare for young people. The Belgian healthcare system is universal and relatively inclusive: children are automatically covered through their parents' insurance, and health insurance remains guaranteed for young people up to the age of 25 who are still studying and are dependants. Financial barriers are low and are further reduced by reforms such as the maximum billing system.

The preventive healthcare structure is also well-developed. Through Kind & Gezin (Flanders) and the Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (ONE, in French-speaking Belgium), young children are systematically monitored. In schools, medical check-ups are provided through Centres for Pupil Guidance (CLBs) and school physicians, and vaccination programmes run smoothly with high coverage rates. This structural approach contributes to the early detection of health problems and the prevention of school dropout.

Objective figures confirm the quality of this access. Only 1–2% of young people report unmet healthcare needs, one of the lowest percentages in Europe. By way of comparison, the EU average for the 16–44 age group stands at 1.7%. According to recent data from belgiqueenbonnesante.be, Belgium even records 0% of unmet healthcare needs due to geographical reasons – an indication that distance rarely acts as a barrier for young people accessing medical care.

Nevertheless, a number of structural problems prevent a perfect score. The biggest concern is the growing issue of waiting times. A survey cited by lespecialiste.be shows that almost three-quarters of Belgians (73.6%) consider the waiting time for hospital admission to be too long – a sharp increase from 49% in 2015. For young people in need of specialist help, such as for mental health issues or developmental disorders, waiting times can sometimes run into several months. Yet, during those crucial developmental years, prompt assistance is of the utmost importance.

Although primary care – such as GPs and paediatricians – generally remains easily accessible, GP density is under pressure, particularly in certain regions such as West Flanders and Luxembourg. Young people and young families in these areas report difficulties in finding a regular GP.

Financially speaking, access to essential care remains relatively good, but certain cost items – such as orthodontics, glasses or dental care for young adults – can still act as a barrier, particularly for families just above the income thresholds for increased reimbursement. Furthermore, a Solidaris survey reveals that one in three Belgians is cutting back on healthy food and four in ten are exercising less for financial reasons. Although these behaviours are less strictly medical in nature, they demonstrate how budgetary pressures can undermine preventive and healthy choices.

Regionally, there are minor differences in the use and perception of healthcare. In Flanders, the rate of doctor visits among young people is slightly higher than in Wallonia, which appears to be partly culturally determined: in Wallonia, people often wait before consulting a doctor. In Brussels, multilingualism sometimes plays a role, but the provision of services per inhabitant is higher there, which facilitates access in the metropolitan context.

Internationally, Belgium scores highly. In the Health Consumer Index, the Belgian healthcare model ranks among the best performers in terms of accessibility, comparable to countries such as France and Germany. Only Scandinavian countries perform better in some areas, mainly thanks to shorter waiting times and more streamlined organisation of care pathways. Our country ranks 5th in the index.

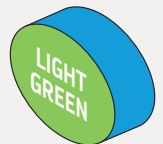
Strategically, the challenge lies in maintaining broad access whilst improving the system's performance. This requires targeted investment in capacity, including training more healthcare professionals. Digital solutions such as teleconsultations can reach young people more quickly and with lower barriers to access, particularly as this generation is familiar with technology. Above all, however, waiting times – particularly in mental healthcare – must be addressed through structural reforms.

The dark-green score indicates that the majority of young people in Belgium receive the care they need. Nevertheless, it is important not to become complacent. **Further efforts remain necessary to guarantee both quantitative and qualitative access to care, with particular attention to waiting times, regional bottlenecks and the pressure on families in precarious financial situations.**

AT A YOUNG AGE, OVERALL PARTICIPATION IN SPORT IS VERY HIGH

ACCESS TO SPORT

SCORE



The score awarded reflects a strong sporting environment for young people in Belgium, combined with clear social inequalities in access and participation. Young people generally exercise a lot, benefit from a well-developed sports infrastructure and participate in organised and informal sport to a relatively high degree. Nevertheless, a gap remains between groups, mainly based on socio-economic status, parents' educational level and cultural background.

At a young age, overall participation in sport is very high. Figures show that over 90% of young people take part in sport in the broadest sense of the word – including walking, cycling and informal sport. In the 18–34 age group in particular, the proportion of people participating in sport is around 96%. The level of organisation is equally impressive: according to the Flemish Government, approximately 36–38% of 18–34-year-olds are members of a sports club, and among children and school pupils, these figures are often even higher.

For children aged 6–11, weekly participation in sport ranges between 65% and 87%, depending on family income, according to figures from Ghent University. The fact that sport and exercise form an integral part of young people's lives is also evident from the JOP Monitor and other youth surveys, which show that sport is important for their physical health, social contacts and mental well-being.

Both Flanders and Wallonia invest heavily in sports infrastructure: sports halls, football pitches, youth centres and sports grounds are present in almost every municipality. Schools provide physical education and often also after-school sports activities. Furthermore, Belgium is regularly chosen as the host country for major sporting events such as European Championships, which further stimulates the sporting culture.

Nevertheless, there are clear differences in who does and who does not participate. Financial barriers remain a significant obstacle. Research by Ghent University shows that 81% of young people from high-income families take part in sport weekly, compared with just 63% from low-income families. For club sports, the differences are even greater: 59% of young people with highly educated parents participate in club sports, compared to 42% with less educated parents. Membership fees, sports equipment and transport costs are often difficult for families living in poverty to afford.

This is confirmed by data from Solidaritis, which show that more than 4 in 10 Belgians do not participate in sport for financial reasons. For young people, parents usually cover these costs, but when the family budget is limited, sporting activities are often cut. Although financial assistance is available – such as increased reimbursements via health insurance funds, local welfare passes from Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW/CPAS) or the Youth Sports Fund – this support does not reach all families, or the application process is too complex.

In addition, gender and cultural factors also play a role. Girls are more likely to drop out of sport during puberty, and ethnically diverse girls are under-represented in sports clubs. Reasons for this include dress codes, mixed-gender sporting environments or a lack of role models. This trend calls for culturally sensitive sports provision and targeted outreach.

At regional level, figures in Flanders are generally slightly higher than in Wallonia, partly due to the more developed club culture in Flanders. In Brussels, formal participation in sport is lower, but informal forms such as street football, urban fitness or sport in public squares and parks are more popular, often due to a lack of space and other contextual factors.

Internationally, Belgium ranks in the European upper tier for youth sports participation. More young people here take part in sport weekly than the EU average, but countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland achieve even higher figures and succeed in spreading sports participation more widely and inclusively across all population groups. Belgium does, however, have some good practices, such as community schools, neighbourhood sports projects and local sports initiatives that increase accessibility.

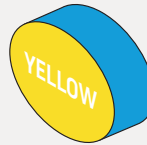
To further improve the score, sustained investment in accessible sport for all is crucial. This can be achieved through free sports taster sessions, neighbourhood infrastructure such as skate parks and playgrounds, and targeted projects for girls or young people in socially vulnerable situations. Reducing membership fees – through sports vouchers, a ‘sports pass for every child’ or automatic subsidies – could also further lower financial barriers.

In summary: access to sport is good for the majority of young people in Belgium, which justifies the high score. However, existing inequalities – financial, cultural and gender-related – lower the overall score. A sports policy that structurally focuses on equal opportunities and inclusive participation could further improve this score.

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES OR IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ARE SIGNIFICANTLY MORE LIKELY TO BE OVERWEIGHT

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

SCORE



A yellow score reflects a nuanced picture: Belgian young people do not lack food – hunger or structural malnutrition are extremely rare – but the quality of their diet leaves much to be desired. Although food security is high, partly thanks to the social safety net (child benefit, school meals, food banks), young people struggle with unbalanced eating habits and an insufficient intake of essential nutrients such as vegetables, fruit and fibre.

Recent analyses by the National Institute for Healthy Nutrition (NICE) show that as many as 99% of Belgian young people aged between 14 and 17 do not meet the recommended daily intake of vegetables (300 grams). On average, young people eat just 110 grams per day – well below the guideline. However, Belgian young people are not among the poorest performers in international comparisons: according to recent figures, around 60% of Flemish young people aged between 11 and 15 eat vegetables every day, placing them among the top performers internationally. Still, ‘every day’ does not necessarily mean ‘enough’.

These poor eating habits are reflected in rising figures for overweight and obesity. According to the 2022–2023 Food Consumption Survey, 14.1% of Belgian young people (aged 10–17) are overweight and 6.7% are obese. Self-reports in an HBSC study show even higher figures: around 21–22% of young people aged 11–18 reported being overweight – a clear increase compared to 2018. This means that today, around 1 in 5 young people are struggling with excess body weight, largely caused by a diet high in sugar and fat but low in nutrients, combined with insufficient physical activity.

The inequality in dietary habits is striking. Young people from disadvantaged families or in vocational education are significantly more likely to be overweight. Data from gezondleven.be show that 37% of young people in vocational education are overweight, compared to just 14% in general education – a difference that points to structural inequality in access to healthy food, parenting styles and health education.

Poverty plays a central role here. Healthy food – fresh fruit, vegetables, high-quality protein sources – is more expensive than energy-dense processed products. A survey by Solidaritas revealed that in 2022, around 33% of Belgians had to cut back on healthy food for financial reasons. It is likely that by 2025, this situation will not have improved significantly. In such contexts, it becomes difficult to make healthy choices, even when food security is assured. Nevertheless, there is some good news: structural hunger is not a regular feature of life in Belgium. Thanks to social safety nets such as school meal schemes, food distribution through Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMW/CPAS) and social grocery shops, there is a basic level of protection. Regionally, we see that in Flanders there is traditionally a slightly greater emphasis on nutrition education – think of campaigns by the Flemish Institute for Healthy Living and initiatives such as Healthy School. Flemish people also consume slightly more fruit and vegetables on average than French-speaking young people, although unhealthy snacks and soft drinks remain popular among young people throughout Belgium.

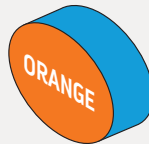
Internationally, Belgium ranks in the European mid-range in terms of youth nutrition. The percentage of overweight young people is lower than in Southern Europe or the United States (where over 30% of young people are overweight), but higher than in some Northern European countries. Belgian young people’s dietary patterns are similar to those of neighbouring countries: energy intake is sufficient, but the quality of the diet is unbalanced – too much sugar, fat and salt, and too little fibre, vitamins and minerals.

Policy measures have already been taken: in Flanders, soft drink vending machines have been banned from schools, there are awareness campaigns such as ‘National Fruit Day’, and work is underway on ‘Healthy School’ projects. In Wallonia, the Plan Nutrition Santé is underway, aimed at promoting health through diet. However, the impact of these initiatives is still only partly visible in the overall figures. The challenges are structural and require a comprehensive approach: healthy food must be made cheaper, more widely available and more appealing to young people. Health campaigns alone are not enough – legislation on the marketing of junk food, a review of the food on offer in schools, and a reduction in VAT on fruit and vegetables are also avenues to explore.

The score therefore indicates that there are no quantitative food shortages, but that the quality and equity of access to healthy food are lacking.

Housing conditions for young people in Belgium

SCORE



Our research paints a mixed picture of the housing reality for young people in Belgium. On the one hand, basic conditions are good: the vast majority of children and young people live in decent homes, with access to basic amenities such as heating, running water and sanitation. Youth homelessness is rare and usually temporary. On the other hand, the affordability and availability of quality housing for vulnerable young people and young adults is a growing challenge.

Legally, the right to housing is enshrined in the constitution, and this translates into high basic standards: over 99% of Belgian homes have electricity, running water and a toilet or shower. Only a small minority (around 2%) of households with children lack an indoor toilet or bath/shower. Other objective parameters, such as living space per person, are also favourable: Belgium scores relatively low on overcrowding among young people. The overcrowding rate for under-18s is around 12%, which is lower than the EU average (where 26% of 15–29-year-olds live in overcrowded homes).

Flanders in particular performs well in terms of housing quality in SERV's international comparison. In Wallonia, damp problems and an ageing housing stock are more common, particularly in old workers' housing. On average, 20.7% of the Belgian population lives in a home with at least one quality issue, although this proportion is slightly lower among families with children, who are more likely to live in newer or more spacious homes.

As far as the living environment is concerned, the overall picture is positive. Most young people grow up in safe neighbourhoods with access to parks, play areas and basic amenities. However, there are regional and urban differences: in cities such as Brussels, more young people live in flats with limited outdoor space. Air pollution and noise pollution can also affect the quality of life in some urban neighbourhoods.

The biggest issue, however, concerns affordability and access to independent living for young adults. In recent years, rents and house prices have risen sharply. As a result, young people are staying with their parents for longer: the average age at which young Belgians leave the family home is currently 26.2 years, slightly higher than a decade ago and comparable to the EU average of 26.5 years. More than one in five Belgians do not leave the family home until after the age of 30, often for financial reasons or to pursue further studies. For many young people today, buying a home is a distant dream.

The housing cost overburden rate – the proportion of young people spending more than 40% of their income on housing – stands at around 10% in Belgium for those aged 15–29. This figure is in line with the European average, but the pressure is considerably higher for low-income young people who rent. Housing costs also represent a heavy burden for families with children: around 11–12% of minors live in a household struggling with housing cost overburden.

THE AFFORDABILITY AND
AVAILABILITY OF QUALITY
HOUSING FOR VULNERABLE
YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG
ADULTS IS A GROWING
CHALLENGE

Waiting lists for social housing pose an additional challenge. In Flanders, tens of thousands of young people are on a waiting list for social housing, with average waiting times of three years or more. This points to a structural shortage of affordable rental properties.

There are, however, policy efforts underway. In Flanders, the Flemish Housing Policy Plan provides, among other things, interest-free loans for young people building or buying a home, rent subsidies for low-income households and quality control via certificates of conformity. In Wallonia, there are renovation grants and initiatives to expand social housing agencies. However, analyses show that these measures – although useful – still lack the scale or reach to tackle the problem structurally.

Internationally, Belgium ranks in the European mid-table. The situation is more favourable than in countries such as the Netherlands or the UK, where rents are higher and young people tend to live at home for longer on average. However, Belgium performs less well than countries such as Germany or Austria, where rental markets are better regulated and there is greater focus on rent protection and social housing.

The score therefore reflects this dual reality: on the one hand, there is no extreme housing poverty – the vast majority of young Belgians grow up in decent homes, with access to amenities and security. On the other hand, housing security for young adults is under pressure, particularly among those on lower incomes. Affordability, waiting times and structural inequalities pose real barriers to an independent, healthy start on the housing market.

THE BIGGEST BOTTLENECK CONCERNS AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS TO INDEPENDENT LIVING FOR YOUNG ADULTS



Cluster score Survival



Survival, as the foundation of children's rights, encompasses the right to life, health and a decent standard of living. Belgium's young people score average to good in this area, but not excellent. **In summary, physical survival rates and basic services are excellent – low infant mortality, high vaccination rates, few material shortages – which boosts the score.** On the other hand, the mental health crisis and affordability issues regarding healthy food, sport and housing drag the score down.

Belgium performs better than many countries on traditional health outcomes and basic infrastructure, but within our own context we see deteriorating trends in mental well-being and increasing inequalities. Regionally, Flanders performs slightly better on some indicators (prevention culture, sports participation, housing quality), whilst Brussels/Wallonia lag behind on certain points; these internal variations are masked by national averages and call for differentiated policies.

In terms of policy, there are positive developments: mental health care is becoming more accessible, there is greater focus on prevention, and initiatives such as the NextGen Barometer itself point to a willingness to change. Yet a cross-cutting vision is often lacking – young people's well-being, health and housing are interlinked.

A young person who feels mentally well, exercises, eats healthily and has a stable home will be able to thrive. This integrated approach must be central to future strategies.

From an international perspective, 'survival' is guaranteed in Belgium, but it is now time to raise the bar from mere survival to a healthy and happy life. A yellow cluster score indicates that there is considerable room for improvement. The qualitative interpretation behind this score – as provided in this report – is crucial. Ultimately, the value of this barometer lies not in the figure itself, but in the insights that lead to targeted action so that every child and young person in Belgium has the best possible opportunities for health and well-being.



CLUSTER II. DEVELOPMENT

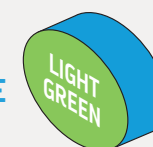


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Education

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

SCORE



Belgium is among the European leaders in reducing early school leaving. In 2022, only 6.2% of 18–24-year-olds left education without an upper secondary education qualification. This means Belgium remains well below the European target of less than 9% by 2030, and also performs better than the EU average of around 9.5% in 2023. In 2024, this figure rose slightly to 7.0%, which is likely due to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on motivation and continuity in education. Nevertheless, Belgium continues to perform better than most other EU Member States. By way of comparison: in Croatia, the proportion of early school leavers stands at around 2%, but in countries such as Romania it still hovers around 17%.

Regional differences are clearly visible in Belgium. Flanders achieves the best result in 2024 with 5.8% of early school leavers, whilst Wallonia (8.1%) and, in particular, Brussels (9.8%) score significantly higher. In Brussels, early school leaving remains a persistent problem, although the percentage there has fallen considerably compared to 2015. The gender gap is also striking: boys are more likely to leave school without a qualification than girls (9.2% versus 4.8% respectively). Boys from migrant backgrounds in metropolitan areas are among the most vulnerable groups.

This positive trend is largely attributable to targeted policy measures. The extension of compulsory education to the age of 18, the expansion of dual learning, step-up projects and tailor-made pathways for young people who have lost interest in school have certainly had an impact. Flanders has been proactive in this regard, adopting innovative approaches to keep young people within the system. In addition, preventive school teams, school liaison workers and the involvement of parents have also contributed to providing greater support for at-risk pupils. Internationally, Belgium ranks among the top performers. Only countries with very small school

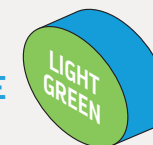
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populations or strict compulsory education laws score even higher. Neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have comparable figures, but face similar challenges with specific at-risk groups.

The score reflects a robust policy with clear results. Yet the task is not complete: structural exclusion still affects specific subgroups, particularly young people from disadvantaged families, pupils with a migrant background and boys in urban contexts.

EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION AND ATTAINMENT

SCORE



Educational participation among young people in Belgium is high and shows a positive trend.

Virtually all children attend pre-school and compulsory education. After secondary education, a large majority opt for further education, with both academic and vocational pathways well attended. The Belgian education system thus offers broad access to education and qualifications.

In terms of higher education, Belgium is on track. The EU target of 40% of people aged 30–34 holding a higher education qualification was comfortably exceeded: in 2022, approximately 47% of this group held a higher education qualification.

This increase reflects a long-term trend of educational expansion, with each new generation of young people being, on average, better educated than the previous one. Young people aged 20–24 are still largely in education, which explains their relatively low employment rate at that age.

The qualification rate in secondary education is also high. According to recent figures, 86–90% of young people obtain at least an upper secondary education qualification (Statbel). This is consistent with the low percentage of early school leavers, and demonstrates that the education system succeeds in adequately preparing the vast majority of young people for further study or the labour market.

However, there are regional differences. Flanders has a relatively higher proportion of highly educated young people than Wallonia, partly due to the higher progression rate to higher education. Brussels exhibits a striking dual profile: on the one hand, a high proportion of low-skilled individuals, and on the other, a significant group of university graduates – often linked to the region’s international and diverse population composition. According to Statbel, the percentage of 25–34-year-olds with a higher education qualification in Belgium in 2024 is estimated at 50.7%, a slight increase compared to the previous year.

BROAD ACCESS, HIGH PARTICIPATION AND RISING QUALIFICATION LEVELS ARE UNDENIABLE STRENGTHS OF THE BELGIAN EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

NEVERTHELESS, STRATEGIC AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT REMAIN

Internationally, Belgium ranks in the upper tier of Europe. The proportion of 25–34-year-olds with a tertiary qualification is above the EU average of 41% (2021). This puts Belgium ahead of countries such as France, Austria and Italy, although the Netherlands and Scandinavia remain leaders in lifelong learning and participation beyond initial education.

In terms of policy, there is a continued focus on accessibility and guidance. Scholarships, mobility support and guidance programmes are designed to lower barriers for disadvantaged young people. At the same time, there is a strong commitment to strengthening vocational and dual learning – including the promotion of STEM subjects – to improve the link with the labour market.

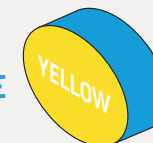
The score awarded reflects a solid foundation: broad access, high participation and rising qualification levels are undeniable strengths of the Belgian education landscape. **Nevertheless, strategic areas for improvement remain. Firstly, efforts must be made to achieve a 100% qualification rate, so that no one leaves education without a qualification. Secondly, there is a need for better alignment between educational choices and economic needs.** The mismatch between educational profiles and job vacancies – particularly in sectors such as healthcare and engineering – highlights that higher education does not automatically lead to better opportunities. Targeted guidance policies are crucial here.

Finally, lifelong learning deserves more attention: the focus is currently mainly on the initial educational pathway, whereas in a changing economy, continuing training is becoming essential. Those who learn how to learn from an early age are better equipped for a sustainable career. On lifelong learning, Belgium still lags far behind. Many people remain convinced that lifelong learning is unnecessary, as shown by Statbel's survey on barriers to participation. In recent years, however, we have begun to catch up: in 2024, one in three people took part in some form of lifelong learning. A hopeful sign.



DELAYED SCHOOL PROGRESSION AND DROPOUT

SCORE



Although the proportion of young people dropping out of education entirely in Belgium is relatively low, delayed school progression remains a persistent challenge. Belgium is among the countries with the highest percentage of pupils who have fallen at least one year behind in their studies at a young age. By the age of 15, an estimated 20–30% of pupils have had to repeat a year, with higher rates in vulnerable groups and metropolitan contexts (see PISA/OECD figures). Repeating a year is therefore not the exception, but rather an ingrained practice in the Belgian education model.

These high repetition rates particularly affect pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. International comparisons show that Belgium exhibits one of the strongest correlations between socio-economic background and educational attainment. Disadvantaged pupils not only repeat a year more often, they are also penalised more severely for poor results. This reinforces educational inequality and increases the risk of school fatigue, demotivation and – in later stages – leaving school without qualifications.

The phenomenon is most pronounced in French-speaking education, where the percentage of pupils repeating a year is structurally higher than in Flanders. There are also significant differences within Flanders itself: schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods report higher rates of delayed school progression than schools in more affluent regions. Although Flanders has been placing greater emphasis on remedial support and flexible learning pathways for several years, the overall percentage of pupils repeating a year remains above the OECD average.

In addition to visible delays, there is also hidden dropout. Not all young people obtain a full qualification at the expected age or via the standard route. In Flanders, an estimated 10% of pupils leave secondary education without a qualification each year, although many subsequently go on to gain qualifications through adult education or other pathways. This highlights the need for more alternative routes to certification and better monitoring of pupils at risk of dropping out.



Policy is increasingly responding to this. There is growing focus on reducing the number of pupils repeating a year through individual learning support, flexible pathways, and modular education. Flanders is also experimenting with dual learning, whereby young people can remain motivated and acquire relevant skills through a combination of learning and working. Nevertheless, the traditional model of 'starting over' after a failed year remains dominant in many schools.

Internationally, it is striking that countries such as Finland and Poland have virtually abolished repeating a year. They focus on intensive support, differentiation within the classroom, and preventive learning interventions. Belgium could learn from this to bring about a cultural shift: from sanctioning to support.

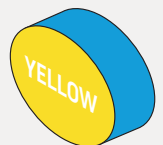
There is therefore a contrast between the strengths of the Belgian education system and this persistent weakness. Whilst the majority of young people leave education with effective qualifications, there remains a significant minority who stumble, fall behind or drop out along the way. If we wish to raise this score to an even higher level, it is crucial to structurally reduce the number of pupils repeating a year and to ensure that every young person obtains a fully-fledged qualification – potentially via alternative and flexible learning pathways.



Economic development – financial literacy

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND NEET RATE

SCORE



Youth unemployment remains one of the most persistent structural challenges in the Belgian labour market. In the third quarter of 2024, the ILO unemployment rate for 15–24-year-olds stood at 19.9% (Statbel figures). This means that almost one in five young people in the labour force were unemployed, an increase compared to the previous year (18.7% in Q3 2023) and significantly above the EU average of 14–15% in 2024.

Following the coronavirus crisis, youth unemployment initially fell (to around 16% in the second quarter of 2024), but this trend was reversed again in the summer due to an increased influx of graduates into the labour market. This temporary rise highlights the sensitivity of the youth labour market to cyclical fluctuations.

Regional differences are significant. In Flanders, youth unemployment fluctuates between 12% and 15%, which is relatively favourable. In Wallonia and, in particular, Brussels, the figures are significantly higher. In the Brussels-Capital Region, youth unemployment is structurally above 25%, a level comparable to that of southern European countries. This gap reflects not only regional differences in educational attainment and economic dynamism, but also persistent obstacles such as discrimination, limited mobility and language barriers.

In addition to unemployment, the NEET rate (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is also an important indicator of youth exclusion. In 2024, 9.9% of 15–29-year-olds were in this situation. This is slightly above the Belgian target of 9%, and shows that nearly 1 in 10 young people are neither in work nor in education or training, and are therefore at risk of long-term social exclusion. In Wallonia and Brussels, the NEET rate stands at 13.1%, whilst Flanders scores significantly better at 7.2%.



ITINERA SEES BELGIUM AS BEING AT A TURNING POINT: THE FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUTH ACTIVATION ARE IN PLACE, BUT THE RESULTS REMAIN AVERAGE FOR THE TIME BEING

On a positive note, the NEET rate has fallen considerably in the long term: from 17.2% in 2000 to just under 10% today. Nevertheless, there has recently been another slight increase (from 9.6% in 2023 to 9.9% in 2024), indicating that sustained efforts are needed to get young people into work on a structural basis.

Policy efforts are focused on activation through the Youth Guarantee programme, which promises young people an offer of work, a work placement or training within a few months of leaving school. In Flanders in particular, support measures such as individual vocational training programmes (IBOs) have been scaled up. Nevertheless, matching young people with available jobs remains problematic.

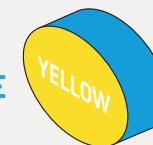
Structural barriers – such as transport poverty, limited access to work placements and discrimination – also hinder the transition from school to work. Young people in vulnerable positions in particular (those without qualifications, from migrant backgrounds, single mothers) face an increased risk of long-term unemployment or NEET status.

Itinera sees Belgium as being at a turning point: the foundations for youth activation are in place, but the results remain average for the time being. The ambition must be to bring the youth unemployment rate structurally below 10% and to further reduce the NEET rate. This requires a stronger link between education and the labour market, high-quality first work experiences, a better distribution of internship opportunities, and active measures to tackle barriers such as discrimination and mobility poverty.



INCOME POSITION AND RISK OF POVERTY

SCORE



The income position of young people in Belgium is relatively well protected compared to other countries. This is partly because many young people live (partly) at home, have access to social benefits and, when in paid employment, receive at least the statutory minimum wage, which in 2024 stands at around €1,955 gross per month for a full-time worker aged 18 or over. Nevertheless, young people's incomes often remain precarious: their working careers are usually still short, starting wages are lower, and accumulated wealth is minimal.

According to the 2023 EU-SILC survey, 13.8% of young people in Belgium aged between 16 and 24 live below the poverty line, meaning their income is less than 60% of the national median income. This puts the risk of poverty for young people slightly above the national average (12.3%). Children aged 0–15 (13.2%) and young adults up to the age of 25 are also slightly more likely to find themselves in a financially vulnerable position than adults aged 25–49 (10.3%).

On a positive note, overall poverty figures in Belgium have fallen in recent years. For instance, monetary poverty – also known as AROP (At Risk of Poverty) – fell from 14.8% in 2019 to 11.5% in 2024 (Statbel figures). This decline also benefits young people, partly thanks to the automatic indexation of wages and benefits, which means incomes rise in line with the cost of living.

The risk of severe material deprivation – for example, not having enough money for heating, adequate food or essential purchases – is low for young people in Belgium in a European context. Belgium is thus performing better than the EU average of 16.2% of people at risk of poverty in 2022, and also better than many Southern and Eastern European countries, where young people are often hit harder.

However, regional differences remain striking. In Flanders, only 7.7% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2024, whilst that proportion is twice as high in Wallonia and Brussels: approximately 18–20% and over 20% respectively. This gap also translates into youth poverty, with young people in these regions being disproportionately vulnerable.



Although Belgian policy provides strong social safeguards – such as student grants, child benefit up to the age of 18 or 25, and, since 2023, increased social minima – many young people still experience uncertainty. Research by Febelfin shows that half of Belgian young people are worried about financial matters. Paying rent, saving, or achieving financial independence remain difficult for many, especially without a stable full-time job.

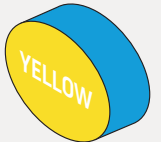
Strategically, the focus is on strengthening young people's position in the labour market, as sustainable employment remains the best protection against poverty. In addition, targeted support is needed for vulnerable subgroups such as NEETs, the low-skilled and young single parents.

The yellow rating indicates that Belgium is performing reasonably well in terms of young people's income position and poverty risk, but not yet at an excellent level. Further progress requires narrowing the regional gap, improving income security at the start of a career, and making affordable housing and care accessible. Only in this way can young people grow up to be truly independent and economically resilient.

THE RISK OF SEVERE MATERIAL DEPRIVATION, FOR EXAMPLE, NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY FOR HEATING, ADEQUATE FOOD OR ESSENTIAL PURCHASES, IS LOW FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN BELGIUM IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

JOB SECURITY AND PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

SCORE



For many young people in Belgium, the transition from school to stable work is bumpy. Their first jobs are often temporary, part-time or insecure. In Belgium, the majority of young people start with a fixed-term contract or as temporary agency workers before securing a permanent contract. In 2018, as many as 47% of 15–24-year-old workers were on temporary contracts – slightly higher than the EU average of 43.5%. Only countries such as Spain scored higher at the time, with more than 70% of youth contracts being temporary.

Recent figures confirm this picture: in 2023, around 49% of young workers in Europe were in temporary employment, with Belgium once again in the highest category (CEDEFOP – EU). In many cases, young people state that they were unable to find permanent work, meaning that precarious employment is not always a conscious choice. In addition, there is also involuntary part-time work – working part-time due to a lack of full-time jobs. Nevertheless, some young people consciously combine part-time work with their studies, which somewhat qualifies these figures.

A striking figure is the youth employment rate: only around 16.5% of all 15–24-year-olds are actually in work. This low proportion is partly due to the fact that many are still studying, but it also shows that a significant proportion of young people are not financially independent.

The good news is that the situation improves as young people get older. In the 25–34 age group, the proportion of temporary contracts falls significantly and Belgium even falls below the EU average. This suggests that temporary jobs often serve as a stepping stone to stable employment. Moreover, the Belgian system offers relatively strong employment protection: even young people in temporary work are entitled to social security, unemployment benefits and protection against dismissal – an advantage compared to countries with fewer safety nets.

Policies have been introduced to improve job security for young people. For instance, efforts have been made to tackle long-term temporary employment chains, and agency work is encouraged as a stepping stone, provided it is combined with training.

STRATEGICALLY, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO PROMOTE HIGH-QUALITY ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Nevertheless, obstacles remain. Employers are often reluctant to take on young people without work experience on a permanent basis. The high labour costs in Belgium – among the highest in the OECD – make this particularly difficult, especially for new entrants with limited productivity.

Strategically, it is essential to promote high-quality entry-level jobs for young people. Consider apprenticeships that can automatically lead to a permanent contract, targeted reductions in wage costs for young workers, and active support during the transition from temporary to permanent employment. Strengthening the learning value and legal certainty of temporary jobs is also crucial: a youth job should not be an end point, but a stepping stone.

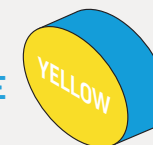
A recent positive development is the federal focus on social protection within flexi-jobs and student work: limited contributions, but with the retention of social rights such as pension accrual.

The current situation is average: young people often start out in a precarious position, but generally do go on to secure permanent employment. Belgium performs better in this respect than countries with structurally high youth unemployment or limited social protection, but there is room for improvement. The way forward lies in strengthening high-quality entry opportunities, reducing the costs of recruiting new entrants and building trust between young people and employers.



FINANCIAL LITERACY AND SAVING BEHAVIOUR

SCORE



The financial literacy of young people in Belgium presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, formal education shows strong results. For instance, Flemish 15-year-olds achieved the highest average score worldwide for financial literacy in the 2022 PISA test, with 16% of top performers compared to the OECD average of 11% and relatively few low performers. This points to an effective transfer of basic financial knowledge at school, certainly in Flanders.

On the other hand, surveys show that this knowledge does not always translate into sound financial behaviour among young adults. Surveys by the FSMA and Febelfin among young people aged 16–30 reveal that only 27% rate themselves highly in terms of financial knowledge, whilst 24% rate themselves as poor. Almost half of young people do not know how to draw up a budget, and 74% do not fully understand how banks operate, such as the fact that savings are lent out as credit.

These gaps lead to financial insecurity: nearly 50% of young people regularly worry about money matters and 57% say they are unable to save enough. The coronavirus crisis exacerbated this situation: in 2021, 61% reported financial difficulties, with one in five citing serious problems. A striking finding is that 34% of young people were afraid their bank card would be declined when making payments.

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Although the economy has recovered, the high cost of housing and living continues to weigh on young people. According to the National Bank of Belgium, only 35% of Belgians have a sound basic understanding of finance (scoring 8/10), with young people aged 16–30 scoring even lower on average – just 4.5/10. As for saving habits: although Belgians are generally known for their thriftiness, 57% of young people save insufficiently or not at all. Those who do save usually do so in small amounts, which leaves them vulnerable to unexpected expenses. An important caveat, of course, is that life has also become more expensive for many young people. According to the Flemish Association of Students, for example, a growing share of students take holiday jobs not to afford leisure activities, but primarily to cover their basic living costs.

Yet there is also some positive news: young people do show a great deal of interest in financial matters. The FSMA survey in 2025 revealed that 96% of 18–25-year-olds regularly discuss money and 81% find it an interesting topic. Topics such as wages, saving, pocket money, taxes and investing are coming up more and more often. It is striking that around 30% of young people obtain financial information from so-called ‘influencers’ on social media, according to a survey commissioned by and published in DPG Media. This demonstrates their curiosity, but also carries the risk of misinformation.

The government and the financial sector have been investing for several years in educational initiatives such as Money Week, Wikifin School and campaigns featuring influencers to break down financial taboos. These efforts are bearing fruit in the education sector – as evidenced by the PISA results – but must also lead to a sustainable, long-term behavioural impact.

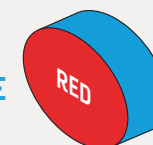
Broadly speaking, the average young Belgian performs well in terms of theoretical knowledge, but there is still work to be done when it comes to practical skills. There is a need for further support in budget management, encouraging saving habits and vigilance regarding debt risks.

The gap must also be bridged between what young people learn at school and the financial reality they face afterwards – such as dealing with taxes, loans or pension accrual. Only then can financial education truly equip them to cope with adult life.

Economic outlook

STATE OF PUBLIC FINANCES

SCORE



Belgium finds itself in a structurally precarious situation regarding its public finances. In 2024, public debt stands at approximately 104% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is well above the eurozone average, estimated at around 87% at the end of 2024. Since peaking at over 108% of GDP in 2021 – caused by the COVID-19 crisis – the debt ratio has barely fallen, despite a return to economic growth. Moreover, according to European Commission forecasts, the debt will continue to rise unless additional policy measures are implemented.

On top of this come chronic budget deficits. In both 2023 and 2024, the deficit hovered around 4–5% of GDP, amounting to an annual public budget gap of approximately €20–30 billion. In concrete terms, the government is therefore structurally spending more than it collects, meaning that the debt will continue to rise even without economic shocks.

For young people, these figures are not abstract, but relevant to their future. For the longer this path is followed, the greater the risk that the burden will shift to the next generation – through higher taxes, frozen public spending or reduced public investment in, for example, education, innovation or the climate. Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the National Bank of Belgium emphasise in recent reports the urgency of budgetary reforms, with a view to intergenerational fairness. The Study Commission on Ageing has calculated that, if no action is taken, the costs of an ageing population could cause debt to rise by an additional 5.4% of GDP per year on average by 2070 (IMF/Study Commission on Ageing). Declining productivity growth is also a cause for concern.

So far, interventions have been limited. **Belgium is struggling to impose budgetary discipline, partly due to political division and structural spending pressures – including pensions, healthcare and energy measures.** Internationally, Belgium ranks among the worst performers in the EU in this regard. Only countries such as Italy, Greece and France are grappling with comparable or

THE RED SCORE IS VERY LOW, AND FULLY JUSTIFIED

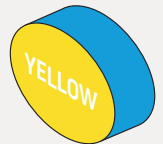
higher debt levels. By way of comparison: Northern European countries such as Sweden and Finland keep their debt ratios much better under control, which offers their younger generations greater financial leeway.

A clear future outlook for young people requires that we also take into account the demographic reality in which they will come of age. It is therefore useful to include demographic projections in analyses of youth policy and participatory processes. Belgium's age pyramid is losing its traditional shape and evolving into an ageing structure, with an increasing proportion of older people and a decline in the number of young people. This development translates into rising dependency ratios. For young people, this means that they will soon have to bear a growing social and economic burden with a smaller workforce, particularly in terms of pensions, healthcare and solidarity mechanisms. **It is therefore essential that their voices are heard in the shaping of forward-looking policies that take these structural shifts into account.**

The red score is fully justified. Based on the most recent data, Belgium's federal public debt in 2025 will amount to approximately €536.7 billion. With a population of around 11.8 million on 1 January 2025, this amounts to a debt of approximately €45,500 per person. **A child born in Belgium inherits a debt burden that is far from negligible.** The current debt dynamics are unsustainable and saddle future generations with a disproportionate responsibility. To rectify the situation, a three-pronged shift in policy is required: (1) promoting structural economic growth through strategic investment, (2) implementing a bold overhaul of public spending – particularly in the areas of pensions and healthcare, and (3) striving for a fair distribution of burdens across generations. Sound fiscal policy is essential to offer young people the future they deserve. In its current form, Belgian fiscal policy undermines precisely that promise.

COMPETITIVENESS OF THE BELGIAN ECONOMY

SCORE



The Belgian economy combines a number of strong fundamentals with persistent structural bottlenecks. There are certainly positive elements: Belgium has a highly productive economy, a well-educated workforce and excellent infrastructure. These strengths were confirmed in the IMD World Competitiveness Ranking 2023, in which Belgium rose to 13th place out of 64 economies – a significant improvement compared to 2019, when the country was still in 27th place. Belgium made progress across virtually all the pillars assessed, such as economic performance, government efficiency and infrastructure.

This rise indicates that the country has recently managed to implement a number of structural reforms and has developed an attractive business climate. As a result, Belgium is once again in the international upper tier, alongside countries such as Germany and the Netherlands. In the WEF's Global Competitiveness Index, Belgium scored 76.4/100 in 2019, placing it 22nd. It is now moving further towards the leading group, where Denmark, Ireland and Switzerland set the pace.

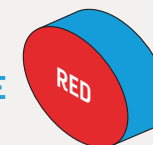
Nevertheless, the situation remains precarious. In 2023, Belgium faced the aftermath of the inflation shock, which increased the risk of a wage-price spiral. Strict application of the wage norm law – which is intended to limit wage cost increases – is therefore crucial to maintaining competitiveness. In addition, a number of structural issues continue to cause concern: the parafiscal burden on labour is particularly high and the labour reserve is insufficiently activated. Labour market shortages, especially shortages of technical profiles and healthcare staff, are also holding back growth, as are slow-moving permit processes and regulated energy tariffs that can dampen investment.

From an international perspective, Belgium is currently in a fairly strong position, but neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands and Germany generally score slightly higher. France follows at a slightly greater distance. Belgium's share of global exports remains stable, but there is little room for decline: emerging economies are knocking on the door.

To move towards a better score, Belgium must tackle the remaining reform priorities: increasing labour market participation (including through lifelong learning and activation), reducing labour costs, investing in the digital and green transition, and consolidating public finances. It is also crucial to create new sectors in which young people can develop – for example, in sustainable technologies or innovative services. A strong competitive position is not only a macroeconomic factor, but also a lever for prosperity, job security and prospects for the younger generation.

PARAFISCAL BURDEN

SCORE



Belgium scores particularly poorly in terms of the tax burden on labour. The so-called tax wedge – the difference between what an employer pays and what an employee takes home – averaged 52–53% in 2024 for a single employee on an average wage. This has placed Belgium at the top of the OECD rankings for years: more than half of the labour cost goes to the state, with less than half remaining as net pay.

Families and low-income workers are also unable to escape this pressure. By way of comparison: the OECD average is around 35–40%, the Netherlands stands at around 37%, and Germany at around 48%. In Anglophone countries, the tax wedge is generally even lower. The high parafiscal burden in Belgium makes it expensive to create jobs and acts as a disincentive for employers, particularly when recruiting young people or inexperienced workers.

For young people starting out, the high tax burden means they are left with less net income than elsewhere, making it harder to save, live independently or invest in their future. The system also discourages second earners – often young women – from entering the workforce, due to the steep progression in the tax burden. Employers increasingly opt for cheap and flexible employment arrangements such as student work, temporary agency work or internships rather than permanent contracts. This leads to more precarious employment among young people.

According to the IMD World Competitiveness Report, reducing the tax wedge is crucial to keeping the Belgian economy competitive. In the long term, the current situation is difficult to sustain, even with the relatively high productivity of the Belgian economy. The tax burden is beginning to hamper growth potential and the attractiveness of the labour market.

For young people, a reduction in labour costs would have a direct impact: more opportunities for permanent employment, higher net wages, and greater scope for financial independence. It would also help to narrow the gap between studying and economic independence.

A common response to the high level of parafiscal charges in Belgium is that these go hand in hand with a comprehensive social safety net and high-quality public services. This model of high taxes in exchange for strong collective protection has long been a social contract that enjoyed broad support. In practice, however, this balance has come under increasing pressure. Various international comparative studies – such as those by the OECD and the European Commission – indicate that, despite its high labour costs, Belgium no longer scores proportionally better in terms of the efficiency, accessibility or quality of public services. The gap between what people contribute and what they get in return is becoming noticeably wider. This not only undermines support for solidarity, but also puts pressure on future confidence in the system, particularly among younger generations.

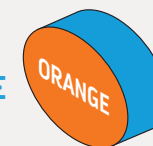
There is still a long way to go. A significant reform of parafiscal charges is necessary to make the labour market more accessible to young people and to counter the brain drain – whereby young talent is moving to countries with more favourable wage conditions. This is undoubtedly a priority action point within youth policy.

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FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, A
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DIRECT IMPACT: MORE
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PERMANENT EMPLOYMENT,
HIGHER NET WAGES, AND
GREATER SCOPE FOR
FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

SCORE



Business confidence in Belgium has remained under pressure since 2022. In March 2025, the National Bank's economic sentiment indicator fell to -15.1 (balance), the lowest level in over a year. This means that the number of pessimistic companies far exceeds the number of optimists.

The underlying causes are well known: the aftermath of the 2022 energy crisis, staff shortages in various sectors, sluggish economic growth and persistent geopolitical uncertainty (including the war in Ukraine). The picture varies by sector: industry and trade are recovering slightly, but the construction and services sectors are lagging behind.

Belgium traditionally has a rather cautious business climate. SMEs in particular are sensitive to political instability, complex regulations and economic cycles. Business confidence is comparable to that in Germany, and largely follows the European trend of declining confidence since 2022.

Low business confidence translates into delayed investments and hesitation to recruit new staff – precisely at a time when young people are looking to take their first steps into the labour market. Entry-level jobs, internships or apprenticeship contracts are then offered less readily. The innovation dynamic also takes a hit. Start-ups – where young people often form the driving force – find it harder to secure funding, staff and room for growth. Pessimism among entrepreneurs thus curtails young people's opportunities to start businesses, experiment and enter new sectors.

Alongside education and employment, entrepreneurship also deserves a central place in the debate on future prospects for young people. Entrepreneurship among young people not only offers opportunities for economic self-reliance and innovation, but also contributes to social renewal. Yet many young people today still face significant barriers to effectively starting a business: complex administrative requirements, a lack of start-up capital, limited access to networks and support, and an educational context in which entrepreneurship is rarely presented as a fully-fledged career path.

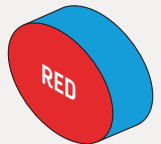
Furthermore, there is a culture in Belgium in which taking risks and failure are less socially accepted, which further inhibits the courage to start a business. Studies also show that societal respect for entrepreneurship in Belgium is lower than in many other European countries. If we truly want to give young people the chance to shape their future, it is essential that we not only facilitate entrepreneurship, but also actively promote it.

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PENSIONS

SCORE



The Belgian pension system poses one of the greatest long-term risks to future generations.

Annual expenditure on pensions already amounts to around 12.2% of GDP in 2024, and without intervention this will rise to 15.2% by 2060 – one of the highest percentages within the OECD. This places Belgium in the top three countries with the heaviest pension burdens, after Slovenia and Luxembourg.

The underlying causes are structural. Belgium has an exceptionally low effective retirement age (61.2 years on average) and a high life expectancy, meaning people are enjoying their retirement for longer and longer. Added to this is the particular reliance on the statutory pension: 86% of the income of those aged 65 and over comes from public sources, compared with an OECD average of 57%. The supplementary pension pillars are insufficiently developed or are paid out as a lump sum rather than monthly supplements.

For young people, this means growing pressure: today, roughly two workers still support one pensioner, but that figure will fall to less than 1.5 by 2040. If no structural reforms follow, young people will later face higher contributions, less generous pensions, or a much higher retirement age – likely a combination of all three.

The measures taken so far, such as raising the statutory retirement age to 67 from 2030 and limited reforms in 2022 (e.g. a minimum pension after 20 years of service), have had only a minimal impact: the estimated savings by 2070 amount to just 0.5% of GDP. More fundamental reforms – such as linking the retirement age to life expectancy or the mandatory accrual of supplementary pension entitlements – are politically sensitive and have been postponed for the time being.



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Internationally, countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden demonstrate that a sustainable pension policy is indeed possible, through structural reforms and shared responsibility between the government, citizens and employers. Belgium is lagging behind in this respect.

The deep-red score therefore reflects a real and urgent problem: Belgium's pension policy is currently unsustainable and unfair to the younger generation. To achieve a fairer system, the following is needed:

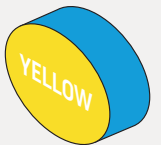
- An increase in the employment rate among 55–67-year-olds
- A cultural shift towards working longer and more flexibly
- Strengthening of the second and third pension pillars
- Structural burden-sharing between generations

Without these adjustments, the pension system risks losing its social legitimacy. It will then become increasingly difficult for young people to believe that they can ever count on a fair pension. This issue therefore requires not only technical but also political courage – with a view to intergenerational solidarity and future-proofing.

Youth employment

EMPLOYMENT RATE

SCORE



The youth employment rate in Belgium is relatively low compared to other EU countries. In 2024, only 26% of 15–24-year-olds were in work, whilst the EU average stands at around 35%. This low participation rate can be partly explained by the longer duration of education in Belgium. Once graduates have completed their studies, the employment rate rises significantly; among 25–29-year-olds, it exceeds 80%.

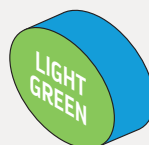
Nevertheless, the transition from study to work remains difficult for many. Flanders scores slightly better in terms of youth labour participation, partly thanks to the system of reduced social security contributions for working students. Flanders is also focusing on dual learning to enable young people to gain work experience during their studies. However, Belgium still lags behind countries such as the Netherlands, where students more often combine a part-time job with their studies.

Strategically, Belgium can improve its score by better integrating student work into the learning pathway and by accelerating the transition from school to work. Guidance during this transition also remains essential.

THE TRANSITION FROM
STUDY TO WORK REMAINS
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INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

SCORE



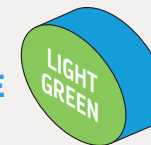
Internship experience forms a crucial link between education and the labour market. For a long time, Belgium had a limited internship culture, certainly in comparison with countries such as Germany. Since 2023, a compulsory internship has been introduced in Flanders for final-year students in vocational and technical education. This has created a need for tens of thousands of additional internship places and has led to logistical pressure.

The government therefore relaxed the internship requirements – company visits and simulations now count towards the requirement. In Wallonia and Brussels, the obligations are more limited. In higher education, internships are often still optional.

The general trend is positive: more young people are finding their way into work placements, partly thanks to EU programmes and youth guarantees. Yet the supply sometimes remains insufficient, particularly for young people from disadvantaged groups. More structural cooperation between schools and businesses is needed, as is support for businesses in mentoring young people.

JOB QUALITY

SCORE



The quality of jobs for young people in Belgium is relatively good. Young people usually work in formal jobs with social protection and receive the minimum wage. In Belgium, the gross minimum wage has been €2,070.48 per month since 1 January 2025, which amounts to approximately €12.11 per hour for full-time employment. Although this is among the highest minimum wages in Europe, there is a growing debate about whether this amount is sufficient to guarantee a decent standard of living, particularly given the rising cost of living.

Fortunately, in-work poverty is rare in Belgium, partly thanks to collective agreements and pay scales. Workplace safety and employment conditions are firmly enshrined in law. Many young people feel valued in their work, particularly when it aligns with their education.

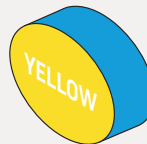
Challenges remain. Young people often start on temporary or part-time contracts.

Overqualification is common: one in five works below their level. Career progression is not always guaranteed, and job-hopping is common among young people seeking more meaningful work or a better work-life balance.

To further improve the score, Belgium must invest in career progression opportunities from day one, quality labels for work placements, and tailored support programmes. Employers, too, must become more attuned to the changing expectations of young people.

LABOUR MARKET MISMATCH

SCORE



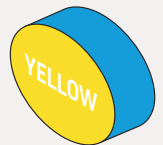
Belgium is grappling with a persistent mismatch in the labour market: despite high youth unemployment, there are many unfilled vacancies, particularly in shortage occupations. In 2024, the vacancy rate stood at 4.1%, the highest in the EU alongside the Netherlands. Yet youth unemployment remains above 15%, indicating structural alignment issues.

Causes include insufficient interest in or intake for technical and care training programmes, language barriers in cities such as Brussels, and limited mobility between regions. Many young people choose fields of study with poorer labour market prospects, leading to hard-to-fill jobs elsewhere.

The solution lies in better career guidance, the promotion of STEM and healthcare professions, and targeted training pathways such as individual vocational training (IBO). Digital matching tools, better cooperation between the VDAB, schools and employers, and incentives for companies to train young people are also important. The score indicates that Belgium is halfway there: progress has been made, but the potential is still not being fully exploited.

Cluster score Development

SCORE



The average score for Cluster 2: Development results in a yellow cluster score. This means that young people's rights and opportunities for development in Belgium are broadly guaranteed, but there is clear scope for improvement. The education sector in particular boosts the overall score: Belgian young people participate in education in large numbers, are increasingly likely to obtain a qualification and rarely leave school early. Early school leaving is therefore no longer a systemic problem, which is a fundamental strength of the Belgian youth policy framework.

Belgium has a relatively robust social protection system, with income safety nets such as child benefit and jobseekers' integration allowances that contribute to a certain extent to mitigating deep poverty among young people. At the same time, poverty experts rightly point to the limits of this protection: for some groups of young people, such as school leavers without qualifications or young people from migrant backgrounds, the safety nets fall short. Structural exclusion, administrative barriers and stigmatisation remain real obstacles. Nevertheless, thanks to its resilient and innovative structure, the Belgian economy offers a foundation for future wealth creation. The extent to which young people can benefit from this, however, will depend on targeted efforts to correct inequalities at an early stage and strengthen social mobility.

Nevertheless, there are bottlenecks that weigh heavily on the overall picture. The most severe impact comes from the sub-domain 'Economic Prospects', which scores poorly due to structural problems in the Belgian economy and public finances. The combination of sky-high public debt, an unsustainable pension system and the highest tax burden on labour in the OECD places a disproportionately heavy burden on future generations. Without policy adjustments, intergenerational injustice looms.

CLUSTER III. PARTICIPATION

In addition, the transition from school to work and the activation of young people remain weak links. Youth unemployment and the NEET rate (young people who are neither in employment nor in education or training) remain relatively high, particularly in Brussels and Wallonia. The proportion of young people in precarious jobs or on temporary contracts is also significant. This points to a need for better alignment between education and the labour market, and more sustainable entry opportunities.

Regional inequalities pose an additional challenge. Flanders performs better on average in terms of education and youth employment, but vulnerable groups remain under-represented there too. In Wallonia and Brussels, we see an accumulation of problems: higher dropout rates, lower participation and a greater risk of poverty among young people. Here, targeted reforms, enhanced support and investment are essential to level the playing field for young people.

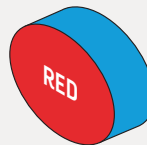
Finally, there is a need for interregional cooperation and policy coherence. Mobility between regions, bilingual training programmes and coordinated policy measures can contribute to a more efficient labour market and better utilisation of talent. Only through a structural and generation-conscious approach can Belgium guarantee young people's rights to development in the long term.



Democratic engagement

TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

SCORE



Young people's trust in Belgian politics is particularly low. According to a poll by WAT WAT and Medialaan (2019), as many as 70% of young people aged between 12 and 24 say they have no trust in 'politics', whilst only 18% do express trust. Young people feel structurally under-represented and feel that their interests are rarely taken into account in policy-making. They point to the lack of young elected representatives and the gap between their lived experience and that of policymakers.

From an international perspective, Belgium stands out negatively. Dutch young people show significantly more trust in democratic institutions: in 2019, nearly 80% of them considered democracy the best form of government, and they also expressed greater trust in the government, according to figures from the Kohnstamm Institute. Belgian young people, by contrast, are among the most distrustful in Europe.

Even at local levels of government, trust is low. In 2024, only 19% of Flemish people (aged 18+) said they had a great deal of trust in the Flemish government, and barely 15% in the federal government. Local authorities fare slightly better, but even there, distrust remains the dominant attitude among young people. During the climate protests, for example, it became clear that young people felt misunderstood when they were not taken seriously by politicians.

Efforts are being made to engage young people, such as the Flemish Youth Council, the right to vote at 16 for European elections, and participation platforms at local level. Yet these initiatives are barely succeeding in reversing the structural mistrust. Young people say they are interested, but rarely feel heard.

Sociologists have long noted political apathy among young people, with no clear sign of improvement. The recent crises – the pandemic, inflation, geopolitical uncertainty – have further eroded general trust in the government. According to figures from the Flemish Government, this trust recovered slightly among adults between 2021 and 2023, but remained structurally low among young people. The perception that politics often revolves around power games rather than solutions also fuels cynicism.

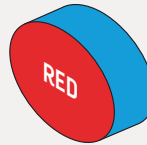
Democracy requires trust – and that only arises when young people feel that their voice matters. Belgium still has a long way to go in this regard.

AS MANY AS 70% OF YOUNG PEOPLE
AGED BETWEEN 12 AND 24 SAY
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WHILST ONLY 18% DO EXPRESS
TRUST



SATISFACTION WITH DEMOCRACY

SCORE



In addition to trust in individuals and institutions, general satisfaction with the democratic system also plays a significant role in how young people relate to politics. Recent research in Wallonia shows that only 26% of the population (aged 18+) in 2023 were satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Belgium – a sharp decline compared to 2018, when 51% were still satisfied (IWEPS). Although specific figures on young people are lacking, it is likely that they are at least as critical. Young people complain that too little is happening in politics, and that decision-making is slow and ineffective.

In Belgium, national democracy continues to score particularly poorly: with 25–30% satisfaction, we are clearly below the European average and far behind frontrunners such as Sweden or the Netherlands, where 60–70% of citizens express a positive view of the democratic system. Belgium belongs more in the same category as Southern European countries or France, where dissatisfaction is deeply rooted. The sharp drop in satisfaction between 2018 and 2023 – from around 50% to 25% – is one of the steepest declines in Europe and points to a systemic problem.

The low level of satisfaction points to a crisis of legitimacy. Young people feel powerless within the existing system. Nevertheless, there are initiatives designed to stimulate democratic renewal: for instance, the parliament of East Belgium has a permanent citizens' panel, and in Flanders there have been experiments with citizens' dialogues such as the G1000 and the climate tables. Such models have the potential to restore trust, provided that young people actually experience an impact on policy.

Civic education has recently become compulsory in Flemish schools, an important step towards equipping young people with knowledge about democratic processes and their own role within them. At the same time, Belgium continues to score poorly on issues such as the fight against fake news and political corruption – precisely the factors that undermine faith in the system. The results show that young people's faith in the democratic system has weakened considerably. If we wish to restore this, a multi-pronged strategy is required.



VOTER TURNOUT AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR

SCORE



Belgium scores highly on formal youth participation in elections, largely thanks to compulsory turnout. In the 2019 federal elections, more than 90% of eligible voters turned out, and young people (aged 18–24) were no exception. In Flanders, only 13.4% of young people cast a blank vote or did not turn out, meaning that 86.6% cast a valid vote – a figure that is close to the maximum.

However, that figure requires nuance.

Many young people vote simply because they have to. Only 54.8% of 14–25-year-olds indicated in the 2018 Flemish JOP Monitor that they would vote if there were no compulsory turnout. When compulsory turnout was abolished for the 2024 local elections, turnout among young people was consequently significantly lower.

Willingness to vote does increase with age, but remains moderate – indicating a low level of intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, in 2023 it emerged that almost half of Flemish young people (47.9%) have no clear political preference or are unsure whether they would cast a blank vote. The youngest voters (aged 16–17) in particular feel uncertain about casting their first vote, now that they are eligible to participate in the European elections for the first time.

By way of comparison: in the Netherlands, where there is no compulsory turnout, youth turnout stood at 67% in 2017; it was only after intensive campaigns that this rose to around 80% in 2021. In many European countries, youth participation remains below 50%.

**THE LOW SATISFACTION POINTS
TO A LEGITIMACY CRISIS**



THANKS TO COMPULSORY TURNOUT, BELGIUM SCORES SIGNIFICANTLY BETTER THAN THE EUROPEAN AVERAGE

Belgium has recently lowered the voting age for European elections to 16. This could accelerate political socialisation, particularly if young people are supported with clear information and resources. Initiatives such as the first youth voting test in 2019 and youth debates show that efforts are being made to engage young people. Yet many young people do not feel sufficiently informed. New learning outcomes for citizenship education in Flanders (since 2020) are an important step towards changing this.

Another trend is the rise of more extreme voices. Young people often use their vote to send a message, rather than out of party loyalty. In Flanders, Vlaams Belang is the most popular party among under-35s; in Wallonia, the PTB and green parties are gaining votes at the expense of traditional players. This indicates engagement, but also a sense of dissatisfaction. Political parties are responding to this with social media, younger candidates and campaigns aimed at young people, but for many, the options remain of limited appeal.

Thanks to compulsory turnout, Belgium scores significantly better than the European average. In the 2019 EU elections, youth turnout in the EU averaged 42% (compared to 28% in 2014), whilst Belgium consistently exceeds 80%. Nevertheless, mobilisation was also higher than usual in Belgium, fuelled by climate marches and social concerns. It is interesting to note that Scandinavian countries with voluntary voting also score highly – there, it appears that when young people feel their vote matters, they also turn out to vote spontaneously.



POLITICAL LITERACY



Political literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable young people to participate democratically. According to Itinera, Belgium receives a mid-range score in this sub-domain. Whilst many young people do have a basic understanding of how our democracy functions, a large group lacks the in-depth insight or self-confidence to be politically active.

International comparisons underscore this. In the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2016), Dutch second-year secondary students scored lower than their peers in countries such as Germany and Scandinavia. Belgium did not participate in this edition, but comparable indicators point to similar shortcomings. In the Netherlands, one in seven young people scored very low on citizenship knowledge. Furthermore, in a 2024 Eurobarometer survey, 51% of young people indicated that they had little or no knowledge of how the EU works – with Belgium presumably not standing out as a positive exception.

Confidence in political competence is also low: young people find politics 'difficult' and often feel uncertain in discussions about policy or democracy. This points to a lack of structural preparation in their education. Until recently, for example, there was no compulsory curriculum component on citizenship in Flanders; learning outcomes were only introduced in 2020. In the French Community, this happened slightly earlier (2017), with the subject 'éducation à la citoyenneté'. Teachers previously indicated that they addressed political themes infrequently or hesitantly – sometimes out of uncertainty, sometimes because of their sensitivity.



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COMPULSORY CURRICULUM
COMPONENT ON CITIZENSHIP
IN FLANDERS: LEARNING
OUTCOMES WERE ONLY
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In recent years, a catch-up effort has been underway. Teachers are being encouraged to incorporate political education more explicitly into their teaching practice.

Nevertheless, the distribution remains uneven. Young people in general education or with higher-educated parents generally have more knowledge than those in vocational education or with a migrant background. This confirms a structural divide: those who are already less inclined to participate also receive less background knowledge and preparation. This vicious circle requires targeted policy.

Countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark serve as examples. There, political education is systematically integrated into the curriculum from a young age, using interactive methods such as class debates, simulations of parliamentary processes and regular discussions of current affairs. Belgium ranks in the middle of the pack alongside France and the Netherlands. Although Belgian young people participate relatively frequently in social or political activities – 90% recently took part in some form of civic activity, according to the Eurobarometer – their scores on knowledge-based questions are likely to remain limited. Questions such as ‘What does the Senate do?’ or ‘How is a law passed?’ would probably produce modest results in a Belgian youth survey.

Generation Z obtains most of its information online, often via social media. This means that young people are up to date, but that the quality of that information varies greatly. Short videos, memes and posts have replaced in-depth analysis. Young people are certainly digitally savvy, but as a result their political knowledge is often bite-sized and fragmented.



Sense of belonging



The extent to which young people feel connected to their environment and society – their ‘sense of belonging’ – forms a crucial pillar of social participation. Belgium scores relatively well in this area: we rate the score as light green. Most young people feel part of their community and society, although there are clear differences between subgroups and regions. The pandemic in particular has put that sense of belonging to the test, but new forms of connection are also emerging, such as digital communities and thematic solidarity based on shared values.

Belgian young people are more socially engaged than average: 75% engage in voluntary activities, with 37.5% doing so in formal contexts such as youth movements or sports clubs. They derive meaning from social contact and say they feel happy in a group. At the national level too, young people predominantly feel connected to their identity. In EU research, a majority state that they identify primarily with their country, which also applies to Belgium. Young people often have a layered identity: in addition to national identity, they also feel a regional and European connection.

Yet this sense of belonging is not universal. Surveys such as ‘Être Jeune en 2021’ – in French-speaking Belgium – show that some young people felt excluded during the pandemic and believed that they were not being taken into account in decision-making.

Structural factors such as discrimination or negative stereotyping also mean that certain groups – such as young people from migrant backgrounds or LGBTQ+ young people – feel less accepted.

The JOP Monitor showed that, on average, boys hold more negative views towards minorities, which can undermine others’ sense of belonging. In large cities, young people with foreign roots experience social exclusion slightly more often, although figures on this remain limited.



THE SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED AND VULNERABLE BACKGROUNDS IS OFTEN SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER. POLICY MUST ADDRESS THIS

Schools are a crucial place where a sense of belonging takes shape. PISA 2018 data revealed that 15-year-olds in the French Community felt relatively strongly connected to their school environment. Flemish research confirms that in Flanders, too, around three in four pupils feel at home at school and experience support from teachers. Nevertheless, one in four feels less connected – often due to bullying, learning difficulties or unsafe classroom environments. PISA shows that a lack of belonging has similar negative effects on well-being as experiences of bullying.

Young people in Belgium are culturally diverse, and many young people from migrant backgrounds combine a connection to their origins with a connection to Belgian society. The JOP Monitor suggests that they are sometimes even more politically interested than peers without a migrant background, but feel less represented. This ‘participation paradox’ points to a gap between motivation and social recognition. Social belonging is often strong among these young people, but requires broader acceptance of multiple identities. Subtle forms of exclusion – such as discrimination in the labour market or in nightlife – undermine this. Linguistic and regional identity also play a role: some young people primarily feel Flemish or Walloon, which can put national cohesion under pressure. Nevertheless, young people often see one another as equals across language borders through shared media, sport or pop culture.

In terms of social connectedness, Belgium ranks in the European upper tier. Compared to countries such as Japan or some Eastern European states, where young people report loneliness more frequently, Belgian young people fare better. Our high rate of participation in community life is comparable to that of Scandinavia – a well-known driver of social cohesion. Nevertheless, it appears that loneliness is on the rise here too: in 2021, 9% of young people in Belgium felt lonely frequently – less than in the UK (20%), but more than in the Netherlands (5%).

To conclude this indicator, Itinera would like to point out that the sense of belonging among young people from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds is often significantly lower. Policy must address this.



Belief in democracy, the rule of law and the political system



In addition to participation and satisfaction, young people’s fundamental belief in democracy and the rule of law is also a key indicator of the political system’s resilience. This score paints a nuanced picture: a majority of young Belgians still endorse democratic values, but a substantial minority harbour doubts about the system or are open to alternatives. Support for abstract principles such as freedom, equality and human rights is predominantly strong, but confidence that these values are effectively realised through the current system is weaker.

Democracy as a system: scepticism is growing despite value orientation

An inter-university survey (2018) shows that one in three young Belgians (aged 18–34) does not consider democracy to be the most effective form of government. Although two-thirds still explicitly choose democracy, this is a smaller proportion than one would ideally expect in an established democracy.

This trend is evident across Europe: according to the Bertelsmann Foundation, only half of European young people have confidence in the democratic system, and a global youth survey by the Open Society Foundations (2022) showed that a third of young people are even open to authoritarian leadership if it ‘offers quicker solutions’.



At the same time, young people are idealistic when it comes to values. Research shows that young people overwhelmingly attach importance to human rights, equality, freedom of expression and climate justice. Belgian young people oppose racism, support LGBTQ+ rights and take part in protests for climate action – all indications of a deep commitment to these values. This is, of course, a description of the average Belgian young person.

However, that support does not automatically translate into trust in the system that is supposed to safeguard those values.

Belief in the rule of law is also mixed. Young people endorse the principles of the rule of law in the abstract, but have doubts about their application.

Globally, we are seeing an erosion of trust in the system among young people. In countries such as the US and Italy, tolerance for ‘strong leadership without democratic oversight’ is on the rise. Germany and Spain are therefore investing heavily in political education. Conversely, countries such as Ukraine demonstrate that young people develop a strong belief in democratic freedom when it is under real threat. Belgium occupies a middle ground: above newer democracies, but below frontrunners such as Scandinavia. Our yellow score is therefore realistic, but fragile.

Globally, we are
seeing an erosion of
trust in the system
among young people



Cluster score Participation



Cluster 3 – Participation paints a mixed picture: Belgian young people formally participate actively in democracy through voting behaviour and engagement in associations, and demonstrate a strong moral compass. At the same time, there is a structural distrust of politics, dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy is growing, and anti-political thinking is gaining ground. Regional nuances are evident – for instance, dissatisfaction with democracy is pronounced in Wallonia, whilst protest votes are more common in Flanders – but the challenges are overarching. Belgium is taking steps in the right direction, such as introducing the right to vote at 16 and strengthening citizenship education, but these initiatives have not yet translated into restored trust or greater satisfaction with the system. Internationally, Belgium sits in the middle of the pack: there is no crisis of participation, but neither is there a success story in this regard.

With a cluster score of yellow, the foundations are in place, but the potential remains underutilised.

The coming years are crucial: youth participation must not only be promoted as an end in itself, but also recognised as a lever for better outcomes in all areas of society. Taking young people seriously in policy is not a symbolic gesture, but a strategic investment in the legitimacy and resilience of our democracy. If we recognise young people today as co-owners of the system, we are building a credible democracy for tomorrow.

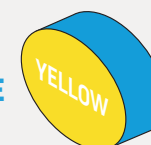


CLUSTER IV. PROTECTION



Protection against poverty and social exclusion

SCORE



Belgium has a comprehensive social protection system comprising child benefit, social security benefits and EU-coordinated action plans such as the Child Guarantee. These efforts are clearly bearing fruit: the number of children (aged 0-17) living in poverty or social exclusion fell from around 554,000 in 2019 to 460,000 in 2023, representing a drop from 23% to 19%. This puts Belgium on track to achieve the target of at least 93,000 fewer children in poverty by 2030 ahead of schedule. These figures are provided by the Federal Public Service Social Security.

Despite this progress, certain groups remain over-represented in the poverty statistics. Children in single-parent families face a risk of poverty of around 25%, and families with a migrant background also remain vulnerable. Furthermore, young people leaving youth care or coming from problematic home situations still too often end up in a grey area between different areas of responsibility. The policy approach is fragmented: housing, youth care and poverty reduction often operate in isolation from one another, with the result that young people with complex needs are left without adequate support.

YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING YOUTH CARE
OR COMING FROM PROBLEMATIC HOME
SITUATIONS STILL TOO OFTEN END UP
IN A GREY AREA BETWEEN DIFFERENT
AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY



**DOMESTICALLY, THE REGIONAL
DISPARITIES ARE STARK: FLANDERS
PERFORMS STRONGLY
(AROPE 12.8% IN 2024),
BUT IN WALLONIA (AROUND 25%)
AND ESPECIALLY BRUSSELS
(AROUND 44%), A SIGNIFICANT
PROPORTION OF CHILDREN LIVE IN
POVERTY OR SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Locally, however, investment is being made in innovative schemes such as ‘Housing First’ pilots or the Upstream project, which attempts to detect the risk of homelessness through schools. But these initiatives remain limited in scale and lack a national strategic framework. In other countries, such as the Netherlands, a national homelessness strategy has been in place for some time – Belgium is lagging behind in this respect. Flanders is taking steps towards an integrated approach, including through housing support programmes and prioritising vulnerable young people in social housing, but at federal level there is still no central coordinating body.

Compared to other EU countries, Belgium is now performing reasonably well in terms of child poverty. The AROPE rate (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) of around 19% is below the EU average of 24.8% in 2023. Whereas Belgium was still lagging behind neighbouring countries such as France and Germany in 2019, by 2024 we are among the few countries showing a downward trend.

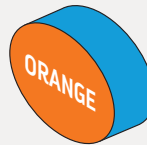
Domestically, however, the regional disparities are stark: Flanders performs strongly (AROPE 12.8% in 2024), but in Wallonia (around 25%) and especially Brussels (around 44%), a significant proportion of children live in poverty or social exclusion. Belgium is thus one of the European countries with the widest regional gap in this regard.

When it comes to homelessness, comparisons are difficult due to varying definitions. Nevertheless, the situation in Belgium is worrying: the number of homeless people counted in Brussels more than doubled between 2008 and 2018 according to the Brussels Poverty Platform, and recent research in Flanders suggests that around 1 in 5 homeless people are young adults.

In the long term, there has been a slight but clear decline in child poverty in Belgium: from around 22.8% in 2015 to 19% in 2023. This decline is partly due to increased employment rates among parents and higher benefits. At the same time, there is a risk of stagnation due to the inflation and purchasing power crisis since 2022: the overall AROPE rate (risk of poverty or social exclusion) for the population remained stable at 18.2% in 2024. Meanwhile, the situation for homeless young people is deteriorating. The coronavirus pandemic and the housing crisis have exacerbated the vulnerability of this group, despite some promising local interventions. Without a structural scaling-up of support, their situation remains precarious.

Protection against domestic violence and intimate partner violence

SCORE



In recent years, Belgium has clearly committed itself to combating intrafamilial violence (IFV), including through the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2016 and the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence 2021–2025, which focuses on prevention, support and judicial protection. In Flanders, the network of Family Justice Centres (FJC) is a significant innovation: victims can turn to a multidisciplinary team there that brings together the police, the judiciary, social services, mental health care and youth support. There are also general services such as the 1712 helpline, which offers free and anonymous help to victims and bystanders.

Nevertheless, these initiatives fall short in key areas. For instance, access to support, legal assistance or psychological counselling for victims – including young people – is often delayed or inadequate. In youth care, attention to child abuse has improved through cooperation between confidential support centres and the public prosecutor's office, but the capacity to provide long-term, intensive support is insufficient. Furthermore, Belgium lacks a central monitoring system for intrafamilial violence statistics, which makes it difficult to base policy on up-to-date data.

In terms of prevalence, Belgium ranks in the European middle: according to the EU-GBV survey (2020), approximately one in three Belgians has experienced intimate partner violence at some point. This is comparable to neighbouring countries such as France and the Netherlands. In terms of response, Belgium lagged behind for a long time – lacking central reporting centres or an integrated chain approach – but the recent roll-out of FJCs in Flanders and domestic violence coordinators in Brussels and Wallonia indicates a catch-up. Nevertheless, compared to countries such as Spain (which has specialised courts for intimate partner violence), there is a lack of a strong legal framework: judicial follow-up is slow and conviction rates remain low. On a positive note, Belgium scores relatively highly in terms of raising awareness.



ALTHOUGH THE PHENOMENON OF 'DATING VIOLENCE' IS NOW RECOGNISED, THERE IS A LACK OF PRECISE DATA AND STRUCTURAL PREVENTION MEASURES TAILORED TO YOUNG PEOPLE

The figures show an increase in reports, but also the continuing severity of the problem. In Flanders, the number of reports of domestic violence rose from 8,956 in 2002 to 15,450 in 2022 – an average of 42 incidents per day. In 2022, the 1712 helpline recorded 9,045 unique calls, representing 12,044 victims – of which 6,600 reports concerned children and around 2,000 involved partner violence. This increase indicates a greater willingness to report, partly thanks to campaigns and digital helplines.

During the coronavirus pandemic, peaks in domestic violence were recorded, leading to temporary government measures such as additional shelters and the 'stay-safe-at-home' campaign. However, incidence figures have not fallen since COVID. The risk of domestic violence among young people remains acute: 15% of young women in Belgium reported having experienced physical partner violence at some point (bruzz.be). Although the phenomenon of 'dating violence' is now recognised, there is a lack of precise data and structural prevention measures tailored to young people.

The 'orange' rating reflects the contrast between policy intentions and reality. Belgium has significantly strengthened its policy framework on intrafamilial violence, but still lacks a coherent, long-term approach centred on prevention. Current measures are often reactive – implemented following a report – whereas a cultural shift is needed in which domestic violence becomes just as socially unacceptable as, for example, drink-driving. This requires structural investment in relationships and sexuality education in schools, in accessible family support and in gender-sensitive parenting.



Furthermore, the fragmentation of responsibilities between regions and policy areas (justice, welfare, education) remains an obstacle to effective cooperation. A young person in Flanders who reports violence ends up on a different pathway than someone in Wallonia. A national vision, possibly via a federal coordinator or observatory for intrafamilial violence, could bring uniformity.

In the judicial sphere, protective measures must be able to follow more swiftly. Victims – particularly young people – suffer harm from protracted proceedings. Temporary restraining orders, electronic monitoring of perpetrators and faster legal proceedings are necessary to guarantee safety. Furthermore, too little attention is still paid to the underlying causes of intimate partner violence among young people, such as toxic masculinity, mental vulnerability or addiction. Investment in psychological support, gender education and social support is crucial to tackling this issue at its root.

The road to a truly safe home environment for all young people in Belgium is still a long one.

VICTIMS – PARTICULARLY
YOUNG PEOPLE – SUFFER
HARM FROM PROTRACTED
PROCEEDINGS



Protection of sexual integrity



The protection of young people's sexual integrity encompasses both the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation and the provision of support and justice for victims. Belgium has taken some important steps in this area. Since 1 June 2022, a thorough reform of sexual criminal law has been in force, centring on modern concepts such as 'violation of sexual integrity' and 'mutual consent'. Offences such as grooming, voyeurism and sexual cyber-intimidation have been given a clear legal definition. The age limit for sexual relations with adults has also been explicitly set at 16.

In terms of victim support, the establishment of Sexual Assault Care Centres (Zorgcentra na Seksueel Geweld, ZSG) represents a significant step forward. In these specialised centres, victims can seek medical, psychological and forensic assistance free of charge and anonymously. The centres are now operational in ten Belgian cities and are regarded as best practice within Europe. For minors, there are also specific initiatives such as Child Focus (for the prevention of grooming, child sexual abuse material and sexual exploitation) and the Stop it Now! helpline.

However, structural gaps remain here too. For instance, there is still a lack of broadly embedded relationship and sexuality education in schools. Although a biennial relationships and sexuality education (RSE) module has been compulsory in secondary education in Flanders since September 2023, its scope is rather limited. Furthermore, there are still shortages of specialised support in youth care for victims of abuse within families or institutions, and there are insufficient therapists and investigating judges with expertise in sexual offences. Policy is still searching for an adequate response to online safety: the number of cases of sextortion and grooming is rising, but the police and the judiciary are struggling with limited capacity to combat these digital crimes.

In terms of policy and prevalence, Belgium ranks in the European middle of the pack. Previous EU surveys show that around 12% of Belgian women have experienced sexual boundary-



THE DIGITALISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES HAS CREATED NEW RISKS FOR WHICH POLICY IS STILL INADEQUATELY EQUIPPED

crossing behaviour before the age of 15 – comparable to the European average (around 10%) and neighbouring countries such as France and Germany. With the recent reform of criminal law, Belgium is aligning itself with countries such as Sweden and Spain, which had previously placed consent at the heart of their legislation. The Sexual Assault Care Centres are also seen internationally as leading examples: France and other countries are using the Belgian model when setting up their own 'one-stop shops'.

At the same time, Belgium lags behind in combating online sexual exploitation. Countries such as the Netherlands and the UK invest considerably more in cybercrime units and the proactive detection of child sexual abuse material, whilst Belgium still often relies on international leads. Compulsory relationship and sexuality education is also more structurally embedded in many neighbouring countries than in Belgium.

The figures show an increase in reports, which partly indicates a greater willingness to report offences. In 2022, the federal police recorded 4,509 reports of rape (including attempted rape), compared to 4,442 in 2021 – an average of 13 per day, with a minor victim in 43% of cases. In addition, Child Focus reported a rising number of reports of sextortion (183 cases), the unauthorised distribution of images (175) and grooming (43) in 2023 (sensoa.be).

The digitalisation of young people's lives has created new risks for which policy is still inadequately equipped. On a positive note, gang rapes appear to be falling (from 241 in 2021 to 195 in 2022) and awareness campaigns are making young people more resilient in online interactions. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of cases remain pending in the justice system, suggesting that many victims are still waiting for justice.

The current score reflects a mixed picture: Belgium has taken significant steps in legislation and victim support, but still lacks a coherent long-term vision. In short, Belgium currently scores at an average level: it is making efforts, but is not a frontrunner.



Hard security



Protection encompasses more than just safeguarding against domestic violence. So-called hard security must also be taken into account. This includes protection against domestic emergencies as well as foreign interference and threats from outside Belgium's borders.

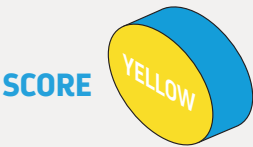
First and foremost: domestic security. In 2023, the Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (OCAD/CUTA) received 332 reports, 40% more than in 2022; 8% were classified as serious. Although progress has been made in recent years in terms of security services, concerns remain regarding capacity and local prevention, particularly in relation to young people. Internationally, Belgium ranks in the European mid-table; many threats originate from lone actors, with minors accounting for 18% of cases. According to Europol TE-SAT analyses, radicalisation among young people is on the rise once again.

Climate change is exacerbating geopolitical tensions. Young people are confronted with extreme weather conditions, mental stress (climate anxiety) and uncertainty. Belgium is engaged within the EU and is developing federal plans, but lacks a coherent strategy linking climate and security. Young people feel inadequately protected: around 48% experience stress when hearing climate news. Compared to neighbouring countries, Belgium is not lagging behind, but it is failing to keep pace with frontrunners such as the Netherlands and Germany.

The war in Ukraine is another source of concern. Media coverage confronts young people with the uncomfortable fact that, at the time of writing, the Belgian armed forces do not have sufficient capability to protect them. Young people still feel relatively safe, but are noticing the increased tensions.



Cluster score Protection



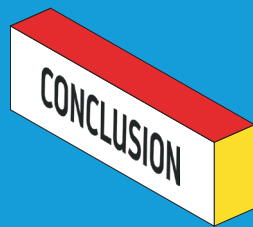
Belgium’s performance in the area of youth protection is moderate. Across all sub-domains, a mixed picture emerges of some progress (declining child poverty, new support initiatives), but also persistent shortcomings (continued high levels of violence, regional inequalities). We therefore assign Cluster 4: Protection an overall score of yellow. This average score reflects the fact that, whilst Belgium has taken significant steps – including falling poverty indicators and renewed policy on violence – the protection of 0–25-year-olds is often insufficiently guaranteed in practice. An accelerated, integrated policy effort is needed to raise this score to a satisfactory level in the coming years.

A 2023 poll shows that 73% of Flemish people are afraid of the state of the world. Young people want reassurance and action. They trust the police and emergency services, but are more critical of politicians, according to figures from the Gezinsbond. Communication is often inadequate: traditional channels dominate, whilst young people want better information via social media. They feel particularly unheard when it comes to climate issues.

Belgian young people are living with geopolitical uncertainty. Belgium offers protection, but this is often fragmented. This sense of insecurity is also factored into the score. Politicians and public services are still failing to make a sufficiently effective and reassuring impression on Belgian young people. Nevertheless, Belgium is, all things considered, a safe country to live in, certainly when it comes to domestic crime. The growing concerns about the country’s external resilience, however, are a separate issue.

BELGIAN YOUNG
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The Itinera NextGen Barometer 2025 shows that Belgium is at a critical crossroads. With an overall 'yellow' score, we are just below average, indicating a situation that is both promising and fundamentally vulnerable. Belgian young people have solid foundations: broad access to education, healthcare, formal opportunities for participation and legal protection against violence. But at the same time, structural inequalities, mental health issues, housing insecurity, the risk of poverty and waning trust in democratic institutions make it clear that these foundations are not equally accessible or robust for everyone.

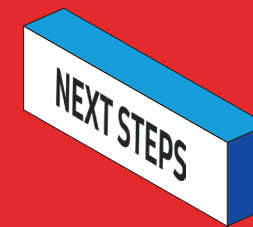
The barometer sharply highlights where the opportunities lie, but also where the system falls short. In each of the four clusters – Survival, Development, Participation and Protection – vulnerabilities become apparent which, when combined, place the living environment and future prospects of young people under serious pressure. The report makes it clear that Belgium is in a 'yellow zone': there is no acute youth crisis, but the system is insufficiently resilient to the multitude of social challenges facing young people today.

The common thread running through the findings is the growing gap between formal rights and lived reality. Although young people are theoretically well protected, many feel invisible, unheard and uncertain about their future. This gap translates into declining trust in institutions, increased mental pressure and a diminishing sense of control. The fact that young people no longer automatically identify with the societal compass is a warning sign.

Yet this report is not a tale of pessimism. A score like this is not an endpoint, but a lever. It means that Belgium has the necessary infrastructure and knowledge to do better – provided there is the political will to truly treat young people as a priority. The barometer also shows that the potential is there: young people are socially engaged, willing to contribute and possess strong values. They do not ask to be patronised, but for trust – and policies that involve, understand and empower them.

If policymakers take this barometer seriously, they can use it as a strategic compass. Every indicator in this report is both a mirror and a lever. By investing specifically in mental health, quality education, equal opportunities in the labour market, social protection and genuine youth participation, Belgium can not only improve its scores but, above all, regain the trust of a new generation.

Our central message therefore remains: young people are not objects of policy. They are full citizens – today, not just tomorrow. It is up to society to realise their right to a hopeful future.



THE RESULTS OF THE NEXTGEN BAROMETER ARE CLEAR:

the foundations for a future-proof society are in place, but they are not sufficiently evenly distributed or sustainably secured. Young people in Belgium are growing up in a context of structural tensions – between formal rights and actual access, between opportunities for participation and being truly heard, between promise and policy reality. The work does not end with this diagnosis. On the contrary: it is precisely here that Itinera is taking the next step with Project HOPE.

HOPE is Itinera's response to the urgent need for long-term thinking for and with young people. Whilst the barometer describes the current situation, HOPE aims to broaden the horizon. This programme brings together researchers, experts and young voices in a mission to develop feasible, future-oriented policy solutions that are rooted in the reality of young people themselves.

Specifically, through HOPE, Itinera aims to:

- Put structural reforms on the agenda in areas such as education, mental health, the labour market and social protection, with an emphasis on prevention, equality and resilience.
- Promote participatory policy development: not just consulting young people, but involving them as co-architects of solutions. HOPE provides co-creation processes, youth forums and intergenerational brainstorming sessions.
- Bridge the regional and federal policy divide: by approaching policy reforms in a systemic and interfederal manner, with a focus on coherence, scalability and impact across regions.
- Translate international best practices into Belgian contexts: HOPE links insights from the barometer to innovative solutions that have proven to work elsewhere.
- Develop long-term indicators and scenarios: using the barometer as a starting point, HOPE measures not only where young people stand today, but also how different policy choices might shape their future.

Project HOPE is therefore not merely a follow-up to the barometer, but a strategic translation of figures into choices, of analysis into action. The aim is clear: to formulate policies that do not treat the youngest generation as a marginalised group, but as a central constituency of the society we wish to build. Those who invest in hope invest in the future.



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