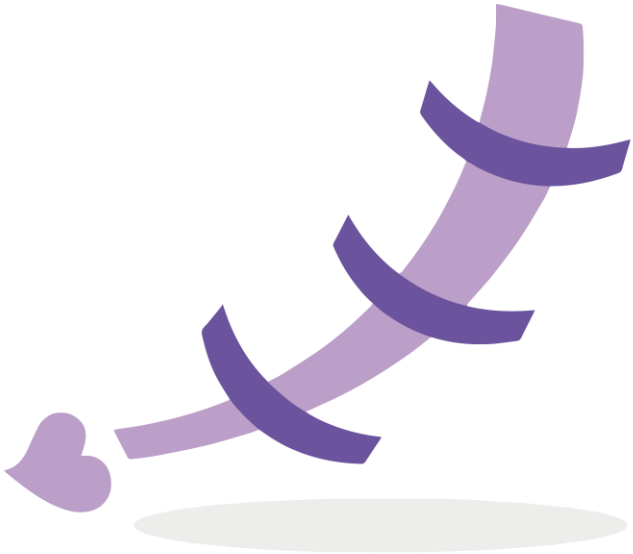

WHEN SCARS BECOME ART

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSION AND MENTAL WELL-BEING OF YOUNG ROMA AND REFUGEES

– *SERBIA*-

Co-funded by the European Union

EDITCENTAR
EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT INFORMATION TRAINING

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Introduction

Youth mental health in Serbia represents a growing public health and social inclusion challenge. Research and national indicators show that approximately **one in four young people** experience stress, anxiety, or depressive symptoms. Despite this, mental health remains a relatively low priority within public health systems and youth policies, while access to youth-friendly, community-based mental health services is limited.

Young people from marginalized groups—particularly **Roma youth, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers**—are exposed to compounded risks. Discrimination, social exclusion, poverty, forced migration, and limited access to education and employment significantly affect their psychosocial well-being. Findings from the *When Scars (!) Become Art* research confirm that discrimination directly contributes to anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction among these groups.

Overview in Serbia

Mental health challenges among young people in Serbia are widespread and often untreated. Preventive programs and early interventions remain underdeveloped, and institutional responses are largely reactive. Stigma surrounding mental health further discourages young people from seeking support.

Roma youth in Serbia face long-term structural discrimination (antigypsyism), beginning in early childhood. Key challenges include:

- Segregated or lower-quality education and high dropout rates, especially in secondary education;
- Very low participation in higher education;
- High unemployment and overrepresentation in informal labor;
- Persistent prejudice and social exclusion.

Research findings indicate that Roma youth report lower life satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety and internalized discrimination. However, increased social inclusion, education, and social connectedness are strongly associated with better mental health outcomes.

Young migrants and refugees in Serbia often experience acute psychological distress related to forced migration, trauma, uncertainty, and insecure legal and socio-economic status. Studies show extremely high exposure to traumatic events, with a majority reporting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress.Educational inclusion and supportive, multicultural school environments significantly reduce distress and improve integration, yet such programs remain limited in scope and coverage.

Strategic Documents wich support mental heath in Serbia

- **Strategy for the Development of Mental Health Care (2007):** Focused on deinstitutionalization and the development of community-based mental health services. While implementation began, many objectives remain unfulfilled.
- **Programme for the Protection of Mental Health (2019–2026):** Aims to strengthen prevention, early diagnosis, community services, intersectoral coordination, and targeted support for vulnerable groups, aligning Serbia with EU and WHO standards.

Institutional Responsibilities in Serbia

1. **Ministry of Health**

Lead authority for mental health policy implementation and financing;

2. **Ministry of Education**

Integration of mental health education and counseling in schools;

3. **Ministry of Youth and Sports**

Coordination of youth well-being and psychosocial support policies;

4. **Institute of Public Health "Dr Milan Jovanović Batut"**

Epidemiological monitoring and awareness campaigns.

In 2022, six ministries signed a **Memorandum of Cooperation on Mental Health**, marking an important step toward intersectoral collaboration.

Youth Policy Context

The **National Youth Strategy 2023–2030** recognizes mental health as a core component of youth well-being. Measure 5.1 specifically promotes youth counseling services, non-formal education, and partnerships with civil society organizations.

Foundational Principles

1. **Evidence-based policy-making** – Programs must be grounded in research and data.
2. **Integrated, multisectoral approach** – Health, education, youth, and social sectors must act jointly.
3. **Youth participation** – Young people should co-create, test, and evaluate programs.
4. **Prevention and early intervention** – Priority on awareness, resilience, and early support.
5. **Accessibility and de-stigmatization** – Free, inclusive, culturally sensitive services, especially for marginalized groups.

Policy Recommendations for Serbia

National Policy and Strategy

Aim is to establish a coherent national framework for youth mental health.

Recommended actions:

1. Integrate youth mental health promotion and prevention across national strategies;
2. Establish a permanent inter-ministerial coordination body for youth mental health;
3. Secure sustainable, long-term funding for prevention and early-intervention programs.

Education and Schools

Aim is to strengthen schools as hubs for mental health promotion and early support.

Recommended actions:

1. Fully implement School Mental Health Guidelines nationwide;
2. Introduce age-appropriate mental health education into curricula;
3. Train teachers, school psychologists, and pedagogues in early identification and support.

Health and Social Services

Aim is to improve access to youth-friendly mental health care.

Recommended actions:

1. Expand free psychological counseling such is OPENS constellation which EDIT Center Psychological counseling is part through primary healthcare and youth centers;
2. Establish youth-friendly services and mobile mental health teams;
3. Reduce waiting lists and administrative barriers for marginalized youth.

Community-Based Prevention and Promotion

Aim is to build supportive local environments for young people.

Recommended actions:

1. Support community-based art, sport, and cultural initiatives for mental well-being;
2. Strengthen the role of youth offices and cultural institutions in awareness-raising, encouraging field work;
3. Recognize and fund NGO-led and youth-led initiatives as integral parts of prevention systems.

Digital Tools and Online Support

Aim is to expand digital access to mental health resources.

Recommended actions:

1. Usage of the Toolkit and its activities (When Scars (!) Become Art project) for the youth workers and young people from the vulnerable groups to establish peer support

2. Integrate helplines, chat services, and mobile applications (such is the mobile App created in the When Scars (!) Become Art project) for self-assessment and peer support;
3. Further develop and scale up the national platform **“Sve je OK”**;
4. Ensure accessibility for young people in remote and underserved areas (field activities).

Specific Recommendations for Serbia

1. Fully implement School Mental Health Guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF.
2. Expand and institutionalize successful digital and community-based models such as the Mobile App and Toolkit as well the platform **“Sve je OK.”**
3. Strengthen intersectoral cooperation between health, education, and youth sectors.
4. Prioritize targeted outreach to Roma youth, migrants, refugees, and other high-risk groups with focus on field and community basedativities.
5. Systematically recognize and fund art-based and participatory community projects as effective mental health tools.

Conclusion

Improving youth mental health in Serbia requires a coordinated, inclusive, and preventive approach. Evidence from research and practice demonstrates that discrimination, exclusion, and lack of access to supportive services significantly undermine young people’s well-being—particularly among marginalized groups. Investing in community-based, youth-friendly, and participatory mental health systems is not only a social obligation, but a long-term investment in social cohesion and resilience.

“It is okay not to be okay—just do not stay there alone.”

Resources

- Programme for the Protection of Mental Health of the Republic of Serbia (2019–2026)
- National Youth Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2023–2030)
- UNICEF Serbia – School Mental Health Guidelines (2023)
- National Mental Health Platform **“Sve je OK”**
- Findings from the When Scars Become Art national research and national expert panel (2024–2025)

Contact

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