

# THE ANTHEM OF A GENERATION: YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT TO ENTER THE LABOR MARKET

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This is the anthem of a generation  
We live off anxiety.  
(Dubioza Kolektiv)

Grounded in a broader socio-cultural context, this article explores the impact of increasing job precarization and the instability of the labor market on the employment prospects of young people in Croatia. By combining a review of previous research with new data collected through a student survey conducted during the academic years 2024–2025, the study highlights both a gradual adaptation to the shifting employment landscape and a notable decline in expectations regarding job stability. Furthermore, the findings underscore a growing concern among students about their future financial security, suggesting that economic uncertainty is becoming a defining feature of youth transition into the labor market.

Keywords: youth, employment, Croatia

Between 2017 and 2021, collaborators on the project *Transformation of Work in Post-Transition Croatia* (TRANSWORK, HRZZ) observed the dynamics of change and adaptation in the work and life economy of Croatian citizens, shaped by significant transformations in labor experiences.<sup>1</sup> Although Croatian society – and consequently the domains of labor and employment – have been significantly affected by phenomena such as corruption and nepotism since the beginning of the post-socialist “transition” period, toward the end of the aforementioned project we observed a somewhat different situation in the labor market, as evident from responses of our interlocutors that diverged from

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<sup>1</sup> This article was created within the project “Precarious Culture and the Future of Work” (BURA), financed by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

those collected at the outset of the research. More specifically, we identified a partial re-definition of the meanings ascribed to work and employment, along with shifts in broader identity frameworks. Additionally, these changes had a substantial impact on how the respondents perceived the future. Therefore, in our following project, *Precarious Culture and the Future of Work* (BURA, NextGenerationEU), we focused on the quality and scope of these changes.

After outlining the context in which the changes occurred and presenting some findings from other researchers – especially those who have studied the generation currently entering the labor market – I will present the initial findings of our research, conducted with students (primarily in the early years of study) across several higher education institutions in Croatia. Our research aimed to explore the motivations behind students' choice of major, their employment status while studying, key factors influencing their job preferences, their willingness to accept employment requiring a lower level of qualification than their field of study, their concerns about financial stability, and their overall aspirations for the future.

## THE CONTEXT

The labor market was still experiencing the repercussions of the 2008/2009 economic crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted economies that had only begun to recover. According to a 2020 Eurofound report, the pandemic had an unprecedented effect on the economy, labor market, and society, despite the European Union's introduction of financial and other support measures, including the *Support to Mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE)* instrument. In the second quarter of 2020, there were 5.7 million fewer employed individuals compared to the fourth quarter of 2019.<sup>2</sup>

Eurostat data further indicate that the pandemic disproportionately affected employment among individuals aged 15 to 29.<sup>3</sup> The *European Youth Forum* report on the social, economic, and mental health impact of COVID-19 on young people in Europe highlighted this trend, stating: "Students were the first to get fired". Respondents reported significant insecurity, dissatisfaction, stress, and concerns about their future:

This fear and uncertainty around work was said to lead to a willingness to accept poor quality work and poor-quality work conditions. Young people in the study were concerned about being asked to reduce their work conditions or take temporary or more precarious contracts. They felt they had no choice over this, as poor conditions were preferable to losing work or having no work.<sup>4</sup>

A review of previous, primarily quantitative, relevant research found that young individuals who are unemployed or working in precarious jobs are more vulnerable to physical

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/system/files/2021-03/ef20050hr1.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> [https://youth.europa.eu/news/effects-of-covid-19-youth-employment\\_hr](https://youth.europa.eu/news/effects-of-covid-19-youth-employment_hr).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youthforum.org/files/European20Youth20Forum20Report20v1.2.pdf>.

and mental health issues (Bartelink et al. 2020: 1–2). Additional evidence supporting these claims is provided by several qualitative studies. Researchers involved in the project *Youth, Unemployment, and Exclusion in Europe: A Multidimensional Approach to Understanding the Conditions and Prospects for Social and Political Integration of Young Unemployed* (YOUNEX, European Commission) conducted approximately 130 interviews in 2010 with unemployed young people aged 18 to 35 in Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, France, and Poland. They found that their respondents' transition to adulthood occurred within a social context defined by constraints, deprivation, and stigmatization, which significantly shaped their beliefs, values, and behaviors. The researchers warned that this situation often led to difficulties in finding meaning in everyday life and feelings of uselessness and dependence on others (Lahusen and Giugni 2016: 1–3).

Many respondents described feelings of “boredom”, “meaninglessness”, “discouragement”, “confusion”, and “shame”, which pushed them to accept temporary, low-paid, and unskilled jobs. If they were unable to earn enough for independent living, they had no choice but to seek emotional and financial support from friends or their parents. However, some parents – having lived through “the golden years” of full employment – struggled to understand that finding work was “not a matter of willpower”. As one respondent put it: “Then you think to yourself, damn, even my parents see me like this, as a slacker” (Grimmer 2016: 23, 51; Lorenzini and Giugni 2016: 84–85; Monticelli, Baglioni and Bassoli 2016: 156).

A 2017 study conducted on a sample of over one thousand Spaniards aged 20 to 34 yielded similar findings. Mireia Bolívar, Francesc Belvis, and Mariana Gutiérrez-Zamora concluded that the lack of opportunities and alternatives, along with the persistent threat of unemployment, not only posed risks to mental health but also served as a “disciplinary measure” imposed by society, forcing young people to endure degrading working conditions and accept “manifestly pathological” labor environments. Moreover, the authors argue that by generalizing both objective and subjective insecurity, precarious employment functions as a new tool of domination – creating submissive personalities and fostering acceptance of exploitation (Bolíbar, Belvis and Gutiérrez-Zamora 2022: 176).<sup>5</sup>

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As early as 2006 – prior to both the global economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic – a survey conducted as part of the project *Social Inclusion and Strategies for Living of Unemployed Youth in Croatia and Slovenia in the European Context* (sent to

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<sup>5</sup> Their findings are further elaborated in “The Embodiment of Insecurity: How Precarious Labour Market Trajectories Affect Young Workers' Health and Wellbeing in Catalonia (Spain)”, a chapter in *Faces of Precarity. Critical Perspectives on Work, Subjectivities and Struggles* (Choonara, Murgia and Carmo 2022: 161–179).

4,810 addresses) identified lack of work experience, nepotism, and corruption as the most frequently cited reasons for unemployment (Koller-Trbović 2009: 98). Some young individuals admitted to earning income through “illegal jobs” where they were “exploited” by employers who did not officially register them (ibid.: 101). Around 40 respondents reported severe consequences of unemployment, including “loss of meaning in life”, “financial dependence”, and in some cases “socially pathological behavior” (ibid.: 103). This unfavorable situation certainly did not help mitigate the economic consequences of the pandemic, nor those of the global economic crisis.

The share of temporary employment among young people in Croatia in 2019 was 42%, significantly above the European Union average (Ostojić 2022: 22–23). However, research focusing on the mental and physical scars left by precarious employment in Croatia remains limited and mostly pertains to specific professions (see, for example, Pešut 2019). One of the most comprehensive studies was conducted by the World Health Organization, based on the understanding that poor working conditions – such as low income, irregular working hours, job insecurity, and a lack of reward for responsibility and effort – are associated with higher levels of stress, elevated blood cholesterol, musculoskeletal disorders, and mental health issues. Findings indicate that employees in Croatia spend more time at their workplaces compared to those in other EU countries, their jobs are less secure, and their work-life balance is worse. Notably, 83% of employees reported experiencing “psychosocial and organizational occupational hazards.” Consequently, while Croatia has a relatively high life expectancy, its healthy life expectancy is among the lowest in the EU (Boyce and Mustajbegović 2019: 2; see also Tomić et al. 2019).

Together with other EU member states, in October 2020 Croatia committed to implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee, aiming to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a high-quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, various measures were introduced to promote youth employment.<sup>7</sup> However, as highlighted in the World Health Organization report, the issue is not merely whether one is employed but also the quality of the working conditions.

In their March 2023 report to the Croatian Parliament, the Ombudsperson for Human Rights and Equality reported that Croatia continues to record a relatively high rate of fixed-term employment, with a significant proportion of young workers affected. The 2022 European Semester Implementation Report identified a particularly high rate of involuntary fixed-term employment among young people aged 15 to 29. In 2020, this rate in Croatia was 25%, more than double the EU average of 12.2%. Fixed-term employment, as emphasized by the Ombudsperson, generates insecurity and job instability, the effects of which often extend into other domains of life. Consequently, young individuals

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<sup>6</sup> <https://gzm.hr/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://gzm.hr/zelim-raditi/#1>.

employed on temporary contracts face significant challenges in achieving, among other things, financial independence and in transitioning out of the parental household. A 2023 Eurostat study, in fact, indicated that young people in Croatia leave the parental home at the latest average age in the European Union – 31.8 years.<sup>8</sup>

Although recent years have seen a steady decline in unemployment rates,<sup>9</sup> data from the Croatian Employment Service (HZZ) indicate that the number of available job vacancies remains significantly lower than the number of unemployed individuals. As of February 13, 2025, there were 24,749 available job listings – 70,550 fewer than the number of unemployed individuals two months earlier.<sup>10</sup> The most in-demand jobs primarily require no formal qualifications, including positions for sales assistants, waiters, cooks, and cleaners.<sup>11</sup> This labor market imbalance represents one of the most significant shifts between the TRANSWORK and BURA projects. At the same time employers in Croatia as well as across the EU have increasingly begun to complain about a lack of “labor force and skills”.<sup>12</sup>

The rapid transformations in the labor market and the increasingly significant shifts in perceptions of work and employment have prompted us to examine the extent to which individuals pursuing higher education and skill enhancement have adapted to these changes – specifically, to what extent they have internalized the fact that the majority of job openings today involve precarious working conditions.

## “I HAVE TO WORK AND EARN SOME INCOME”

Between October 2024 and January 2025, we conducted a survey across multiple higher education institutions in Dubrovnik, Opatija, Osijek, Pula, Rijeka, Split, Zadar, and Zagreb.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.ombudsman.hr/hr/mladi/>. Cf. Potočnik 2017: 67–69. In contrast, the lowest average ages – all under 23 years old – were recorded in Finland (21.4 years), Sweden and Denmark (both 21.8 years), and Estonia (22.8 years). Meanwhile, in Slovenia, the average age is 29.1 years, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it stands at 29.2 years (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240930-2>).

<sup>9</sup> In 2013, the number of unemployed individuals stood at 345,112. By 2017, when research began on the TRANSWORK project, this figure had decreased to 193,967. Last year, in 2024, at the start of the BURA project, the number of unemployed individuals had further declined to 95,299.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hzz.hr/statistika/>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://burzarada.hzz.hr/>.

<sup>12</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/news/tackling-labour-and-skills-shortages-eu-2024-03-20\\_hr](https://commission.europa.eu/news/tackling-labour-and-skills-shortages-eu-2024-03-20_hr); <https://www.poslovnih.hr/hrvatska/poslodavci-se-zale-na-kronican-nedostatak-radnika-1-posto-stranaca-ima-vss-4441322>; <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/gospodarstvo/hrvatska-ima-nedostatak-kvalificirane-radne-snage-11528412>.

<sup>13</sup> The institutions involved include the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Pula, Rijeka, Split, and Zadar, the Maritime Faculty in Dubrovnik, the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management in Opatija, the Faculty of Economics and Tourism in Pula, the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Osijek, the Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences in Osijek, the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture in Osijek, the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, the Technical Polytechnic in Zagreb, and the Faculty of Economy in Zagreb, as well as the Diopter Open University in Pula (for adult education).

While our sample is not representative,<sup>14</sup> the number of responses (248) and the diversity of institutions covered across Croatia allow for a meaningful analytical approach. Our questionnaire was aligned with relevant research conducted by European scholars and was adjusted following an initial test phase with approximately 60 responses. The final survey included 16 questions, primarily open-ended, except for one multiple-choice question with the option to provide an unlisted response. The majority of respondents were between 18 and 24 years old, with only a negligible number of older students.

Approximately half of the respondents reported working while studying, mostly seasonal or temporary jobs in the summer tourism sector, typically in positions that do not require formal qualifications. Many students enrolled in their respective programs due to personal interest, particularly those in the humanities. However, a significant proportion pursued higher education with the belief that a degree would improve their employment prospects and income levels.

While slightly more than half of the respondents believed that there would be sufficient job opportunities in the near future, many noted that these opportunities largely consisted of jobs not requiring formal education. Some explicitly mentioned that such positions are increasingly filled by workers from so-called “third countries”, who are more willing to accept lower wages and poorer working conditions. Consequently, over half of the respondents expressed concerns about their financial future, while others provided ambivalent responses. Among those who were not worried, some explained that their financial security was ensured by family wealth, primarily in the form of real estate assets.

Nonetheless, even those with financial stability sought jobs with high salaries, which was the most common response to the question about job expectations. The second most frequent response, “job security”, further highlighted a strong desire for financial independence and the opportunity to move out of their parental homes. By contrast, only a few respondents prioritized flexible working hours, career advancement opportunities, quality health and social security, or remote work. Notably, no respondent indicated a preference for a “dynamic job” or provided an alternative response.

The results of comparable studies in other countries do not allow for direct comparison due to several factors. Firstly, the research outcomes vary significantly, likely due to differences in survey design and response formulations. The majority of existing studies are quantitative, with only a few scholars opting for semi-structured interviews. For example, a Statista report revealed that in the United States, 79% of Generation Z employees would accept a lower-paying job if the company’s mission aligned with their values.<sup>15</sup> In Germany

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<sup>14</sup> Among other things, a disproportionately high number of higher education institutions from Osijek responded to our invitation, while institutions from Zagreb are underrepresented. For this reason, numerical data is not included in the analysis.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1498753/gen-z-graduates-working-preferences-us/>.

and Switzerland, young workers prioritize work-life balance,<sup>16</sup> followed by opportunities for learning and personal development.<sup>17</sup> In Switzerland, only 17% of young employees cited salary as the most important job factor.<sup>18</sup> A study by Zuzana Kirchmayer and Jana Fratričová in Slovakia found that young people valued job enjoyment the most, followed by a positive workplace atmosphere, with salary ranked third (2020: 6023). Similarly, research in Poland found that the top job preferences were a friendly work environment, professional development opportunities, and adequate compensation (Bińczycski, Łukasiński and Dorocki 2023: 6). The 2023 Deloitte Global Survey, conducted on 22,800 respondents across 44 countries, found that 44% of Generation Z (and 40% of Millennials) rejected potential employers due to environmental concerns, non-inclusive practices, lack of mental health support, and poor work-life balance.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, findings from the European Employment Services (EURES) indicate that Generation Z is more financially driven than Millennials and more focused on career-building, primarily because they have been more severely impacted by job scarcity<sup>20</sup> and are more concerned with repaying student loans and saving for the future.<sup>21</sup> Just as an example, the BBC reported in mid-2023 that “To some people, Gen Z may seem salary-obsessed” due to their financial struggles. The article contrasts their reality with that of previous generations, stating that the older generations worked 40 hours a week, earned enough to buy a house, and enjoyed barbecues on the weekend. In contrast, Gen Z works 50 hours a week at their jobs and another 20 hours side hustling, yet they still barely make enough to cover rent.<sup>22</sup>

Our study aligns with the findings of the aforementioned research, while also indicating that students’ motivations for choosing their field of study, their engagement in employment during studies, career plans, and future aspirations are shaped not only by broader economic and political contexts, but also by personal factors such as age, regional envi-

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<sup>16</sup> The term “work/life balance” is a widely used yet inherently thought-provoking formulation, as it seemingly implies that “life” occurs only outside of the workplace. Nevertheless, numerous studies have confirmed the existence of a fundamental conflict between these two domains. Work-nonwork conflict is a specific form of interrole conflict, wherein the demands of work and personal life are mutually incompatible, making active participation in one role more difficult due to engagement in the other. As a result, increased pressures in one domain may limit an individual’s ability to meet obligations in the other, thereby exacerbating work-nonwork conflict. More specifically, when individuals experience threats to their job security, they often encounter heightened work-related stress. This stress may manifest as preoccupation with the possibility of job loss or overperformance to mitigate their perceived vulnerability. Ultimately, increased pressure in the work domain limits the capacity to meet nonwork-related responsibilities, thereby intensifying work-nonwork conflict (Boswell, Wendy R., Olson-Buchanan, Julie B., and Harris, T. Brad. 2013. “Cannot Afford to Have a Life: Employee Adaptation to Feelings of Job Insecurity”. *Personnel Psychology* 67/4: 887–915: 893).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1498753/gen-z-graduates-working-preferences-us/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1489334/survey-reasons-for-employer-choice-gen-y-and-z-switzerland/>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/issues/work/content/genz-millennialsurvey.html>.

<sup>20</sup> [https://eures.europa.eu/millennials-and-gen-z-workplace-similarities-and-differences-2023-03-02\\_en](https://eures.europa.eu/millennials-and-gen-z-workplace-similarities-and-differences-2023-03-02_en).

<sup>21</sup> <https://extensishr.com/resource/blogs/what-does-gen-z-want-in-the-workplace/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230530-why-gen-z-are-so-motivated-by-pay>.

ronment, and family economic background. A comparable study was conducted in 2013 by collaborators on the project *Potrebe, problemi i potencijali mladih u Hrvatskoj* (Needs, problems and potentials of young people in Croatia) (Ilišin and Spajić-Vrkaš 2017), who observed what they termed a “forced prolongation of youth status” among young people (ibid.: 16). According to their findings, the most desirable job characteristics for youth were job security (94.9%), followed by a friendly and relaxed working atmosphere (93.4%), and high income (87.1%; Potočnik and Spajić-Vrkaš 2017: 170).

During the TRANSWORK project, we observed that the youngest participants to some extent adapted to the conditions of the labor market (Senjković 2024: 144–146). Today, this adaptation appears to be even more pronounced, as evidenced by the fact that only a fifth of respondents in our survey identified “job security” as their top priority, while almost half prioritized good or sufficient income.

The clearest indicator of this shift is the response to the question: “Would you accept a job that does not match your field of study and/or requires minimal qualifications?” More than 80% of respondents answered affirmatively, often with reservations such as: “if there were no other options”, “if I found the job interesting”, or “if it were temporary”.

Jobs requiring less education are desirable as long as they offer decent pay. I would take such a job because my family members all work in similar positions, and we manage to live decently on those wages. However, not all jobs are equally paid, and many demand a lot of work and sacrifice. I wouldn't work for a minimum wage under strict quotas. (21 years old, female, Opatija)

I would try to learn the job as best as I could. Every job is important in its own way. Every job brings experience, and all experience is valuable. (21 years old, male, Opatija)

Yes, because I need financial security. (24 years old, female, Pula)

Yes, any job can be good, even if it requires minimal qualifications, as long as it brings personal satisfaction. (23 years old, male, Pula)

Yes, if I had no other choice. (24 years old, female, Split)

Yes, because I have to work and earn some income. (20 years old, female, Split)

Yes, it's better to be temporarily employed than unemployed. (25 years old, female, Split)

Yes, if I can't get a job in my field, I would take another job while continuing to search for one. (23 years old, male, Osijek)

It depends on the pay. (19 years old, male, Osijek)

Yes, because one has to live off something. (22 years old, male, Zagreb)

It depends on the type of work. I would consider such an option. I have interests in fields not necessarily related to my formal education, which could be interesting and challenging. (25 years old, male, Zagreb)

Yes, why not? Why should my so-called education define me? (No data on age or gender, Osijek)



The majority of affirmative responses suggest that any job is considered a necessary survival strategy, as if precariousness is already assumed as an inevitable reality. The sense of concern is evident, as is the existing engagement of respondents in “survival mode”, yet this does not reduce its impact.

## “TIMES ARE HARD, AND THEY WILL GET EVEN HARDER”

BBC journalist Megan Carnegie presented findings from a 2022 Cigna study, which surveyed almost 12,000 individuals across the United States, Australia, Belgium, India, Japan, Kenya, China, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, the UAE, and the UK. The study reports that the impact of the financial crunch and growing uncertainty about the future are beginning to weigh heavily on people. According to the study, it is particularly younger workers who appear to be experiencing its impact the greatest, with 39% saying that money concerns are now a major cause of stress – up from 37% in 2021 – followed by 34% who say they are worried about the future.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, in response to the direct question in our survey, “Are you concerned about your financial future? Do you feel fear or anxiety because of it?” – which we introduced after analyzing the first responses – more than half of the respondents answered affirmatively or partially affirmatively:

Yes, because I feel that things in the world (globally) are changing very fast, while locally they are changing very slowly or not at all. Both scenarios scare me – stagnation leads to decline and change leads to insecurity and unpredictability. (23 years old, Zagreb)

Yes, I'm afraid I won't find a job or that my salary won't be enough to live on. (20 years old, female, Split)

Yes, but not because of work. Times are hard, and they will get even harder. (20 years old, female, Osijek)

Yes. Times are difficult, and life is getting harder. Opportunities for young people are increasingly limited, especially due to the rising number of foreign workers. (23 years old, female, Pula)

Yes, because financial security today is uncertain. I don't know if I'll ever be able to buy property without a 40-year mortgage, or how I'll make it through the month with the high cost of basic living expenses. (23 years old, female, Zagreb)

Yes, the golden age of IT is over, and the future is unpredictable. AI and quantum computing will be the key factors. (30 years old, male, Zagreb)

Most respondents did not express aspirations for a luxurious lifestyle – a typical response described the desire for an income “sufficient to live on”. Besides the rising cost of goods

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.cigna.com.hk/iwov-resources/docs/Cigna-360-Global-Well-being-Survey.pdf>.

and housing, the biggest concerns were the inability to find work in their trained profession and the influx of workers from “third countries”, who, with lower expectations, filled jobs that could otherwise serve as a “temporary solution”.<sup>24</sup> Even those who responded negatively to this question most often expressed confidence in their ability to adapt and be resourceful. This aligns with prevailing work cultures that assume employment and income instability as the norm, making long-term life planning difficult (Burrows 2013: 381).<sup>25</sup>

Yet, all this does not address the mental and physical health consequences of normalizing stress, worry, and the inability to plan for the future. A substantial body of research indicates that the anticipation of loss (i.e., threat perception) can be as psychologically damaging as loss itself. Job insecurity – defined as the perceived threat of losing one’s job in the near future – is widely recognized as a major work-related stressor, leading to detrimental effects on well-being, workplace attitudes, and organizational behavior (Vander Elst et al. 2014: 100). Furthermore, according to several scholars, this situation generates a “scarring effect” – over time, individuals develop lower aspirations and diminished expectations (Bell and Blanchflower 2011; O’Reilly et al. 2015: 1; Ralston et al. 2021; Mühlböck et al. 2022). As a result, they experience lower lifetime earnings and a higher likelihood of suffering from mental health issues and disorders (Bartelink et al. 2020: 1–2).

## “WE LIVE OFF ANXIETY”

The 2017 song by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian band referenced in this study’s title metaphorically addresses *sekiracija* [worry, anxiety], attributing it to the overwhelming media exposure to negative news – a phenomenon that, in itself, is not unfamiliar.<sup>26</sup> However, our research

<sup>24</sup> According to Eurostat data cited in the study *Hrvatska. Mladi u vremenu neizvjesnosti* (Croatia. Youth at a time of uncertainty) (Gvozdanović et al. 2024: 16) in 2023 only 1.1% of Croatia’s registered population aged 15–64 were immigrants from non-EU countries. However, 2024 saw a significant increase in the number of workers from so-called “third countries” (i.e., countries outside the European Union). According to the Croatian Pension Insurance Institute, approximately 132,000 third-country nationals were employed in Croatia as of October 2024 (<https://trend.com.hr/2024/10/14/132-tisuce-radnika-iz-trecih-zemalja-radi-u-hrvatskoj-a-drzava-im-produljuje-radne-dozvole-nepoznavanje-hrvatskog-jezika-istaknuto-kao-najveci-problem/>, accessed 5. May 2025). During the same year, the Ministry of the Interior issued a total of 206,529 residence and work permits to foreign nationals – a record number since the abolition of labor import quotas in 2021. The highest numbers of permits were granted to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (38,100), Nepal (35,635), Serbia (27,988), India (20,502), and the Philippines (14,680) (<https://sas-knjigovodstvo.hr/u-2024-godini-preko-200-000-radnih-dozvola-strani-radnici-sve-vazniji-za-domace-poslodavce/>, accessed 5. May 2025).

<sup>25</sup> Data from Eurofound (2012) highlights the high proportion of young people who are reluctantly employed on a temporary basis for a certain period (*Young people and temporary employment in Europe*, p. 12, [https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef\\_files/docs/erm/tn1304017s/tn1304017s.pdf](https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_files/docs/erm/tn1304017s/tn1304017s.pdf)).

<sup>26</sup> This issue has long been a subject of academic inquiry, dating back at least to the aftermath of World War I and gaining particular scholarly attention from the 1960s onward (see, for example, The Glasgow Media Group 1976).

suggests that *sekiracija* has become an integral part of everyday life, something that is accepted as inevitable and internalized in advance, leading to varied adaptation strategies.

In many cases, adaptation manifests as learning to live from one day to the next – sometimes through persistent pursuit of one’s chosen path and aspirations (“Whatever happens, we’ll find a way”), and at other times through attempts at planning and seeking a seemingly viable route forward.

Despite the labor market’s demand for graduates, even those who opted for degrees that traditionally promised stable jobs, satisfactory working conditions, and relatively high incomes are now facing a new threat:

New technologies will accelerate existing jobs by reshaping them into highly stressful positions, and employment will largely depend on how AI interprets our resumes. (23 years old, female, Zagreb)

It is difficult to predict the impact of [new technologies]... Every sector will experience sudden and significant changes, and young employees must be prepared for that. (22 years old, male, Zagreb)

New technologies will definitely influence job positions and the quantity of available work in the field of IT and computing. The main impact will be on the number of workers needed for specific jobs. Jobs will exist, but fewer people will be hired for the same work compared to recent years. Some positions will disappear, while others will emerge. (24 years old, male, Zagreb)

New technologies bring automation and optimization of many processes, which will create new jobs but also eliminate existing ones. Continuous learning and adaptation to change will be essential. (25 years old, male, Zagreb)

I think new technologies (in general) will make it even harder for people to find jobs that truly fulfill them. (23 years old, Zagreb)

These observations suggest that relevant research is struggling to keep pace with the rapid changes in labor market dynamics. This raises the question of whether we are asking the right questions in our studies. When respondents are asked about their concerns for the future, many answer negatively – not because they are not worried, but because they have already internalized the expectation that they will not, like their parents, immediately secure a stable job, progress in their careers, and eventually receive the symbolic “gold watch” for lifelong service.

The very concept of achievement, as British sociologist Ray Pahl observed in 1995, has had to change:

If success is becoming a more elusive concept as a result of flexibilization, is there a corollary that failure is equally ambiguous and problematic? [...] if most graduates expect to have a period of experimentation and uncertainty [...], if most women expect to do various short-term part-time jobs during the period when they have children under five [...]; then failure cannot be the same as it was [before]. (Pahl 1995: 4)

Does this mean that we are witnessing the formation of a new, submissive workforce, ready to accept neoliberal exploitation as the norm? Or is the reality better captured by a simple, offhand remark overheard in a conversation at a post office between a retired worker and a postal clerk – a reflection on the shifting attitudes toward work and job stability?

Retiree: I had to take disability retirement. They still miss me. I worked well, honestly. Today, someone comes in, stays for a week, and then leaves.

Postal Clerk: They don't give up... They're not like us.

Although the political and economic histories of Croatia and the United States leave little room for direct comparison of the living and working conditions of their respective populations, the episode I happened to witness evokes the qualitative differences in life and work trajectories – and, consequently, in attitudes toward life and labor – between father and son, Enrico and Rico, as captured by the eminent American sociologist Richard Sennett in his 1998 book *The Corrosion of Character*. This reflection introduces a series of relevant conceptual entry points for contemporary research, which should also seek to address one of the most pressing questions: if it is true that young people are currently undergoing a process of adaptation to contemporary labor market demands, what are the implications of this for their mental health and overall well-being?

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## HIMNA GENERACIJE: MLADI PRED ULASKOM NA TRŽIŠTE RADA

Utemeljen na širem društvenom i kulturnom kontekstu članak se zanima za utjecaj sve veće prekarizacije poslova i nestabilnog tržišta rada na radne perspektive mladih u Hrvatskoj. Kroz kombinaciju pregleda dosadašnjih istraživanja i novih podataka prikupljenih anketom među studentima (2024.–2025.), istraživanje ukazuje na postupnu prilagodbu mogućnostima zapošljavanja, ali i na smanjenje očekivanja i zabrinutost za financijsku sigurnost.

Ključne riječi: mladi, zaposlenost, Hrvatska