

Snapshots of Hungarian and American Youth

REFLECTION

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Snapshots of Hungarian and American Youth



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Foreword

The Youth Research Institute regularly conducts representative questionnaire-based surveys that aim to explore a range of social topics through a concise set of targeted questions. Although these empirical data do not allow for an in-depth or comprehensive examination of each issue, they provide valuable, up-to-date insights into how young people think and perceive the world around them. We routinely share these findings in our public lectures, while our *Reflection* report offers a concise summary of the most significant and thought-provoking results.

The *Reflection* report stands out for its comparative approach. Across most chapters, we contrast the responses of Hungarian participants with those of American young people aged 15–39. While international research is not unprecedented in the five-year history of the Youth Research Institute, earlier comparative efforts remained within the European region. The present transatlantic survey thus marks a further expansion of our analytical horizon.

The themes addressed in this report are framed by considerations of both the present and the future. Following an overview of the current agenda, we present insights into how Hungarian and American youth aged 15–39 think about family and family planning, digital competencies, body image, dietary preferences, and their visions for the future.

¹ Kiss-Kozma, G. – Székely, L. (2023). Youth + - Five observations on 15-39-year-olds in Hungary. Mathias Corvinus Collegium – Youth Research Institute.



ON THE AGENDA:
THE TOPICS WE TALK
ABOUT TOO MUCH –
OR NOT ENOUGH

On the Agenda: The Topics We Talk About Too Much – or Not Enough

Beyond current political affairs, what other topics shape public discourse? What issues do we discuss more frequently today than a few years ago—and perhaps even more importantly, which subjects deserve greater attention in the public sphere?

Levente Székely

To speak of the agenda is to speak of the media itself. At the core of agenda-setting theory lies the argument that the media exert a formative influence on public thought. This influence does not consist in prescribing what people should think, but in delineating what they think about. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) model emphasises the mechanism of thematisation, through which the media bring certain issues into public discourse while allowing others to fade from view.

The motivations driving the media's agenda-setting practices remain a persistent topic of debate in public discourse. The priorities established by the media do not necessarily mirror the hierarchy of importance that society itself might adopt—assuming such a hierarchy could even be discerned by asking the public what they consider significant or worthy of attention. Public opinion research frequently engages with this issue by inviting respondents to assess the relative importance of selected topics or news items.

In its most recent study, the Youth Research Institute adopted a somewhat different approach to examine which topics young people in Hungary and the United States (aged 15–39) perceive as overrepresented in, or missing from, public discourse. More precisely, the study investigated whether young people perceive certain predefined topics as being discussed more or less frequently in the public sphere today compared to five years ago.

Among the topics shaping the public agenda, artificial intelligence stands out prominently: 76% of Americans and 88% of Hungarians believe that it is discussed far more frequently today than five years ago. Although there is a clear difference between these two figures, artificial intelligence eclipses all other issues—such as migration, mental health, or climate change—in both countries.

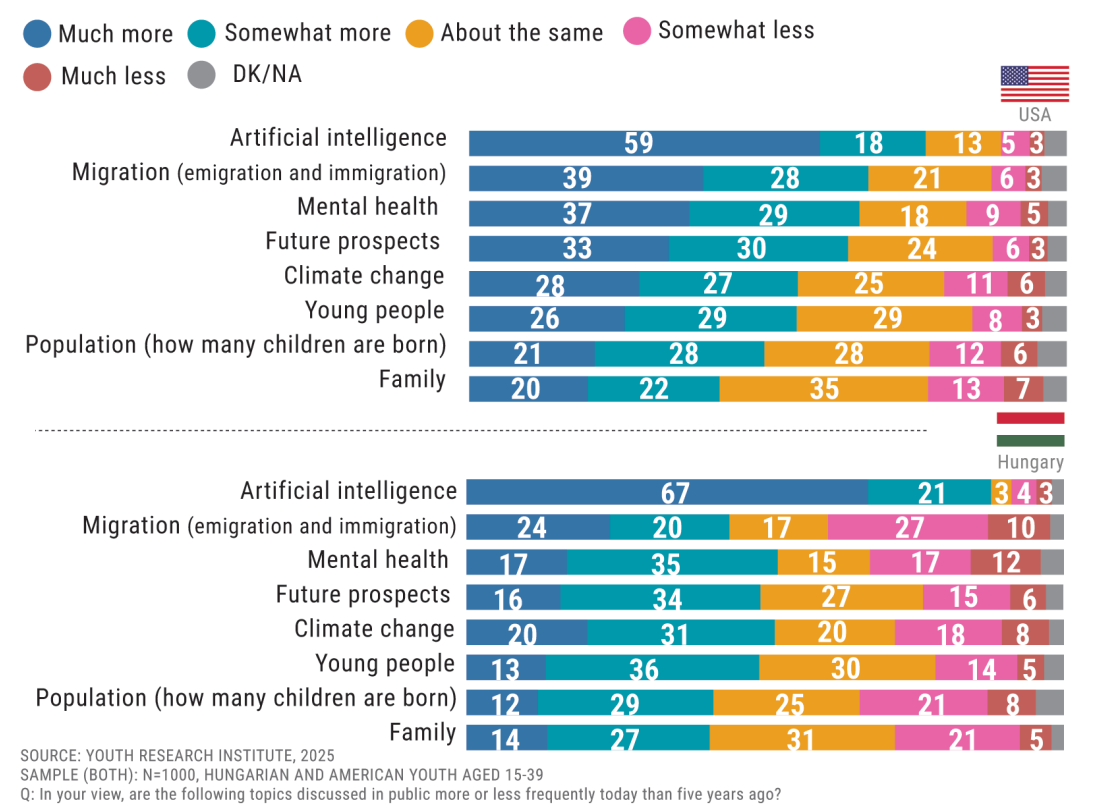
Among the topics shaping the public agenda, artificial intelligence stands out prominently, eclipsing all other issues such as migration, mental health, or climate change

Hungarian respondents aged 15–39 place noticeably greater emphasis on this topic, with a much sharper perceived distinction between the prominence of artificial intelligence and that of other subjects.

Among Americans aged 15–39, migration emerged as the second most frequently mentioned topic (67%), whereas for Hungarians it ranked only sixth, with 44% believing that migration is discussed more today than five years ago. For Hungarian respondents in the 15–39 age group, climate change and mental health tied for second place, with 52% indicating that both topics have become more central to public discourse in recent years.

Mental health also occupies a prominent position in the United States, ranking third overall; 65% of American respondents felt that it receives more attention today than in the past. In the case of climate change, the American and Hungarian data are relatively close, with roughly half of respondents in both countries perceiving increased discussion of the issue. A similar pattern emerges with respect to youth-related topics, whose growing visibility is likewise recognised by approximately half of those surveyed.

Of the remaining two areas, population change reveals a more pronounced difference between Americans and Hungarians, while in the case of family-related issues, the two groups show considerable similarity: just over two-fifths in both countries perceive an increase in public attention.

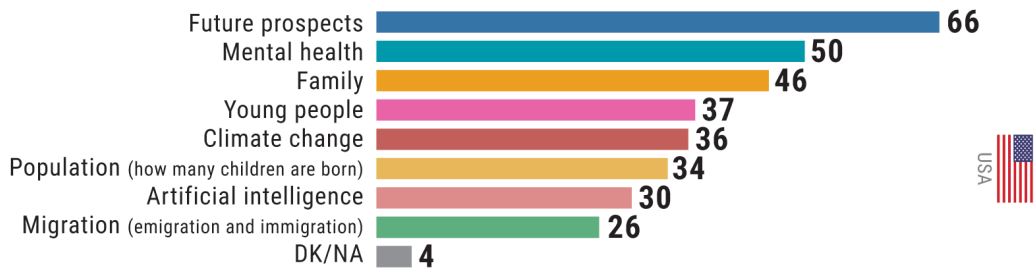
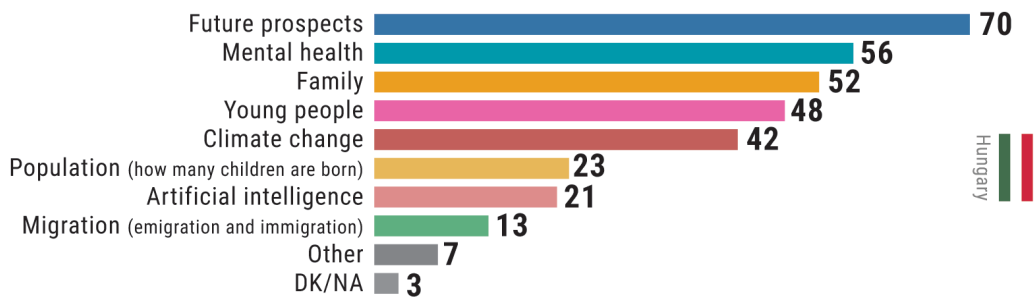


All this reveals much about how the relative importance of individual topics is perceived; however, even more noteworthy is which issues respondents believe deserve greater public discussion. Among the eight topics examined, the strongest consensus concerns mental health, which tops the preference list of American respondents and ranks second among Hungarians aged 15–39. Two-thirds of Americans (66%), compared with 56% of Hungarians, believe that mental health should receive more attention in public discourse. It is remarkable that despite perceiving an increase in attention to this issue in recent years, young people aged 15–39 in both Hungary and the United States would still like to see mental health occupy an even greater place in public discussion.

Hungarian respondents aged 15–39 place the topic of the future at the top of their list: nearly three-quarters identify it as an under-discussed issue, whereas fewer than half of Americans (46%)

do the same. In Hungary, only three topics are considered underrepresented in public discourse by at least half of respondents—mental health, the future, and family (52%). In the American sample, there are only two such topics: mental health and climate change (50%).

Despite the many differences between the two countries, one striking similarity is the relative devaluation of artificial intelligence. While 37% of Americans aged 15–39 and only 21% of Hungarians would like to see more public discussion on artificial intelligence, the majority in both groups—although aware of its strong presence in the public sphere—would prefer to prioritise other issues.



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 SAMPLE (BOTH): N=1000, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39
 / Q. In your view, which topics should receive more public discussion?



It is a legitimate question to ask what factors might lie behind the devaluation of the topic of artificial intelligence. In a previous paper (Székely, 2025), I traced experiences related to the perception of AI back to Anthony Downs's observation. According to Downs (1972), public attention rarely focuses on a single issue for an extended period—even when that issue represents a persistent and crucial matter for society. Instead, the dynamics of public opinion follow a systematic “issue-attention cycle.” That is, a given problem suddenly comes to the forefront and receives intense attention for a short while, but then, largely unresolved, gradually fades from focus.

The loss of focus is primarily due to the fact that such problems typically demand costly, complex, or inconvenient solutions, making it easier to turn towards a policy of avoidance. Within only a few years, AI has burst into public consciousness and into our everyday lives. The initial attention and growing concern about this technology, which has disrupted our way of life, soon led to a state of AI fatigue—referring to our inability to continuously follow developments in artificial intelligence. The constant stream of new applications and AI-related news generates such a level of noise that it ceases to be stimulating; instead, it overwhelms and fosters a disengaged attitude.

It is also worth reflecting on whether such disengagement is primarily a response to the incessant novelty or whether the relationship is more complex. After all, we can observe that within the Hungarian sample, the future is by far the most popular topic among those aged 15–39. The combined choice of the future and AI is uncommon: in the Hungarian sample, it stands at 16%, while in the American sample, it is 21%—that is, the proportion of respondents who would like to hear more about both artificial intelligence and the future.

Among the topics examined, the future shows the closest association with two others: youth and family. This co-occurrence appears in both the Hungarian and the American samples; however, while in the Hungarian case the association is stronger with youth, in the American case it is stronger with family. Based on these findings, it may be suggested that the future and technological innovation are not necessarily closely intertwined.

When young people express a desire to hear more about the future, it is quite likely that they also wish to hear more about family and youth.

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FAMILY IDEALS AND FAMILY PLANNING



Family Ideals and Family Planning

Georgina Kiss-Kozma

Concerns about population trends today relate far more to the challenge of population decline than to that of overpopulation, particularly in the developed world. From the perspective of projections concerning the future, it is especially important to examine young people's family creation plans: when and how many children they intend to have, and how they think about family.

Europe's demographic situation has long been regarded unfavourable. One of the main factors contributing to population decline is the decreasing willingness to have children, a trend which arises from the rapid transformation of family-formation practices. These practices are most strongly shaped by the postponement of childbirth and by changes in marital patterns. Although cohabitation and the expansion of diverse family formations have become increasingly common, family formation has traditionally begun with marriage. Numerous studies indicate that those living within marriage report higher levels of satisfaction with their relationship status than those who merely cohabit (Youth Research Institute, 2023). Research findings also show that approximately two-thirds of both Hungarian and American young people would like to get married at some point in their lives.

The data also reveal that while only 6% of Hungarians aged 15–39 reported that they definitely do not wish to marry, the proportion of individuals in the United States who entirely reject the idea of marriage is nearly twice as high. However, compared with Hungarian youth, young Americans are considerably more certain about their future family plans: whereas 7% of respondents in the United States were unable to give an answer, the proportion of uncertain respondents among Hungarian youth is nearly twice as large.

Marriage is not the only element featuring in the plans of both Hungarian and American young people and young adults. The majority also aspire to lifelong commitment, and for a relative majority, the most desirable form of such commitment is marriage. Among Hungarian respondents, 67% expressed a desire to live in a lifelong relationship, while among young Americans this figure stands at 68%. Almost four in ten Hungarians (39%) and one in

Women today commence family formation at an age by which, three decades earlier, they would almost have completed their childbearing

two Americans (51%) regard marriage as the most ideal form of lifelong commitment.

According to the professional literature, young people's desire to marry, their family plans, and subsequently the stability of their marriages are influenced by a range of factors, among which experiences derived from the family of origin play a particularly important role. For one-third (34%) of Hungarian youth, their parents' relationship serves primarily as a model to follow, while an even higher proportion (44%) regard their grandparents' marriage as their principal reference point.

In contrast, young adults in the United States tend to view their parents' relationships and family lives, rather than those of their grandparents, as the dominant models (48% vs. 43%). However, relationship counselling—one possible form of intergenerational support—is only partially characteristic of this generation. Hungarian young adults, by comparison, generally do not seek relationship advice from their parents or from other close or distant relatives (47–57%). Although American youth rely somewhat more on the advice

of older generations in relationship matters, even in their case the majority do not receive such guidance from either parents or other family members (40–28%).

Childbearing is frequently postponed within this age group, as young adults increasingly defer family formation until their thirties. In Hungary, women aged 20–24—previously considered to be at the peak of their fertility—had more than two-thirds fewer children between 1990 and 2009. Their place was assumed by women in their late twenties and early thirties, with fertility rates showing only a moderate increase. This paradigm shift unfolded rapidly, within a relatively brief period. As a result, fertility and birth rates fell sharply and subsequently stagnated at a persistently low level. The annual number of births decreased due to the absence of children born to younger mothers. The births these women had postponed were not compensated for at all during the 1990s, and only partially offset after the turn of the millennium by the rising fertility within “older” female age groups (KSH, 2011). The average age of women at the birth of their first child rose from the earlier 23 years to more than 29 years, implying that women today typically commence family formation at an age by which, three decades earlier, they would almost have completed their childbearing.

It is therefore particularly important to examine young people’s perceptions of the age span within which they consider childbearing feasible. Both Hungarian and American youth tend to agree that individuals can make responsible decisions about childbearing after the age of 22–25. However, while Hungarian respondents generally consider the upper age limit for such decisions to be around 40 years, American young adults view responsible childbearing as possible even beyond 45 years of age. Nonetheless, the postponement of childbearing increases the likelihood that not all desired children will ultimately be born.

It is thus unsurprising that, although Hungarian and American youth aged 15–39 deem the ideal number of children to exceed two (Hungary: 2.11; USA: 2.35), they are currently raising fewer than one child on average (Hungary: 0.6; USA: 0.77). Age-specific data indicate that in Hungary only individuals over the age of 35 have, on average, at least one child, while in the United States this threshold is reached above age 30. It is particularly noteworthy that the number of children young people plan to have in the future remains lower than the number they themselves consider ideal (Hungary: 1.74; USA: 2.13).

Age (yrs)	Number of children at present		Number of planned children (N=930)		Ideal number of children	
	 Hungary (N=989)	 USA (N=997)	 Hungary	 USA (N=980)	 Hungary (N=957)	 USA (N=947)
15-17	0,02	0,16	1,71	2,29	2,3	2,51
18-24	0,16	0,44	1,89	2,2	2,08	2,41
25-29	0,58	0,8	1,95	2,22	2,08	2,4
30-34	0,91	1,07	1,62	2,13	1,96	2,25
35-39	1,07	1,15	1,5	1,89	2,23	2,25
Total	0,6	0,77	1,74	2,13	2,11	2,35



Childbearing is preceded by a complex decision-making process. The academic literature distinguishes among several approaches, including economic perspectives, which primarily examine the financial and material determinants of fertility decisions. Another key framework, the theory of the Second Demographic Transition, emphasises that cultural change also exerts a substantial influence on demographic processes (Lesthaeghe, 2010; 2014).

For this reason, it is important to periodically assess the social climate in which young people live and how they interpret the world around them. The youth stage of life has substantially lengthened and transformed over recent decades due to major social changes—such as the latest communication revolution, the spread of digital media culture, globalisation, and the so-called “polycrisis”, or “era of crises.” Because of this extended of the youth phase, young people reach key markers of adulthood—such as forming a family—at increasingly later ages. Within the traditionally defined youth age range (15–29 years), family formation is therefore shifting from an accomplished life event to an element of future life planning. In this age cohort, the focus is thus not on realised family forms but on young people’s

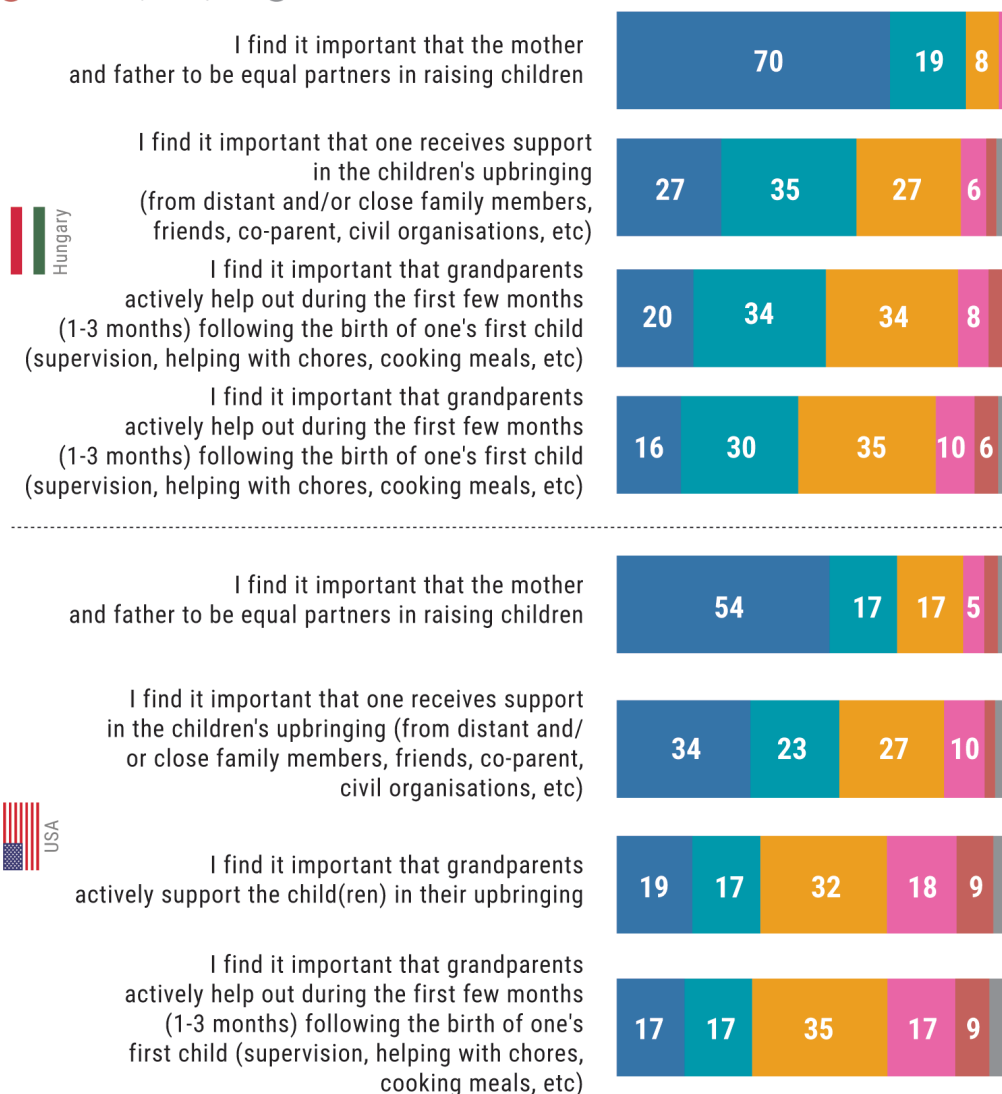
perceptions of the ideal family. Our findings indicate that, although demographic data show the expansion of cohabitation, the weakening of marriage as an institution, rising divorce rates, delayed marriage, and social media trends that valorise singlehood, the family model regarded as ideal by young people remains a traditional one. Despite minor differences in emphasis, youth in both Hungary and the United States articulate similar views.

In Hungary, respondents described the ideal family as one in which both the mother and the father are present (85%), parental responsibilities are shared equally (81%), the biological parents live together and jointly raise their children (70%), the parents are married (48%), the first child is born before the age of 30 (53%), and grandparents play an active role in childcare (48%).

Among American respondents, the ideal family is characterised by an equal division of child-rearing responsibilities between parents (76%), the presence of both mother and father (72%), cohabitation and joint parenting by the biological parents (61%), parental marriage (52%), having the first child before the age of 30 (51%), and active grandparental involvement in childcare (48%).



● Completely agree
 ● Somewhat agree
 ● Yes and no
 ● Somewhat disagree
● Completely disagree
 ● DK/NA

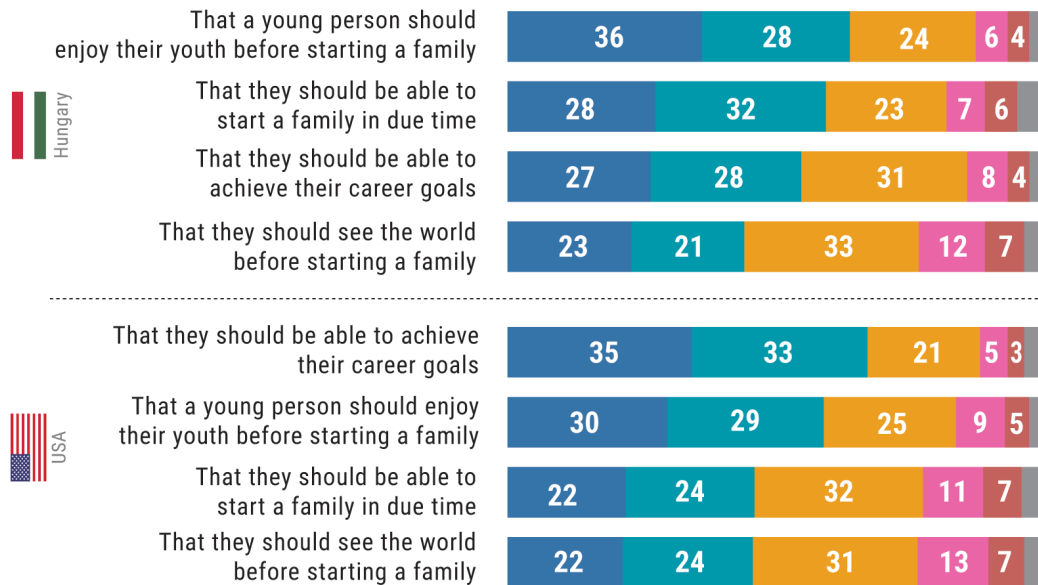


SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39
 Hungary N=347, USA N=596 NO CHILDREN/ Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

The expectations of those planning to have children largely correspond to the practical experiences of parents who are already raising children. In both Hungary and the United States, only a minority of parents report being unable to rely on support from their immediate or extended family during child-rearing. Cultural and situational differences are evident, however, in that the proportion of American parents who can rely solely on themselves is twice that observed among Hungarian parents (40% vs. 20%).

The proportion of parents who experienced active assistance from grandparents is similar in both countries: 51% of Hungarian and 48% of American respondents reported that in the first few months following the birth of their child (1–3 months), grandparents provided substantial help—through their presence, household support, meal preparation, and related activities. Parents in both countries report comparable current levels of support from grandparents or extended family members, as well as from civil organisations. Approximately one in two parents (45–52%) can rely on the former, while around two in five (40–41%) receive help from the latter.

● To a great extent ● Very important ● Partly important, partly not ● Not very important
● Not at all important ● DK/NA



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 SAMPLE (BOTH): N=1000, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: How important do you consider the following...?

The period of youth has not only been extended but has also undergone substantial transformation. Compared with previous generations, contemporary young people live and think differently, and their system of value systems have shifted markedly. Alongside locally embedded values, global value orientations now exert an increasingly significant influence on their lives and worldviews. Modern liberal ideologies also shape young people's attitudes toward family formation. This is reflected in the following data, which indicate that both climate-related ideological considerations and the diffusion of voluntary childlessness are particularly pronounced among American youth. Nearly one in two American young adults (45%) agree that their decision not to have children is a conscious choice, and one in three (33%) agree that limiting the number of children is important for the sake of protecting the planet. Among Hungarian respondents, these proportions are lower (voluntary childlessness: 25%; importance of climate-related considerations: 26%).

At the same time, it is widely recognised that addressing the climate crisis requires advanced technologies and, consequently, a larger number of talented young individuals capable of

producing such innovations. Another constraint on childbearing may arise from the perception that women must choose between family and career. Approximately one-fifth of both Hungarian and American youth (20–22%) feel that this constitutes a significant challenge in family planning.

The postponement of family formation is also influenced by the growing perception among young people worldwide that it is important to “experience their youth” before starting a family (Hungary: 64%; USA: 59%) and to “see the world” (Hungary: 44%; USA: 46%). Somewhat paradoxically, however, both Hungarian and American youth also consider it important to establish a family in due time (Hungary: 60%; USA: 46%) while simultaneously attributing high importance to the pursuit of career goals (Hungary: 55%; USA: 68%).



● Completely agree
 ● Somewhat agree
 ● Yes and no
 ● Somewhat disagree
● Completely disagree
 ● DK/NA



Hungary

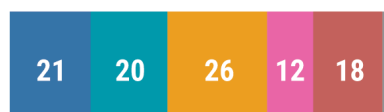
In the first few months (1-3 months) following the birth of the child(ren) the grandparents actively helped out (visited, helped with chores, etc)



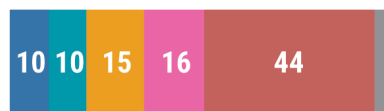
I can count on the active support of grandparents in raising my child(ren) (supervision, help with chores, etc)



I can count on help in raising my child(ren) from... (close and/or distant family members, friends, fellow parents, civil organisations, etc)



I can only count on myself in raising my child(ren) (divorced, partner works remotely, grandparents are unavailable, etc)



In the first few months (1-3 months) following the birth of the child(ren) the grandparents actively helped out (visited, helped with chores, etc)



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I can count on help in raising my child(ren) from... (close and/or distant family members, friends, fellow parents, NGOs, etc)



I can only count on myself in raising my child(ren) (divorced, partner works remotely, grandparents are unavailable, etc)



USA

SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 SAMPLE: NHungary=347, NUSA=401, AMERICAN AND HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39
 RAISING CHILDREN/ Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

This may also be linked to the belief among young people that they still have sufficient time to have children—even at the age of 40 or beyond. However, it is well established that fertility declines markedly with advancing age, thereby reducing the likelihood that all desired children will eventually be born. For this reason, it is particularly important to educate young people and to raise their awareness regarding fertility and family formation.

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DIGITAL SKILLS AND AI LITERACY



Digital Skills and AI Literacy

We speak a great deal—perhaps excessively, according to many young people—about artificial intelligence (AI). AI-based solutions have become integral to everyday life, and we are no longer merely passive recipients, but active creators of content produced with the assistance of artificial intelligence. The key questions, however, are the extent to which we are aware of this, how well we understand these technologies, and how confident we feel in using them.

Previous research has shown that young people generally approach technological innovations with a positive attitude, although some remain sceptical about technological progress (Székely, 2025a). Regardless of individual perspectives, it is evident that exposure to digitalisation is continually increasing—especially among young people. In developments related to artificial intelligence, young people can be considered the most important social group: they are typically the first to adopt new technologies, and so-called innovators and early adopters frequently emerge from their ranks. A 2024 study conducted by the Youth Research Institute indicated that half of Hungarian young people perceive AI to have an impact on their everyday lives (Székely, 2025a). As noted above, both Hungarian and American youth report that AI has become far more prominent in public discourse today than it was only a few years ago.

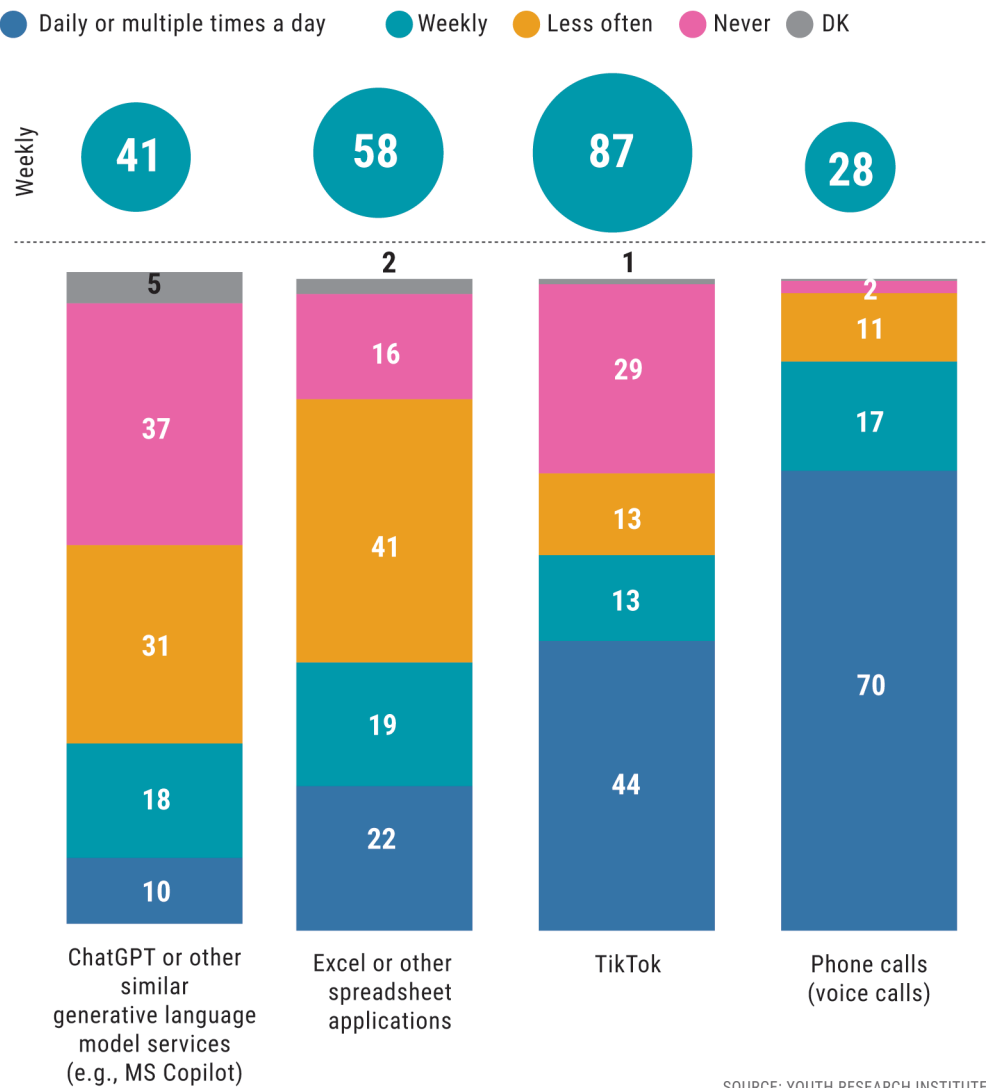
In professional discussions, alongside patterns of use and technological innovations, future scenarios also receive attention—often with an emphasis on potential risks. These include anxieties concerning cognitive decline and the eventual intellectual deterioration of humans. It is already apparent that generative language models surpass humans in efficiency in certain domains, possess more extensive factual knowledge, and operate at speeds that far exceed human capabilities. It is certain that AI will bring transformative changes across many fields—changes that may themselves become generational markers (Székely, 2025b)—and that, within an AI-saturated environment, knowledge enabling the effective and meaningful use of AI will become indispensable. Technological paradigms render previous solutions obsolete, and the knowledge associated with them redundant.

Half of the 15–39-year-old cohort report that they generally recognise AI-generated content such as music, text, or images

The Youth Research Institute's early-2025 study examined the knowledge of 15–39-year-olds across several traditional and emerging domains. We sought to understand what kinds of experience and confidence they possess in areas such as office software and the use of AI. The research reveals that in this age group one in five respondents use spreadsheet software (e.g. Excel) daily, and roughly the same proportion work with spreadsheets at least weekly. There is no substantial variation in usage across age groups, but a significant difference can be observed between females and males. Nearly one in two males surveyed (47%) use spreadsheet software at least weekly, compared with one in three females (34%). A noteworthy point of comparison is the use of ChatGPT or other similar generative language-model services (e.g. MS Copilot), which show a daily usage rate of

10% and a weekly rate of 18%. In this case, there is no meaningful gender difference, but age proves decisive: while one-third of teenagers (34%) use such services at least weekly, only one-fifth (19%) of those over 35 do so.

The research also demonstrated that communication and content consumption are far more frequent activities; for instance, TikTok is used more often than either generative language models or office software.



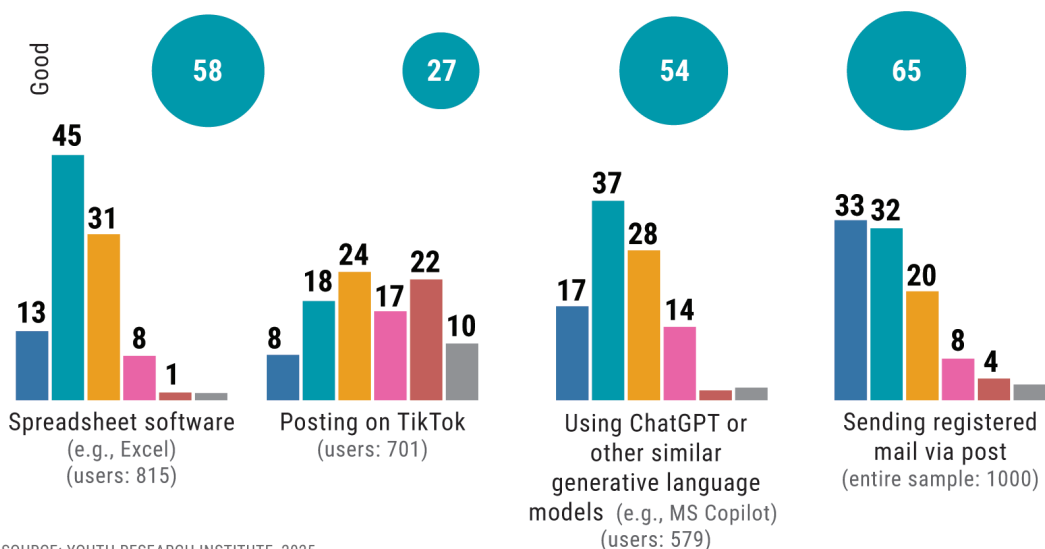
SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: How often do you use the following?

Respondents were also asked to assess their own user knowledge in these areas, and the results were broadly similar: more than half rated their spreadsheet skills (58%) and their ability to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools (54%) as good or excellent. Spreadsheet proficiency was particularly high among those currently in education, with two out of three rating their own skills as at least good. In the case of AI, the confidence was even higher: 70% of students assessed their skills as

good or excellent. While spreadsheet knowledge did not exhibit notable differences across social or demographic groups, AI-related skills displayed clear generational patterns. Among respondents under the age of 25, two-thirds rated their AI skills as good or excellent; among 25–34-year-olds, this proportion declined to one-half; and for those aged 35 and older, only 40% expressed comparable confidence.



● Excellent ● Good ● Average ● Sufficient ● Insufficient ● DK



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025

BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q : Using a scale similar to school grades from 1 to 5, how would you rate your knowledge of the following?

Although young people are generally confident in their ability to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools and to post content on TikTok, there are activities in which older age groups demonstrate a clear advantage. In this study, respondents were also asked how easily they could manage the task of sending a registered postal item. Overall, approximately two in three rated their knowledge as at least good, yet substantial age-related differences emerged: only four in ten 15–17-year-olds expressed such confidence, compared with three-quarters of respondents over the age of 30.

Focusing more specifically on AI-related knowledge, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which a series of statements applied to them. These items assessed both the current use of AI and familiarity with related concepts. Half of the 15–39-year-old cohort (54%) reported that they generally recognise AI-generated content, such as music, text, or images. Younger respondents, students, and residents of Budapest tended to be more confident in this regard. Two-fifths (43%) stated they could identify areas—whether professional or personal—in which AI is currently used. Students and Budapest residents considered themselves more knowledgeable about AI applications, and notable gender differences were observed: half of men (50%) felt confident in

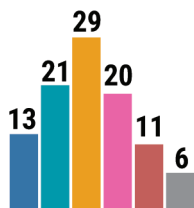
this regard, compared with only a third of women (35%).

However, confidence declined when respondents were asked about specifics. Only one in three 15–39-year-olds reported being able name AI-based programs or applications. Self-assessed knowledge tended to be higher among men, Budapest residents, and those currently studying. Regarding their own work, 38% could imagine that AI might perform some tasks more efficiently in the future. Among these respondents, residents of Budapest, students, and the youngest age group (15–17-year-olds) were overrepresented.

● Completely applies
 ● Mostly applies
 ● Partly applies
 ● Mostly does not apply
● Does not apply at all
 ● DK

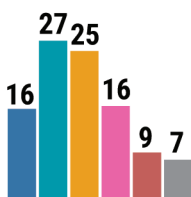
Good

34



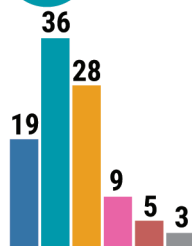
I can name programs/
applications that
are based on
artificial intelligence

43



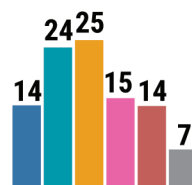
I can name areas
in both private and
professional intelligence
spheres where artificial
intelligence is present

54



I can generally
recognise content
produced by artificial
intelligence (e.g., music,
text, images)

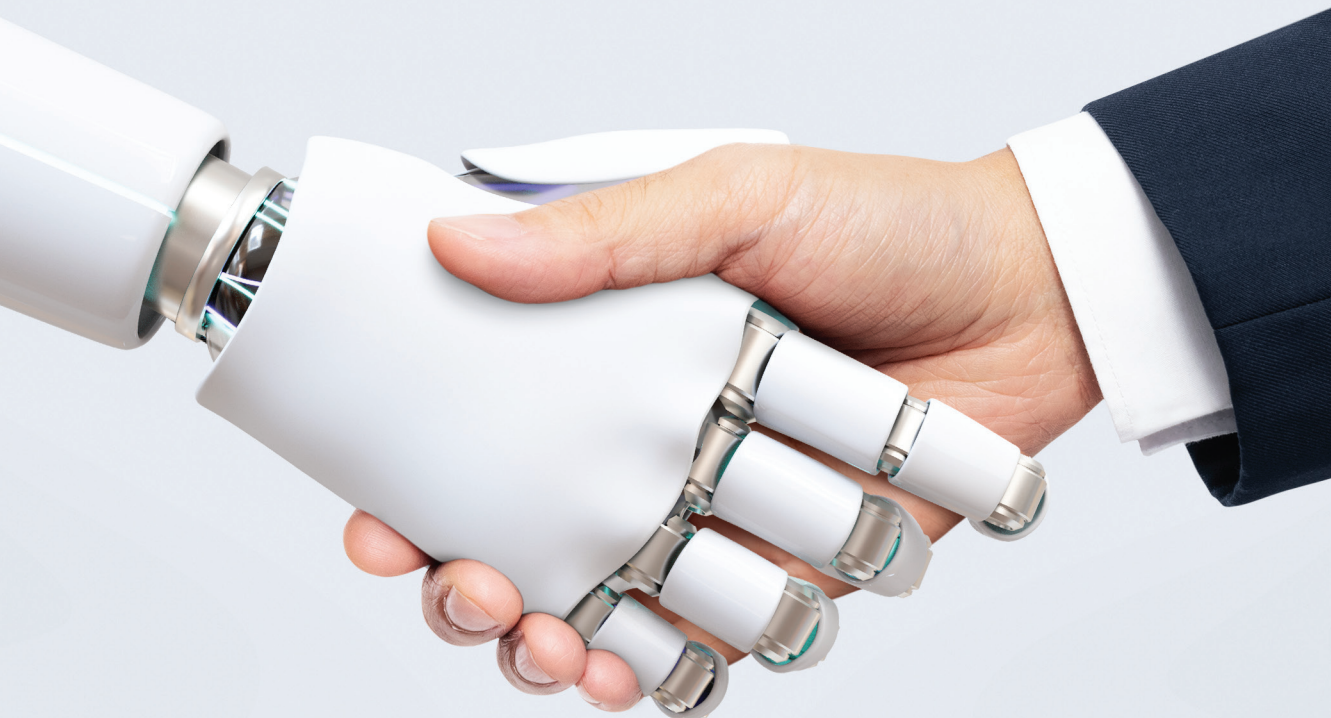
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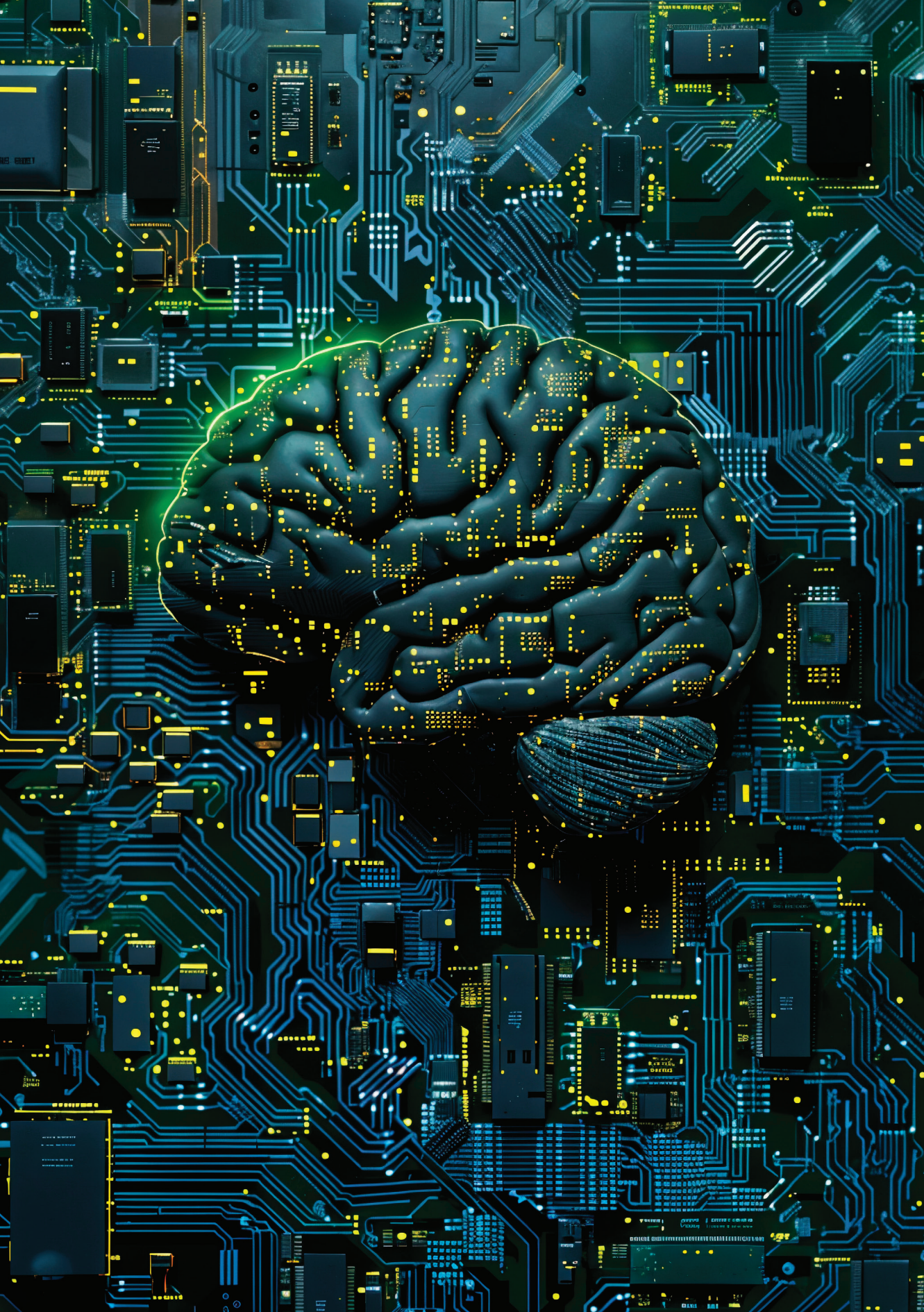


I can imagine that
in my current or
future job artificial
intelligence will
outperform me
in certain tasks

SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025

BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: To what extent do you consider this statement applies to you?





The findings indicate that even within this relatively narrow age range, age remains a decisive factor: younger individuals are generally more confident in their abilities relating to artificial intelligence. Overall attitudes are positive, despite the presence of certain concerns. Simultaneously, both the proportion of users and the intensity of use are increasing, as is the volume of AI-generated content.

Although the proportion of AI-produced content is not expanding as rapidly as was anticipated a few years ago, it is evident that today's young people must navigate an environment in which AI-generated content is available in virtually unlimited quantities. AI literacy is essential for enabling them to filter this abundance and identify

the comparatively small fraction that is genuinely relevant and useful. What is new is primarily the sheer scale of content; the underlying logic remains unchanged. Recent years have demonstrated that an increase in online content does not automatically equate to being surrounded by better or more valuable material. On the contrary, public discourse has often centred on misinformation and the proliferation of low-quality content, with only a small proportion proving genuinely worthwhile. AI does not alter this tendency; it amplifies it. Consequently, digital skills—and AI literacy as one of their core components—are more important than ever.

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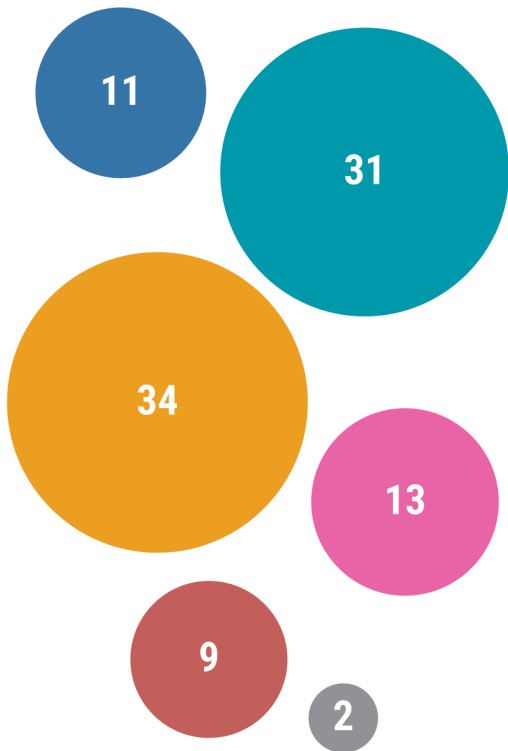
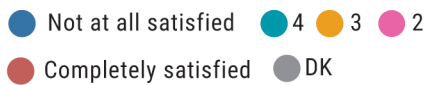
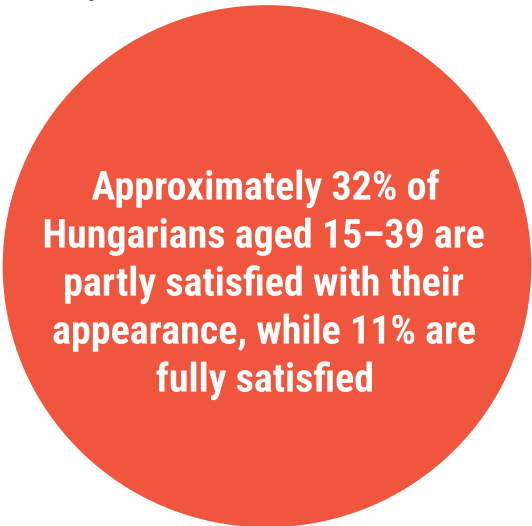
BODY IMAGE AND BODY IDEALS

Body Image and Body Ideals

Fanni Radnai

Within social media environments, where young people encounter edited and retouched images of their peers daily, physical appearance—and the reactions it elicits—plays an increasingly influential role in the development of self-esteem and identity. The highly visual nature of social media platforms often communicates unrealistic expectations to young people, which can substantially shape how they perceive and position themselves within society.

Although dissatisfaction with body image can occur among both males and females, the former are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of social media. According to the 2021 report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), body image-related issues disproportionately affect young girls. Data from the 2017–18 WHO HBSC survey further indicate that nearly half of girls report experiencing mental health problems on a weekly basis, compared with one-third of boys.



The EIGE report (2021) highlights the strong association between body image and mental health, emphasising that it is not actual body mass index or objectively measured overweight status that primarily affects mental well-being, but rather perceived overweight and dissatisfaction with one’s body. In other words, irrespective of whether an individual is objectively overweight, self-perception significantly determines the likelihood of experiencing depressive symptoms or, in more severe cases, suicidal ideation. Moreover, the EIGE (2021) study underscores the close link between social media use and concerns related to body image. The online environment is particularly potent in reinforcing girls’ tendency to strive toward unattainable beauty ideals. The 2024 STADA Health Report similarly indicates that females are significantly less satisfied with their appearance. Perceptions of bodyweight also differ: although females, on average, have healthier BMIs, a higher proportion perceive themselves as overweight—an imbalance especially pronounced among the younger age groups.

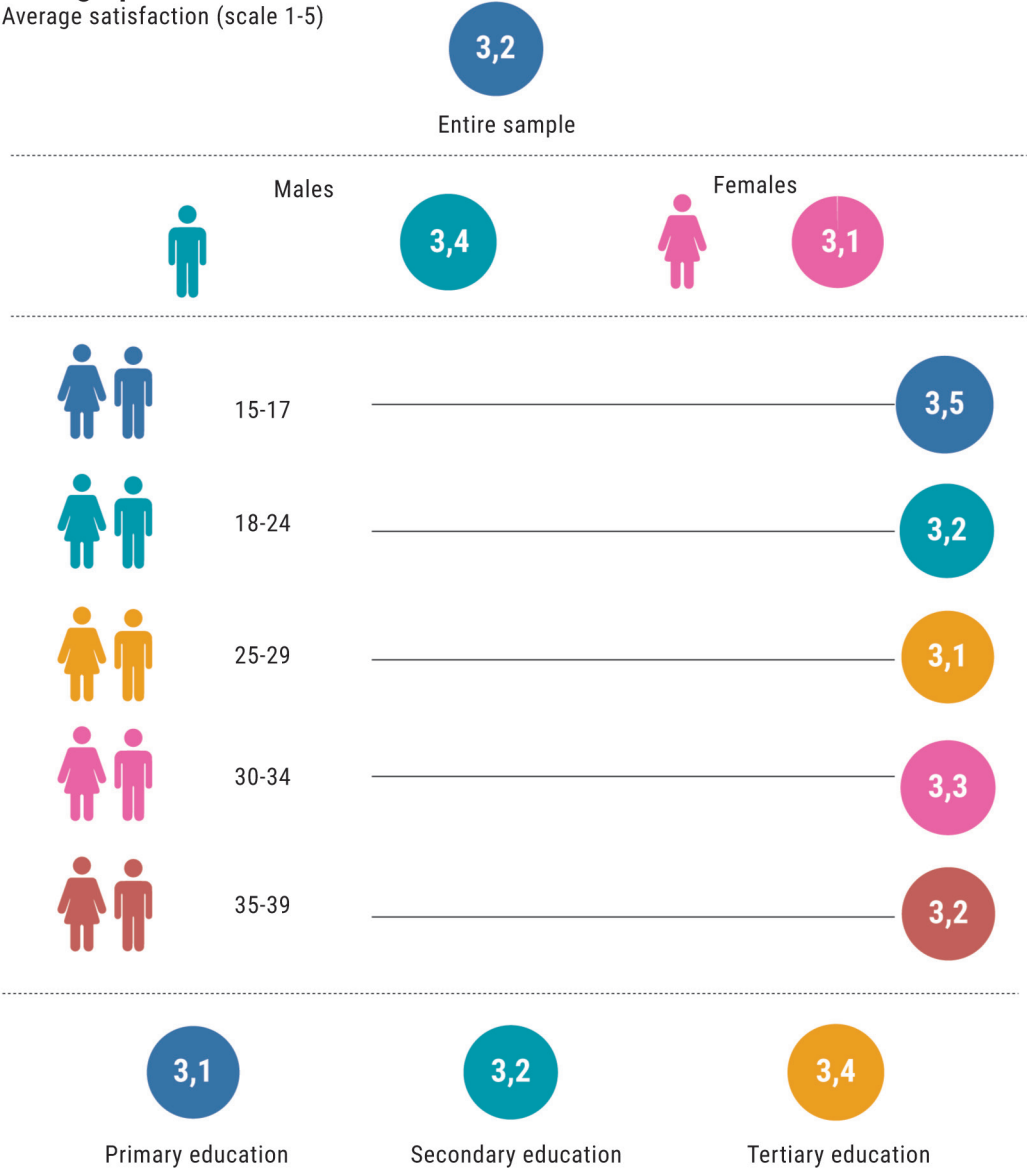
SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: How satisfied are you with your appearance?

According to research conducted by the Youth Research Institute, only 42% of Hungarian individuals aged 15–39 reported being satisfied with their appearance. Most young people fall into the moderately satisfied category. Across the full distribution, 34% of respondents rated their satisfaction as neutral, 32% as partially satisfied, 11% as fully satisfied, 13% as rather dissatisfied, and 9% as completely dissatisfied with their appearance. On average, Hungarian youth rated themselves 3.22, slightly above the midpoint of the scale.

The study also reveals notable gender differences in body image satisfaction among young people. The upper two points of the scale (satisfied) were selected by 48% of men and 37% of women, whereas the two lowest points (dissatisfied) were chosen by 18% of men and 27% of women. On average, men rated their appearance 3.38, while women rated theirs 3.06. Positive self-perception appears more common among men, whereas women—consistent with international trends—exhibit a higher prevalence of dissatisfaction.

Demographic cohort

Average satisfaction (scale 1-5)





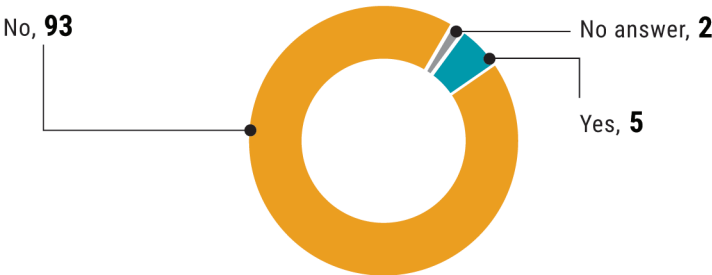
When analysed by age, younger individuals exhibit greater confidence in their appearance. The research indicates that satisfaction with one's physical appearance declines with age: the youngest respondents perceive themselves as the most attractive, whereas older age groups report lower levels of satisfaction. The proportion of those satisfied is approximately 50% among 15–17-year-olds, 44% among 18–24-year-olds, and around 40% for those aged 25 and above. Average satisfaction scores are highest among 15–17-year-olds (3.46), followed by 18–24-year-olds (3.23), 25–29-year-olds (3.11), 30–34-year-olds (3.27), and 35–39-year-olds (3.15).

Self-esteem is also associated with educational attainment: the higher the level of education, the more likely an individual is to report satisfaction with their appearance. Among those with primary education, 37% report being satisfied, compared with 42% of individuals with secondary education and 51% of respondents with tertiary education.

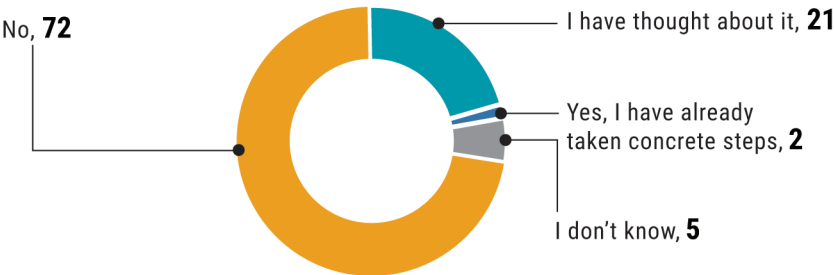
This trend suggests that higher educational attainment is associated with a greater likelihood of maintaining a positive self-image and a lower incidence of dissatisfaction. Average satisfaction scores are 3.11 for individuals with primary education, 3.23 for those with secondary education, and 3.39 for those with tertiary education.

According to the STADA Health Report (2024), more than three-quarters of Europeans agree that society and the media place excessive emphasis on physical appearance. Furthermore, half of the population support stricter regulation and greater transparency regarding the use of filters on social media. The report also notes that, although cosmetic procedures are not yet widespread in Europe, a substantial number of people are considering aesthetic dentistry, weight-loss interventions, or general plastic surgery. The primary motivations for such procedures are to enhance body satisfaction, increase self-confidence, and reduce visible signs of ageing.

Have you ever had a cosmetic procedure?



Do you plan to have any (further) cosmetic procedures?



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: Have you ever had a cosmetic procedure? / Do you plan to have any (further) cosmetic procedures?



Hungarian data suggest that cosmetic procedures have not yet become widespread domestically, reflecting broader European trends, in contrast to countries such as South Korea or China, where such procedures are more commonly adopted by young people. Among Hungarian youth aged 15–39, 5% reported having undergone a cosmetic procedure, while 93% responded negatively. Disaggregated by gender, 4% of males and 7% of females reported having undergone a procedure. Age-specific prevalence is as follows: 7% of 15–17-year-olds, 5% of 18–24-year-olds, 6% of 25–29-year-olds, 5% of 30–34-year-olds, and 7% of 35–39-year-olds have undergone some form of cosmetic intervention.

The majority of Hungarian 15–39-year-olds (72%) do not plan to undergo cosmetic procedures. Nevertheless, 21% have considered such interventions, indicating potential future trends, while 2% have already taken concrete steps in this regard. Taken together, those considering or actively pursuing cosmetic procedures constitute approximately one quarter of the youth population.

Significant gender differences are observed among those expressing interest or taking steps, with twice as many females (30%) as males (16%) engaged with the issue. No clear relationship was identified between age and openness to cosmetic interventions. Status-based analysis reveals that 21% of students, 21% of employed young adults,

and 35% of NEETs² have considered or undertaken steps toward cosmetic procedures.

Addressing deteriorating self-image among young people is of critical importance. Both the WHO and UNICEF emphasise the significance of youth self-perception and the influence of social media. According to these international organisations, the risks associated with body image disturbances and self-esteem issues require multi-level interventions. Within educational settings, it is essential to introduce knowledge relating to body image and self-esteem from an early age, alongside raising awareness of social pressures and the distorting effects of social media. Enhancing digital literacy and teaching safe social media practices can also positively influence young people's self-perception.

Moreover, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle—including regular physical activity, balanced nutrition, and holistic well-being—constitutes a fundamental principle of youth development (EIGE, 2021; WHO, 2016). Facilitating access to mental health services and reinforcing a preventive approach is likewise essential. Early identification and targeted intervention for disorders related to body image and self-esteem are particularly warranted, given their close association with young people's mental health, academic performance, and social integration (WHO, 2016; UNICEF, 2021).





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² NEET is an acronym for "Not in Education, Employment, or Training" and refers to young people who are neither active in the labour market nor participating in any form of education or training.

NUTRITIONAL PREFERENCES AND ATTITUDES

Nutritional Preferences and Attitudes

Fanni Radnai

Among Hungarian adolescents and young adults, health-oriented dietary trends are increasingly prevalent. Only a minority regard visits to fast-food establishments as trendy, while the vast majority regularly prepare meals at home, with a substantial proportion adhering to dietary restrictions for medical or health-related reasons.

According to the WHO's 2024 European survey, dietary behaviours among young people exhibit a dual pattern: although the demand for health-conscious eating is rising, the overall quality of daily meals is declining according to multiple indicators, and social disparities are becoming apparent at an early age. Only a smaller proportion of adolescents have access to fruits and vegetables daily, with many teenagers consuming neither. The regularity of breakfast has declined compared with previous surveys, particularly among girls and older age groups. Concurrently, the daily consumption of sugary beverages and confectionery remains prominent in young people's diets. A slight decrease in soft drink consumption is observed, whereas confectionery intake appears to be increasing, particularly among girls. Gender differences are also evident: boys are more likely to consume soft drinks, while girls more frequently consume confectionery daily, and lower levels of physical activity are more pronounced among girls (WHO, 2024).

Socioeconomic status further determines diet quality. Adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds consume vegetables and fruits less frequently, opt for sugary beverages more often, and exhibit higher rates of overweight and obesity. Fewer young people from these backgrounds achieve the recommended daily levels of physical activity. Dietary habits among young people are increasingly shaped by financial and environmental conditions; as decisions are largely influenced by accessibility, cost, and availability, heightened health consciousness does not necessarily translate into improved daily dietary quality (Rakić et al., 2024).

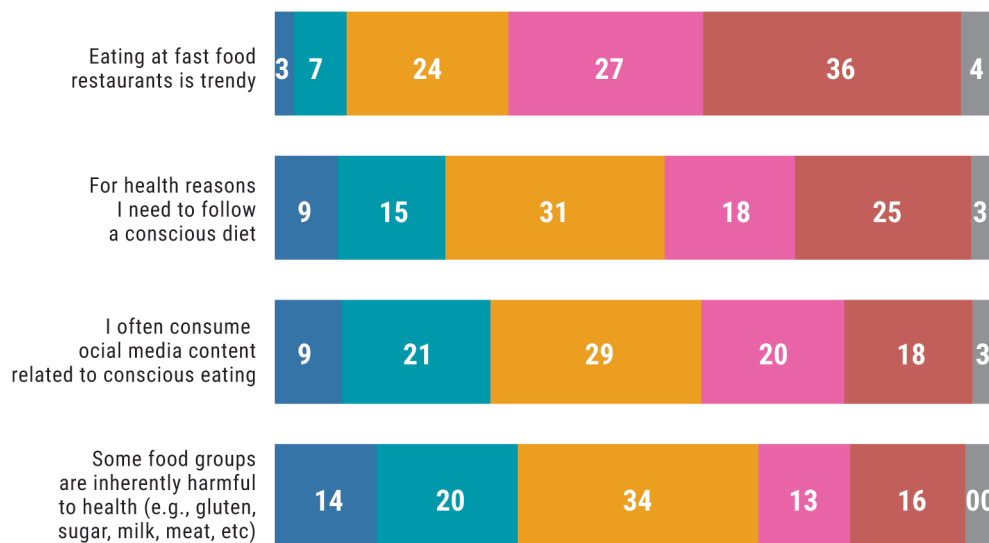
EU policy aims to address poor dietary behaviours through systemic interventions. Key measures

Health-conscious eating is increasingly prevalent among Hungarian youth—24% of 15–39-year-olds adhere to dietary restrictions for health reasons

include improving food composition, providing clear nutritional labelling, imposing taxes on unhealthy products, reducing the prices of fruits and vegetables, enhancing the quality and accessibility of school and community meals, and restricting the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children. The overarching objective is to create a food and built environment in which healthier choices are the easier choices, particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth (European Parliament, 2024).



● Completely agree
 ● Mostly agree
 ● Partly agree, partly disagree
 ● Mostly disagree
 ● Completely disagree
 ● DK



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 / Q: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Health-conscious eating habits are increasingly prevalent among Hungarian youth, with a substantial proportion motivated by health-related imperatives. According to data from the Hungarian Youth Research Institute, 24% of individuals aged 15–39 report adhering to a conscious diet due to medical reasons, indicating that their dietary practices are driven by necessity rather than choice. This proportion increases with age: 17% among 15–17-year-olds, 23% among 18–24-year-olds, and 25% among those aged 25 and above. Gender differences are evident, with a higher prevalence among females (26%) compared to males (22%). Urban–rural disparities are also observed, with slightly higher rates of health-driven dietary awareness in the capital (28%) relative to rural areas (23%). By occupational status, 25% of employed youth, 23% of students, and 16% of NEET³ youth reported that their conscious dietary practices were motivated by health considerations.

Perceptions of the health impact of specific food groups are divided: 34% of young people regard certain foods inherently harmful (e.g., gluten, sugar, dairy, meat), whereas 29% disagree with this statement.

Social media has a discernible influence on young people's dietary habits, though engagement varies.

Overall, 30% of 15–39-year-olds frequently consume nutrition-related social media content, with higher rates among 18–24-year-olds (32%) and 25–29-year-olds (33%), and lower among 15–17-year-olds (24%). Gender differences are pronounced: 35% of women versus 25% of men engage frequently with such content.

Fast food is socially regarded negatively, and self-reported consumption remains limited. On average, young people dine at fast food restaurants once every two weeks. Daily consumers comprise only 1%, weekly consumers 19%, occasional consumers 72%, and 7% report never eating in fast-food establishments.

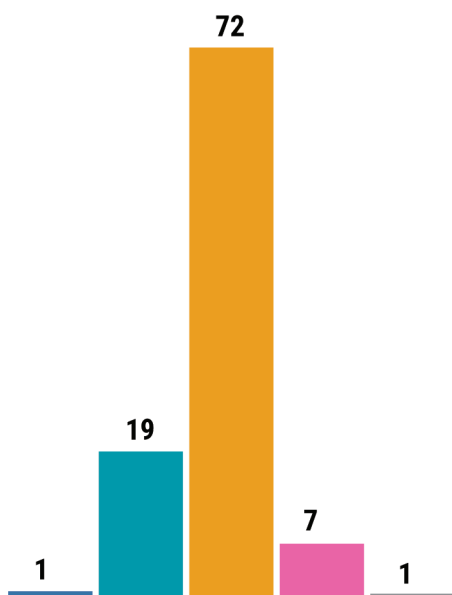
³ NEET is an acronym for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training” and refers to young people who are neither active in the labour market nor participating in any form of education or training.



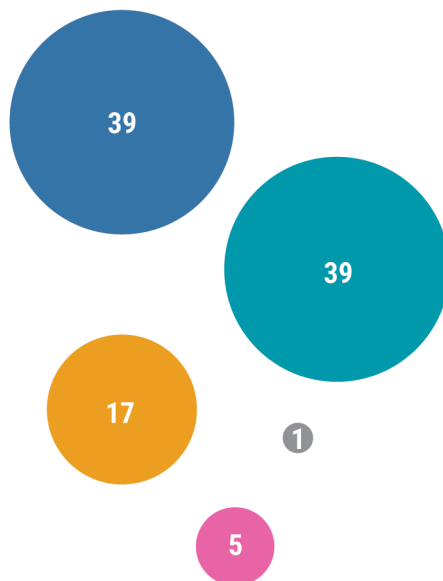


● Daily or multiple times a day
 ● Weekly
 ● Less often
 ● Never
 ● DK

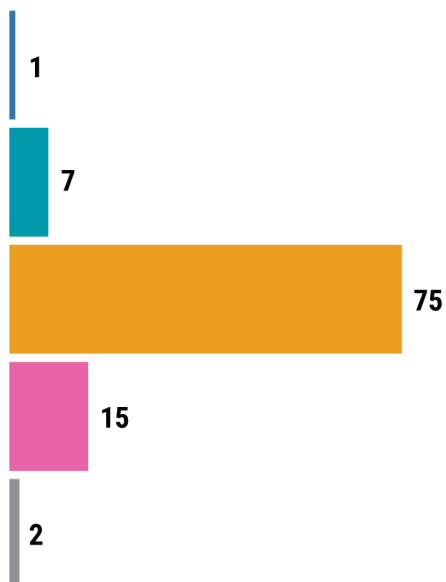
DINING AT FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS



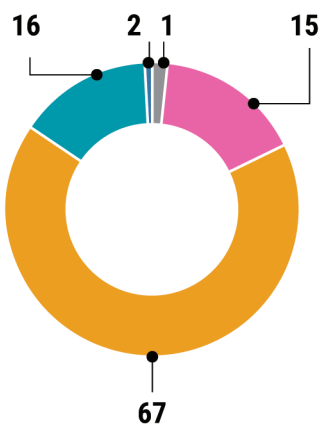
COOKING, FOOD PREPARATION FOR SELF/FAMILY



DINING AT TRADITIONAL RESTAURANTS



ORDERING FOOD FOR DELIVERY



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 BASE: N=1000, HUNGARIAN YOUTH 15-39 / Q: How often do you do the following?

The perception of dining at fast food restaurants as trendy is notably low and is primarily observed among the youngest age group. Across the entire sample, only 10% consider fast food to be trendy, whereas among 15–17-year-olds, 22% share this view, a figure markedly higher than in other age groups. Among 18–24-year-olds, 10% consider it trendy; among 25–29-year-olds, 7%; among 30–34-year-olds, 7%; and among 35–39-year-olds, 10%. In terms of gender, 13% of men and 7% of women regard fast food as trendy, the latter being particularly low relative to the overall average. Regionally, 12% of Budapest residents and 9% of those living outside the capital consider fast food trendy. By occupational status, 14% of students and 9% of employed individuals perceive fast food in this way.

Home cooking constitutes a central aspect of daily life for young people. Overall, 78% of Hungarian youth prepare meals for themselves or their families at least weekly, with an average frequency of three times per week. Daily meal preparation is particularly characteristic of young people living

in independent households, whereas it is less common among the youngest age group. Only 8% of 15–17-year-olds cook daily, although 47% prepare meals regularly. The most active group is the 25–29-year-olds, 88% of whom cook at least weekly.

Dining at traditional restaurants and using food delivery services remain infrequent, occasional choices for young people. Only 1% dine at a restaurant daily, 7% weekly, 75% less frequently, and 15% never visit traditional restaurants. Regular restaurant attendance is reported by 5% of women and 12% of men. Regarding food delivery, 2% order daily, 16% weekly, 67% less frequently, and 15% completely abstain from ordering. Weekly delivery is more prevalent in Budapest and county-level cities (20–26%) and less common in smaller settlements (9–12%), partly reflecting differences in service availability.

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OPTIMISM AND CONCERNS

Optimism and Concerns

Levente Székely

Hungarian youth are future-oriented, with the majority believing that public discourse on the future should be expanded. Although generally optimistic, they express concern regarding certain issues—particularly the broader economic situation and, even more acutely, potential personal loss.

In our previous research, we observed that young people perceive uncertainty and an unpredictable future as the most significant challenges facing their generation (Székely, 2022; Székely & Kiss-Kozma, 2024). In the current study, we sought to explore the notion of the future more thoroughly, including an assessment of both the recent and more distant past. In this context, the recent past refers to the year 2024, which Hungarian respondents aged 15–39 most frequently described using the terms “change,” “difficult,” and “chaos.” A noteworthy point of comparison can be drawn with the responses of American youth, which reveal both similarities and differences. Among the three most frequently cited terms, “crazy” ranked first and “chaos” third, while the second most common response was the simple descriptor “good.”

Half of Hungarian respondents (52%) reported having faced unexpected events in 2024, with this perception being particularly pronounced among those currently in education. Family and friendship relationships were most frequently characterised by happiness (50%), while a relative majority (40%) also considered 2024 a fundamentally successful year in terms of achieving their personal goals. The perception of unexpected events was slightly higher among American respondents aged 15–39, 56% of whom reported encountering unforeseen events in 2024. Similarly, a slightly larger proportion of Americans perceived their interpersonal relationships as happy and regarded the past year as successful (46%). Nevertheless, external circumstances also caused concern: one-third of Hungarian respondents aged 15–39 (35%), compared with nearly half of American respondents (48%), indicated that they were worried about political or economic developments in 2024.

While respondents across age groups similarly perceive their interpersonal relationships as happy, younger individuals are more likely than those over

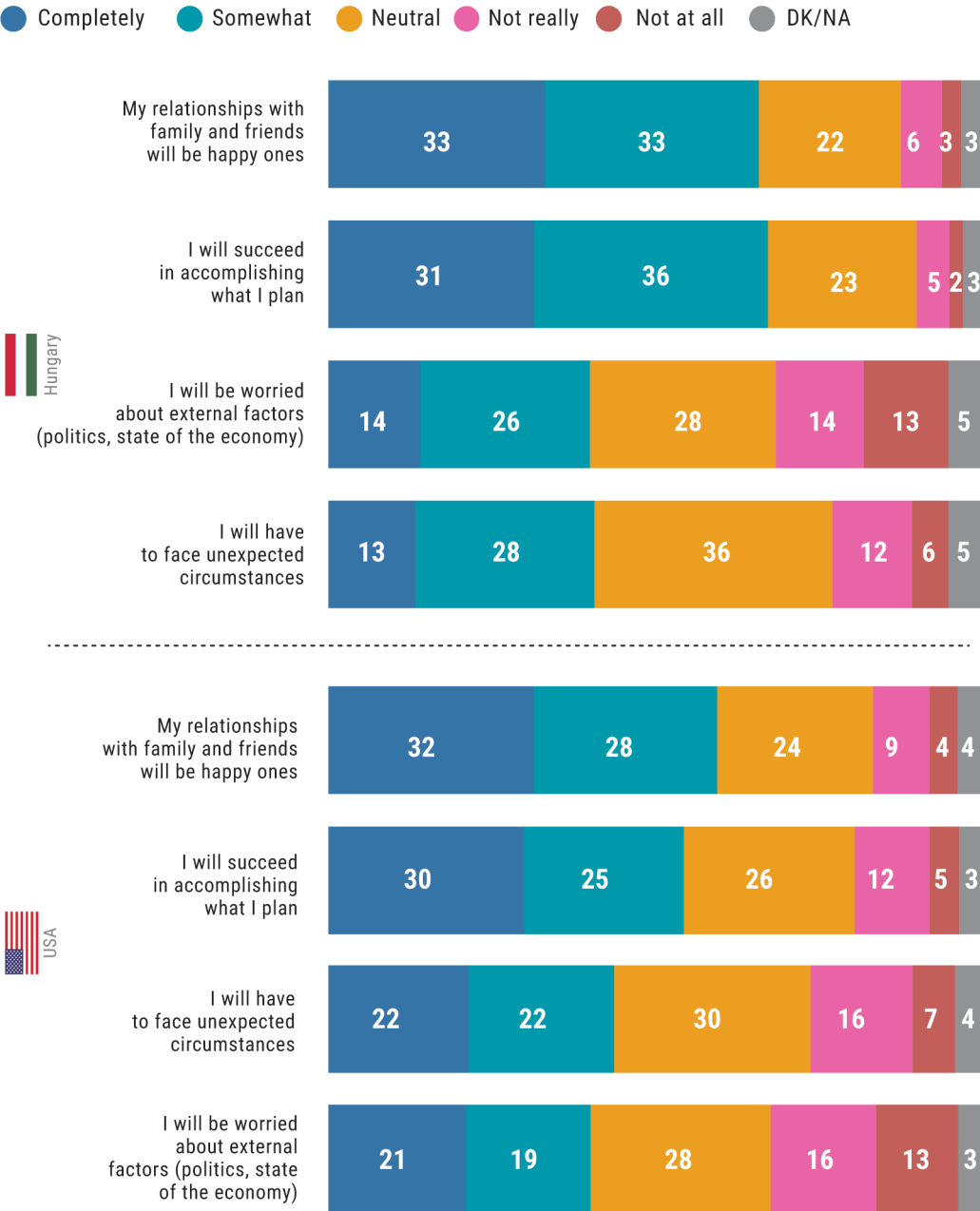
Americans aged 15–39 tend to be more pessimistic than their Hungarian counterparts. Whereas two-thirds of Hungarians expect to realise their plans, only 55% of Americans feel the same way

30 to regard 2024 as a successful year.

Hungarian expectations for 2025 are most frequently summarised by the term “hope,” although several respondents also mentioned “success,” “anticipation,” and “development.” Similarly, American respondents aged 15–39 most used the terms “better,” “hope,” “good,” and “exciting.” Overall, these responses depict a tumultuous and challenging 2024, followed by a hopeful outlook for 2025.

In detail, most Hungarian respondents anticipate unexpected events in 2025 (41%). Two-thirds expect their interpersonal relationships to be characterised by happiness, and the same proportion anticipate successful achievement of their personal plans. American respondents aged 15–39 exhibit similar expectations, with 44% anticipating unforeseen events and 60% expecting happiness in their interpersonal relationships. A notable difference emerges regarding the perceived likelihood of achieving personal goals: American respondents appear more pessimistic, with 55% expecting to realise their plans, compared to two-thirds of Hungarian respondents.

Regarding expectations for the future, it can be observed that while the American sample does not exhibit pronounced differences, several statistically significant distinctions emerge among Hungarian respondents across various demographic characteristics. Among Hungarian individuals aged 15–39, younger respondents are the most optimistic about their familial and friendship networks: 83% of 15–17-year-olds anticipate that their interpersonal relationships will be characterised by happiness in 2025.



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
SAMPLE (BOTH): N=1000, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39 /
Q: To what extent do you expect the following to characterise the coming year (2025)?





A different perspective on the past and present is provided by comparing childhood aspirations with current life circumstances. In our study, respondents were asked to what extent their present lives correspond to the lives they had envisioned for themselves as children. The results present a mixed picture: respondents in both Hungary and the United States generally perceive themselves as positioned midway between their childhood dreams and adult realities. Minor differences are evident in the overall assessment, with the mean score on a five-point scale hovering around 3.1 in both cases. A more detailed breakdown highlights differences between

Hungarian and American respondents aged 15–39. Among Hungarians, younger age groups (15–17 years) report higher levels of satisfaction with the realisation of their childhood aspirations, whereas in the American sample, it is the 30–39-year-olds who feel that their childhood visions have been more fully realised. In both samples, higher levels of educational attainment are associated with greater satisfaction. Gender differences are observed only in the American sample, where males report higher satisfaction with the realisation of their childhood dreams than females.



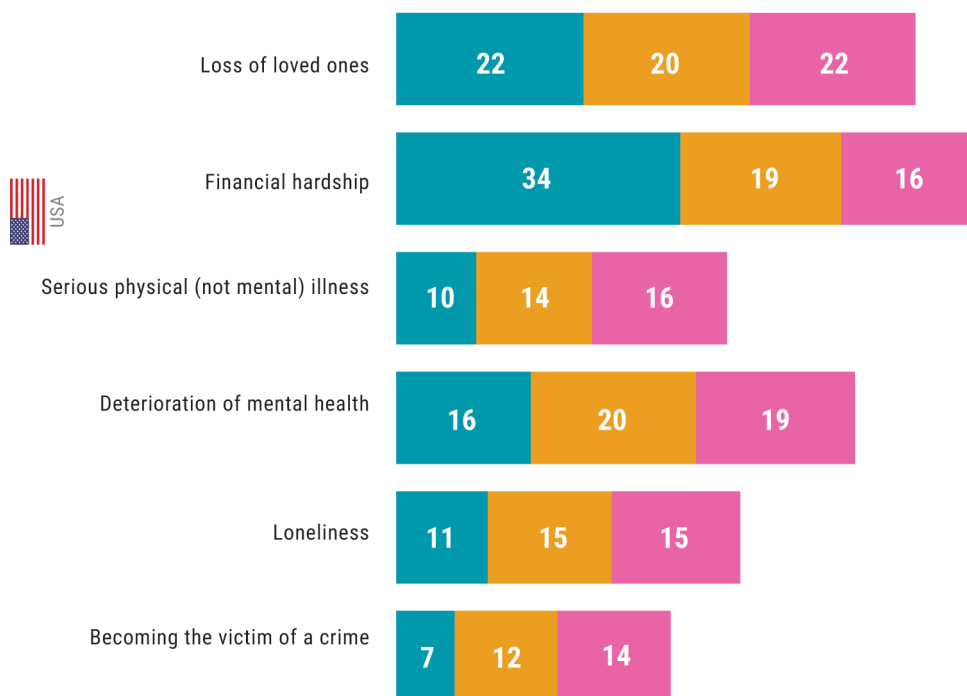
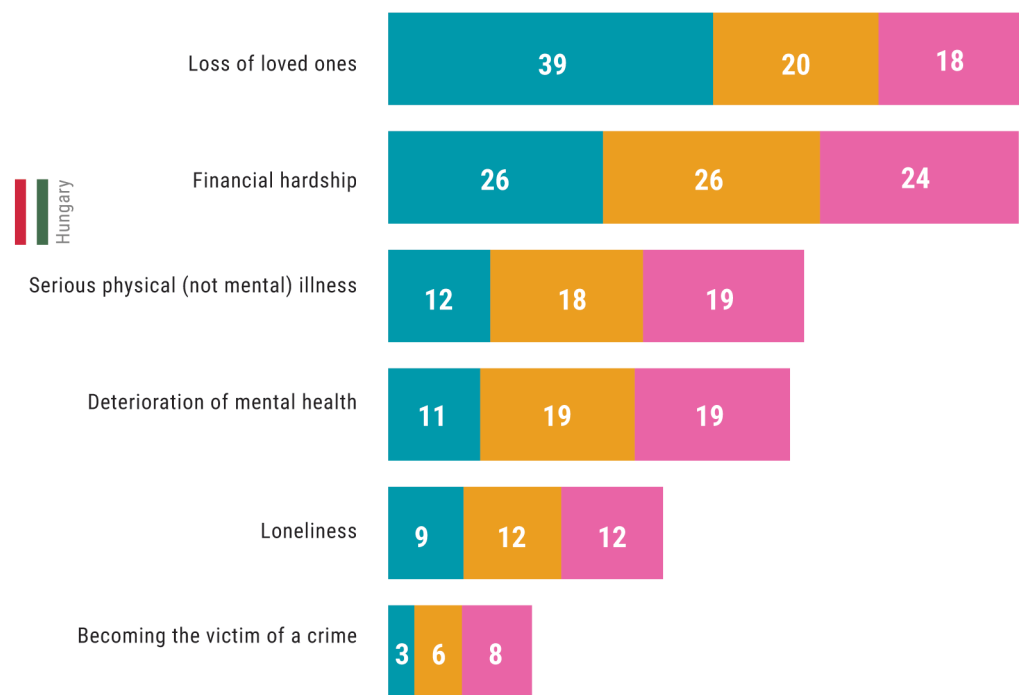
Previous research has extensively examined young people's fears, asking them to assess potential threats that commonly appear in visions of dystopian futures or that are relevant in contemporary society (Székely, 2021; Kiss-Kozma & Székely, 2023). These studies indicate that a potential global pandemic and climate change are viewed with comparable levels of concern. Regarding the future, young people identify a forthcoming economic crisis and poor governance as the most alarming scenarios, whereas fears associated with technological developments, such as artificial intelligence or the proliferation of robots, are less prevalent.

In the most recent study by the Youth Research Institute, the issue was approached somewhat differently by categorising potential fears into those concerning external circumstances and those affecting personal life. This distinction revealed that negative changes in personal circumstances

elicit substantially more concern than changes in conditions that typically influence an individual's life more indirectly. Within the personal domain, the loss of family members and financial losses were identified as the most alarming threats in both the Hungarian and American samples, with minor differences. Specifically, for Hungarian respondents aged 15–39, the loss of a loved one was the greatest source of concern, followed by financial hardship. In contrast, American respondents were primarily concerned about financial hardship, with the loss of a loved one ranking second. Hungarian respondents expressed nearly equal concern for physical and mental health issues, whereas concern for mental health problems was more pronounced among Americans. Additionally, American participants more frequently included loneliness and becoming the victim of a crime in the top three most worrying threats.



● 1. Most worried about ● 2. Most worried about ● 3. Most worried about

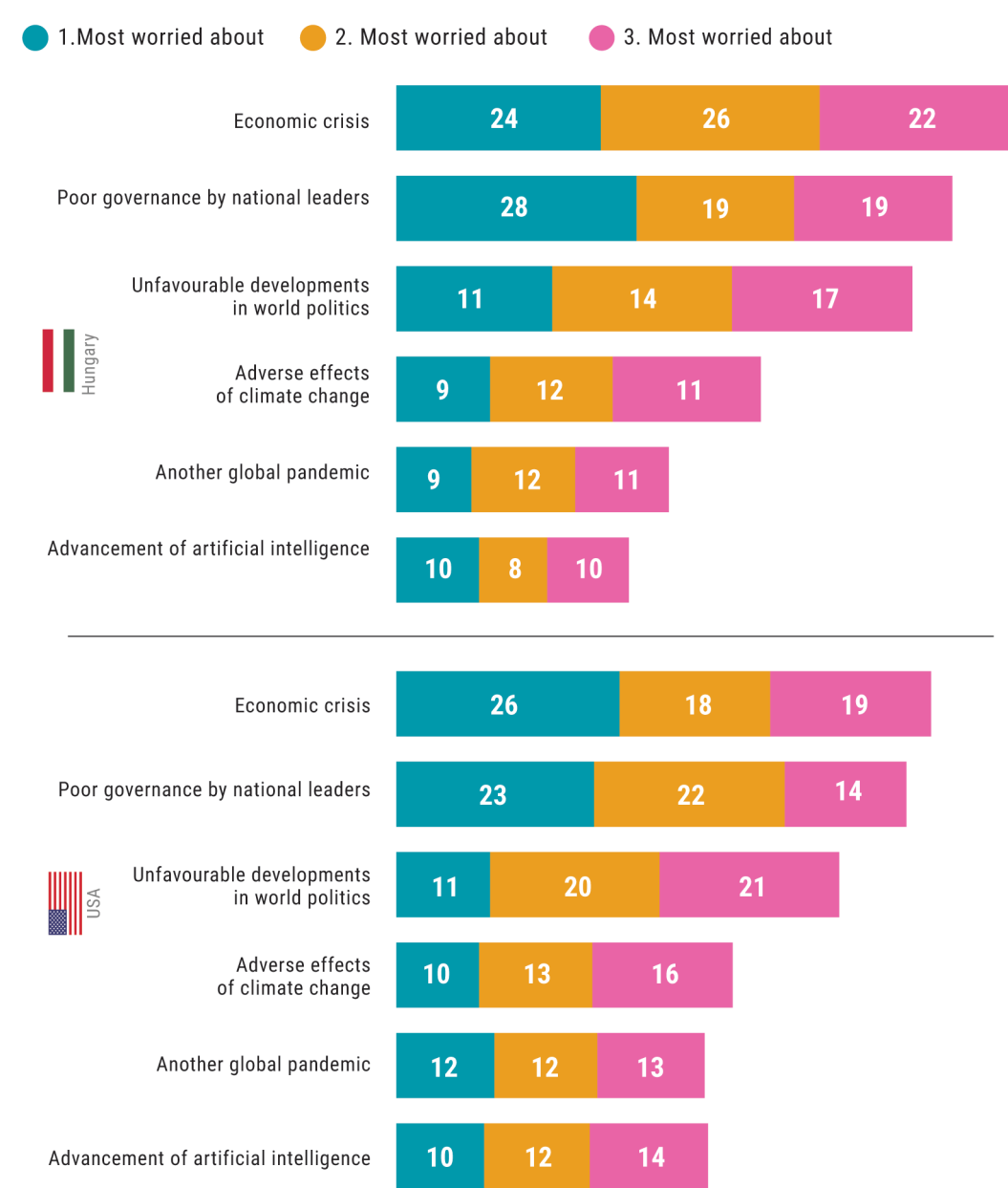


SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025

SAMPLE (BOTH): N=1000, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39

Q: Please rank the following personal circumstances in terms of which three you fear most about the future, starting with the one you fear the most.

Similarly, in relation to external circumstances, it can be observed that the responses from Hungarian participants are more concentrated in a single direction, while American responses show a more evenly distributed pattern. The order of preferences for the statements is identical among both Hungarian and American respondents. The greatest concern is for an economic crisis, followed by the threat of poor governance at both national and international levels. Concern for climate change is similarly ranked among both Hungarian and American respondents aged 15–39. Notably, the potential for another global pandemic has fallen lower in the rankings compared to data from previous years, while fear of artificial intelligence has increased, as both samples produced nearly identical results in this regard.



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
SAMPLE (BOTH): N=1000, HUNGARIAN AND AMERICAN YOUTH AGED 15-39
Q: Please rank the following external factors in terms of which three you fear most about the future, starting with the one you fear the most.



Young people aged 15–39, whether in Hungary or the United States, generally adopt an optimistic outlook on the future. A comparison of their evaluations of last year and their expectations for the current year reveals that both their perceptions of human relationships and their plans for the future are characterised by a positive attitude.

Their concerns about the future are primarily driven by fear of personal loss, but they also express apprehension regarding the risks associated with a continuing economic crisis and poor governance. Consequently, options that offer predictability are likely to retain their appeal.

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Methodology

The *Reflection* report comprises studies based largely on empirical research conducted by the Youth Research Institute over the past year. Covering a wide range of topics, it presents an overview of Hungarian youth and, in many instances, offers comparisons with young people in the United States.

Our research examined young people, with data collection carried out between December 2024 and January 2025. Responses were obtained through online, self-administered questionnaire-based interviews (CAWI), during which a total of 1,000 Hungarian and 1,000 American participants aged 15–39 were surveyed using representative sampling.

The Hungarian target group was reached through online research panels and social media (Facebook, TikTok). Recruitment of respondents aged 15–19 required parental consent; for those aged 15–17, recruitment was also conducted through schools. Mobile phones were used for completing the questionnaire in 80% of cases. The dropout rate ranged between 40–50%. Participants in the United States were contacted via secure invitations sent by online panel providers.





