

Findings of Health Behaviour in School-aged Children in Ireland from 1998-2018

NUI Galway report highlights trends in children's health behaviours over 20 years

HBSC study reveals an overall decrease across all substance use measures; an increase in young people reporting pressure from schoolwork; and more children report feeling low

- 5.3% of Irish children aged 10-17 said they were smoking in 2018, compared to 22.6% in 1998
- In 2018 19% reported they had ever been drunk, compared to 33% in 1998
- 8.5% reported in 2018 they had used cannabis in the last year, compared to 12.3% in 1998
- 44.3% reported feeling pressured by school work, compared to 32.9% in 1998
- 34.3% reported feeling low about every week or more frequently, compared to 23% in 1998

Monday 8 March 2021: Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Wellbeing and National Drugs Strategy Frank Feighan today launched the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Trends Report 1998-2018 (HBSC).

The report was led by senior researcher Aoife Gavin in collaboration with the HBSC research team at the Health Promotion Research Centre in NUI Galway.

Compared to the findings from 1998, the study found fewer children using substances, more than half of children exercise regularly, more children are feeling pressured by school work and more children report feeling low.

The HBSC is a cross-sectional study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe. It runs every four years. In 2018, 45 countries and regions participated, collecting data on health behaviours, health outcomes and the social contexts of children's lives.

The study compared findings of health behaviour in school-aged children from 1998 to 2018.

Health risk behaviours – An overall decrease across all substance use measures.

:: Fewer children report currently smoking – 5.3% in 2018, compared to 22.6% in 1998.

:: Fewer children report that they have ever been drunk – 19% in 2018 compared to 33% in 1998.

:: Fewer children report cannabis use in the last year – 8.5% in 2018, compared to 12.3% in 1998.

Positive health behaviours – An overall improvement among young people

:: More children brushing teeth more than once a day – 70.1% in 2018, compared to 57.6% in 1998.

:: More children always wearing a seatbelt in car journeys – 81.4% in 2018, compared to 41% in 1998.

:: The proportion of young people doing vigorous exercise four or more times a week has remained stable – 52.1% in 2018, compared to 52.6% in 1998.

Launching the report, Minister Frank Feighan said: "I welcome the publication of this latest report from the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children Study. This international project has provided

us with essential data which has helped to shape and inform policy relating to the health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

“This new Trends report gives us a wonderful opportunity to take stock, both of the many very significant improvements to our children’s health, and of those areas where we have not, perhaps, made as much progress as we would have liked. The information contained in this study will be of great importance in terms of future planning and policy direction regarding children’s health.”

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Roderic O’Gorman T.D. said:

“Ireland is headed in the right direction when it comes to the health of young people, and it is clear that past Government initiatives to support healthy choices are having a positive impact on reducing alcohol consumption and smoking, helping to keep our young people safe.

“The research also suggests that an increased emphasis is needed around supporting the positive mental health of young people, and following the impact of Covid-19, this is an issue that may become more prevalent. In February, my Department launched the Supporting Children Campaign which aims to outline the supports available for children and families during the pandemic. We have also increased funding for youth services in 2021, in recognition of the positive impact youth work can have on young people’s lives.

“Thanks to the HBSC research team in NUI Galway and the contributions from young people, we now have a valuable piece of research that will help to inform future healthy living initiatives aimed at improving the lives of children and young people in Ireland.”

Commenting on the findings, Co-Principal Investigator Dr Colette Kelly from the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway, said: “This report is the culmination of many years of work, and brings together some good news about the health behaviours of Irish children with a sustained decrease in substance use for example.

“There is a continuing positive trend in children communicating with parents and reports of good places in the local area to spend free time. The report also highlights areas in need of improvement in particular more young people are reporting that they feel pressured by school work and there is an increase in the proportion of children who report feeling low. The report provides a breakdown of age, gender and social class patterns which provide more in-depth information on each of the indicators.”

To read the full report, visit -

<http://www.nuigalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-Trends-Report-2021.pdf>

Ends

Media queries and interview requests to ed.carty@nuigalway.ie 086 4178175

Interviews available with Principal Investigator Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn; Co-Principal Investigator Dr Colette Kelly; and Senior researcher Aoife Gavin from the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway;

Photo: Aislinn O’Byrne, aged 13, (left) and Gabrielle O’Byrne, aged 11, at NUI Galway ahead of the launch of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Trends Report 1998-2018 (HBSC).

Notes for Editors

Please see below a brief on some of the key results from the HBSC Trends Report and FAQs.

Findings from the HBSC 2018 study

Health risk behaviours

Overall, 5.3% of young people reported in 2018 that they currently **smoke** compared to 22.6% in 1998.

32.1% reported in 2018 that they had their first **cigarette** at age 13 or younger, compared to 61% in 1998.

In 2018, 19% of young people reported that they have ever been **drunk**, compared to 33% in 1998.

8.5% reported in 2018 that they used **cannabis** in the last 12 months compared to 12.3% in 1998.

In 2018, 13.7% of children reported **bullying** at school one or more times in the past couple of months, compared to 25.1% in 1998.

Positive health behaviours

Overall, 23.3% reported in 2018 that they consume **fruit** more than once a day, compared to 17.6% in 1998.

81.4% reported in 2018 that they always wear a **seatbelt** when they are travelling by car compared to 41% in 1998.

52.1% of children reported in 2018 that they **exercise** four or more times per week compared to 52.6% in 1998.

Sexual health behaviours

The proportion of 15 to 17 year-olds who reported that they have ever had **sex** was 22% in 2018. In 2010 the proportion was 25.5%.

65.9% of young people aged 15 to 17 reported in 2018 that they used a **condom** at last sexual intercourse, compared to 78% in 2010.

Health and wellbeing

Overall, 31% of children reported in 2018 that their **health** is excellent compared to 28.2% in 2002.

87.6% of children reported in 2018 that they are **happy** with their life compared to 88.1% in 1998.

72.8% of children reported high **life satisfaction** in 2018 compared to 76% in 2002.

The proportion of children who reported **feeling low** about every week or more frequently was 34.3% in 2018. In 1998 it was 23%.

In 2018 14.4% of children reported being on a **diet** or doing something else to lose weight, compared to 11.9% in 2002.

Social context of children's lives

Overall, 84% of children reported in 2018 that it was easy to talk to their mother compared to 73% in 1998.

71.5% reported in 2018 that it was easy to talk to their father compared to 47.4% in 1998.

73.2% reported that they lived with both parents compared to 90.8% in 1998.

Overall, 71.5% reported in 2018 that they liked school compared to 68.1% in 2002 but feeling pressured by schoolwork was reported by 44.3% of children in 2018 compared to 32.9% in 1998.

63.5% of children reported in 2018 that there are good places in their local area to spend free time compared to 45.1% in 2002.

FAQs

What is the HBSC survey?

The survey has been carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway since 1998 and brings together all of the data, relating to more than 62,000 Irish children, collected over this period to examine key trends and patterns between 1998 and 2018. The overall study aims to gain new insight into and increase our understanding of young people's health and wellbeing, health behaviours and their social context. As well as serving a monitoring and a knowledge-generating function, one of the key objectives of HBSC has been to inform policy and practice.

Who took part in the latest survey in 2018?

The 2018 HBSC study comprised of a nationally representative sample of 15,557 pupils aged 10-17 years from 255 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland.

How is the data collected?

HBSC is a school-based survey with data collected through self-completion questionnaires administered by teachers in the classroom. The international HBSC survey instrument is a standard questionnaire developed by the international research network.

How is the data used?

The findings are used at both national and international level to gain new insight into young people's health and well-being, to understand the social determinants of health and to inform policy and practice to improve young people's lives. The Irish HBSC data and outputs are included in many national and international policy reports and strategies including those on Drugs and Alcohol, Physical Activity, Child Participation in Decision Making, Obesity, Injury Prevention, Cardiovascular Health and the overall National Health Policy.

How does Ireland compare to these other European countries or the 45 participating countries in terms of the health of our young people?

The international rankings presented in the report refer to 15 year olds in Ireland and in 26 other countries for which data is available. In general Irish children fare well compared to their international peers. In particular, positive trends worth noting include fruit consumption, physical activity and communication with mother and father.

What differences does this report show us about the teenagers of today compared to the teenagers of 10 and 20 years ago?

Children in Ireland are less likely to engage in health risk behaviours, such as smoking, drinking, and cannabis use, compared to 20 years ago. More children are engaged in positive health behaviours such as daily fruit consumption, regular brushing of teeth and wearing seatbelts. However, it is worth noting that young people today are reporting higher levels of school pressure, feeling low and more young people report being on a diet than in the past, especially the older boys. This report presents many positive trends alongside areas of concern, which require further investment.

About NUI Galway

Established in 1845, NUI Galway is a bilingual university comprised of four colleges, 19 schools, five research institutes, 19,070 students, 3,308 international students, 2,200 staff, research collaborations with 3,267 international institutions in 114 countries, 110,000 alumni, while 98% of graduates are in employment or further study within six months.

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