

This factsheet provides information on the sexual behaviour of young people in Northern Ireland. The information is drawn from *Towards better sexual health: a survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland* which was published by fpa in 2002.¹ In addition, comparative information is provided, drawn from other recent Northern Ireland-wide surveys.

Key issues

- Just over one third of young people have sex before the age of 17 (the legal age of consent).
- Young men are more likely to have sex before they are 16 than young women.
- The sexual behaviour of young people in Northern Ireland is very similar to young people in Britain.

Current research

- The *Towards better sexual health* survey produced the first ever comprehensive Northern Ireland-wide data on the sexual behaviour of young people. One thousand young people aged between 14 and 25 completed a structured survey questionnaire, and 71 focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews also took place.¹
- In 2001, some sexual health issues were included within the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*.² As part of this survey, 397 sexually active young people were surveyed, compared with 535 in the *Towards better sexual health* survey.
- The *Health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland* survey in 1999 included questions on sexual behaviour and contraception. Of the 4,465 12-16 year olds questioned, 665 indicated they were sexually active.³
- ACCORD's 2002 report surveyed 746 young people aged 15 (37%), 16 (62%) and 17 (1%) in Catholic maintained post-primary schools of whom 29% indicated that they had experienced sexual intercourse.⁴

- In 2004, sexual intercourse was included in a survey of risk behaviours in 14-15 year old school children, carried out by Love for Life.⁵

Research findings

The absence of comprehensive data prior to 2002 makes it difficult to comment on whether young people are having sex at an earlier age. However, the *Towards better sexual health* survey revealed the following:

- 53.3% of all respondents had experienced sexual intercourse. Of these, 36.7% had sex before age 17 (the legal age of consent), and 27.4% had sex before age 16.
- Catholics were less likely than other respondents to have sex before age 16.
- 57.6% (61.5% males and 54.4% females) of sexually active respondents were happy with the timing of their first sexual intercourse. Reflecting on their first sexual intercourse, young women were five times as likely as young men to say that they had not wanted to have sex at all.
- 42.6% of young men and 33.6% of young women said that they were drunk when they first had sex.
- 10.3% of young men and 4.5% of young women reported that they had taken drugs when they first had sex.
- Sexually active respondents had had on average six sexual partners; young women had had on average five partners, and young men had had eight.¹

In both the *Towards better sexual health* survey and the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*, young men aged 16-24 years were almost twice as likely as young women to report first intercourse by the age of 16.^{1,2}

The *Health behaviour of school children* survey reported that over two thirds of the 12-16 year olds questioned said they would find it easy to access contraception compared with 68.5% of 14-16 year olds in the *Towards better sexual health* survey.^{3,1} In both surveys, respondents

were most likely to obtain contraception over the counter in chemists, shops or in bars.

ACCORD's research showed that the proportion of those who had experienced sexual intercourse increased when examined in the light of family structure; for example, of the 118 respondents who do not normally live with both parents, 46% had experienced sexual intercourse (compared to 29% overall in their survey).⁴ The *Towards better sexual health* survey revealed that young people who lived with both biological parents were better qualified at age 18 and had higher educational aspirations, and were less likely to have sex before the age of 16.¹

A comparison with British surveys of sexual attitudes and lifestyles confirms that in key indicators, such as age of first sexual intercourse, numbers of sexual partners and contraceptive uptake, young people in Northern Ireland are very similar to their counterparts in Britain.⁶

Love for Life's survey concluded that since 2000, when comprehensive data on the sexual behaviour of young people was included in surveys, there has been no dramatic rise in the prevalence of sexual behaviour or the age at which it begins.⁵

References

1. Schubotz D, Simpson A, Rolston B. *Towards better sexual health: a survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: fpa, 2002.
2. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey 2001*. Belfast: Central Survey Unit, Department of Finance and Personnel, 2002.
3. Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. *The health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland: a report on the 1997/98 survey*. Belfast: HPA, 2000.

4. Loughrey C. Beliefs, attitudes and experiences of pupils, parents and teachers about relationships and sexuality education in post-primary Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. Belfast: ACCORD, 2002.
5. Love for Life. *Risk behaviours in Northern Ireland: 14–15 year old school children*. Craigavon: Love for Life, 2005.
6. Wellings K et al. Sexual behaviour in Britain: early heterosexual experience. *The Lancet* 2001; 358:1843-1850.

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