

THE FACTS

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 facts

- Just over one third of young people have sex before the age of 17 (the legal age of consent at the time of the survey).
- 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 questionnaire, and 71 focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews also took place.¹
- Research published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2002 looked at 6,300 pupils aged between 11 and 16 and found that 11% of respondents had had sexual intercourse, with the majority being 14 years of age at the time of first sex.²
- In 2001, some sexual health issues were included within the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*.³ As part of this survey, 397 sexually active young people were questioned, 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 that they were sexually active.⁴

- 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.⁵
- In 2004, questions on sexual intercourse were included in a survey of risk behaviours in 14-15 year old school children, carried out by Love for Life.⁶

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 the age of 17 (the legal age of consent at the time of the survey) and 27.4% had sex before the age of 16.
- Catholics were less likely than other respondents to have sex before the age of 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 more likely than 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 they were drunk when they first had sex.
- 10.3% of young men and 4.5% of young women said 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

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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.^{1,3}

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.^{1,4} In both surveys, respondents were most likely to obtain contraception over the counter in chemists, shops or bars.

The *Pupils' sexual experience – young person's behaviour and attitude survey* found that 74% of respondents used some method of contraception when they first had sex.² In total, 62% said they would find it easy to obtain contraception and as in the above research, most said they would get it in shops, chemists, bars or public toilets.

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 did not normally live with both parents, 46% had experienced sexual intercourse (compared to 29% overall in their survey).⁵

The *Towards better sexual health* survey revealed that young people who lived with both biological parents were better qualified at age 18, 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.⁷

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.⁷

References

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7. Wellings K et al. *Sexual behaviour in Britain: early heterosexual experience*. *The Lancet* 2001; 358: 1843-50.

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