

June 17, 2008

## **Health Inequalities in Young People's Health – How do Ireland's children compare internationally?**

The Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway announce the publication of a new World Health Organisation report "**Health Inequalities in Young People's Health**". This is the latest international report of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey:

[http://www.euro.who.int/InformationSources/Publications/Catalogue/20080616\\_1](http://www.euro.who.int/InformationSources/Publications/Catalogue/20080616_1)

This report presents findings on key health and well-being measures in young people in 41 countries across Europe and North America. As well as cross-national patterns, it highlights transitions in health at certain ages and examines differences between boys and girls and between children from more and less affluent families. Information is presented from more than 200,000 students aged 11, 13 and 15 years.

Health is considered in its broadest sense, as physical, social and emotional well-being. Findings on the social context of health such as peer and family relationships, the school environment and socio-economic determinants of health are also included in the report. Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, from NUI Galway's Health Promotion Research Centre, was Principal Investigator for Ireland and co-author of the report. According to Dr. Nic Gabhainn, "*this is the first time that inequalities in youth health have been systematically documented by age, gender, affluence and geography across so many countries – it is a landmark in our understanding of the health of young people. The age groups involved represent the onset of adolescence, a time when young people face the challenges of physical and emotional changes, and the years when important life and career decisions are beginning to be made*".

In comparison to the other 40 countries across Europe and North America, Irish children rank highly on many positive health indicators, including physical activity (top 10) and breakfast eating (top 10) and report relatively low levels of health complaints (bottom 10) and medically attended injuries (bottom 10). We are also in the top five for number of close friends and for perceived school performance in all age groups. Children in primary school (11 year olds) are near the bottom of the league, with relatively low levels for some negative behaviours such as fighting (37th) and being bullied (33rd) and are also in the top ten countries for reported high life satisfaction.

Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn says *“this is good news for Ireland, we have held on to our position near the top of the physical activity league, and have improved on sweets and soft drink consumption, as well as tooth brushing, where we had performed poorly in previous cross-national HBSC surveys”*.

Irish rates of smoking and drinking have decreased since previous HBSC studies in 1998 and 2002. Irish 15 year olds are just average for smoking tobacco at least weekly (19%, rank 16th), and having been drunk at least twice (33%, rank 20th), and just above average for cannabis use in the last 30 days (9%, rank 12th).

Across Europe, including Ireland, consistent inequalities between children based on gender and family affluence are evident and will require further attention.

Gender: There are important gender differences, particularly in the older age groups. At age 15, boys are more likely than girls to eat breakfast (70% vs. 57%), undertake physical activity (27% vs. 13%), to have used cannabis recently (11% vs. 7%) and to have been fighting (19% vs. 7%). Boys are also more likely to spend time with friends in the evening (43% vs. 33%), to have been injured (50% vs. 34%) and to get on well with their fathers (66% vs. 50%).

At age 15, girls are more likely than boys to report that they're doing well in school (71% vs. 61%), to feel supported by their classmates (65% vs. 53%), but to feel pressured by their schoolwork (60% vs. 47%). Girls report more health complaints (40% vs. 25%) and are more likely to think they are too fat (45% vs. 22%). In terms of health behaviours, girls are more likely than boys to eat fruit every day (39% vs. 29%), to brush their teeth at least daily (76% vs. 52%) and to diet (19% vs. 8%).

Family Affluence: children from more affluent families have more positive eating patterns – they are more likely to eat breakfast, to eat fruit and less likely to consume soft drinks. More affluent children also report better relationships with their fathers and their friends and get on better in school. Those from less affluent families are more likely to smoke cigarettes, spend more time out at night with friends and watch more than the recommended 2 hours of television per day.

Minister for Health Promotion and Food Safety, Ms Mary Wallace T.D. said *"I welcome the publication of the International Report on the Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children (HBSC) Survey. The International Report contains a wealth of data on the health behaviours of children across 41 countries. The health and well-being of Irish children compares very favourably internationally. The study shows that all countries face challenges in relation to the health behaviours of their young population in such areas as diet, smoking, drinking alcohol and physical activity. The data published today will continue to inform policy and service development in the coming years."*

These findings illustrate that there is much work to be done in creating a level playing field for young people in Ireland and across Europe. The information in this report will prove vital to those developing policy, strategy and practice in the area of youth health. The HBSC team in NUI Galway will continue to work on analysing and understanding these patterns.

**Notes for editors:**

HBSC Ireland is located in the Health Promotion Research Centre at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The HBSC Ireland team is led by Dr Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Principal Investigator, Dr. Michal Molcho, Deputy Principal Investigator and Dr Colette Kelly, Survey Manager. HBSC Ireland is supported by the Health Promotion Policy Unit and the Office of the Minister for Children in the Department of Health and Children.

Ireland has been involved in the International World Health Organisation – HBSC study since 1994 and this is the third international report that has included data from Ireland. Previous reports in 2000 and 2004 included 28 and 35 countries respectively.

Further details on HBSC Ireland, including previous reports and factsheets are available from [www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc](http://www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc). Further information on the International network of researchers is available from [www.hbsc.org](http://www.hbsc.org). The international co-ordinator of the WHO-HBSC study is

Professor Candace Currie of the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit at the University of Edinburgh.

HBSC Ireland would like to thank all 337 Irish schools that took part and most especially all the children and parents who consented and agreed to take part.

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**Top 10** out of 41 countries across Europe and North America for *11 Year Olds*

Rank	Physical activity <sup>1</sup>	Breakfast Eating <sup>2</sup>	Close Friends <sup>3</sup>	School performance <sup>4</sup>
1	Slovakia (47%)	Netherlands (91%)	England (92%)	Macedonia <sup>5</sup> (93%)
2	Ireland (45%)	Portugal (89%)	Norway (91%)	Greece (92%)
3	Finland (43%)	Sweden (86%)	Denmark (91%)	Croatia (89%)
4	Greenland (35%)	Spain (85%)	Ireland (90%)	Slovenia (88%)
5	Bulgaria (33%)	Denmark (82%)	Austria (90%)	Romania (85%)
6	Scotland (33%)	Norway (81%)	Hungary (90%)	Denmark (82%)
7	Croatia (31%)	Belgium (Flemish) (81%)	Sweden (89%)	Ireland (81%)
8	Canada (31%)	Iceland (79%)	Iceland (90%)	Israel (81%)
9	USA (30%)	Ireland (79%)	Wales (89%)	Austria (81%)
10	Denmark (29%)	Scotland (78%)	Netherlands (89%)	Switzerland (80%)
<b>Ave<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>74%</b>

1. % Meeting the physical activity guidelines of at least one hour a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity
2. % Eating breakfast every day before school
3. % Having 3 or more close friends of the same gender
4. % Who report that they are doing well or very well at school
5. The Former Yugoslav Republic (TFYR) of Macedonia
6. Average for all 41 countries

**Bottom 10** out of 41 countries across Europe and North America for *11 Year Olds*

Rank	Symptoms <sup>1</sup>	Injuries <sup>2</sup>	Fighting <sup>3</sup>	Bullied <sup>4</sup>
32	Portugal (23%)	Hungary (39%)	Lithuania (12%)	Denmark (10%)
33	Denmark (22%)	Slovenia (38%)	Austria (12%)	Hungary (10%)
34	Sweden (21%)	Canada (37%)	Estonia (12%)	Croatia (10%)
35	Finland (21%)	Sweden (36%)	Switzerland (12%)	Ireland (10%)
36	Germany (21%)	Bulgaria (36%)	Netherlands (11%)	Finland (9%)
37	Belgium (Flemish) (20%)	Austria (36%)	Ireland (10%)	Iceland (7%)
38	Ireland (20%)	Greenland (35%)	Macedonia <sup>5</sup> (10%)	Malta (7%)
39	Netherlands (19%)	Ireland (35%)	USA (10%)	Czech Republic (6%)
40	Slovenia (16%)	Macedonia <sup>5</sup> (26%)	Finland (10%)	Spain (6%)
41	Austria (15%)	Poland (25%)	Germany (9%)	Sweden (4%)
<b>Ave<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>15%</b>

1. % reporting more than one symptom (headache, stomach ache, etc.) more than once a week
2. % reporting more than one medically attended injury in the past year
3. % reporting being involved in at least 3 physical fights in the last 12 months
4. % who have been bullied at school at least twice in the past couple of months
5. The Former Yugoslav Republic (TFYR) of Macedonia
6. Average for all 41 countries