

One in ten 16 year olds have self-harmed

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One in ten 16 year olds in Northern Ireland have self-harmed in the past year, according to new research by ARK at Queen's University and the University of Ulster.

Of the 941 [young people](#) who were questioned during the 2008 Young Life and Times Survey, a further 14 per cent had thought about harming themselves in the past year but had not done so.

This is the first time a representative sample of young people in Northern Ireland has been asked about their attitudes to and experiences of self-harm.

Other key findings from the survey were:

- Females were much more likely than males to say that they had thought about self-harm (18 per cent of females, 7 per cent of males) or had tried to harm themselves (13 per cent of females and 5 per cent of males).
- There were strong links between self-harm and social pressures to drink alcohol, take drugs and to lose weight.
- There were also strong links between self-harm and high levels of stress, high expectations young people felt they could not fulfil, and experiences of [bullying](#) in school.
- 25 per cent of respondents said that they had suffered from serious mental or emotional health problems in the last year, for which they felt they needed professional help. Only 9 per cent,

however, had asked for professional help.

- Young people from not-well-off financial backgrounds were significantly more likely than those from well-off backgrounds to be affected by [mental health](#) issues, to have considered self-harm or to have self-harmed. Over 42 per cent of females from not-well-off backgrounds said they had suffered from mental and emotional health problems in the past year compared to just 19 per cent of well-off males. Not-well-off females were six times more likely to have tried to harm themselves as well-off males, who were the group least affected by self-harm (18 per cent and 3 per cent respectively).

Dr Dirk Schubotz, Young Life and Times Director based at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and [Social Work](#) at Queen's said: "This research will help fill the gap in our understanding of young people's attitudes to and experiences of self-harm. We hope these findings will raise awareness of this sensitive issue. Self-harm is something that often happens behind closed doors, but this study has shown that one in ten 16 year olds has tried to harm themselves in the past year, and one in seven have thought about doing so.

"In particular, the findings highlight the pressures experienced by young people. One respondent commented 'There are so many pressures on young adults, girls especially, that many of us feel that there is no way out, no escape other than to end the hurt'. Another said: 'I feel young people are put under too much pressure at school and therefore get stressed. I think we are made do too many exams at too young of an age.'

"Perhaps a greater openness towards the emotional upheavals experienced by young people, and an appreciation of the stress they can be under, particularly in school, may help remove the stigma attached to the issue of self-harm and encourage young people to seek help."

The results of the 2008 Young Life and Times Survey are available online at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/2008 The project on self-harm was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and was backed by academics involved in similar studies in England and Scotland, namely Professor Keith Hawton at the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford and Professor Rory O'Connor at the University of Stirling.

A Research Update on self-harm is available from the Young Life and Times website at or in hard copy from Dr Dirk Schubotz, YLT Director, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN.

Source: Queen's University, Belfast

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