

Study reveals one in ten 16-year-olds surveyed have considered self-harm

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One in ten 16-year-olds surveyed in a new study by Queen's University and the University of Ulster have considered self-harm or taking an overdose.

The results of the annual Young Life and Times (YLT) survey, which are published today (Friday 16 May) during Mental Health Awareness Week, also found that almost a third of 16-year-olds questioned had experienced serious personal, emotional or [mental health](#) problems at some point in the past year. 1,367 16-year-olds across Northern Ireland took part in the 2013 survey undertaken by ARK, a joint initiative by Queen's University and the University of Ulster. The research aims to give an insight into the lives of 16-year-olds across Northern Ireland, by addressing a range of key issues. In 2013 the survey focussed on 16-year-olds' sense of community belonging, their experience of financial hardship, and their mental health, including self-harm.

The key findings of the 2013 survey on 16-year-olds' mental health include:

- 28 per cent of 16-year-olds said that they had experienced serious personal, emotional or mental [health problems](#) at some point in the past year.
- Just over one third of these respondents had sought professional help for these problems.
- 13 per cent of respondents said that they had, at some point in the past, seriously thought about taking an overdose or harming

themselves, and 6 per cent had thought about this in the past month.

- 13 per cent of respondents said they had self-harmed – 5 per cent had done so once and 8 per cent more than once. The most likely reason (60 per cent) given by these [young people](#) for doing this was that they 'wanted to punish themselves'.

In 2008, when these questions were asked for the first time in YLT, 26 per cent of 16-year-olds had experienced serious mental health problems, 13 per cent of respondents had thought about self-harm, whilst 10 per cent had actually done so.

Dr Dirk Schubotz from the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University and YLT Director, said: "These findings from the YLT survey show that despite the investment in mental health services in Northern Ireland, compared to five years ago, there has been virtually no change with regard to young people's experiences of stress and mental health problems. It is particularly significant to note that still only a small minority of 16-year-olds seek professional help when experiencing serious emotional health problems.

"Although mental health campaigns have for some time attempted to de-stigmatise mental ill-health, by far the most likely reason why young people self-harm remains self-punishment. This suggests that young people with [mental health problems](#) keep blaming themselves for these, rather than appreciating external stressors such as pressures arising from school work or financial difficulties."

These findings are further illuminated by a Research Update also published today which compares the experiences of financial hardship among YLT respondents with those of Primary 7 children who took part in the 2013 Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey, which was also undertaken by ARK.

The key findings of the Research Update include:

- Three percent among both KLT and YLT respondents said that their families had not enough money for ordinary or special things.
- 21 per cent of P7 children (KLT respondents), but 40 per cent of 16-year-olds (YLT respondents) said their parents had money for ordinary, but not for special things.
- Nearly one quarter (24 per cent) of YLT respondents said their families had difficulties in affording their school uniform, whilst holidays organised by schools were difficult to afford by nearly four in ten (39 per cent) families of YLT respondents.
- It is 16-year-olds from not well-off families, those who find it difficult to afford ordinary things, and those who have been affected the most by the recent economic crisis, who were also most likely to suffer from poor mental health and to have self-harmed.

Dr Paula Devine, author of the ARK Research Update on Financial Wellbeing, said: "The 2013 YLT survey shows that around four in ten families with teenage children find it difficult to make ends meet. The data from the KLT and YLT surveys clearly identify the financial pressures upon families and will be an important tool for government, in particular to monitor progress related to its Child Poverty Strategy which aims for a sustained reduction in poverty."

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

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