

Largest report of its kind reveals the issues affecting adolescents today

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Schools and society as a whole have a role to play in helping young people tackle numerous challenges around their health and wellbeing, researchers say.

The School Health Research Network is led by Professor Simon Murphy at Cardiff University and is the largest network of its type in the world. The network includes every Welsh [secondary school](#) and conducts a biennial survey in partnership with Welsh Government and Public Health Wales.

The resulting report offers new insights on the experiences and challenges faced by young people – on topics including health, [social media use](#), [school work](#) and alcohol consumption. Professor Murphy, based at the Centre for Development and Evaluation of Complex Interventions for Public Health Improvements (DECIPHer), said: "Our study reveals the real issues affecting young people today. Although much work has been done to successfully promote health and wellbeing in schools, results demonstrate that there are key areas where schools and students need further support and guidance."

Dr Graham Moore at DECIPHer Cardiff University has led the biennial study which analysed survey data gathered from more than 100,000 children attending secondary schools. This equates to 65% of the secondary [school](#) population in Wales. He states that, "We can see there have been some significant improvements in the health and wellbeing of teenagers in Wales over the past 10 to 25 years. Rates of weekly

smoking and drinking alcohol have declined as has the proportion of students who report first sex at a young age. Other areas, however, have shown no improvement – such as their overall life satisfaction and [physical activity](#) – and self-rated health is an area that has significantly worsened."

Key findings from the report include:

- One in five young people reported that they have fair or poor health. Most adolescents were positive about their current health, with 25% reporting that they are experiencing excellent health and 53% experiencing good [health](#).
- Nearly one third of pupils (31%) reported irritability or sleep issues.
- The survey revealed 15% of year 7 students looked at an electronic screen after 11pm on a school night; nearly half (46%) of year 11 students said they did so.
- Twenty percent of females were classified as 'problematic social media' users (as measured by the social media disorder scale), compared to 15% of males.
- More than 80% of adolescents reported that they felt some degree of pressure from their school work with nearly one quarter (24%) reporting 'a lot' of pressure, but this was strongly related to age. The proportion of adolescents reporting 'some' or 'a lot' of pressure more than doubled from year seven to year 11.
- Sixteen percent of adolescents identified themselves as having a caring responsibility for someone in their family as a result of them being disabled, physically or mentally unwell or having a problem with alcohol or drugs. Of these young carers, one-quarter reported that they looked after more than one person, representing 4% of all adolescents.
- Nearly all (94%) sexually active adolescents had first had sex below the age of consent, although the most frequently cited age

at first sex was 15 years old (45%). Overall, 20% of sexually active adolescents reported they had first had sex at age 13 years or younger, although the proportion was higher among males compared to females (24% and 16% respectively) and among those from the least affluent households (25%).

- Almost half of adolescents (48%) reported that they do not drink alcohol and a further 44% said they drink less than weekly.

Professor Murphy added: "Our extensive and far-reaching report illustrates that [young people](#) in their [teenage years](#) have a huge number of different issues to contend with. By researching their views and experiences on this scale, we are able to offer tangible insights into what their concerns are and how parents, teachers and policymakers can help them as they make the journey into adulthood."

More information: Student Health and Wellbeing In Wales: Report of the 2017/18 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey and School Health Research Network Student Health and Wellbeing Survey: www.shrn.org.uk/national-data/

Provided by Cardiff University

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