

# Study compares the health of Irish children to those across Europe and Canada

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A new report, "Spotlight on Adolescent Health and Well-being," published today by the WHO Regional Office for Europe, compiles extensive data on the physical health, social relationships and mental well-

being of 227 441 schoolchildren aged 11, 13 and 15, from 45 countries. Irish children rank low on substance use such as smoking and drinking alcohol and high on physical activity. Ireland also ranks high for problematic social media use. The report presents the comparative international findings of the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey, which is co-ordinated by the WHO and undertaken every four years. The Irish arm of this study is led by Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn in the Health Promotion Research Centre in NUI Galway. In this new report Irish 11, 13 and 15 year olds are compared to those in 44 other countries across Europe and North America. Key comparative findings show that:

- Irish children rank highly for eating breakfast and low for sugar-sweetened soft drink consumption at all ages. There have been significant reductions in sweets and soft drink consumption since 2014
- Ireland ranks low at all ages for reported tobacco and alcohol use
- Ireland ranks high relative to other countries in reported vigorous physical activity
- Life satisfaction has significantly reduced since 2014, and Ireland ranks low for [life satisfaction](#) among 15-year olds
- Ireland ranks highly for problematic social media use at all ages, and among 13 and 15 year olds, Ireland ranks highly for reports of having been cyberbullied.

## The Irish Study

The Irish survey was carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway and was the sixth round of data collection in Ireland. The overall study aims to gain new insights, and increase our understanding of young people's health and wellbeing, health behaviours and their social context, both nationally and internationally.

As well as serving as a monitoring and a knowledge-generating function, one of the key objectives of HBSC has been to inform policy and practice, with the Irish section of the study being funded by the Department of Health. The cross-national survey covers diverse aspects of adolescent health and social behaviour, including self-assessment of mental health; body image; dietary habits; physical activity; school context; relationships with families and peers; tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use; bullying and injuries; and sexual health (for those aged 15 and above only). A special focus on online communication was included in the most recent HBSC survey, to better understand the expanding role of digital technology in young people's lives.

Kate O'Flaherty, Head of Health and Wellbeing at the Department of Health said: "This latest international study enables us to compare our progress in the area of child health and wellbeing with that of 45 other countries; our European neighbours and Canada. This study provides valuable international behavioural information recorded shortly before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic; the next study will allow us to gauge the effect of the pandemic on teenage behaviour, health and wellbeing.

There are many areas where Ireland is doing well, for example our low smoking rates, low consumption of alcohol and sugar-sweetened drinks and comparatively good levels of physical activity. The areas of mental wellbeing and life satisfaction were comparatively less positive, and while there is already a lot of good work underway between Government Departments, agencies and other partners to address this, it will be of increased priority as we support wellbeing and resilience in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic."

Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn from the Health Promotion Research Centre at NUI Galway, and the Principal Investigator of the Irish HBSC study, commented on the Irish findings within the report: "This study

provides valuable insight into the health and wellbeing of children in Ireland, and how we compare with children in other countries. It is positive to note we retain comparatively low rates of substance use and high rates of physical activity. The improvements in dietary behaviour in relation to lower intake of sweets and soft drinks are very welcome. However, there are also some areas that require further effort. For example, compared to other countries, Irish children report higher levels of problematic social media use than most countries and rates of cyberbullying are of concern. It is clear that more work is required to address the reductions in life satisfaction across all age groups."

Key Irish findings:

## **Health promoting behaviours**

- Daily breakfast consumption: Irish children ranked within the top 5 countries for the proportion of children reporting daily breakfast consumption
- Meeting physical activity recommendations of at least one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) daily: When compared to other countries, Ireland ranks in the top 10 for the proportion of 11 and 13 year-old boys and girls meeting physical activity recommendations. At all ages, a larger proportion of boys report meeting the recommendations than girls.

## **Risk-taking behaviour**

- Initiation of risk behaviours: In Ireland, the proportion of 11 and 13 year-old children reporting initiation of cigarette smoking and alcohol use is low relative to other countries
- Drinking behaviours and tobacco use are continuing to improve in Ireland and when compared to other countries

- Risky sexual behaviour: Girls in Ireland rank among the top 10 countries for not using the contraceptive pill or condom at last intercourse.

## **Mental Health and Well-being**

- Life satisfaction: Irish 15-year olds ranked within the bottom 2 countries for life satisfaction
- Life satisfaction has significantly reduced in all age groups of Irish children since 2014
- Ireland ranks low on reports of symptoms (stomachache, backache, nervous and dizziness at age 11
- Girls at age 13 and 15 are more likely than boys to report multiple symptoms
- High family affluence is related to better self-rated health, higher life satisfaction and lower rate of multiple symptoms.

## **Social interaction with family and peers**

- Perceived family support: Ireland ranked within the bottom ten countries for the proportion of 11 and 13 year-old children reporting high family support
- Perceived family and peer support: have improved among 13 year-old girls since 2014.
- Problematic social media use: Across all ages, Ireland ranked within the top 10 countries for the proportion of children categorised with problematic social media use
- Bullied others at school: Ireland (13 and 15 year-olds) ranked within the bottom 10 countries for the proportion of children who report bullying others at school
- Cyberbullying: Compared to other countries, Ireland ranks among the top 10 countries for prevalence of cyberbullying

among older [children](#) (13 and 15 year-olds).

Data collected for the study are based on surveys completed by thousands of adolescents, thereby ensuring that their voices and concerns can be taken fully into account when the WHO frames its European strategies, policies and actions for improving child and [adolescent health](#) and well-being. The study feeds into a growing body of evidence calling for more effective and targeted interventions by governments and policy makers to tackle the effects of social, health and gender inequalities among young people in Europe.

Provided by National University of Ireland Galway

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