

Risky behaviours: prevalence in adolescence

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 14 Survey



MCS Age 14 Survey

The most recent survey of the Millennium Cohort Study was the Age 14 Sweep, which took place between January 2015 and March 2016. The participants were interviewed face to face and completed a questionnaire and two cognitive assessments.

The next sweep is taking place this year when the participants are aged 17.

You can find out more about the data collected from the Age 14 Sweep on our website. The data from this and all previous sweeps are available from the UK Data Service.

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Introduction

Risky activities, like binge drinking, habitual smoking and anti-social behaviour, increase sharply in adolescence, with potential long-term consequences for young people's health and wellbeing.

Using information gathered from more than 11,000 14-year-olds in the UK, this paper explores:

- How common risk-taking behaviour is among teenagers in the UK.

- Which risky activities teenagers are more likely to get involved in, including substance use and anti-social behaviour.
- How risky behaviours differ according to teenagers' backgrounds.

This briefing is part of a series on different topics, based on the most recent data from the Millennium Cohort Study.

Key findings

- By the time they were 14, around 5 in 10 UK teenagers had experimented with alcohol, smoking or drugs in some way, and more than 1 in 10 teenagers admitted to binge drinking.
- Boys tended to have first tried alcohol at a younger age than girls: 1 in 5 boys had drunk alcohol by age 11, compared to 1 in 7 girls.
- Teens who had first tried a cigarette before they were 12 were much more likely to have developed a smoking habit by age 14 than those who were 12 or older when they had their first smoke.
- On the whole, risk-taking activities of all types were more common among teenage boys than teenage girls, and were less common among teens from ethnic minority groups.
- Rates of assault (shoving, hitting, slapping or punching) were high among teens, with 41% of boys and 21% of girls admitting they had done this.
- With some exceptions, teenagers whose parents had lower level formal qualifications were no more or less likely to get involved in risky activities than those with more highly qualified parents.
- Risky activities were generally much less common among teenagers in Northern Ireland, where rates were considerably lower, particularly for drinking, smoking and drug-taking.

Our approach

The findings in this briefing are based on data collected through the Millennium Cohort Study, a UK-wide birth cohort study, managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

When they were 14, we surveyed the study participants on a wide range of topics. As part of this, they completed a questionnaire, in private, about their experiences of taking part in a variety of different risk-taking activities like smoking, drinking alcohol and shoplifting.

We used multivariate regression modelling to analyse the teenagers' answers to these questions alongside other data we had collected about them over their lives, to identify patterns and trends and to see which factors were most closely associated with teenage risky behaviours.



Findings

Alcohol, smoking and drug-taking

Just under half of 14-year-olds said they had tried alcohol at least once and around one in ten admitted to binge drinking (in other words, having five or more drinks at a time on at least one occasion).

Comparing boys and girls with similar backgrounds, such as ethnicity, parental education and occupation, teenage boys were slightly (2 percentage points) more likely than teenage girls to say they had been binge drinking.

There were also some significant differences in teenagers' alcohol experiences across the UK countries:

- In Northern Ireland a much smaller proportion of teenagers had tried alcohol (26%, compared to 48% for the whole of UK) or had been binge drinking (5%, compared to 11%).
- Compared to the UK average, in Wales and in Scotland a slightly bigger proportion of teenagers reported binge drinking – 14% and 13% respectively. However, this is largely explained by a higher white ethnic composition in these countries; white British teenagers are more likely than those from ethnic minorities to report using substances by age 14.

Around 14% of 14-year-olds said they had smoked tobacco at least once, a further 3% were regular smokers, and 83% said they had never smoked at all.

Compared to the UK-wide figures, in Northern Ireland a smaller proportion of teenagers said they were regular smokers (less than 1%).

Around 6% of UK teenagers had taken drugs, mostly in the form of cannabis. Drug-taking was less prevalent in some parts of the UK; in Wales 4% had tried cannabis or other drugs, and in Northern Ireland the figure dropped to below 3%.

Overall, around 5 in 10 14-year-olds had experimented with substance use in some way, either drinking alcohol, smoking and/or taking drugs. But more than 1 in 10 (12%) had engaged in problematic substance use. In other words, they had either smoked regularly, been binge drinking at least once, smoked cannabis three times or more, or taken other illegal drugs at least once. Binge drinking was by far the most common activity.

Comparing teenagers from similar backgrounds revealed that, by age 14, boys were slightly more likely than girls to have experimented with alcohol, smoking and/or drugs, and also to have used these substances in a problematic way.

Boys also tended to have tried alcohol for the first time at a younger age than girls: 20% of boys had drunk alcohol before they were 12, compared to 14% of girls.

Anti-social behaviour

Overall, around 14% of teenagers had caused a public nuisance (been noisy or rude in a public place) at least once in the previous 12 months. Just under 3% had done graffiti without permission and nearly 4% had been involved in vandalism. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to have done these things.

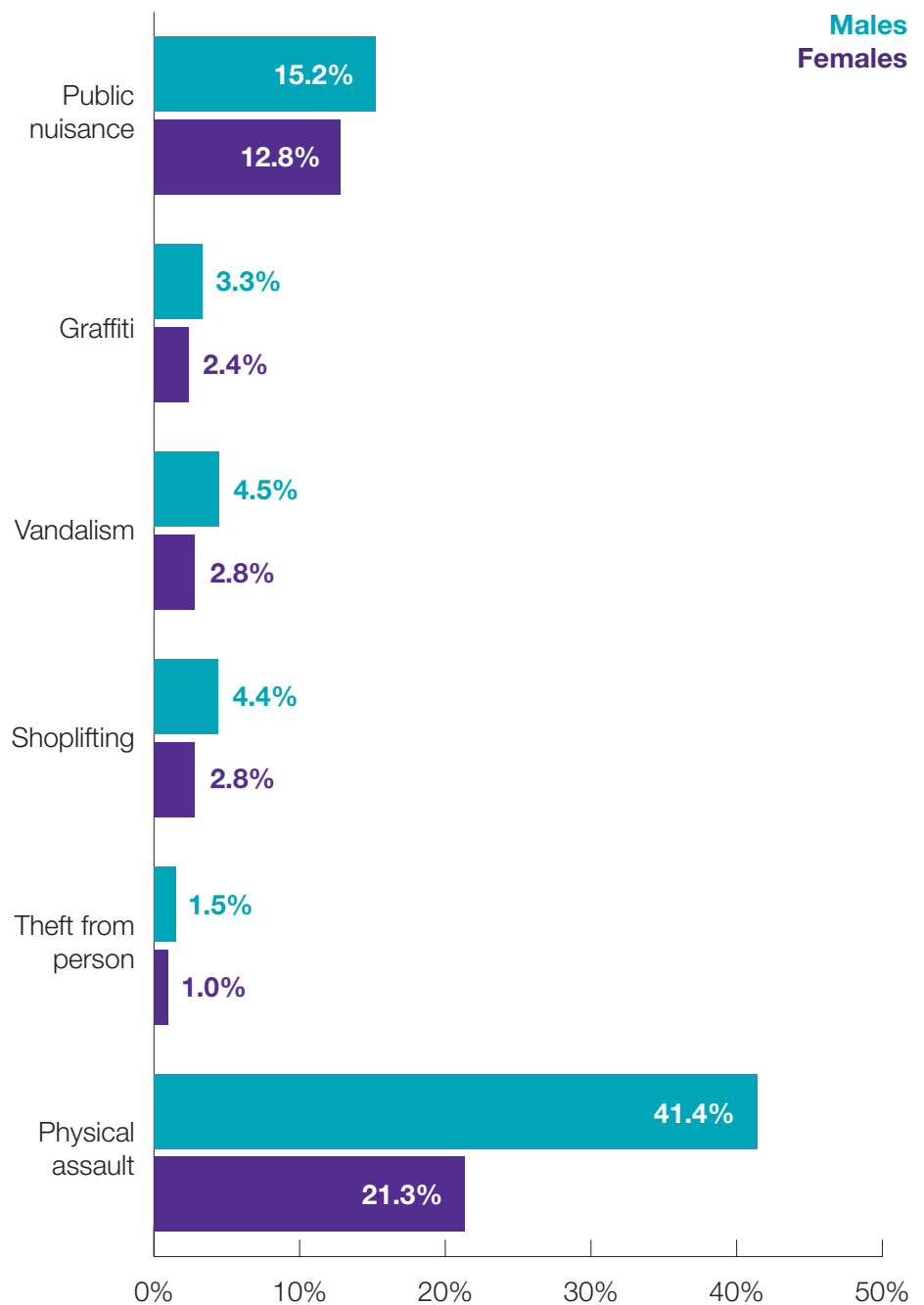
4% of all 14-year-olds surveyed said they had shoplifted in the last 12 months, and 1% said they had committed theft. Again, the figures were a bit lower for teenage girls compared to teenage boys.

A surprisingly large number of teenagers reported having physically assaulted someone (measured as having shoved, hit, slapped or punched). Just over 31% said they had done this, and 1% said they had assaulted someone using a weapon.

These figures were much higher for teenage boys. They were almost twice as likely as girls to admit to physical assault (41% versus 21%), and were also more likely to say they had assaulted somebody with a weapon, though overall a much smaller proportion of teenagers had done this (1.7% of boys and 0.5% of girls).

We found minimal differences in how common this sort of behaviour was across the four UK countries, once we had accounted for the variations in their ethnic compositions.

FIGURE 1:
Rates of different anti-social activities



Gambling

Around 13% of 14-year-olds said they had gambled in one form or another in the previous four weeks, mainly making informal bets with friends or playing on fruit machines. Overall, gambling was more common among boys – 17% of boys had done this, compared to 8% of girls.

Sexual activity

Just over 10% of 14-year-olds reported having had some form of intimate sexual contact. The figures were higher for teenage boys (12%) than teenage girls (9%), and were lowest in Northern Ireland where slightly over 6% of all teenagers reported having sexual contact.

“Around 1 in 5 teenagers had had some contact with the police, and around 8% of teenagers had been cautioned or formally warned.”

Criminal activities

We asked the teenagers about gang membership, cyber crime and any contact they might have had with the police.

Only a small proportion of teenagers said they were currently part of a gang (2%) and a similar proportion said they had previously been in one.

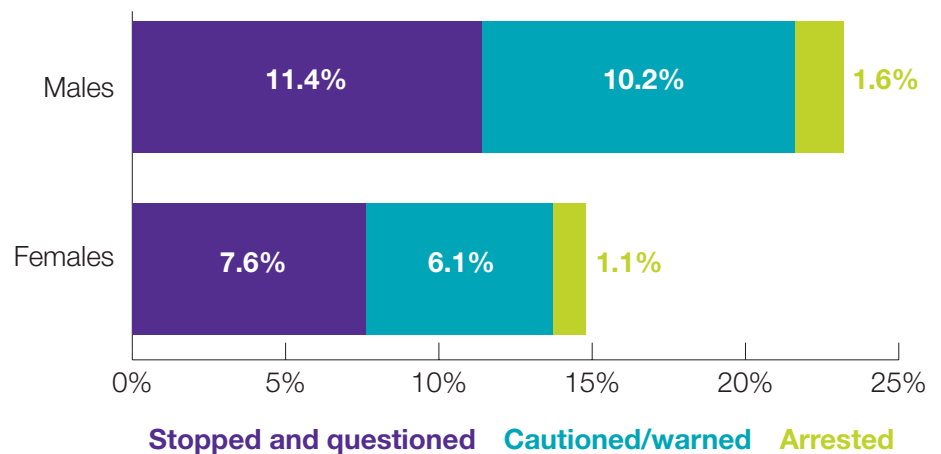
Around 5% of 14-year-olds said they had hacked somebody's computer at least once in the past 12 months, and just under 1% had sent a virus. The figures for teenage boys were higher than for their female peers, with around 7% of boys admitting to cyber crime compared to less than 4% of girls.

Around 1 in 5 teenagers had had some contact with the police; just under 10% had been stopped and questioned, around 8% had been cautioned or formally warned, and just over 1% had been arrested.

Teenagers in Scotland had had more contact with the police than elsewhere in the UK. Here the figures increased to 15% (stopped and questioned) and 12% (cautioned).

Teenage boys were far more likely than teenage girls to have had police contact, 23% compared to 15% of girls.

FIGURE 2:
Most serious level of police contact by gender



Factors associated with risk-taking

On the whole, ethnic minority teenagers were less likely than their white peers to be involved in risky activities. 94% of Bangladeshi 14-year-olds said they had never tried smoking, drinking or drugs, compared to 44% of white British 14-year-olds. Black African teenagers had had less contact with the police than white teenagers, and Black African and Black Caribbean teenagers were less likely to have ever been a gang member, though they were more likely to say they had physically assaulted (shoved, hit, slapped or punched) someone.

14-year-olds who had reached or been through puberty, and also those who identified as being gay or bisexual, were more likely to drink,

smoke and/or take drugs and to have had sexual contact. These activities were also more common among teens from single parent families as well as those whose parents drank frequently or took drugs.

Teenagers were at greater risk of getting involved in criminal activities, such as cyber crime and joining gangs, and of having contact with the police, if they had reached or been through puberty, were from a single parent family or had parents with higher levels of substance use.

For the most part, parents' education level neither increased nor decreased the odds of teenagers' getting involved in risky activities. However, there were

a few exceptions; 14-year-olds whose parents had the lowest formal educational qualifications were more likely than all others to have been stopped and questioned by the police, and those whose parents were educated to at least degree level were more likely to have engaged in anti-social behaviour, mainly in the form of assault.

“Ethnic minority teenagers were less likely than their white peers to be involved in risky activities.”

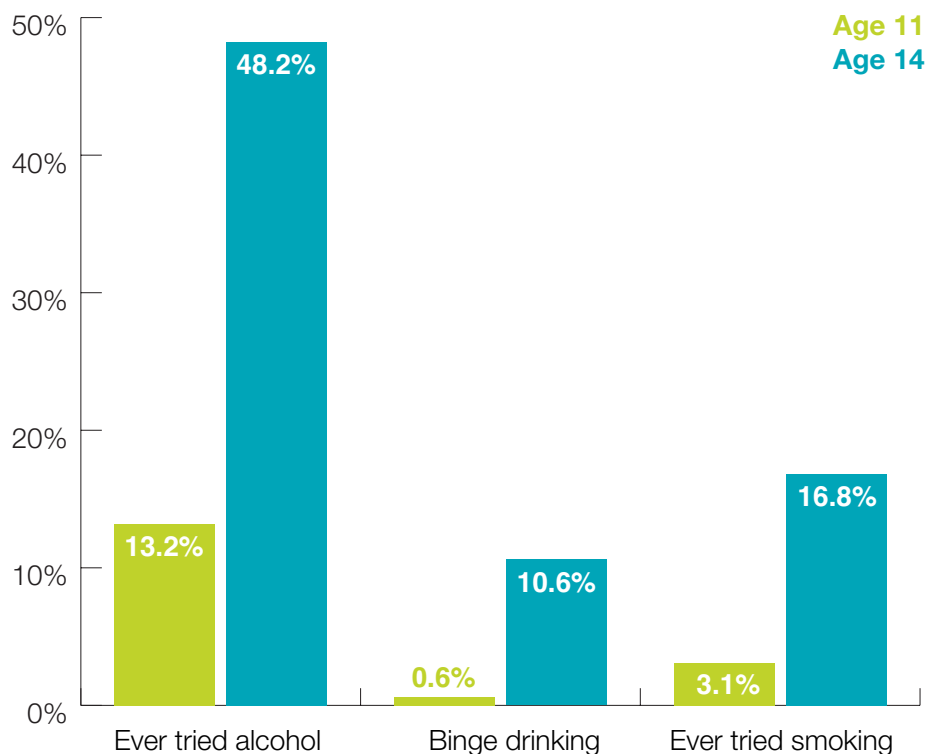
Age when risky behaviour starts

Study participants were previously asked about certain risky activities when they were 11 years old.

Comparing the age 11 and age 14 data revealed an increase in binge drinking between ages 11 and 14, from 0.6% to nearly 11%. The number of young people who had tried a cigarette at least once also jumped significantly between ages 11 and 14, from 3% to 17%.

Young people who had smoked for the first time before they were 12 were more likely to have a smoking habit by the time they were 14 than those who were 12 or older when they first had a cigarette. Of those who had first tried smoking at age 11 or before, 25% said that they were regular smokers by age 14. Among those who had tried their first cigarette age 12 to 14, 15% reported being regular smokers at age 14.

FIGURE 3:
Substance use at ages 11 and 14



Conclusions

These findings provide valuable insights into UK teenagers' participation in a range of different risky activities. In particular they flag up significant levels of binge drinking and high rates of contact with the police among teenagers across the country.

Our detailed analysis points to which groups of young people are at a greater risk of getting involved in these potentially damaging activities, whether because of their gender, background, pubertal stage or where they live.

By comparing the age 14 data with earlier data collected from participants, we see a sharp increase in substance use (smoking and drinking) between the ages of 11 and 14, and also how early, experimental engagement in these activities can lead to concerning habits by age 14.

These findings should be of value when identifying strategies and allocating resources to address risky behaviour among young people. In particular, our analysis suggests that activities aimed at reducing the uptake of smoking and drinking should begin at primary school age.

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About the Millennium Cohort Study and Age 14 Sweep

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has been following the lives of over 19,500 children since they were born in the UK at the turn of the new century. It's one of four longitudinal studies that we manage at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

The study carries out regular surveys (known as 'sweeps') to collect information about participants' physical,

socio-emotional, cognitive and behavioural development over time, alongside detailed information on their daily life, behaviour and experiences. The data collected is a rich and unique resource for researchers across a range of disciplines.

The MCS has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and a consortium of government departments. It would not have been possible without the important contributions of the participants and their families.

For more information

This briefing is a summary of the working paper, Determinants of risky behaviours in adolescence, by Emla Fitzsimons, Jenny Jackman, Arabella Kyprianides and Aase Villadsen, available from the CLS website.

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