**Under Strict Embargo until 14:00pm Tuesday 3rd June 2025**

**University of Galway study reveals major shifts in young people’s health behaviours over 25 years**

**Findings of The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study in Ireland from 1998-2022**

**Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study in Ireland from 1998-2022** **reveals a drop in substance misuse; a decrease in condom use and an increase in young people feeling pressured by schoolwork**

***Tuesday June 3, 2025****:* The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Trends Report 1998–2022, launched today by the Minister of State at the Department of Health with special responsibility for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy, Jennifer Murnane O’Connor TD, highlights notable changes in the health behaviours and wellbeing of Irish children over the past 25 years.

This report, led by researcher Louise Lunney in collaboration with the HBSC research team at the Health Promotion Research Centre at University of Galway, found significant reductions in substance use and improvements in certain health behaviours, alongside a worrying decline in mental health and increased pressure related to schoolwork.

The report brings together data from over 70,000 children in Ireland since 1998, offering critical insights to inform policy, practice and supports for young people.

The HBSC is a cross-sectional study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe. It runs every four years.

Among the key trends reported:

* Smoking among 10–17-year-olds fell to 4.7% in 2022, down from 22.6% in 1998.
* Reports of having ever been drunk declined from 33% in 1998 to 17.8% in 2022.
* Cannabis use in the past year dropped to 6.5% in 2022, compared to 12.3% in 1998.
* Daily soft drink consumption decreased dramatically from 37.4% in 2002 to 6.6% in 2022.

However, the report also reveals that:

* 46.3% of children report feeling low weekly or more often - double the figure from 1998.
* 47.8% of children feel pressured by schoolwork, up from 32.9% in 1998.
* Despite an overall decline in reported sexual activity, fewer young people (55.2% in 2022, down from 78.0% in 2010) report using a condom during last sexual intercourse

The HBSC study is conducted every four years in collaboration with the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. In 2022, 45 countries and regions participated, collecting data on health behaviours, health outcomes and the social contexts of children’s lives.

***Minister Jennifer Murnane O’Connor******said:*** “I would like to extend my most sincere thanks to the University of Galway’s HBSC team, who have conducted this study on our behalf since 1998. HBSC is a key, internationally comparable study that provides us with vital information regarding the health of our children, highlighting both positive trends, such as the reductions in tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use since 1998, but also the more concerning ones, such as many of the indicators relating to mental health and the pressures of schoolwork.

“I also want to thank the children and the schools involved in this research. In taking the time to make your voices heard, you are helping us to help future generations and to make growing up a more positive experience. As the report shows, we have done some great work over the past 25 years; however, there is always more to do.”

***Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn, Principal Investigator at the Health Promotion Research Centre at University of Galway, said:*** “A study like HBSC, that tracks trends in health behaviours, outcomes and social context of children’s lives over such a long period is a huge resource to anyone interested in children’s lives. Over 70,000 children have been involved since 1998, and many people across Irish society have helped in some way, particularly schools, teachers and parents.

“While many indicators have improved over time, the pressures that children feel from school and society are increasing. Now is the time for our society to support teachers and parents in schools and communities to protect and promote youth well-being.”

Compared to findings from 1998\*, the study found fewer children engaging in substance use, more children feeling pressured by schoolwork, less young people reporting sexual activity and among those that do – fewer are reporting using a condom. Mental health indicators have disimproved, with more young people reporting feeling low, fewer reporting high life satisfaction and fewer reporting feeling happy with their lives.

**Additional findings include:**

**Health behaviour outcomes** – both positive and negative trends

* More children report sleep difficulties in getting to sleep about every week or more frequently – 46.3% in 2022, compared to 30.9% in 1998.
* More children report having a headache about every week or more frequently – 38.2% in 2022, compared to 26.0% in 1998.
* More children brushing their teeth more than once a day – 72.5% in 2022, compared to 57.6% in 1998.
* More children report always wearing a seatbelt when travelling by car – 81.2% in 2022, compared to 41% in 1998.

***Co-Principal Investigator, Professor Colette Kelly from the Health Promotion Research Centre at the University of Galway, said:*** “This report is the culmination of many years of work, and brings together some good news about the health behaviours of Irish children. However, it also illustrates persistent inequalities in young people’s health. Children from lower social class groups are doing less well than those from higher social class groups across a range of indicators. The report provides a breakdown of age, gender and social class patterns which provide more in-depth information on each of the indicators.”

\*Base years vary across indicators – see full report details here: <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/hbsc/>

Ends

Media queries to pressoffice@universityofgalway.ie

Interviews available with Co-Principal Investigators Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn and Professor Colette Kelly; and researchers Louise Lunney and Aoife Gavin from the Health Promotion Research Centre at the University of Galway.

**Notes for Editor**

**Findings from the HBSC 1998-2022 Trends Report**

**Health risk behaviours**Overall, 4.7% of young people reported in 2022 that they currently smoke compared to 22.6% in 1998.

27.7% reported in 2022 that they had their first cigarette at age 13 or younger, compared to 61% in 2002.

In 2022, 17.8% of young people reported that they have ever been drunk, compared to 33% in 1998.

6.5% reported in 2022 that they used cannabis in the last 12 months compared to 12.3% in 1998.

**Dietary and physical activity**Overall, 24.7% of children reported eating fruit more than once a day in 2022, compared to 17.6% in 2002.

6.6% of children reported in 2022 drinking soft drinks daily or more compared to 37.4% in 2002.

50.3% of children reported in 2022 that they exercise four or more times per week compared to 52.6% in 1998.

**Sexual health behaviours**The proportion of 15 to 17 year-olds who reported that they ever had sex was 19.6% in 2022. In 2010 the proportion was 25.5%.

55.2% of young people aged 15 to 17 reported in 2022 that they used a condom at last sexual intercourse, compared to 78% in 2010.

**Mental Health and Well Being**Overall, 25.5% of children reported in 2022 that their health is excellent compared to 28.2% in 2002.

78.5% of children reported in 2022 that they are happy with their life compared to 88.1% in 1998.

61.6% of children reported high life satisfaction in 2022 compared to 76% in 2002.

The proportion of children who reported feeling low about every week or more frequently was 46.3% in 2022. In 1998 it was 23%

**Social context of children’s lives**Overall, 70.2% of children reported in 2022 that it was easy to talk to their father compared to 47.4% in 1998.

81.9% reported in 2022 that it was easy to talk to their mother compared to 73.0% in 1998.

55.2% of children in 2022 reported high family support compared to 57.3% in 2014.

Overall, 52.2% of children in 2022 reported high peer support compared to 55.2% in 2014.

47.8% of children reported feeling pressured by schoolwork compared to 32.9% in 1998.

Overall, 49.2% of children in 2022 reported high teacher support compared to 51.9% in 2014.

63.1% of children report that there are good places in their local area to spend their free time compared to 45.1% in 2002.

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

**What is the HBSC survey?**The survey has been carried out by the Health Promotion Research Centre, at University of Galway since 1998 and brings together all of the data, relating to more than 70,533 Irish children, collected over this period to examine key trends and patterns between 1998 and 2022. The overall study aims to gain new insight into and increase our understanding of young people’s health and wellbeing, health behaviours and their social context. As well as serving a monitoring and a knowledge-generating function, one of the key objectives of HBSC has been to inform policy and practice.

**Who took part in the latest survey in 2022?**The 2022 HBSC study comprised of a nationally representative sample of 8,061 pupils aged 10-17 years from 191 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland.

**How is the data collected?**HBSC is a school-based survey with data collected through self-completion questionnaires administered by teachers in the classroom. The international HBSC survey instrument is a standard questionnaire developed by the international research network.

**How is the data used?**The findings are used at both national and international level to gain new insight into young people’s health and well-being, to understand the social determinants of health and to inform policy and practice to improve young people’s lives. The Irish HBSC data and outputs are included in many national and international policy reports and strategies including those on Drugs and Alcohol, Physical Activity, Child Participation in Decision Making, Obesity, Injury Prevention, Cardiovascular Health and the overall National Health Policy.

**How does Ireland compare to these other European countries or the 45 participating countries in terms of health of our young people?**
The international rankings presented in the report refer to 15-year-olds in Ireland and in other countries for which data is available. In general, Irish children fare well compared to their international peers. In particular, positive trends worth noting include fruit consumption, physical activity and communication with fathers.

**About University of Galway**

Established in 1845, University of Galway is one of the top 2% of universities in the world. We are a bilingual university, comprised of four colleges, 18 schools and five research institutes, with more than 19,000 students, including around 3,000 international students. We have been accredited with an Athena SWAN Institutional Bronze Award, and 12 out of our 18 schools hold individual Athena SWAN Awards. We have more than 2,500 staff, and research collaborations with 4,675 international institutions in 137 countries. We have 133,000 alumni and 98% of graduates are in employment or further study within six months.

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