

Widespread Health Inequality Among School Children in Ireland

Under strict embargo until Tuesday, 7 October, 2008: The extent of health inequalities among children in Ireland has been revealed by a report released today by the Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway. This is the second national report from the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study “*Inequalities in Health among School-aged Children in Ireland*”.

For the first time, patterns in health, health behaviour and wellbeing among children from the Travelling Community, immigrant children, children with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and children in disadvantaged schools, have been studied in comparison to other children.

Key findings include: lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction among students with a disability or chronic illness; elevated rates of alcohol use among girls and boys from the Travelling Community; lower rates of drunkenness among immigrant boys; children from disadvantaged schools reporting poorer diets and higher levels of bully victimisation among Traveller girls, immigrants and children with a disability or chronic illness. Students from the Travelling Community, from immigrant families and with a disability or chronic illness are less likely to feel accepted by other students and girls in particular are less likely to have three or more friends. Interestingly, very few differences are identified between groups in terms of their relationships with parents.

Dr Saoirse Nic Gabhainn of NUI Galway’s Health Promotion Research Centre, said: “This is a landmark report which challenges our assumptions in relation to inequality and diversity in Ireland. We knew there were inequalities in health among adults but it was thought that children were more equal - this is simply not the case. Some groups of children are having a more difficult time than others, and this is an issue for all of us”.

Focusing on children from 5th class to 5th year, all of whom are in school, this is the first time that differences and similarities in general health and well-being, substance use, diet and food behaviour, physical activity, violence and injuries, perceptions of school and relationships with parents and friends have been systematically documented.

Welcoming the report, Ms Mary Wallace T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children with special responsibility for Health Promotion and Food Safety, said: “It is important to document how our children are doing. This will help us better understand where our efforts need to be focussed. We are committed to using research evidence to inform our approach to social inclusion”.

The HBSC Ireland study has been based at the Health Promotion Research Centre, NUI Galway since 1994 and all reports and articles are available for download from www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc

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