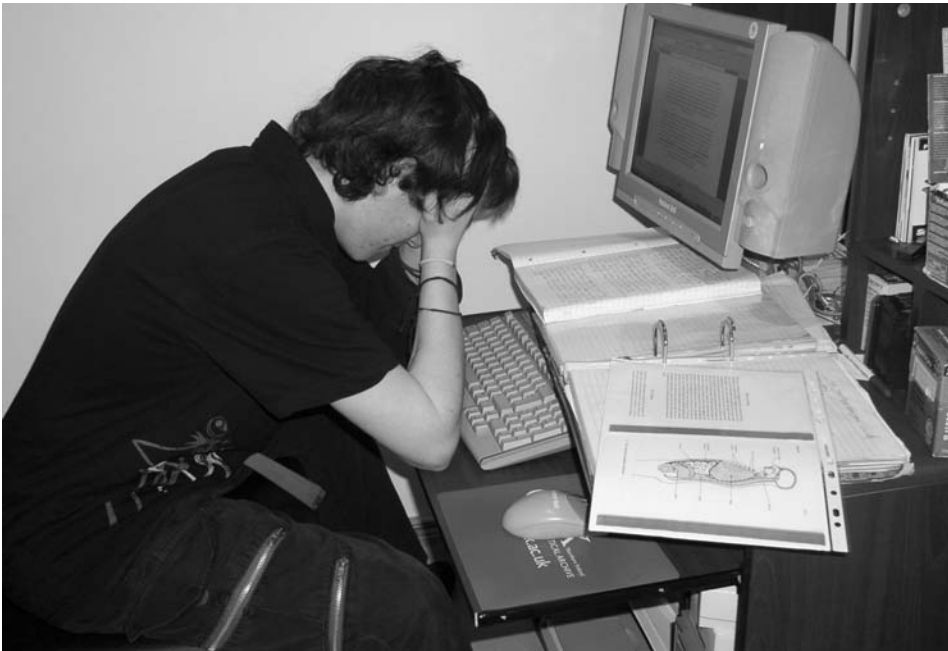




# Research Update

## Stress at Sixteen

Ed Cairns and Katrina Lloyd



### Introduction

There have been concerns voiced in the press and elsewhere about the general level of mental health in Northern Ireland. Certainly it would appear that over the last thirty years suicide rates in Northern Ireland have been increasing. What is more, over the period 1983-2001, suicide rates have been highest in the youngest age bands (16-24 and 25-34 years) (McWhirter, 2004).

Despite these obvious pointers to the importance of mental health among young adults, this age group has largely been neglected in terms of actual research. For this reason, the 2004 **Young Life and Times survey** included a number of questions related to the mental health of Northern Irish 16 year olds on the verge of entering adult life.

### Who took part?

All 16 year olds born in February were invited to take part. Questionnaires were distributed during August and September

2004. 1,983 questionnaires were sent out, 824 were returned completed. This is a response rate of 42%.

Of these, 42% were male and 58% were female, the majority of whom said they were white (97%) and reported that they had lived for 10 or more years in Northern Ireland (97%). Also, 39% of respondents indicated that they saw themselves as 'part of the Protestant community', 44% as 'part of the Catholic community' and 17% said they saw themselves as 'neither'.

### Measuring psychological distress

Our measure of mental health was the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12), which has been widely used in adult surveys in Northern Ireland (O'Reilly and Stevenson, 2003). The GHQ12 is a screening instrument for non-psychotic psychiatric disorder and is based on answers to questions about twelve symptoms, such as concentration,

sleep loss due to worry, anxiety, loss of confidence and general happiness, experienced by respondents in the period of a few weeks before the interview. For each item, there are four response categories to choose from.

There are various ways to score the GHQ12. The method used in this survey involved taking people's answers to the twelve GHQ questions and summing them to give a scale ranging from 0 to 12. Higher scores on the GHQ12 reflect poorer mental health and a score of 4 or more is often taken to indicate a level of psychological distress that could be of clinical significance (McWhirter, 2004).

In this Research Update, we have focused on those young people who had a score of 4 or more on the GHQ12, and were thus deemed to be psychologically distressed.

### Levels of psychological distress

A general indication of the overall mental health levels of our 16-year-old sample can be obtained by looking at the scores of the 791 young people who completed the GHQ12 and who scored a total of 4 or more. This suggested that 24%, or about one quarter, of the sample were suffering enough to be considered 'psychologically distressed' and therefore in need of further investigation.

In order to find out if this rate of psychological distress was a general problem, we looked at whether there were differences in the rates for young women and young men, for those who lived in towns and in the country, and for Catholics and Protestants.

### Young women or young men?

Significantly more females (30%) than males (16%) fell into the psychologically distressed category. This gender difference in stress levels is clearly not just confined to the GHQ12 as it can also be seen in

Table 1: How often do you get stressed?

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Very often	6	13	10
Often	14	24	20
Sometimes	33	39	37
Rarely	39	21	29
Never	8	4	6

the answers to the question 'How often do you get stressed?' As Table 1 shows, 47% of male respondents said they 'rarely' or 'never' got stressed while only 25% of females responded in the same way.

## Town or country?

A common belief is that the 'storm and stress' of adolescence is felt most acutely among those who live in cities or towns and less so by those residing in the leafy suburbs or quiet countryside. Figures from the Young Life and Times survey suggest that this is not so, at least among this age group in Northern Ireland. Among young men there was some suggestion that living in a village or the country is linked to lower levels of psychological distress, but among young women levels were roughly equivalent whether they lived in a city or town, the suburbs, or in a village or the country (Figure 1).

## Catholics or Protestants?

Findings from surveys of adults in Northern Ireland have shown that rates of psychological distress tend to be slightly higher for Catholics compared to Protestants (O'Reilly and Stevenson, 2003). For this reason we looked to see if levels of psychological distress were different among the young people who had indicated they belonged to the Protestant community, the Catholic community or neither community. Overall there were no major differences, with 22% of Protestants, 25% of Catholics and 24% of those belonging to neither community falling into the psychologically distressed category. Even when we compared young men and women from the Protestant, Catholic and 'neither' communities separately, there were no statistically significant differences.

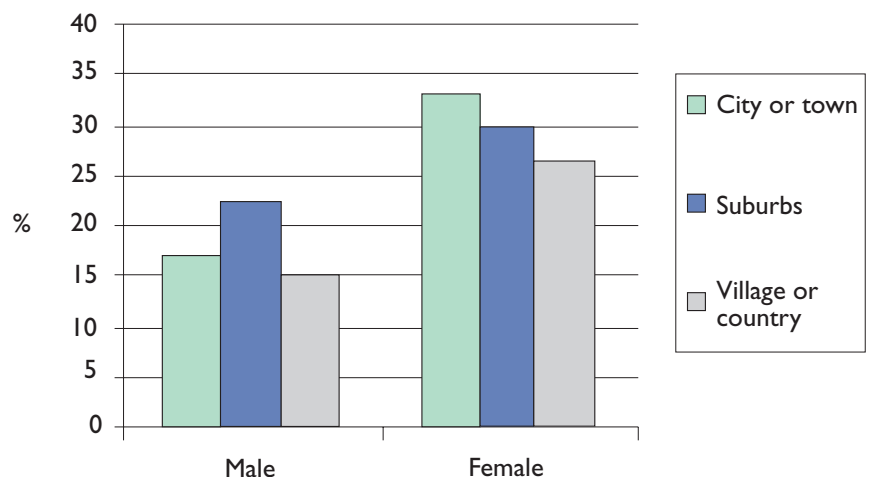
## What do 16 year olds worry about?

Psychological distress can be linked to the circumstances we find ourselves in at any given time in our lives. To explore this idea, the young people who took part in the Young Life and Times survey were invited to answer an open-ended question 'What makes you stressed?' In all, 87% of participants took the trouble to respond to this question. For the purposes of this analysis, the responses to the first-named stressor were sorted into eight categories. As Table 2 shows, the most frequently mentioned stressor was 'schoolwork/exams' (69%). What is more, this was equally true for both sexes.

Table 2: What makes you stressed?

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Schoolwork/exams	62	73	69
Family problems	12	8	9
Problems with friends	0	3	2
Relationship problems	1	1	1
Life in general/worrying	1	4	3
Being under pressure	7	6	6
Financial problems/work	17	4	9
Health problems	1	1	1

Figure 1: Psychological distress by gender and area



## Academic pressure

Respondents were asked specifically about their experiences of school and, reflecting the concern with schoolwork identified in the open-ended question, 75% said they had felt pressured by schoolwork at least sometimes; with over one quarter saying this happened 'often' or 'always'. Again, these results did not differ significantly between the sexes (Table 3).

Table 3: How often did you feel pressured by schoolwork?

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Always	5	5	5
Often	21	22	21
Sometimes	46	51	49
Rarely	22	18	20
Never	7	4	5

Because it is possible that feeling pressured by schoolwork is related to the type of school attended, we next looked at the answers to this question given by those who were at secondary schools compared to those at grammar schools. We found that there were no differences among young men but that young women at grammar schools were more likely to say they were 'always' or 'often' pressured at school compared to those at secondary schools (Table 4). The survey also found that being pressured at school was related to higher levels of psychological distress and this was equally true for both males and females.

## Bullied at school

Given the prominence of bullying in media reports about youth culture, respondents were asked a specific question on this topic. In fact, as Figure 2 shows, only 13% of the young people in the survey reported that they were bullied at school at least sometimes. This ties in with the fact that, when asked ‘what makes you stressed’, bullying did not emerge as a major concern for this age group.

Despite the low levels of bullying reported, as Table 5 shows, there would appear to be a significant relationship between reporting having been bullied at school and psychological distress – but only for males. More than twice as many young men who reported having been bullied at school ‘always’ or ‘often’ could be classified as psychologically distressed as those who responded ‘sometimes’ ‘rarely’ or ‘never’.

Table 4: Pressured by schoolwork by type of school attended

	%		
	Male	Female	All
<b>Male</b>			
Grammar school	24	49	27
Secondary school	26	47	27
<b>Female</b>			
Grammar school	35	47	18
Secondary school	20	54	26

## Putting the findings in context

As no other survey has looked at mental health in this age group, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether the levels of psychological distress reported here for 16 year olds in Northern Ireland in 2004 are unusually high or not. In fact the rates of psychological distress in this survey are similar to those found among adults in the 1997 Northern Ireland Health and Wellbeing survey where 21% of respondents had a score of 4 or more on the GHQ12 (O’Reilly and Stevenson, 2003).

Also, in our survey of 16 year olds, we found more psychological distress among

females than males. Again this is similar to the Northern Irish adult survey, which found that 27% of women and 17% of men reported high levels of psychological distress. The adult survey also found that rates were slightly (but not significantly) higher for Catholics compared to Protestants. Once again, this finding is exactly in line with the results of the 2004 Young Life and Times survey.

However, O’Reilly and Stevenson (2003) reported that the rates of psychological distress found among adults in Northern Ireland were higher than those found in the rest of the United Kingdom. If we look at the GHQ12 scores of the small number (N=251) of 16 year olds who took part in the British Household Panel Survey (Wave 12, 2002) we find that these young people showed a lower rate of psychological distress (15%) compared to our Northern Irish sample (24%).

On a more positive note, the results from the 1997 Northern Ireland Health and Wellbeing survey (O’Reilly & Stevenson, 2003) indicated that among young adults (16-24 years) rates of psychological distress were somewhat lower than in the rest of the population – especially for men (women, 26% and men 9%). This is

in line with earlier research in Northern Ireland that showed that, as young people left school and entered employment, their mental health improved (Cairns et al, 1991). This may indicate that psychological distress at 16 years is, for at least some people, transient and that this may be particularly so for males.

This does not mean that as young people in Northern Ireland move from adolescence to adulthood they have no worries. When a sample of Northern Irish 16-24 year olds (N=414) was asked in 2000 what they worried about, most said they worried about not having enough money (Health Promotion Agency, 2001). However, of the young people in full-time education in the sample, the majority (60%) reported worrying about schoolwork and exams. This is in line with the findings from the 2004 Young Life and Times survey.

What this does suggest is that the last years of education are a particularly stressful period for young people in Northern Ireland, and that for some of them, either because of a combination of environmental or personality factors, this stress may be damaging to their mental health.

Figure 2: Were you bullied at school?

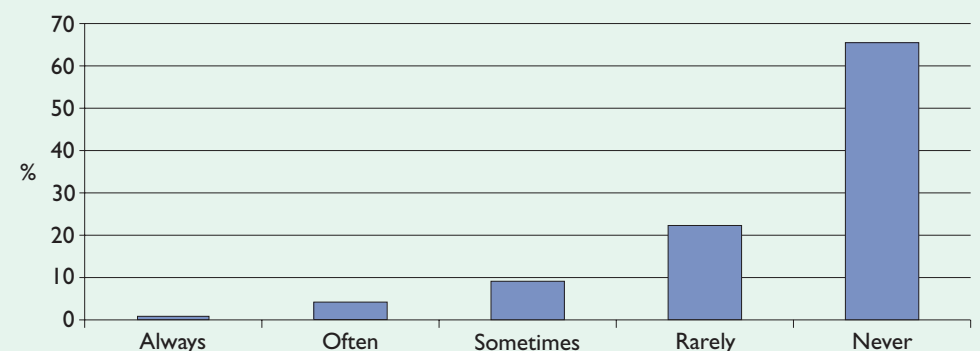


Table 5: Psychological distress and how often bullied at school

	Bullied at school	Psychologically distressed
		%
<b>Male</b>	Sometimes/rarely/never	13
	Always/often	28
<b>Female</b>	Sometimes/rarely/never	29
	Always/often	37
<b>All</b>	Sometimes/rarely/never	23
	Always/often	33

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The Young Life and Times survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland. In 2004, 824 young people aged 16 completed the survey in one of three ways: online, by self-completion questionnaire or by phone.

The Young Life and Times survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides independent sources of information on what young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) or call the survey team at Queen's University (028 9097 3947) with any queries.

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## Key Points

- 24% of sixteen year olds reported high levels of 'psychological distress'.
- Significantly more females (30%) than males (16%) were psychologically distressed.
- There were no major religious differences with 22% of Protestants and 25% of Catholics falling into the psychologically distressed category.
- 47% of males compared with only 25% of females said they 'rarely' or 'never' got stressed.
- 75% of respondents said that they had felt pressured by schoolwork at least sometimes; with over one quarter saying this happened 'often' or 'always'.
- Young women at grammar schools were more likely to say they were 'always' or 'often' pressured at school compared to those at secondary schools.
- Only 13% of young people reported that they were bullied at school at least sometimes.
- More than twice as many young men who reported having been bullied at school 'always' or 'often' could be classified as psychologically distressed as those who responded 'sometimes' 'rarely' or 'never'.