

Dating among 16-year olds in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Romantic personal relationships can have a profound influence on adolescent development. Studies have shown that these relationships can influence self-identity and play an important role in relationships with family and peers (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Relationships during adolescence can also have implications for young people's current wellbeing as well as how they may later approach relationships into adulthood (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019; Smetana et al., 2006).

Furthermore, who people form personal relationships with can both reflect and predict the dynamics of social group interactions within the larger society. People are more likely to interact with those like themselves. This can be due to preferences motivated by shared experiences and values, the increased likelihood of meeting people like themselves in their daily lives (e.g. family friends, neighbours, etc.), and/or social influence (e.g. from parents, religious leaders, etc.) (Kalmijn, 1998). Romantic relationships are arguably the most intimate type of social relationship that an individual actively chooses, which can reflect closer inter-group mixing than in other areas such as living or working with members of an out-group.

In Northern Ireland, historical, cultural, and structural legacies related to the Northern Ireland conflict have resulted in largely segregated communities (McAlister et al., 2014). Religious identity can reflect actual religious belief but can also be related to strong community identity rather than religious practice (Mitchell, 2006) and this can be reflected in marriages and personal relationships (Leonard, 2009; Lloyd & Robinson, 2011). Seeing how often people interact with others from out-group communities (meaning not from the same social group) can indicate how salient the boundaries and barriers are between different groups (Kalmijn, 1998). Looking at how often young people date someone from a different background to themselves, such as religion, can therefore reflect how religious background is operating within society.

This Research Update reports on respondents who had dated by the age of sixteen and to what extent they had dated people from different backgrounds to themselves. The Update draws on data collected in the 2023 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. YLT is an annual cross-sectional social attitude survey run by ARK among 16-year olds in Northern Ireland. 2,011 16-year olds took part in the 2023 survey and were asked about their experience with dating.

Dating experiences

Slightly over half of 16-year olds reported having had a boyfriend or a girlfriend, with 36% reporting currently having a boyfriend or girlfriend, 21% having had one in the past, and 43% never having dated. There was a notable difference in dating experience depending on where respondents lived. Young people were most likely to have dated if they lived in the big city (64%) and least likely (47%) if they lived in a farm or home in the country.

There were also variations across gender and sexual identities. 58% males and 55% females had dated. LGBTQ+ identity was captured by combining information across two questions on gender identity and sexual attraction. Among LGBTQ+ young people, 66% had ever dated compared to 57% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Turning to religious belonging, 54% of those who said they identified as belonging to a particular religion had started dating by 16 years of age compared to 61% of those that identified as having no religion. There were also differences between respondents with different religious identities. 58% of Protestants had ever dated compared to 53% of Catholics and just 38% of respondents with other faiths (e.g. Muslim, Hindu, Orthodox).

Dating across social groups

YLT respondents who reported having had a romantic partner were additionally asked questions about whether their current or last partner came from similar religious, ethnic and financial backgrounds and had the same or a different national identity and gender identity.

Just 18% had dated someone from a different ethnicity. 21% of young people had dated someone with a different national identity than themselves. There was slightly more out-group dating

regarding religious background with just under one in three respondents (33%) dating someone from a different religion. 16-year olds were more likely to date someone from a different financial background, yet still less than half (47%) did so.

Urban and rural settings

As Table 1 shows, those living in a farm or home in the country reported the lowest levels of out-group dating compared to the other areas lived for all

four background areas. For example, 9% of those living in a farm or home in the country dated someone from a different ethnic background. Those living in the suburbs or outskirts of a big city had the highest levels of out-group dating on both national identity (33%) and religious background (37%). Again, those living in a farm or home in the country had the lowest out-group dating for family financial background at 38%.

Table 1. Percentage of 16-year olds having partners with different backgrounds by type of place they live

	%				
	A big city	The suburbs or outskirts of a big city	A small city or town	A country village	A farm or home in the country
Dissimilar Family Financial Background	48	46	48	51	38
Different Ethnicity	19	21	21	16	9
Different Religion	31	37	34	33	24
Different National Identity	20	33	29	24	15

Family financial background

Table 2 shows that those from families in well-off financial backgrounds were less likely to date people dissimilar to themselves across all characteristics. Those coming from not well-off financial backgrounds had the highest levels of out-group dating when considering their partner's religious and family financial background, while only being marginally lower on out-group dating when considering their partner's ethnic background and national identity than those coming from an average financial background.

Table 2. Percentage of 16-year olds having partners with different backgrounds by family financial background

	%		
	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
Dissimilar Family Financial Background	55	49	39
Different Ethnicity	19	20	14
Different Religion	38	35	28
Different National Identity	28	29	18

Sexuality and gender

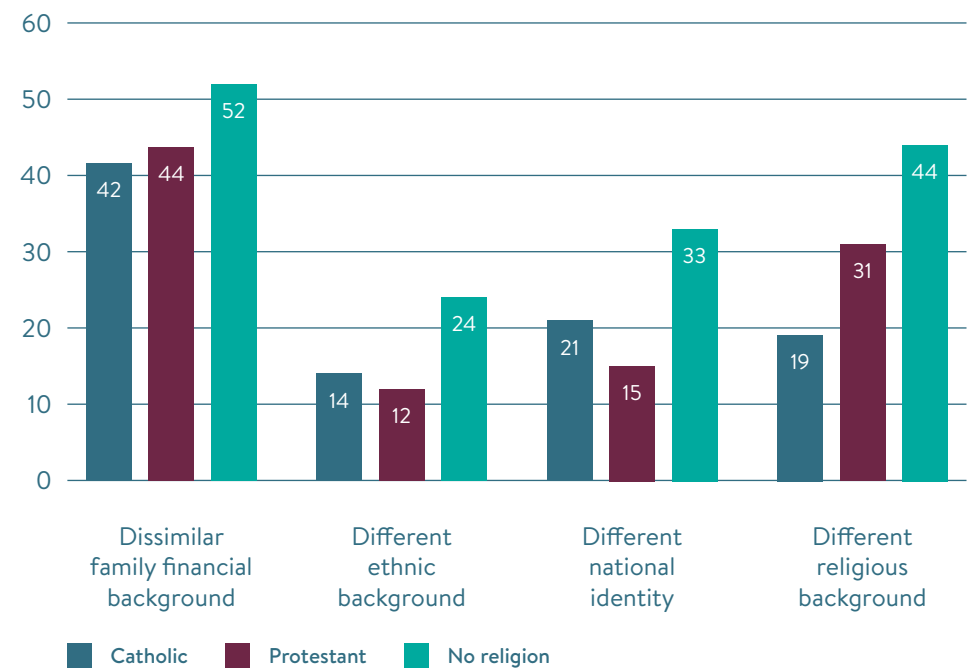
Examining sexuality and gender reveals a consistent pattern of those with an LGBTQ+ identity reporting higher levels of out-group dating on all four background characteristics than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. The largest difference was dating across religious backgrounds with 47% of LGBTQ+ young people dating outside of their own religion compared to 28% of non-LGBTQ+ youth. This was followed by national identity with 38% of LGBTQ+ young people dating within their own religion compared to 21% of non-LGBTQ+ youth. In fact, LGBTQ+ respondents had the highest level of reported out-group dating across all the demographics examined with 56% dating someone coming from a different family financial situation, which compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers at 43%. The smallest difference was found among same ethnic background where LGBTQ+ young people reported 21% out-group dating compared to 16% among non-LGBTQ+ young people.

Religious background and national identity

Figure 1 shows that those that reported having no religion showed the highest level of out-group dating across all four characteristics. Among young people with no religion, the percentage of out-group dating was 52% for financial background, 24% for ethnicity, 44% for religion, and 33% for nationality. Catholic young people meanwhile reported the lowest levels of out-group dating for religious background (19%) and financial background (42%), while Protestant young people reported the lowest levels of out-group dating for ethnicity (12%) and national identity (15%).

There is less variation for out-group dating across national identity than for the religious background; however, some differences occur. Notably, 40% of those reporting a Northern Irish identity have dated someone from a different religious background identity. Meanwhile, those with an Irish identity show the lowest levels of out-group dating for all characteristics.

Figure 1. Proportion of YLT respondents having a current/last partner with a different background, by religion (%)



Discussion and conclusion

A slight majority of 16-years olds in Northern Ireland reported having had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Among those that have dated, most had a partner coming from similar family financial, ethnic, religion, or nationality background. Young people were least likely to have dated someone from a different ethnic background. While ethnicity can be interpreted in a number of ways, the relatively small percentage (3.4%) of the Northern Irish population belonging to ethnic minority groups (NISRA, 2022) is likely to be a factor for the small number of respondents who had dated someone from a different ethnicity.

The YLT data suggest that religious and national identity lines remain visible in dating behaviour, if lessened, in current post-conflict times. Cultural traditions, family attitudes, and personal preferences may still encourage dating within one's own background. Those who identify as having no religious background may have weaker in-group community ties that facilitate opportunities to interact with and date people from more diverse backgrounds.

The low levels of out-dating among 16-year olds coming from a farm or

home in the country, suggests these communities may have stronger in-group dating preferences, fewer opportunities to interact with groups different from themselves, and/or stronger social pressure to date within their own social group.

The literature suggests that those having a LGBTQ+ identity may be more likely to date people different from themselves due to smaller dating pools and more open perspectives (see Luo, 2017). The YLT survey results reflect this, with those having LGBTQ+ identities reporting higher levels of out-group dating on all four characteristics than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Overall, the findings point to some permeability across social groups, but social distance remains in terms of dating people with different family financial, ethnic, religious or nationality backgrounds. More research is needed to determine if these distances are being driven by opportunity, preference, or social networks, which could help shed further light on how social groups are interacting and perceiving one other within Northern Ireland.

Key Points:

- Slightly over half of young people in Northern Ireland have had a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Young people were least likely to have dated someone from a different ethnic background but most likely to have dated someone from a dissimilar family financial background.
- Those living in an area described as a farm or home in the country are the least likely to have had a boyfriend/girlfriend and, among those that have dated, are the least likely to date someone having different background characteristics.
- Those coming from well-off financial family backgrounds were the least likely to date someone from different backgrounds compared to those coming from average or not well-off family financial backgrounds.
- LGBTQ+ 16-year olds were more likely to have dated and, among those that have dated, more likely to have dated someone with a different background than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.
- Respondents with no religious background were more likely to have dated than those with religious affiliation. Those without religious background were more likely to have dated someone from a different background than either Catholic or Protestant respondents.
- Those reporting exclusively an Irish identity were the least likely to have had a boyfriend or girlfriend with a different background characteristic compared to those reporting as Northern Irish, Protestant, or those affiliating with multiple national identities.

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. In total, 2,011 16-year olds took part in the 2023 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt.



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