



Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey

Summary of Results

2026



Background

Every year, ARK, a joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, invites 16-year-olds from across Northern Ireland (NI) to take part in the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey to share their views on school, politics, community relations and other social issues.

Due to the large number of questions, in 2026 YLT was a 'split survey'. This meant that there were two versions of the survey - some questions were asked in both and some in one or the other.

This document provides a summary of some key findings from the 2026 survey. Detailed results for all YLT surveys (2003–2026), as well as topical Research Updates, are freely available on the YLT website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt.

The 2026 YLT survey was part-funded by the Executive Office, the Departments of Justice and Education, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, the Commissioner for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland, and Politics in Action.



Who Took Part in the 2026 YLT Survey?

Everybody living in Northern Ireland who celebrated their 16th birthday between January and March 2026 was invited to take part in the survey. Of the 1,965 16-year-olds who took part in YLT:

- **59 per cent** were female, **40 per cent** were male and **1 per cent** had another gender identity.
- **19 per cent** said they lived in a big city or its outskirts, **48 per cent** in a small city or town and **31 per cent** in a village or in the countryside.
- **48 per cent** attended a grammar school, **41 per cent** a secondary school, **8 per cent** a formally integrated school, and **3 per cent** another type of school.
- **75 per cent** lived with both parents, **16 per cent** lived only with their mother, **2 per cent** lived only with their father and **6 per cent** lived with their mother some time and father some time. **1 per cent** had other living arrangements.
- **15 per cent** of respondents said they had a long-standing physical, mental, or developmental/sensory health condition. For **21 per cent** of these respondents this health condition limited their ability to carry out day-to-day activities 'a lot'.
- **62 per cent** regarded themselves as belonging to a particular religion - **35 per cent** Catholic and **24 per cent** Protestant and other Christian, while **2 per cent** belonged to other religions. **39 per cent** of respondents indicated that they belonged to no religion.
- **34 per cent** of respondents said their families were financially either well-off or very well-off, **50 per cent** described them as average, and **9 per cent** said their families were not well-off or not at all well-off. **7 per cent** did not know.
- When asked what they thought they would be doing in two years' time, **82 per cent** of respondents reckoned they would be going to college or university full- or part-time. A further **11 per cent** felt that they would be working full- or part-time, while the remainder chose 'unemployed', 'on a training scheme' or 'other'.

Good Relations

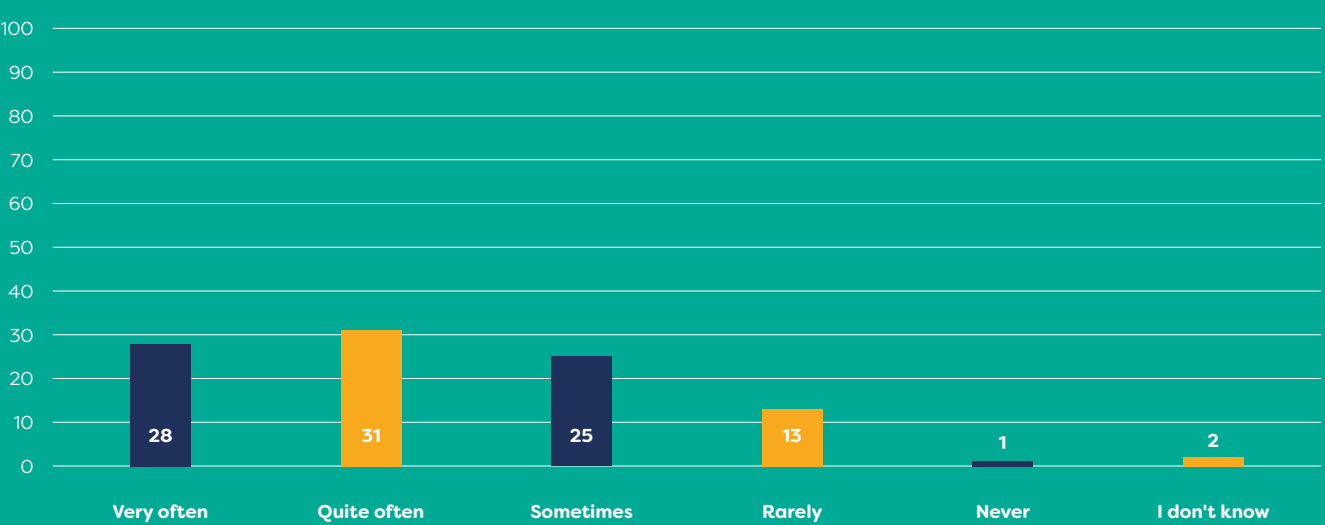
Three quarters of respondents (75%) thought that religion would always make a difference to how people in Northern Ireland feel about each other. Approximately one third of respondents (31%) thought relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than 5 years ago whilst 5 per cent thought they were worse. However, around half (49%) thought relations were about the same. When asked what they thought relations would be like in 5 years' time, the proportions were similar: 32 per cent thought they would be better, 9 per cent thought they would be worse and 45 per cent thought they would be about the same.

Approximately a fifth (22%) of 16-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed that Northern Ireland is a place where people respect each other,

35 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and two fifths (40%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Nevertheless, 71 per cent of respondents said that they definitely or probably had a sense of belonging to Northern Ireland; this was noticeably higher for Protestants and other Christians (82%) than for Catholics (69%) or the non-religious (65%).

Figure 1 shows how often respondents saw or heard racist comments or jokes. 59 per cent said they saw or heard them very or quite often. A quarter (25%) saw or heard them sometimes, but only 14 per cent encountered racist jokes or comments rarely or never.

Figure 1: How often do you see or hear racist comments or jokes? (%)



34 per cent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country. 57 per cent strongly agreed or agreed that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution, whilst 35 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they would like more opportunities to get to know asylum seekers or refugees.

One third (33%) of respondents felt that refugees positively contribute to our society. However, two thirds (67%) agreed or strongly agreed that people's perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers are negatively affected by the media.

Table 1 indicates that around half (51%) of all respondents felt very or quite favourable about people from minority ethnic communities. Positive attitudes to minority ethnic communities varied between Catholics (55%), Protestants and other Christians (45%) and those of no religion (51%). Overall, these were lower than positive attitudes to the Catholic community (65%) or to the Protestant community (57%).

Table 1: Respondents who feel very or quite favourable about people from the Catholic, Protestant and minority ethnic communities, by religion (%)

	Catholic	Protestant and other Christians	No religion	All
Catholic community	89	48	57	65
Protestant community	45	78	54	57
Minority ethnic communities	55	45	51	51

Community Safety and Attitudes to Paramilitaries

84 per cent of YLT respondents said they felt fairly or very safe in the area where they lived. Males were more likely than females to state that they felt 'very safe' (43% v 31%). However, those of no religion (33%) were less likely to feel very safe than Catholics (38%) or Protestants and other Christians (37%).

Respondents who lived in rural areas were much more likely (55%) to say that they felt 'very safe' in their area than respondents from urban areas (29%). Those who lived in rural areas were also more likely to agree or strongly agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) kept their area safe (41% compared to 35% of those living in urban areas).

About 36 per cent of respondents who lived in urban areas agreed or strongly agreed that there was a lot of crime, drugs, and anti-social behaviour among young people in their areas, compared to just around 20 per cent living in rural communities.

Approximately 12 per cent of respondents living in urban areas, compared to just 3 per cent of respondents in rural neighbourhoods, agreed or strongly agreed that paramilitaries had a controlling influence in their area. Around 54 per cent of respondents living in rural settings disagreed or strongly disagreed that young people were being influenced too much by paramilitary groups, compared to about 41 per cent who lived in urban areas.

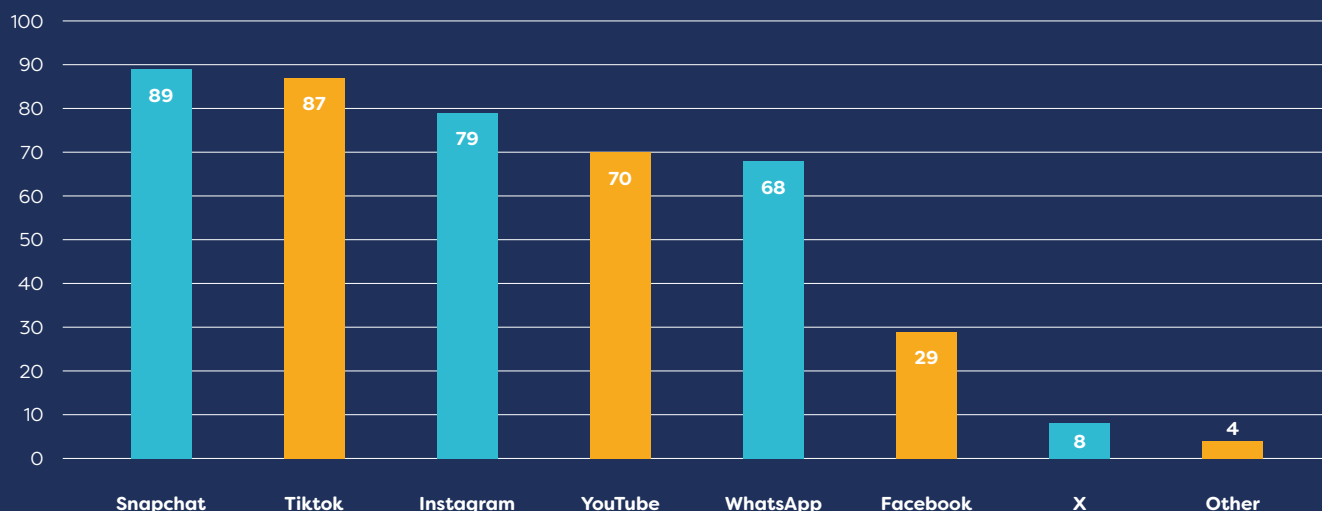


Social media

Only 1 per cent of YLT respondents did not spend any time on social media. 45 per cent spent 3-5 hours per day, 24 per cent spent 6-8 hours, 19 per cent fewer than 3 hours and 9 per cent more than 8 hours. Females (37%) were more

likely to spend more than 6 hours per day on social media compared to males (27%). Figure 2 shows that Snapchat (89%), TikTok (87%) and Instagram (79%) were the most popular social media apps used by 16-year-olds.

Figure 2: Social media apps used (%)



YLT respondents reported experiencing multiple types of harmful behaviours on social media (Table 2), although over half (54%) of all respondents had not experienced any. Of those who had, posting/sharing material considered offensive, indecent or obscene was the most common (24%), followed by someone sharing their information/photos/videos with others without consent (16%) and people deliberately being dishonest to them to obtain a financial/personal benefit or cause them to lose something (16%).

Females were more likely than males to report experience of someone attempting to build a relationship with them to try to manipulate them into doing things for them (12% v 8%) or someone stalking their activities (16% v 11%). The only behaviours which males were more likely to experience than females were having their information/photos/videos shared with others without consent (18% v 15%) and people deliberately being dishonest to obtain a financial/personal benefit or cause them to lose something (18% v 15%).



Table 2: Experience of social media-related behaviours (%)

I have not experienced any of these behaviours on social media	54
Someone posting/sharing material which you found offensive, indecent or obscene	24
Someone sharing your information/photos/videos with others without your consent	16
People deliberately being dishonest to you to obtain a financial/personal benefit or cause you to lose something (e.g. money)	16
Someone stalking your activities	14
Someone posting/sharing material motivated by hostility/dislike towards your race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or gender.	12
Someone attempting to build a relationship with you to try to manipulate you into doing things for them.	11
Offers to buy or sell illegal or stolen goods	10
Someone posting/sharing threatening, intimidating or harassing material about you or towards you.	8
Blackmail (e.g. someone demanding something from you to not reveal compromising or damaging material)	7
Someone using your information on social media to hack into your accounts	6
Someone using your information on social media to steal your identity	4

Gender-based violence and personal relationships

YLT respondents were asked about forms of violence they had experienced in the last year because of their gender (Table 3). Two thirds (67%) had not experienced any type of gender-

based violence. Females were more likely than males to experience all types of violence, with the exception of physical violence (6% v 9%).

Table 3: Experience of gender-based violence in the last year (%)

None	67
Psychological violence (e.g. Being insulted, stalked, harassed, controlled against your will, or threatened with violence)	16
Online violence (e.g. Receiving threats online or via social media, online trolling, or being sent or being asked for intimate images against your will)	14
Sexual violence (e.g. Upskirting, unwanted touching, or being coerced into sexual acts)	8
Physical violence (e.g. Being beaten, slapped, pushed or restrained)	7
I don't know	7
Other types of violence	1

When asked about how easy or difficult it would be to get help and support if they experienced gender-based violence, 54 per cent of 16-year-olds from the survey thought that it would be very or quite easy, 20 per cent thought that it would be quite or very difficult and 26 per cent did not know. When asked who they would be willing to report gender-based violence

to (Table 4), a family member (71%) was the most likely response, followed by a close friend (46%), the police (27%), and a staff member at school or college (25%). Males respondents were slightly more likely than female respondents to state that they would be uncomfortable reporting or discussing gender-based violence (8% v 7%).

Table 4: Willingness to report gender-based violence to (%)

A family member	71
A close friend	46
The police	27
A teacher or other staff member in your school or college	25
My boyfriend/girlfriend	14
A charity or helpline	11
I would not feel comfortable discussing or reporting it	8
A doctor or nurse	7
Someone you trust in your church or religious community	5
I don't know	5
Other	2

Victims of crime

7 per cent of YLT respondents had been a victim of crime in the last 2 years, while over four fifths (83%) had not; 8 per cent were unsure, while 2 per cent preferred not to say. A quarter (25%) agreed or strongly agreed that the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is very effective, while another quarter (25%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Around a third (32%)

neither agreed nor disagreed. Those who had experienced a crime in the past two years had much less favourable views of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland (Figure 3). Nearly 50 per cent of 16-year-old crime victims disagreed or strongly disagreed that the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is very effective.

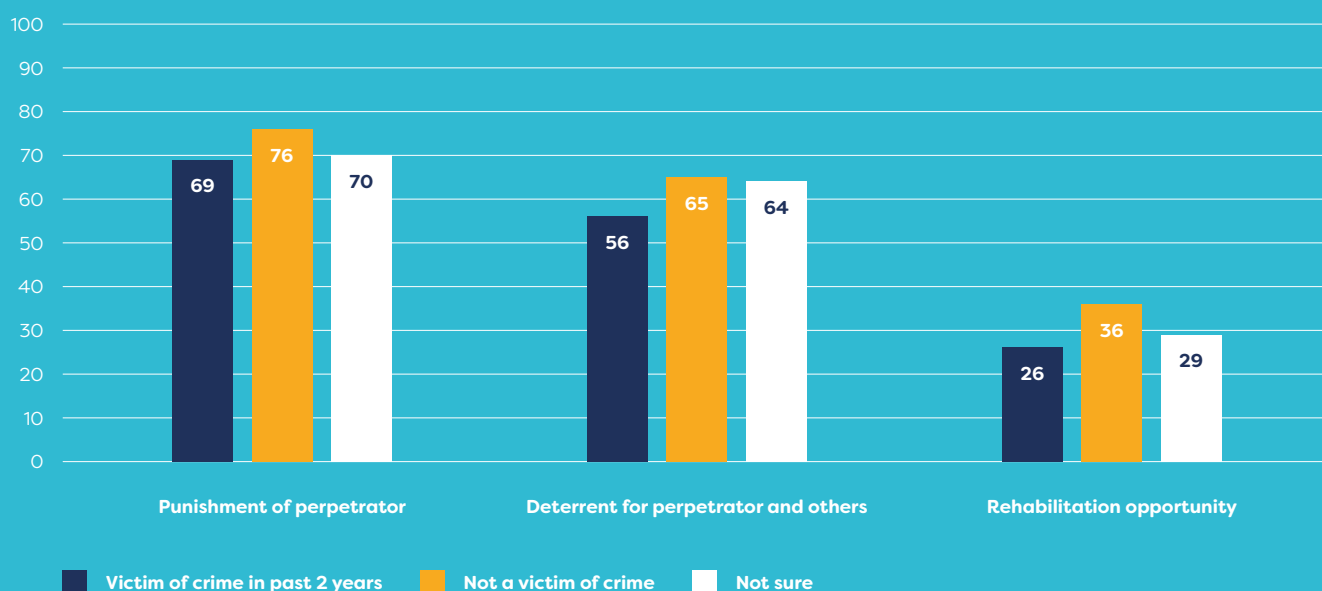
Figure 3: Respondents agreeing or disagreeing that the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland is very effective, by crime experience (%)



Figure 4 shows that those who were never a victim of crime were more likely to say that the purpose of sentencing was punishment than those who had been a victim of crime in the past two years (76% v 69%). Those who were never a victim of crime were also more likely to say that being a deterrent is the main purpose of sentencing than those who had been a victim

of crime in the past two years (65% v 56%). Just over one quarter (26%) of respondents who had been a victim of crime thought providing the person who committed the crime with an opportunity for rehabilitation was the main purpose of sentencing compared to 36 per cent of those who had never been a victim of crime.

Figure 4: Perceived main purpose of sentencing, by crime experience (%)



Shared education

When asked if they would like their school to be part of a shared education campus, just under a quarter of 16-year-olds said yes (24%) while almost three fifths said no (28%). Just under one in four (37%) did not know, while 11 per cent noted that their school was already part of a shared education campus. Those of no religion (27%) were more likely to prefer a shared education campus than Protestants (20%) or Catholics (24%). YLT respondents were asked about whether

their school and youth project/centre had encouraged understanding, and promoted equal treatment, of people with differing identities through various activities (Figure 5). In schools, differing ethnicities (73%), disabilities (71%) and religious beliefs (70%) were the three most commonly featured groups. For the approximately one third (34%) of 16-year-olds who had attended a youth centre or project, these three groups were also the most common focus in these activities.

Figure 5: Has your school or youth project/centre encouraged understanding and promoted equal treatment for differing groups of people through activities (%)



Lowering the voting age

As Table 5 illustrates, four in ten (40%) YLT respondents supported lowering the voting age to 16, while just under a third (32%) opposed this and almost three tenths did not know (28%). Males (43%) and those from not well-off

backgrounds (46%) were more likely to support the lowering of the voting age to 16 than females (38%) or those of average (40%) or well-off (40%) households.

Table 5: Are you personally in favour of lowering the voting age to 16, by gender and family affluence (%)

	All	Male	Female	Not well-off	Average well-off	Well-off
I am in favour of this	40	43	38	46	40	40
I am not in favour of this	32	31	33	29	33	34
I don't know	28	26	29	26	28	27

Note: due to rounding, rows may not add up to 100.

Environment

YLT respondents were asked a series of questions about their connection with nature (Table 6). Treating nature with respect scored highest, with 87% of 16-year-olds agreeing, strongly agreeing

or completely agreeing. Feeling part of nature scored lowest, with 39% agreeing, strongly agreeing or completely agreeing.

Table 6: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about nature? (%)

	Disagree/ Strongly disagree/ Completely disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree/Strongly agree/Completely agree
I always treat nature with respect	5	8	87
Being in nature makes me very happy	4	13	82
I always find beauty in nature	6	13	82
I find being in nature really amazing	6	20	74
Spending time in nature is very important to me	10	23	67
I feel part of nature	22	40	39

Note: due to rounding, rows may not add up to 100.

Survey respondents were also asked about which pro-nature conservation behaviours they took part in (Table 7). Participating in wildlife surveys was the least common activity, with 95% of 16-year-olds occasionally, rarely or never

taking part. In contrast, seven tenths (70%) of respondents frequently, very frequently or always tried to avoid disturbing wildlife when walking in nature by themselves or with their dog. Less than a fifth (19%) occasionally, rarely or never did this.

Table 7: How often do you do the following pro-nature conservation behaviours by yourself or with someone else? (%)

	Occasionally/ rarely/ never	Sometimes	Frequently/ very frequently/ always
Take part in wildlife surveys (such as Garden bird watch, Bio-Blitz, etc.)	95	3	1
Make homes for nature (such as insects, hedgehogs, etc.)	80	13	7
Talk to other people (such as family, friends, etc.) about the importance of looking after nature and the environment	71	15	15
Leave an area of lawn/ flowerbed to grow wild	71	12	18
Grow flowers and/or plants that birds and insects will like	68	15	17
Pick up litter to help nature have a better home	66	21	12
Put food out to feed garden birds	63	14	23
When walking in nature, by myself or with a dog, I try to avoid disturbing wildlife	19	11	70

Note: due to rounding, rows may not add up to 100.

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