

A national survey of problem behaviour and associated risk and protective factors among young people

A representative sample of more than 14,000 students in English, Scottish and Welsh secondary schools (Years 7-11) took part in a survey to assess their involvement in crime, drug and alcohol misuse and other antisocial activities. The questionnaire, developed by *Communities that Care*, also investigated their exposure to factors associated with a greater or lower risk of problem behaviour. The results showed that:

-  **Although almost half the young people aged 11 to 17 reported committing at least one criminal act, offending and illegal drug use were mostly infrequent.**
-  **Most young people appeared to be well-supervised and supported by parents who held positive expectations for their behaviour. Schools were generally deemed to set and enforce clear rules, although four out of ten students in Year 11 admitted truancy in the previous year.**
-  **Most young people liked their neighbourhoods, but around a fifth felt unsafe going out at night – girls more than boys.**
-  **The highest proportions of students admitting offences were in Year 10. A third of these 14- and 15-year-olds said they had vandalised property in the past year and more than a quarter had stolen from shops.**
-  **In the youngest age group, more boys reported criminal acts than girls. By Year 10, the gender gap had closed for vandalism and shoplifting. This was not the case for violent behaviour or more serious property crimes, where boys outnumbered girls in all age groups.**
-  **One in ten boys in Year 7 and almost a quarter in Year 11 said they had carried a weapon in the past year. One in five boys in Year 11 admitted attacking someone intending to hurt them seriously.**
-  **'Under-age drinking' was common. More than four out of ten students in Year 10 and over half in Year 11 acknowledged 'binges' when they consumed five or more alcoholic drinks in a session.**
-  **Three out of ten boys and one in four girls in Year 11 said they had used cannabis at least once. Use of more harmful illegal drugs was much lower. However, 8.5 per cent of boys and 10 per cent of girls in Years 9 and 10 admitted solvent abuse.**

Introduction

Research has identified factors in children's and young people's lives associated with an increased risk of problems at school, drug and alcohol misuse and criminal behaviour. Other factors protect them from difficulties, even when heavily exposed to risk. This evidence has established the potential for strategies to promote children's positive development, based on the risk and protection profile of the neighbourhoods where they live. The Communities that Care (CtC) programme proposes a method for assembling this profile, including a confidential questionnaire for completion by young people in secondary schools. The CtC Youth Survey[®] asks questions about their involvement in problem behaviour and their exposure to individual risk and protective factors.

This study reports the first results from a national survey using the same 'self-report' instrument.

Risk and protective factors

The CtC model describes 17 major risk factors (Box 1) and 6 protective factors (Box 2) derived from analysis of, mainly, longitudinal research studies and chosen because they appear susceptible to modification by a community-based programme.

Box 1: Risk factors

Family

- Poor parental supervision and discipline
- Family conflict
- Family history of problem behaviour
- Parental involvement / attitudes condoning problem behaviour
- *Low income and poor housing*

School

- *Low achievement, beginning at primary school*
- Aggressive behaviour, including bullying
- Lack of commitment, including truancy
- School disorganisation

Community

- Community disorganisation and neglect
- Availability of drugs
- *Disadvantaged neighbourhood*
- *High turnover and lack of neighbourhood attachment*

Individuals, friends and peers

- Alienation and lack of social commitment
- Attitudes that condone problem behaviour
- Early involvement in problem behaviour
- Friends involved in problem behaviour

Italics indicate factors not measured by the CtC Youth Survey but audited using other data sources

Protective factors (Box 2) are linked to positive outcomes even when children are growing up in adverse circumstances and heavily exposed to risk.

Box 2: Protective factors

- Strong bonds with family, friends and teachers
- Healthy standards set by parents, teachers and community leaders
- *Opportunities for involvement in families, schools and the community
- *Social and learning skills to enable participation
- *Recognition and praise for positive behaviour

*These factors operate together as a 'protective process'

The CtC model assumes that although children may be born with certain predispositions, their behaviour patterns must be learned. Community-based action to reduce risk in children's lives and enhance protection can not only enable them to achieve their potential, but also reduce the chances of involvement in crime, substance misuse and other problem behaviour.

Young people's involvement in crime

The schools survey found sizeable minorities of young people had knowingly broken the law at some stage. Almost half (48.5 per cent) reported committing some kind of criminal offence at some time in their lives. For example, around four out of ten 14- and 15-year-olds in Year 10 said they had 'ever' stolen or tried to steal something. Asked about the past year, a third of these students said they had vandalised property, while more than a quarter said they had shoplifted. Reported involvement in these, the two most common offences, increased sharply with age after Year 7 but 'peaked' in Year 10. Gender differences also disappeared with age. However, most offending appeared to be infrequent: for example, 10 per cent of Year 10 boys said they had shoplifted on three or more occasions in the past year, compared with 18 per cent who answered 'once or twice'.

More serious property crime

A distinction emerged between participation in theft, vandalism and handling stolen goods and in more serious property crimes, such as burglary, which were considerably less common. Boys heavily outnumbered girls in all age groups. One in ten boys in Year 11 said they had broken into a building to steal in the past year, including 4 per cent who reported doing so three or more times.

Violence

Boys also outnumbered girls in offences relating to violence. One in ten boys in Year 7, rising to almost a quarter in Year 11, said they had carried a weapon to school or in the street during the past year. Eight per cent of the youngest boys and 19 per cent of the oldest admitted having attacked someone else intending to seriously hurt them.

Alcohol

Reported alcohol consumption was very common. Six out of ten boys and half the girls in Year 7 said they had tried at least one alcoholic drink. Eight out of ten students of both sexes in Year 11 said they had drunk alcohol in the previous four weeks. More significantly, in terms of potential harm, more than four out of ten students in Year 10 and more than half in Year 11 reported consuming five or more alcoholic drinks in a single session – so called ‘binge’ drinking. More than a quarter of either sex in Year 11 reported three or more alcohol ‘binges’ in the past month.

Tobacco

Smoking appeared less attractive as an ‘under age’ activity. Most students in their first two years at secondary school said they had never had a cigarette and, even in Year 11, nearly half the boys and over a third of girls said the same. Smoking was more prevalent among girls than boys in all year groups. By Year 11, 22 per cent of boys said they smoked ‘now and then’ or ‘regularly’ compared with 29 per cent of girls.

Illegal drugs

Cannabis was, predictably, the illegal drug that young people most often said they had used. Reported ‘lifetime’ use rose from 1.5 per cent of boys in Year 7 to 30 per cent in Year 11 and from 0.8 per cent of girls to 25 per cent. Levels of frequent use were much lower: 9 per cent of boys and 5 per cent of girls in Year 11 said they had used the drug on three or more occasions in the past month. Reported use of more harmful, illegal drugs was also relatively low. Around 5 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls in Year 11 had ‘ever’ used Ecstasy, while slightly lower proportions of both sexes said the same about amphetamines. Reported use of cocaine reached 4 per cent among the oldest boys and 2.5 per cent among girls. The equivalent figures for heroin use were less than 2 per cent and less than 1 per cent respectively. About one in twelve boys and girls in Year 11 agreed they had been ‘out of control on drugs’ at least once.

Solvents

Arguably more worrying, in terms of the potential for immediate harm, was the number of young people, especially under-15s, who reported sniffing glue and other solvents. Around 8.5 per cent of boys and more than 10 per cent of girls in Years 9 and 10 said they had used solvents at least once. The peak age group for use in the past month was Year 9. Reported frequent use was, however, rare.

Truancy and exclusion

Reports of truancy rose steeply with age. Some 7 per cent of girls and 11 per cent of boys in Year 7 said they had truanted in the previous year, compared with 41 per cent of girls and 38 per cent of boys in Year 11. Most who had taken unauthorised absence said it only involved occasional lessons. But 16 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls in Year 11 reported taking whole days or longer. The numbers saying they had been temporarily or permanently excluded from school were much lower, but with boys heavily outnumbering girls.

Risk and protective factors

The survey findings support both the *Communities that Care* model and the validity of the questionnaire as a means of assessing risk and protective factors among young people. For every risk factor, an increased exposure to risk, as measured by the survey, was found to relate significantly to an increased likelihood of reported involvement in problem behaviour. Conversely, the more young people were exposed to protective factors, the less likely they were to report taking part in antisocial activities.

The results relating to families suggest that young people are generally well-supervised and supported by their parents, including positive expectations for their behaviour. Almost nine out of ten students agreed (definitely or mostly) that there were clear rules at home. A large majority also said their parents gave them lots of opportunities to do ‘fun things’ as a family. Definite acknowledgement of clear family rules did, however, drop from 59 per cent in Year 7 to 36 per cent in Year 11. There was a comparable decline (from 70 per cent to 52 per cent) in young people agreeing that parents often showed they were proud of them. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that their parents would think it wrong for them to steal or use illegal drugs. However, the proportion thinking their parents would object to under-age drinking declined from 91 per cent in Year 7 to 56 per cent in Year 11.

Schools were generally judged to set and enforce clear rules on issues like late arrival, absence and bullying. Large majorities agreed there were lots of

opportunities to participate in class and extra-curricular activities. Three out of four students said they had usually tried their best at school, with an even bigger majority agreeing that their schoolwork was very important for their future. But enthusiasm for school and the curriculum waned with age. The proportion saying they often or mostly hated school grew from a quarter in Year 7 to a third in Year 11. More boys said they hated school than girls.

Most young people said they liked their neighbourhoods. But it was evident that a fifth or more felt no attachment and were living in areas marked by significant criminal and antisocial activity. For example, 23 per cent agreed that drug-dealing took place, 22 per cent thought it would be easy to obtain cannabis, 16 per cent reported 'lots of fights' and 21 per cent felt unsafe going out after dark. Girls were more likely to say they felt unsafe than boys.

Answers to questions about personal attitudes and those of peers revealed an expected element of rebelliousness that grew with age. For example, 30 per cent said they 'liked to see how much they could get away with' and 22 per cent agreed they did the opposite of what people told them 'just to make them mad'. Almost four out of ten (38 per cent) agreed it was 'alright to beat people up if they start the fight'. And while 84 per cent thought it wrong to launch a serious, unprovoked attack, only 61 per cent said the same about 'picking a fight'.

Nearly two-thirds said they had drunk alcohol before the age of 13 and one in seven said they began drinking at least once a week. More boys (8 per cent) said they had been arrested than girls. Reports of having close friends involved in problem behaviour increased with age. Overall, 50 per cent said they had friends who had drunk alcohol without their parents knowing, 19 per cent used cannabis, 12 per cent carried a weapon to school and 6 per cent used 'Class A' illegal drugs like LSD, ecstasy or cocaine.

Conclusion

Widespread use of alcohol, especially underage 'binge' drinking, stands out as a neglected area for concern, as does the solvent abuse reported by small, but significant minorities of the youngest age groups surveyed and the sizeable minorities of young people who say they carry weapons and have participated in serious assaults.

The national survey creates scope for analysing the relative strength of individual factors in influencing children and young people's behaviour and better understanding of their collective role in causation.

About the project

Communities that Care commissioned market researchers Ipsos-RSL to conduct the youth survey in a random sample of secondary schools in England, Scotland and Wales. One class in each of Years 7 to 11 (S1 to S5 in Scottish schools) was randomly selected to take part at each of the 89 secondary schools that agreed to participate. Altogether, 14,666 students completed questionnaires during the first two terms of the 2000 / 2001 academic year. After filtering the data for inconsistencies, 14,445 'valid' forms were included in the analysis.

How to get further information

The full report, *Youth at risk? A national survey of risk factors, protective factors and problem behaviour among young people in England, Scotland and Wales* by Sarah Beinart, Barry Anderson, Stephanie Lee and David Utting, is published by *Communities that Care*, Ground Floor, Unit 25, King's Exchange Business Village, Tileyard Road, London N7 (price £12.95 plus £2.50 p&p), Tel: 020 7837 5900, e-mail: ctc@communitiesthatcare.org.uk.