



SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE: EVIDENCE FROM GROWING UP IN IRELAND

DATE

14TH JUNE 2024

VENUE

IRISH PARLIAMENTARY WOMEN'S CAUCUS WORKSHOP

AUTHORS

ANNE NOLAN, EMER SMYTH

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

- Independent research institute established in 1960
- We undertake policy-relevant social and economic research on a number of themes (e.g., health, education, social inclusion, macroeconomics, labour market, etc.)
- Our research is funded by government departments, state agencies and national/international scientific programmes (e.g., Horizon Europe)
- Current programme of research, funded by the Health Service Executive (HSE) Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme, examines sexual health and wellbeing among young people in Ireland
 - Update to 2015 Sexual Health Strategy due
 - New sexual health and wellbeing survey being developed



An Roinn Sláinte
Department of Health

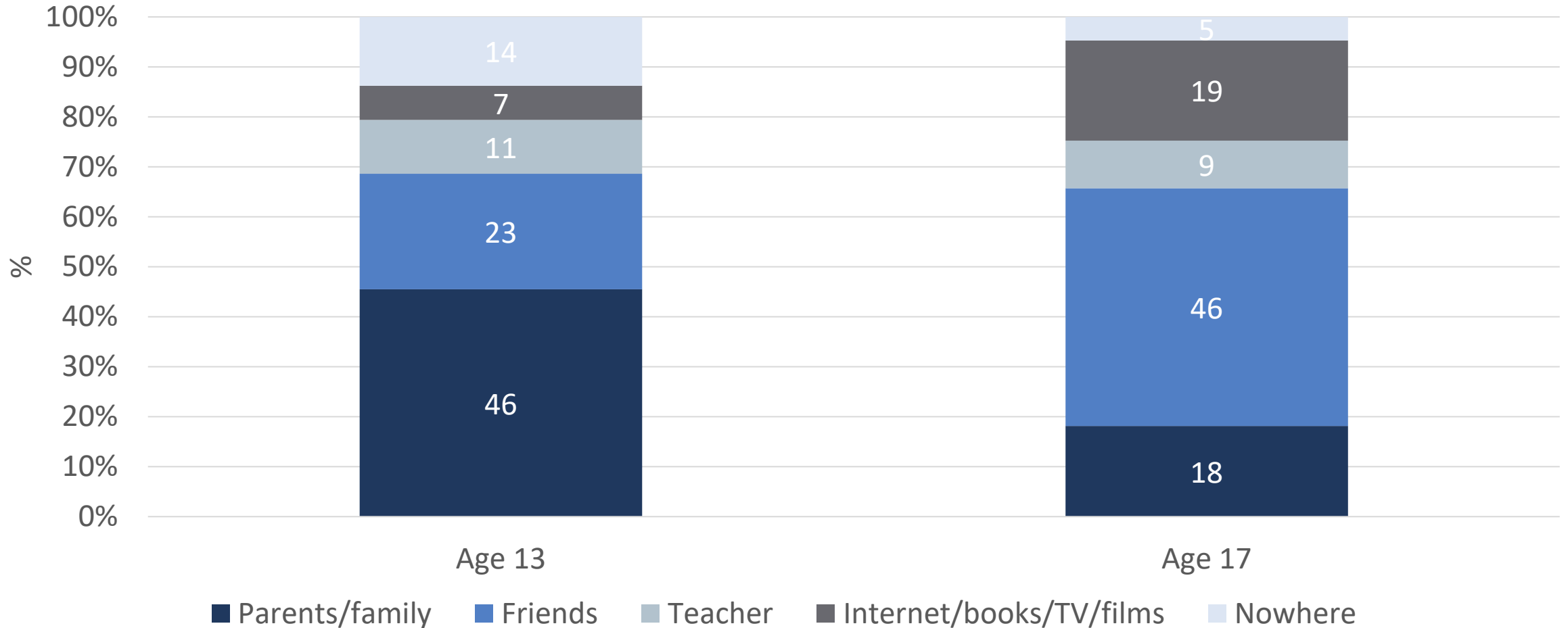


HSE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

- Use data from Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), the national longitudinal study of children and young people in Ireland
 - GUI surveys two cohorts of young people ('08 and '98 cohorts), and will shortly begin data collection for a new birth cohort, cohort '24
- For this programme, use data from waves 3 and 4 of '98 Cohort of GUI (collected in 2015 at age 17 & 2018 at age 20)
 - Information on sexual health and wellbeing is collected in the self-completion questionnaire
 - Also use information collected in earlier waves at ages 9, 13 and 17
- Topics examined include:
 - Sexual initiation
 - Sexual health behaviours (contraception use, pornography use, sexual health literacy)
 - RSE and sources of information on sex

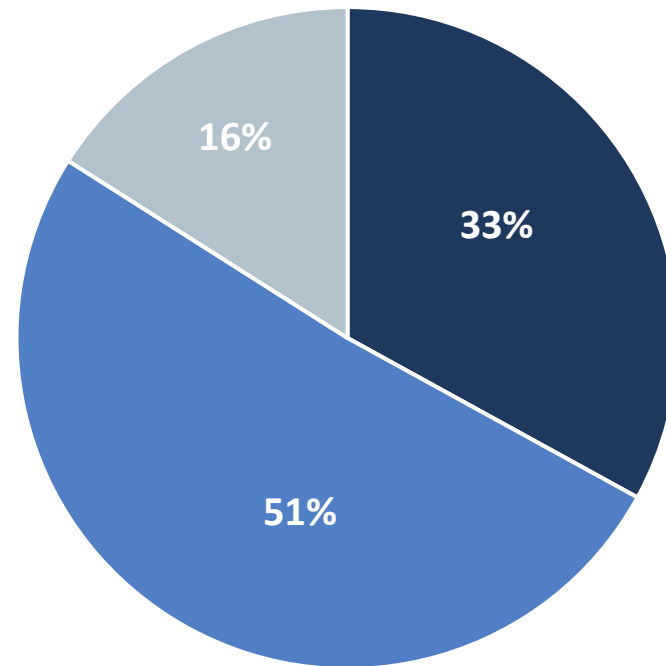


1. SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON SEX (13 AND 17 YEARS OF AGE)



2. (AGE OF) SEXUAL INITIATION IN GUI

- GUI does not ask about age of sexual initiation (of sexual intercourse)
- Instead, information collected at ages 17 and 20 on whether the young person has had sexual intercourse can be used to infer age of sexual initiation



Source: O'Mahony et al. (2021)

FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH TIMING OF SEXUAL INITIATION

■ Earlier:

- Lone-parent family
- Living in disadvantaged area for young men
- Friends as main source of information on sex at 13
- Large and more age-diverse peer networks: role models and peer pressure

■ Later:

- Homosexual or questioning/asexual
- More advantaged background
- Migrant parent(s)
- Teacher as main source of information on sex at 17
- Feeling school prepared them for adult life

3. CIRCUMSTANCES OF FIRST SEX

	Males	Females
Contraception use (% yes)*	87.1	90.7
Timing regret (% 'happened too soon')*	9.9	25.7

* gender difference is statistically significant

- Factors associated with not using contraception: first sex outside a steady relationship; lower levels of school achievement
- Factors linked to timing regret: first sex outside a steady relationship; peer group had had sex (women)

4. SEXUAL HEALTH BEHAVIOURS (AGE 20¹)

	Males	Females
Condom use (% always)	36.8	33.1
Contraception use (% yes) ^{2 ***}	62.9	72.2

¹ For those who have had sexual intercourse by age 20 (n=3,500 approx.)

² at first sex, % using contraception was around 90%

*** gender difference is significant at p<.001 level, ** p<.01, * p<.05

5. SEXUAL HEALTH LITERACY

- At age 20, GUI respondents were asked two questions to gauge their sexual health literacy (adapted from US NLSY):
 - When during the female monthly cycle of menstrual periods is pregnancy most likely to occur?
 - Which of these methods is the most effective for preventing sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS or gonorrhea?

Pregnancy ***	Males	Females
Right before period begins/during the period	31.6	19.5
About a week before the period begins	15.6	15.9
About two weeks after the period begins	20.9	36.5
Anytime during the month, makes no difference	8.7	16.0
Don't know/not answered	23.3	12.2

Most effective method **	Males	Females
Withdrawal	4.2	2.6
Condom	83.8	85.1
Birth control pill	2.5	3.6
Good hygiene	4.5	3.2
Don't know/not answered	5.0	0.7

*** gender difference is significant at $p < .001$ level, ** $p < .01$

6. PORNOGRAPHY USE

- Strong gendered patterns in use of pornography at age 20: 64% males v. 13% females
- Men from more advantaged backgrounds more likely to use pornography
- Use is responsive to rule-setting (religiosity, internet monitoring (males), home alone (females))
- Internet (and to a lesser extent, friends) as a source of information on sex at earlier ages is a predictor of use
- Pornography use related to earlier timing of sexual initiation, and lower levels of condom use
- Associations with poorer wellbeing (depression, life satisfaction, aggression and negative coping strategies), particularly for young men

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- Significant proportion of young people are reliant on friends for information about sex; four in ten have not discussed sex/relationship issues with their parents by age 17
- Importance of peer networks in timing of first sex
- Concerning levels of sexual health literacy among young adults, especially regarding fertility
- Significant fall-off in condom use between first and current sex – on-going research on the factors; implications for STIs and unplanned pregnancies
- Pornography use emerges as a factor in lower condom use; and in poorer wellbeing, especially among young men