

Definition and measurement

Risky behaviour refers to actions undertaken by children that are normally considered adult behaviours, and which can negatively affect their lives. Levels of risky behaviour in each country show the extent to which children are receiving suitable guardianship or information regarding age appropriate activities. Risky behaviour indicators include rates and trends of self-reported excessive drinking and regular smoking in early adolescence. As well, risky behaviour includes self-reported rates of early sexual experiences, and non-use of condoms to protect against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Data for risky behaviour indicators are taken from the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey 2005/06 (HBSC)*. Twenty-five OECD countries are included in the survey. However some countries choose not to ask children questions about drinking, smoking or sex. Country estimates are calculated using reported rates and sample numbers for 15-year-old boys and girls. For rates of drunkenness results for the 13-year-old cohort are also included.

Considerable numbers of girls and boys smoke and get drunk. Girls smoke more than boys, but boys are more likely to get drunk. In 2005-06 smoking was especially popular amongst Austrian girls and Finnish boys, and least popular amongst boys in the United States and Canada. Rates by sex by country ranged from 7% to 30%. Drunkenness did not vary quite so starkly. Getting drunk repeatedly was most prevalent amongst boys in the United Kingdom and Denmark and least common amongst Italian and Swiss girls (CO6.1).

Alcohol and cigarette consumption amongst 15-year-olds is falling from a high recorded in the late 1990s. Country convergence in risk behaviours is also evident as overall rates fall amongst girls for smoking, and drunkenness for both sexes. With the exception of Greece all countries report declining rates in youth smoking for both boys and girls. Levels of smoking for both sexes are at their lowest for a decade, with less than one in five children of either sex smoking regularly. There have been large reductions in drunkenness in Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom, where youth historically have high levels of alcohol abuse. At the national level increasing rates of drunkenness among boys are rare. Five countries – Austria, France,

Italy, Poland and Spain – report increases. Of these only Austria and Poland were high to start with. Perhaps less surprisingly drunkenness amongst girls is also falling. However an increase for drunkenness amongst girls is seen in Hungary which is not matched by a similar increase for boys.

One quarter of 15-year-old boys and girls report early sexual experiences (CO6.2). There is not a great deal of variation between countries, with all but two reporting rates within 10% either side of the average. There is a fairly robust geographical divide in early sexual experiences between the sexes. Early sexual experiences are more prevalent for boys in Mediterranean countries, and more prevalent for girls in northern European countries.

One quarter of 15-year-old boys and girls who had an early sexual experience did not use a condom in their last sexual encounter. With only 16 OECD countries providing rates, data for condom use is limited. Nine OECD countries participating in the HBSC survey chose not to ask for this information from their 15-year-old children. Around three in four children report using appropriate protection during their last sexual intercourse, ranging from a low of 70% to a high of around 90%. In almost all countries girls use condoms less than boys.

Further reading

Currie, C. et al. (2008), *Inequalities in Young People's Health: HBSC International Report*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, Denmark.

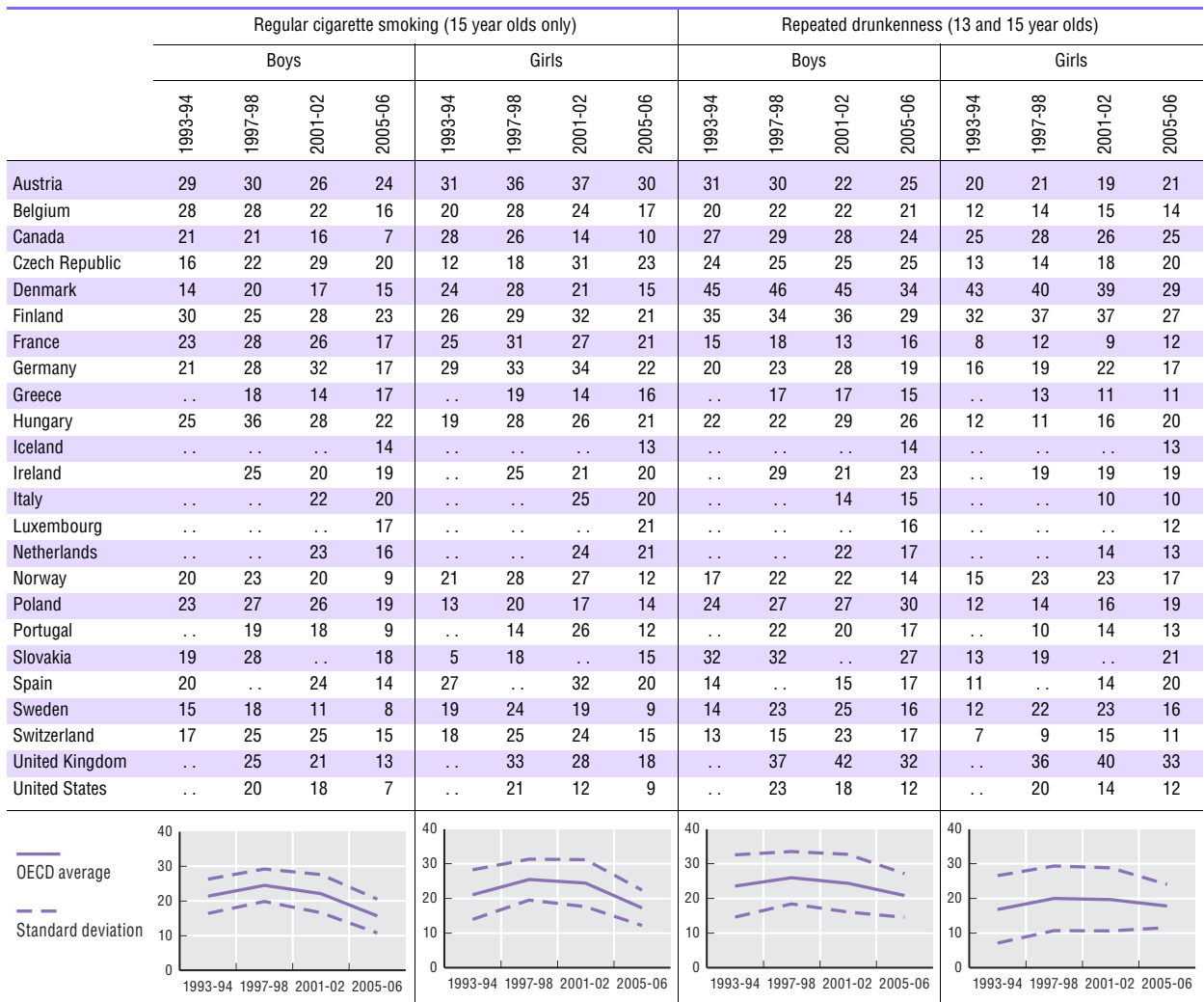
Figure and table notes

Table CO6.1: UK figures are for England only. Belgium figures are a simple average of Flemish and French-speaking figures for each wave except 1997-98 when French-speaking Belgium did not participate. The OECD average is calculated using reported figures for each wave. Cigarette smoking is for smoking at least one cigarette during the past week and is for 15-year-olds only. Drunkenness shows the proportion of children aged 13 and 15 who report ever having been drunk 2-3 times or more (sample weights are used to calculate averages between age cohorts). The actual question was "Have you ever had so much alcohol that you were really drunk?". Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Japan, Korea and Mexico are missing.

Figure CO6.2: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Norway, Ireland, the United States, Turkey and Mexico are missing. Iceland, Luxembourg, Italy and the Czech Republic do not ask children about condom use. Data for Belgium is Flemish Belgium only. Data for the United Kingdom does not include Northern Ireland. The sexual intercourse question asked children aged 15 whether they had ever had sexual intercourse. The condom question was "The last time you had sex did you or your partner use a condom?".

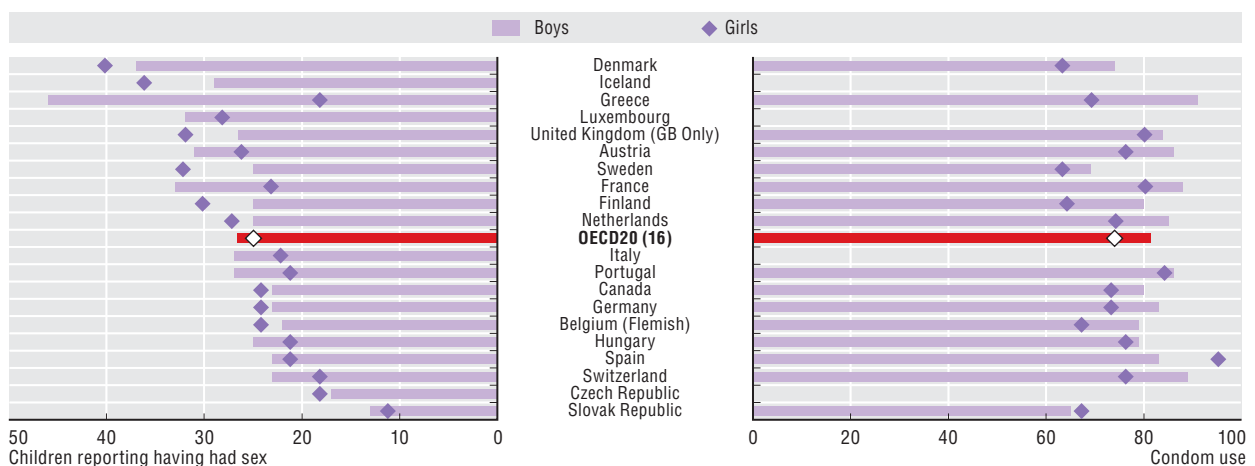
CO6.1. Cigarette smoking and drunkenness amongst teen-aged children is falling from highs in the 1990s

Rates of cigarette smoking and repeated drunkenness of teen-aged boys and girls, percentages, 1993-94 to 2005-06



CO6.2. One in four 15-year-olds have had sex, often without adequate protection

Sexual activity and condom use amongst 15-year-olds, in percentage



Source: *Inequalities in Young People's Health: HBS International Report* (Currie et al., 2008).

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