

Young people 'happier and healthier'

St Andrews-led study examines global trends in adolescent health and wellbeing

Young people are happier and healthier than their counterparts a decade ago, according to a major new study into the wellbeing of adolescents across Europe and North America.

Today's report, part of a collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) coordinated internationally by the University of St Andrews, sheds new light on the habits and happiness of 11 to 15 year-olds in over 40 different countries across a 16 year period (1994-2010).

The special report on trends, published today (Tuesday 24 March 2015), is a collection of in-depth studies of comparable data on a wide range of topics, from multiple countries and repeated surveys of school children. Findings include some significant improvements in how young people report their own health and well-being.

Overall, the results suggest that while there are still causes for concern, contemporary adolescents are in a better position than past generations.

The special supplement, published by The European Journal of Public Health, pulls together 20 papers from researchers taking part in the HBSC study, a cross-national collaboration with the WHO. It is the only study of its kind in Europe and North America and provides insights into the social determinants of young people's health and well-being.

Professor Candace Currie, the International Coordinator of the HBSC study and Professor of Child and Adolescent Health at the University of St Andrews, said the research was "a vital source of information for policy-makers, parents and young people themselves."

Professor Currie commented, "Adolescence is a crucial stage in life when you lay the foundation for adulthood, whether that's healthy or otherwise. And while there is much to celebrate about the health and well-being of many young people today, others continue to experience real and worrying problems."

"Evidence like the papers in this supplement give policy-makers an opportunity to act to secure the health of the next generation."

The papers included in the report describe how trends can be interpreted when looking at patterns and differences between countries, across areas such as eating habits, obesity, physical activity, bullying, safe sex, communication at home, and the use of alcohol, tobacco and cannabis.

The results show that over the last decade an increasing proportion of adolescents eat fruit and vegetables and were physically active on a daily basis, keep their teeth clean, did not suffer from injury, rate their health as excellent, practice safe sex, and find it easy to talk to their parents about things that matter to them.

Alongside this we have seen a decline in young people experiencing bullying, drinking alcohol weekly, and increasing numbers living free from tobacco and cannabis.

Yet, despite this general trend towards healthier eating and healthy lifestyles, the research also found that obesity rates either increased or remained stable at already high levels, between 2002 and 2010.

The researchers behind the study warn that despite the generally positive findings, many - if not the majority - of adolescents living in Europe and North America, still do not meet the recommendations for healthy living.

In the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, Lithuania, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, Switzerland and USA, fewer young people were physically active on a daily basis in 2010 than 2002.

Critically, several key groups still remain at risk of poor health, with potentially damaging and long-lasting consequences.

The detailed analyses revealed that girls, older children and in particular those in Northern European countries experience lower levels of life satisfaction. Findings also reveal that in the majority of countries, children from less affluent families had more health complaints.

And although the majority of adolescents reported excellent health, a marked increase in medication for headaches was shown across 12 out of 20 countries studied.

The report suggests that while the overall optimistic picture seems surprising considering that many countries faced a severe economic crisis in the last decade, policies and actions to improve public health were implemented in many countries in the same period. It also concludes that the general feeling that young people are better off today could also be attributed to changes in fashions, behavioural norms and societal values.

Professor Currie continued, "For more than 30 years the HBSC study and research network has built up an increasingly detailed picture of trends and developments in adolescent health internationally. This valuable database can support strategies to disrupt negative cycles that take root in the second decade and contribute to health inequities in the long-term. Policy makers can use this work to ensure that their decisions are targeted, effective and have their roots in the real world."

"By comparing today's young people with their counterparts a decade ago we can better understand how their health is influenced by the circumstances in which they live; access to care, schools and recreational facilities; and their homes, towns and communities. This is a vital source of information."

The report 'Trends in young people's health and social determinants' is published by The European Journal of Public Health and appears online at:

http://eurpub.oxfordjournals.org/content/25/suppl_2