

John Balding

Young people in 1998: looking back, and looking ahead

We cannot look into the future — but we know a lot about the recent past. The approaching Millennium prompted us to explore our archive of data gathered since the early days of the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ) service, and to look for trends in young people's lifestyles that might act as pointers for the next few years.

The result was a very different *Young People* report to the twelve annual ones that have preceded it in the series that began in 1986. The 1998 data are presented in the usual way, but in addition they are seen as the latest in a succession of annual data sets, with the question responses in some cases going back uninterruptedly to 1983.

Professor Ted Wragg (University of Exeter), on seeing an advance copy of the book, kindly agreed to put his response into a Foreword, which we reproduce here.

There were some very significant changes in our society during the fifteen years between 1983 and 1998: millions of jobs disappeared from manufacturing industry, computers spread rapidly through offices and homes, larger numbers of pupils achieved formal qualifications, girls began to outperform boys at all stages of schooling, and the proportion of each age group

going on to university increased from a seventh to a third.

During this critical fifteen year period John Balding and his colleagues at the Schools Health Education Unit have assiduously chronicled the changes in young people's lifestyles. Some 500,000 pupils have filled in questionnaires about every conceivable aspect of their health and well-being. It is a unique historical and contemporary archive of young people in the last years of the millennium.

It is always easy to look for the bad news and there is understandable alarm whenever the figures for drug taking, smoking or alcohol consumption go up. What is encouraging, however, is that most young people seem to lead a very healthy life, both physically and mentally. The word 'sensible' comes to mind more frequently than 'dangerous' or 'irresponsible'. The great majority do their homework, clean their teeth regularly and save up their pocket money.

Even in areas of great worry, like drug taking, it is noticeable that the figures seem to be on a downward trend. Whereas the numbers of 14-15 year olds trying an illegal drug have increased substantially during the past fifteen years, from below ten per cent to about a quarter, the number of regular users of most of the

individual drugs in the list is actually below one per cent.

What is noticeable is how, in a number of areas, girls' and boys' profiles have changed over the years. Although they spend longer than boys on their homework, girls are more likely to smoke and drink wine. Their profiles are also moving close to the boys in drinking spirits and trying drugs, and older girls are far less likely to play sports. This is a matter of some concern, as young women are now notoriously unattracted to team sports once they enter and leave adolescence. Most worrying of all, however, is girls' much greater anxiety about their body shape. Whereas boys have sportsmen and pop singers as their role models, most of whom are fairly chunky, girls are tempted to envy emaciated 'super models'.

It is in this and other areas where adults, including parents and teachers, can use the masses of valuable data that this report contains. Over the years there has been some excellent press coverage of the findings of John Balding and his team and I hope once more they are brought to the attention of a wide audience. ♪

The following pages present some examples from *Young People in 1998*. However, it is important for readers to know something about the background to this review of our serial data.

The early years: 1980-85

Schools started using the questionnaire in 1980, and by 1982 there was already a very busy 'cottage industry' of coders processing scripts. The data were punched by the University of Exeter data-prep team and stored on magnetic tape or hard discs, an arrangement that continued until we developed our own independent network a few years ago.

Unfortunately we are unable to 'look back' as far as these very early surveys: the 1983 data are the oldest still recoverable, in the form of two scrapbooks containing the combined

printout of surveys carried out in 1983 and 1984 using Version 8 of the questionnaire. From 1985 onwards, however, the record is complete. The annual *Young People* reports started the following year.

Versions and variations

The HRBQ is an evolving enquiry instrument. Revisions are needed for at least two reasons: as young people's behaviour patterns change, some questions need to be updated or replaced; and, despite careful trialling, these new questions may have to be modified in some way in the light of their use.

Eight different versions are represented in the period 1983-98, as follows:

Version	Period
8/9	1983-85
10	1986
11	1987-89
12/14	1990
15	1991-92
16	1993-95
17/18	1996
19	1997-98

(Versions 8 & 9, 12 & 14, and 17 & 18 were identical, and their numbers were changed for administrative reasons. Version 13, produced for the Health Education Authority, was as far as we know never used.)

It follows from this table that questions introduced in Versions 10 and later do not have a history of use back to 1983, while questions abandoned before Version 19 do not appear in *Young People in 1998*.

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To obtain your copy, telephone or fax SHEU for an order form. *We cannot accept orders without accompanying payment.*

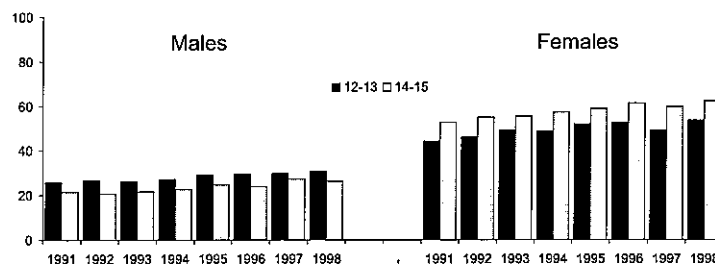
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1. Diet



More girls than ever want to lose weight

The histogram shows the percentage that *want to lose weight*



Our surveys have always shown that many more females than males want to lose weight. In 1998, we recorded that almost 70% of the older females were dissatisfied with their weight. This included more than 60% wanting to lose weight, and a few percent wanting to gain some.

The histogram shows that the percentage of both genders wishing to lose weight has risen slightly since 1991, and also that the percentage of females wanting to lose weight was the highest it has ever been in 1998.

It also shows that among the males more of the Year 8s than Year 10s want to lose weight, the reverse of the situation with respect to the females. It is easy to understand why more

females than males want to lose weight, but the age differences are interesting:

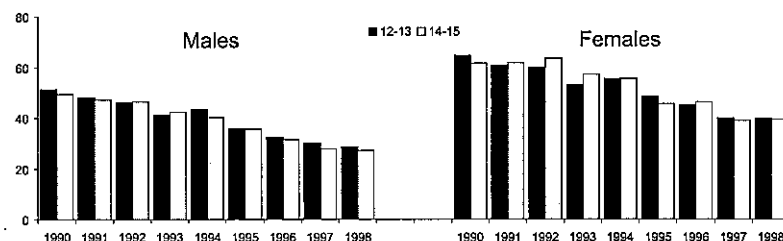
Are they more self-conscious, or does weight seem more of a disadvantage? Or are more overweight? (Their growth spurt begins at about this time.)

The fashion for using very slender female models shows no sign of coming to an end.

See *Young People in 1997*, pages 8-9, for an analysis of young people's recorded weights and their attitudes to their weight. This shows that, particularly in the case of the females, most of those wanting to lose weight are within the limits of 'healthy' weight, and some are already underweight.

Young people are losing their taste for fresh fruit.

The histogram shows the percentage that ate fresh fruit *on most days*



This information is derived from a question that asked them about their consumption of different foods. This section of the checklist contains fruit and vegetable items, among which we have regularly noted the females' preferences for most of the items. Gender differences in health and diet consciousness are, in fact, reflected most markedly in this section.

In view of the year-round availability of fruit, we were astonished by the downward trend in the histogram, which refers to its consumption *on most days* since 1990.

Cost and availability factors do not seem to explain this fall of more than 20 percentage

points (which means that in the case of the males, only just over half as many are eating fruit frequently now as were doing so eight years ago). The long-term nature and uniformity of the fall suggest that it is not an effect of questionnaire revisions.

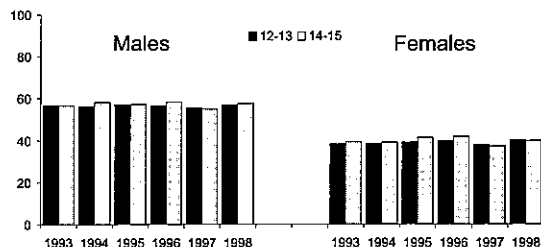
We have also noted other long-term dietary trends. The females' taste for chips is no longer considerably less than the males'; the appeal of high-fibre cereals has not changed much over the past eight years; the popularity of full-fat milk fell until the mid-nineties. The proportion of young people consuming red meat frequently has halved since 1991.

2. Doctor & dentist



More girls than boys feel 'uneasy' when visiting the doctor

The histogram shows the percentage that felt at ease on their last visit.



Use of this question over almost two decades has always shown that more males than females felt *at ease*.

In the 1998 data, about 20% of the females felt *quite uneasy* or *very uneasy*, and fewer younger than older respondents record being *quite uneasy* or *very uneasy*.

The histogram shows that the percentage that felt *at ease* has not changed since 1993.

This question has a very long history, having been asked since 1981, but a change in the response categories makes the pre-1993 data

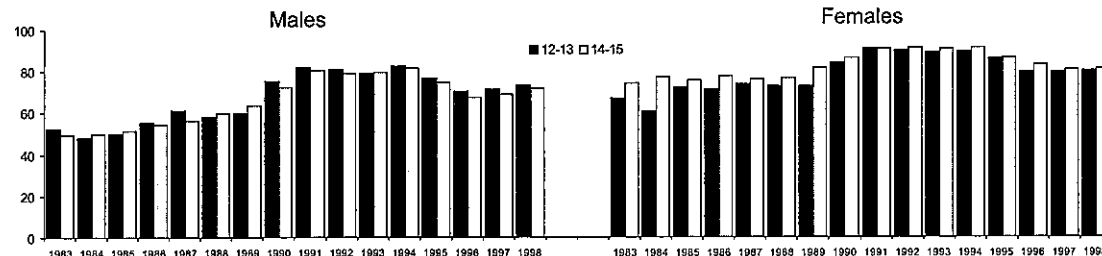
incompatible with the later results.

Earlier data recorded the gender of the GP, and suggested that both boys and girls were more likely to be at ease with female doctors, who are of course in the minority.

The level of ease with the doctor could reflect general confidence with adults, or concern about the reason for the visit. The increased uneasiness of the older group seems to suggest the second reason, especially if we consider girls, generally, to be more at ease when talking about personal aspects of their lives.

Young people are brushing their teeth more frequently than they used to.

The histogram shows the percentage that brushed their teeth *at least twice* on the previous day.



In 1998, more than 70% of males and at least 80% of females brushed their teeth twice or more, but the histogram shows some large 'waves' since 1983 in the responses to this long-running question.

The overall upward trend towards higher brushing levels is disturbed by a 'peak' between 1990 and 1994.

The male levels, which started well behind the female, have become much closer over this 15-year interval. The higher-female levels may

reflect the importance they attach to having their teeth looking nice, as part of their general appearance, rather than extra concern about dental health.

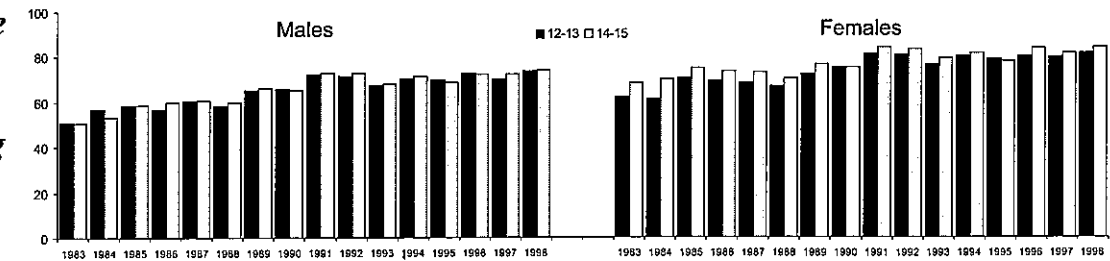
The 'peak' in the accumulated data corresponds to a temporary change in the form of the question, when the respondents were presented with four times when they might have brushed their teeth on the previous day, and asked to check each one. We wonder if this had the effect of joggling their memories.

3. Health & safety

19
Young People in 1998

More young people are fussy about washing their hands after visiting the toilet.

The histogram shows the percentage that wash their hands *whenever possible*.



The *whenever possible* response has always been the most frequently-chosen one. Over the 16 years of surveys the percentage choosing *whenever possible* has broadly increased, although there was a peak in 1991-92.

More than two-thirds of the males and over 80% of the females do currently wash *whenever possible*: the percentage that *never or almost never* wash is very small.

There are many health benefits from this practice, including breaking the cycle of infection of parasitic worms such as threadworms, but the *whenever possible* response recognises

that for reasons of time or lack of facilities it may not always be possible or convenient.

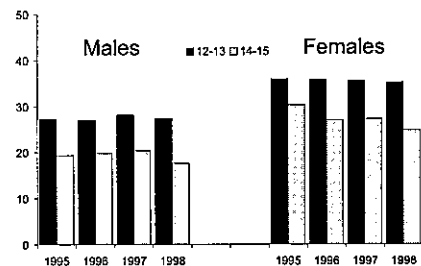
We are inclined to view the increase from 1983-98 as reflecting a real trend in young people's perception of the importance of this practice, and the picture is very similar to that for toothbrushing on the previous page.

The enhanced percentages in 1991-92 may be an artefact of the data collection.

We have discovered that the levels of bathing or showering are currently below the levels of the early nineties, which suggests that we are looking at differently-motivated practices.

More girls than boys are afraid of being bullied at school.

The histogram shows the percentage that feel afraid at least *sometimes*



This question has only a short history, having been introduced in response to increased concern about the level and effect of bullying in schools. It asked the pupils if they were ever afraid of going to school because of bullying.

No overall trend in the levels can be made out over this short period; the fall in levels recorded by the Year 10 females is not matched by those for any other group.

We see that a substantial percentage of the pupils fear going to school because of bullying at least *sometimes*. The females are more fearful than the males, and the Year 8s are more concerned than the Year 10s.

We do not attempt to define what 'bullying' is, as in the question it is effectively defined as

anything that makes them afraid of going to school. This does not, perhaps, rule out bullying by teachers.

Schools are particularly anxious to discover the levels of bullying recorded by their pupils, since (a) it is a dimension of the environment in which they expect their pupils to work and play, and (b) unlike most of the factors affecting their pupils, it is something that they should be able to influence.

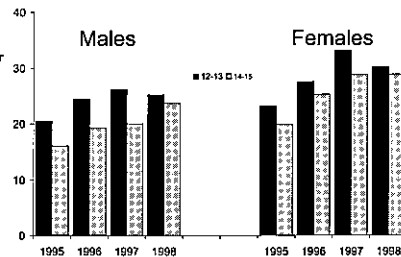
As with some other questions, such as personal asthma or visits to the doctor, some of the pupils most affected by the threat of bullying may not be in school to take part in the survey. The figures, therefore, may under-estimate the proportion that are most seriously affected by the prospect of being bullied.

4. Family & home



The number of young people being taken to school by car has increased.

The histogram shows the percentage that travelled by car at least part of the way.



Although this question has been used for only four years, an upward trend is immediately apparent. In 1998 more than a quarter, the majority Year 8 females, went at least part of the way to school by car.

Responses not shown here reveal that about 20% went by school bus.

Between 1995 and 1997 the number going by car increased by about a third, which is one of the most rapid behaviour changes ever recorded in our data.

More than one method of transport may be recorded. An analysis of the 1997 figures for

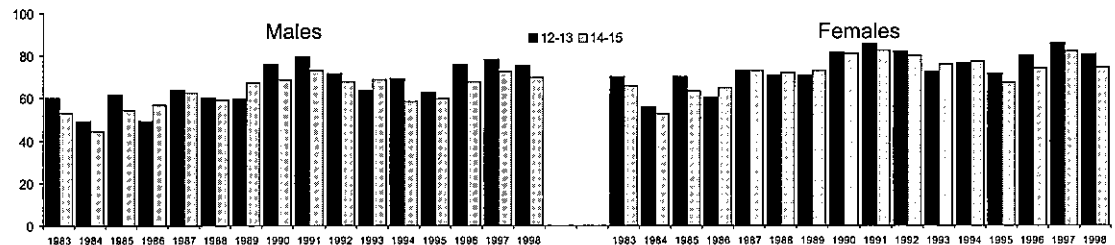
Year 10 respondents showed that 45% of males and 35% of females walked or cycled all the way to school, compared with 45% and 51% respectively that were transported all the way.

It is too early to tell whether the flattening off in 1998 represents a positive response to recent campaigns to reduce 'school runs'.

Collaborative research by SHEU in Devon (W. Prendergast: *Travelwise* survey, Devon County Council, 1999) suggests that more young people would like to cycle to school than are either (a) allowed to by their parents or (b) encouraged to do so by their schools.

The proportion doing evening homework has shown ups and downs.

The histogram shows the percentage that did some homework on the previous evening (Monday-Thursday).



We usually find that more females than males do homework, and they tend to spend longer at it.

The 1998 data are no exception, but the fact that fewer of the older pupils did any homework at all probably does not reflect their total homework commitment. Typically, the Year 10s have greater freedom to organise their homework, and spend longer on it, whereas the Year 8s are more likely to have a steady supply of smaller 'overnight' tasks.

The serial data show more male-female variations than is usual for the same question. For example, the responses for 1986, 1989 and 1993 show more Year 10s (male and female) reporting doing homework, instead of the other way round.

Beneath the fluctuations there may be a small overall increase in the percentage doing some homework.

The fluctuations in the serial data cannot be directly attributed to questionnaire version changes. The form of the question for the 1995 'low' was the same as for the 1997 'high', while the data producing the 1991 'high', which is similar to 1997, came from a completely different question format.

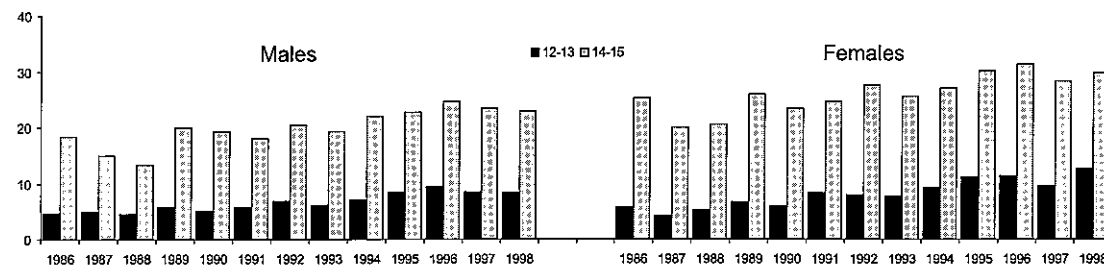
Inspection of the complete set of histograms in *Young People in 1998* almost always reveals greater consistency between year groups and genders than is found here. This seems to be saying that the amount of homework set and done is more 'sample-dependent' than most of the information collected by the HRBQ.

5. Drugs: Smoking



The percentage of smokers has fluctuated, but the trend has been upwards.

The histogram shows the percentage that had smoked at least one cigarette during the previous week.



In 1988 we published survey findings that suggested smoking levels were falling. Ours were not the only ones. It turns out that this date marked the beginning of an upward trend that still shows no certain sign of having reached its peak, although 1996 may have seen a local maximum. The proportional increase since 1986 is greater for Year 8 than for Year 10.

A consistent finding has been that more females than males of the same age smoke, and that the percentage of smokers increases greatly between Years 8 and 10. The Year 10 females include the greatest number of smokers, as well as the heaviest smokers.

Assuming that smokers like to go out with

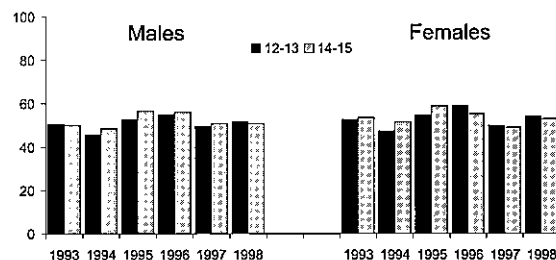
other smokers, and that females tend to go out with males older than themselves, it is possible that the percentage of smoking males in the top of the secondary age range is similar to the percentage of Year 10 females.

Smoking levels of less than 20 a week are hardly addictive in adults; what is known about young people's addiction levels?

Smoking levels have increased rather than decreased since the publication of the *Health of the Nation* targets in 1992. This does not mean that 'anti-smoking' campaigns have achieved nothing, since the levels might have grown even higher without them, but we suspect that fashion, rather than addiction, is the prime reason.

Half have at least one smoker around the home.

The histogram shows the percentage living in a home where at least one person smokes.



The 1998 results show that slightly more than half the homes represented have a smoker either living there or often visiting.

Since 1993 the levels have undulated, but show an average of about 50%. The high 1996 values are in accord with our other results, showing this as a 'high' smoking year.

Information about smokers in the home is relevant to young people on two counts: passive smoking, and an atmosphere of approval of the habit. However, having smokers in the home does not necessarily mean that the house is smoky. They could be banned from communal rooms, or even be sent outside.

Our figures show that a home is more likely

to have two or more smokers than just one, which supports the idea that smokers and non-smokers form their own groups. As a result, children in 'smoking' homes will tend to experience approval, rather than just toleration, of smoking, and grow up thinking that it is normal behaviour.

The question asks the respondents to include themselves and regular visitors if they smoke at home.

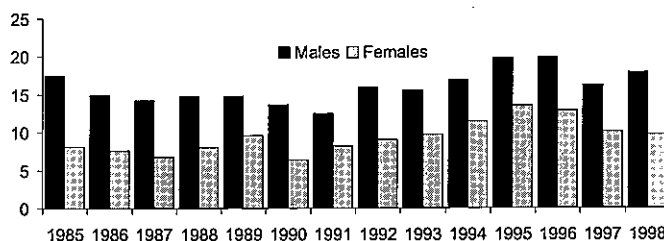
Another question asks about smoking by family and friends. Fewer than a third have no close family member or friend that smokes; about half the Year 10 respondents have a close friend that smokes.

5. Drugs: Alcohol

Young People in 1998

The percentage of 'drinkers' has shown an overall decrease.

The histogram shows the percentage of Year 10 pupils that had drunk 10 or more units of alcohol during the past week.



The proportion of Year 10 pupils drinking 10 units or more of alcohol reached a peak in 1995-96, after a low point in 1991.

The number of units of alcohol recorded is based on 'standard' strengths and reported measures. These are likely to be underestimates for the following reasons.

Many beers and ciders exceed the nominal 'one unit per half-pint' strength.

Similarly, we note that many wines and

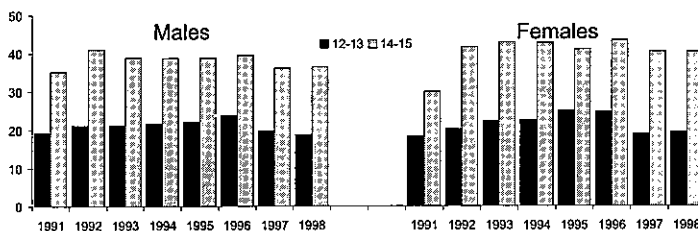
'alcopops' (e.g. Hooch) are considerably stronger than the estimate of one unit per glass that we record for their consumption.

The fact that young people's 'measures' of wines and spirits may in some cases be generous is another reason why the derived number of units may be on the low side.

Our data suggest that fewer young people are now drinking alcohol, but the drinkers are tending to drink more.

Almost half the Year 10 'drinkers' may drink at home without their parents knowing about it.

The histogram shows the percentage whose parents do not always know if they are drinking at home.



The 1998 results show that 60% of the Year 8s and almost 80% of the Year 10s sometimes drink at home. Of these, about a third of the Year 8s and half the Year 10s do so with their parents *not always* knowing about it.

The proportion whose parents *do not always know* has varied somewhat since 1991, but no trend is suggested.

The question was added because of interest in the amount of alcohol being drunk during the previous week at home — always the most popular venue. The answer is that there is quite a lot of clandestine drinking going on.

The young people who say they do not drink

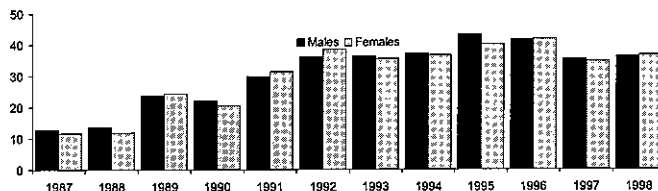
at home may contain a substantial proportion who do not drink at all. These figures (40% of the Year 8s and a little over 20% of the Year 10s) place an upper limit on the proportion of 'never drinkers', as we have no information on drinking attitudes and experience to match the detailed data we have collected with respect to smoking and illegal drugs.

The 1998 Year 10 data show that about 20% drank at a *friend's or relation's home or outside in a public place*, 14% at a *disco, club or party*, and 11% in a *pub or bar*. The percentage drinking *outside in a public place* has declined since the question was introduced in 1995.

5. Drugs: Illegal drugs



About a third of the Year 10s had been offered at least one drug.



The histogram shows the percentage of Year 10 pupils that had been offered at least one drug.

In 1998 about 10% of the Year 8 pupils had been offered or encouraged to try a drug, the proportion increasing to more than a third in Year 10. There was little difference between the levels of offers to males and females.

An analysis of the answers to this question shows that *cannabis leaf* was the most likely drug to have been offered.

The serial data suggest that the level of offers

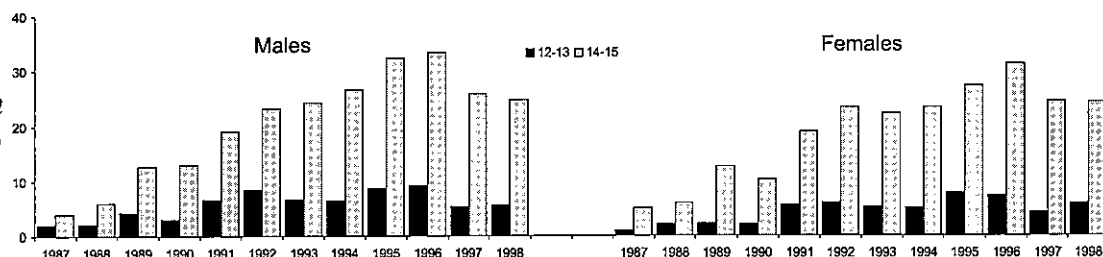
reached a peak in 1995-96, following a sharp rise from the late 80s.

Please note that the 1990 question did not include 'encouraged to try'.

The level of offers needs to be matched against the levels of use shown below.

With so much offering of drugs going on, it is natural for 'drugs education' to explore ways of refusing offers.

About a quarter of the Year 10s had tried one — though the percentage may be falling.



The histogram shows the percentage of Year 10 pupils that had tried at least one drug.

The 1998 results showed that about 1 in 4 pupils in Year 10 — four times as many as in Year 8 — had tried at least one drug.

Cannabis is by far the most likely drug to have been tried.

The general upward trend since 1987 reached a peak in 1995-96.

The lower 1997 and 1998 figures could represent the start of a decline, or a temporary recession on the way to higher levels.

We have referred to the 'Czar Effect' (*Education and Health*, Vol. 16 No. 5), where the government's appointment of a 'drugs Czar' coincided with lower reported levels of use.

A simple 'offer/acceptance' mode suggests

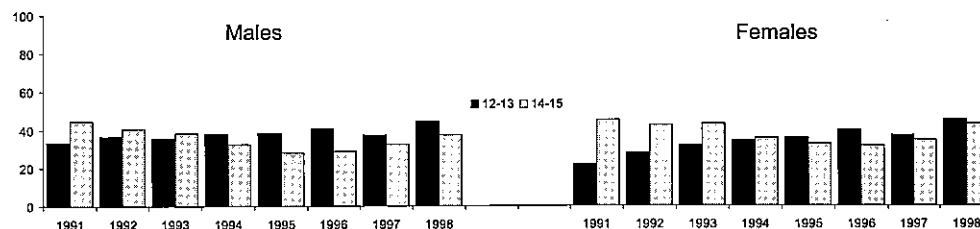
that in 1998 half the Year 8s and a third of the Year 10s had refused all offers. However, some of the drug users might have gone looking for drugs, instead of waiting to have them offered.

The lower histogram represents eight years of monitoring attitudes to cannabis leaf (among many other drugs). No overall 'trend' is evident, but the details are interesting.

The Year 10 trend suggests a minimum sense of risk in the mid-Nineties.

But the most intriguing feature is the rise in the Year 8 pupils' assessment of risk, compared with that of their Year 10 counterparts. For most of the drugs in the list, more Year 10 respondents note them as *always unsafe*.

The histogram shows the percentage of Year 10 pupils that think cannabis leaf is *always unsafe*.

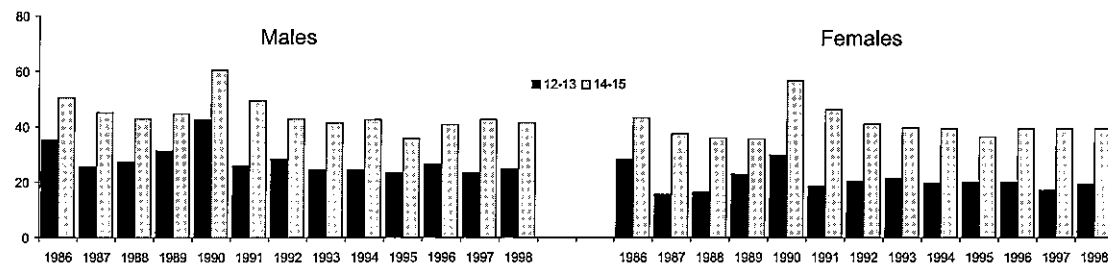


6. Money



The percentage of 'workers' has remained steady for many years.

The histogram shows the percentage that had a regular paid job.



In 1998 more males, and more of the older group, had a job. This has been the pattern over the history of the question.

Since 1986, with the exception of the 1986 and 1990 results, the recorded percentage of young people with a paid job has remained fairly stable, and there is no evidence in this 13-year tracking of any increase in the percentage of young people with regular paid work. Neither have we found evidence that they are working longer hours.

The inconsistent 1990 figures correspond to a change in the form of the question, which often has an effect on the data even though the

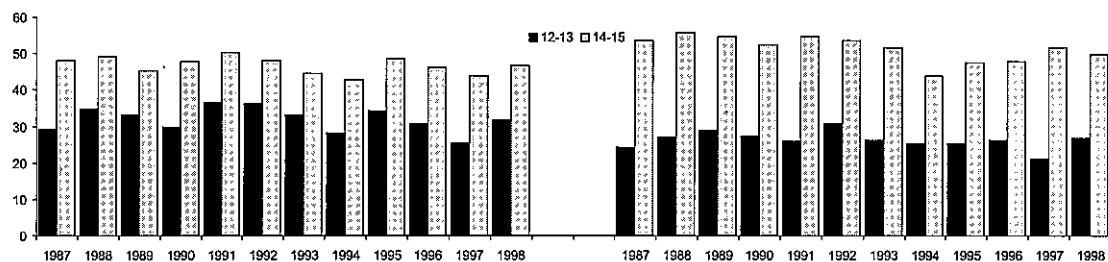
exact reason may be difficult to establish. A sampling effect, the other possibility, is not suspected.

What is the reason for not quite so many females as males having a job? Have they less need of the extra money, less general motivation, fewer job opportunities, or more concern about possible conflict with school work?

Asked what job they do, *paper or milk rounds* occupy almost half the male 'workers'. *Babysitting* is the 'top job' for the females, with *paid housework* and *paper or milk rounds* second. Working in a *shop*, or *waitressing*, is increasingly common for the Year 10 females.

The number of hours they work has not changed much either.

The histogram shows the percentage of the workers that had worked for more than 5 hours.



It is clear from the histogram that the Year 10 workers tend to work longer hours than those in Year 8.

It is interesting that in Year 8 slightly more males than females are working the longer hours, while this is reversed for the Year 10 workers.

Since 1987 there have been peaks and troughs in the record of those working more than 5 hours a week, but no clear overall trend is seen.

The 1998 data show that the median (most common) length of time for the Year 8s was 2 hours, while for the Year 10s it was 6-7 hours (males) and 8-10 hours (females).

About 7% of the Year 8 workers worked for 11-20 hours, and about 13% of the Year 10 workers came into this category. Almost 3% of the Year 10 male workers worked for 21 hours or more.

We calculated the average rates of pay per hour as follows:

Year group	8	10
Males	£3.24	£3.51
Females	£2.96	£3.04

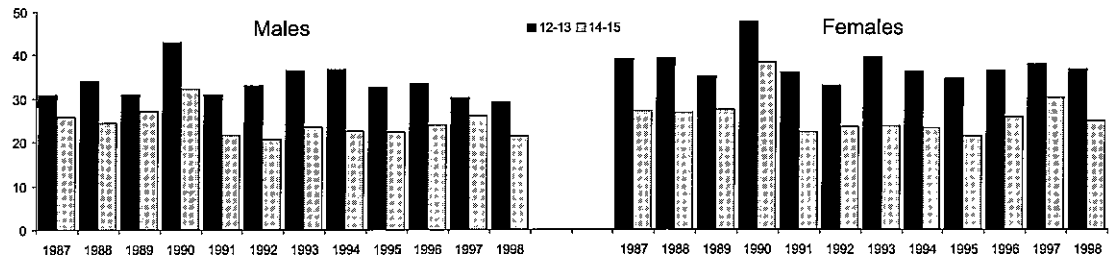
In addition to the side-effects of long working hours, young people's employment raises health & safety and low-pay issues.

7. Exercise & sport



Involvement in most physical activities decreases with age.

The histogram shows the percentage that went swimming at least weekly.



Swimming is one of the most popular sports in the list, and appeals to both males and females.

In general, since 1987, between 30% and 40% of the Year 8s, and between 20% and 30% of the Year 10s, have been swimming on a weekly basis.

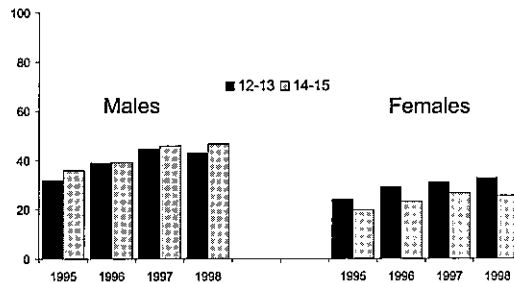
The serial data reveal no overall decrease in

swimming levels during the past 12 years, but the decreased involvement with increased age is very clear.

Soccer (including the 5-a-side variety), cycling, jogging and basketball also exceed an average of 20% for the males, and netball and cycling exceed an average of 20% for the females.

Although activity levels may be rising, only a small proportion are exercising for even the minimum recommended time.

The histogram shows the percentage that had exercised at least three times during the previous week.



In 1998 about 80% of all groups had exercised to this level at least once, but there were more males than females among the frequent exercisers.

Since its inclusion in 1995, this question has accumulated only four years' worth of data. However, even over this short period the results suggest an increase in the number exercising at least three times a week.

Half an hour per day of moderate exercise, such as walking, or three 20-minute spells per week of vigorous exercise, have been suggested as minimum activity levels. Commitment to a

programme of regular exercise may appear daunting, but a decision to put some 'negotiable' time to better use — such as by walking to or from school — could be the answer.

Cycling is excellent exercise, and we discovered from a recent SHEU-based survey that almost 20% of the Year 9 males would like to cycle to school, but for various reasons were not able to.

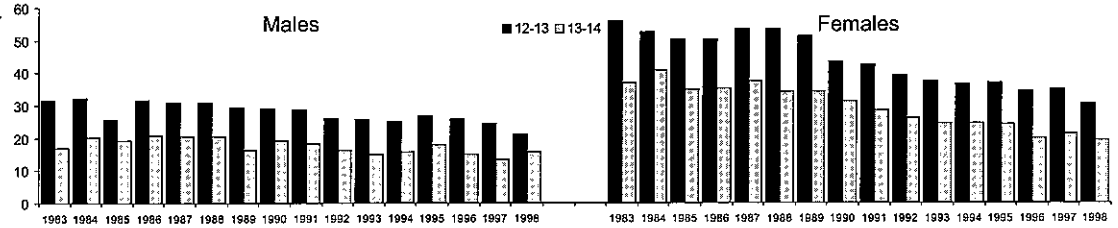
The serial data suggest that fewer than half the males, and only a quarter of the females, are exercising vigorously at the minimum recommended level.

8. Social & personal



Parents are playing a smaller part in young people's 'sex education'.

The histogram shows the percentage that said parents were their main source of information about sex.



To set the results for parents in context, the 1998 results showed that the most important sources of information were:

- Year 8 males: *School lessons*
- Year 8 females: *Parents*
- Year 10 males & females: *Friends*

The serial data present a decline in the vote for parents, and further analysis in the book reveals that *teachers* or *school lessons* are now perceived as being more important than they

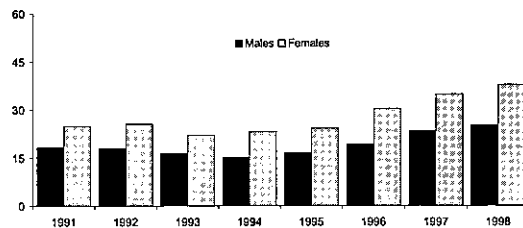
once were.

This does not necessarily mean that parents are doing a 'worse job', since the jobs of parents and teachers may be different. Perhaps the changing levels reflect changing views of what 'sex education' means.

We also ask the young people whom they would like to be their main source of information about sex, and parents usually come top of the list.

Increasing numbers of Year 10 pupils worry about school, possibly fewer about the way they look.

The left-hand histogram shows the percentage that worry quite a lot or a lot about school. The left-hand histogram shows the percentage that worry quite a lot or a lot about the way they look.



Within an extensive checklist of 'worry' areas, the *school* acquires increasing importance for the older pupils.

The way you look is always the most common worry, but among the Year 10s, in 1998, school was second for the males and third for the females (whose second was *family*).

It is, perhaps, not surprising that more Year 10s than Year 8s tend to worry about school, but the difference in levels has become very marked recently. In the last three years the percentage of Year 10 female 'worriers' has increased by almost a half, but the Year 8s have remained unchanged. The male Year 10s have also drawn away, though not to the same extent.

What causes the worry? It seems unlikely to be bullying, since the younger pupils usually register greater concern about this. Since the females appear to be more conscientious about their homework, it could be the amount of

school work that is making so many of them anxious. Is there more than there used to be?

The right-hand histogram shows that throughout the Nineties more than 50% of the Year 10 females have worried about the way they look. However, the males are by no means indifferent, with more than a quarter of them also concerned about their personal appearance.

The worries in the checklist range from personal ones, such as school and health, to others that may only touch them indirectly, such as unemployment or gambling. This is suggested by the fact that some non-smoking youngsters in non-smoking households can worry about smoking.

The following percentages worry *quite a lot* or *a lot* about at least one of these problems:

	Males	Females
Year 8	56.3%	70.2%
Year 10	68.3%	83.5%