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## Vicki Lader

# Surveying the Sexual Behaviour of Teenagers in Brighton and Hove

In February 2007, the majority of Year 10 students from Brighton and Hove completed the Health Related Behaviour Survey from the Schools Health Education Unit. Students from all nine secondary schools and the pupil referral unit took part. The survey was managed by the Healthy Schools team, alongside PCT colleagues and those from other agencies. This is the fourth time that the city council have used the survey with the last results gathered in 2004.

### First sexual experience

Nationally, the Natsal survey<sup>1</sup> gives a retrospective view of age of first sexual experience. The percentage of males who experienced sexual intercourse under 16 was 30%, and females 26%. Other findings, from a survey of 14-15 year olds in Rochdale<sup>2</sup>, explored the links between alcohol use and risks with sexual health. 32% in Rochdale said they were sexually active.

In Brighton and Hove, the decision was made to gather similar information to provide a local picture. Findings would then be reported back to young people as both they and adults often overestimate the numbers of under 16s who are sexually active.

### Influence of Peers

Research has consistently shown peers to be one of the strongest influences on behaviour, especially on youth. Perkins<sup>3</sup> tells us that research documents a consistent and dramatic pattern of misperceptions about peer norms. The tendency may be to

consider high risk and harmful behaviour; substance misuse, violence, bullying and sexual risk-taking, as the norm. However, these behaviours and attitudes belong to a minority of young people and do not represent what is typical of the majority of young people within a school.

By collecting local data, a true picture of young people's attitudes about sexual behaviour can be obtained and reported back to the peer group.

### Questionnaire

Since the survey is administered in schools, the questions needed to be sensitively worded so as not to cause concern amongst teachers, students or parents. For example one sexual relationship question was devised as follows:-

Nationally we know that 28% of under 16s have had sex, which means that 72% have not.

Which of the following best describes you?

0 = I have never had a sexual relationship

1 = I am in a relationship and thinking about having sex

2 = I have had a sexual relationship in the past

3 = I am currently in a sexual relationship

Local PSHE co-ordinators were consulted on the wording for the sexual relationship question. Feedback was mainly positive with some concern over the phrase "sexual relationship" but, as this was a pilot, the

question went into the survey as it stood.

## Results

The response to the sexual relationship question was made by 92% - 1683 out of a possible 1834 Year 10 students in Brighton. The 8% of students not supplying an answer was consistent with the majority of non-respondents for the rest of the survey.

Table 1 shows the responses from across Brighton:-

Table 1.	Male	Female	All
Not had a sexual relationship	71%	68%	70%
Currently in a relationship and thinking about having sex	7%	7%	7%
Has a sexual relationship in the past	14%	15%	14%
Currently in a sexual relationship	8%	10%	10%

Table 2 shows the responses from three surveys:-

Table 2. Under 16 year olds who experienced sexual intercourse

	Male	Female	All
Brighton	22%	25%	24%
Natsal	30%	26%	28%
Rochdale			32%

## Conclusion

Table 1 shows that, 77% of Year 10 students say they have not had a sexual relationship - 70% who have not had a sexual relationship plus 7% currently in a relationship and thinking about having sex.

Table 2 shows that 24% of those in Brighton had a sexual relationship (14% had a past sexual relationship plus 10% currently in a sexual relationship). This compares to 28% Natsal survey and 32% Rochdale survey.

Table 2 also shows that young females in Brighton (25%) are more likely than males

(22%) to have had a sexual relationship compared to figures from Natsal - females (26%) and males (30%).

## Use of the Data

The results will be used in a variety of ways:-

~ To report the normative data back to peer groups to enable them to know the true social norm. This will be carried out in a variety of ways both informally, i.e. students making notice board displays in schools and formally through the sexual health media campaign of the city public health department.

~ To inform teaching and learning in Sex and Relationships education (SRE). The data give perspective on the behaviour of young people and consequently the messages that young people need to receive through their SRE. It is important that teachers do not assume that all young people are sexually active and teaching about delay and readiness for sex are a vital part of the SRE curriculum.

~ To inform local service provision for young people. A range of sexual health and youth advice services for under 25s have been developed over the past four years across the city. Having an understanding of young people's sexual behaviour can help to inform whether these services are best placed to meet the needs of young people.

## References

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