Briefing Paper 22

Sexual health of 15-year olds in Scotland 3: Protection at last intercourse

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Sexual health is defined as a state of physical, emotional and social well-being regarding an individual's sexual behaviour. Adolescence is a key period in the development of personal relationships and sexual behaviour and one aspect of positive sexual health includes safe sex with contraception and adequate protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This 22nd HBSC Briefing Paper (BP) examines protection at last sexual intercourse among 15-year olds** who have ever had sex, using data from the HBSC Surveys in Scotland in 2010 and 2014. It follows BP20 and BP21, which present findings on other aspects of sexual health using the same survey data. These examine social and individual factors associated with sexual behaviour and circumstances of first sex respectively.

Summary of key findings

- Of all contraceptive methods used at last sexual intercourse, condoms are the most frequently reported by boys and girls in both 2010 and 2014.
- From 2010 to 2014 there has been a decrease in proportion of boys and girls reporting using condoms at last sexual intercourse.
- Whilst the numbers reporting the use of withdrawal as a contraceptive method are small, there is some indication that the use of this method increased between 2010 and 2014.
- Reported pill use at last sexual intercourse also increased between 2010 and 2014 among boys and girls.

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**Prevalences for 2014 may vary slightly from other reporting due to different categorisation of variables.
Condoms are the most commonly-reported method of protection at last intercourse among 15-year-old boys, but rates declined over the past four years from 75% in 2010 to 59% in 2014. Boys reporting that their partner used the contraceptive pill at last sexual intercourse increased from 13% in 2010 to 24% in 2014.

Condoms are also the most frequently reported method by girls. Similar to boys, reported condom use at last sexual intercourse decreased from 70% in 2010 to 58% in 2014. The reported use of birth control pills increased among girls between 2010 and 2014, from 22% to 32%, respectively.

The number reporting the use of contraceptive implants at last intercourse is small. However, there is some evidence to suggest a slight increase between 2010 and 2014, particularly according to boys’ reports (2% in 2010 to 5% in 2014).

Similarly, reports of withdrawal as a contraceptive method are relatively rare, and the use of this method also appears to have increased from 2010, especially among girls with 14% reporting using this method at last intercourse in 2014, compared to 8% in 2010.

Background

Unprotected or poorly-protected sexual intercourse bears an increased risk of STIs as well as of unintended pregnancy. In an international comparison of European countries, the most common contraceptive method among adolescents is condom use, which is considered appropriate to prevent pregnancy as well as protect against STIs. However, rates of condom and contraceptive pill use were relatively low in Scotland compared to other countries in 2010.
Condom use remains the most common method of protection at last sex among young people in Scotland, although there has been a decrease in use by boys and girls. Significant increases in reported use of the pill by girls was seen since 2010. This may indicate easier access to, or acceptability of, sexual health services. The gender difference in contraceptive pill use may be explained by boys not knowing whether their partner uses this contraceptive method.

There are indications that the use of withdrawal has increased among both boys and girls between 2010 and 2014 although due to small numbers the finding should be treated with caution. Other research has reported that some young people may learn about sexual behaviour from pornographic material. However it is not possible to test whether this could explain the observed increase in reporting of withdrawal as HBSC does not currently collect data on use of pornography.
BP 20 shows that there has been a decrease in the percentage of 15-year old girls who report having had sex between 2010 and 2014, however a greater proportion of those who are sexually active are from more socioeconomically-deprived backgrounds. Furthermore, higher levels of non-protection from STIs are reported in this briefing paper. These results suggest that continued efforts are required to enable young people to protect themselves effectively against both STIs and unintended pregnancies.

Note on authors

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References

Available at http://www.cahru.org/publications/briefing-papers-and-factsheets/14-scottish-questionnaire