

HBSC Briefing Series: 5

# Bullying, Fighting and Injury

Angela Clements and Launa Harris

Research and Evaluation Branch  
Health Promotion Division  
Office of the Chief Medical Officer

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi

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## Introduction

The impact of bullying, fighting and injury on young people's emotional and physical health and well-being should not be underestimated. The detrimental and long-term effects that such events can have on future health highlight the need to monitor young peoples' health behaviours.

The *Young People's Health in Context* report presents the international findings from the 2001/02 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey.<sup>1</sup> The HBSC is a cross-national research study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for Europe.

This short report is the fifth in a series of HBSC briefings aimed at highlighting aspects of young people's health targeted in the Welsh Assembly Government's key policies and programmes on adolescent health. Based on chapters in *Young People's Health in Context*, the report compares Wales with selected HBSC countries with a focus on bullying, fighting and injury. Data are presented for the three UK countries participating in the study and contrasted with those countries reporting the highest/lowest rates of behaviours.

## Background

In health terms, childhood and adolescence are particularly important times of life. Certain behaviours, such as substance use, are initiated during the adolescent years, while some patterns of behaviour, such as eating habits and physical activity, can become established in earlier childhood.<sup>2</sup> Given this, research into young people's health and health behaviour – and the factors that influence them – is essential for the development of evidence-based policy and practice in Wales.

The HBSC study collects cross-national data every four years to help measure and track aspects of adolescent health and health-related behaviours and their developmental and social contexts.<sup>3</sup> The study was first undertaken in 1983/84 and Wales first participated in 1986. Interim surveys are also conducted in Wales every two years.

The cross-national and national data provide a unique opportunity to further develop the evidence base for policy and practice. They contribute to particular areas of adolescent health highlighted in, for example, the *Children and Young People's Action Plan*<sup>4</sup>, *Healthy and Active Lifestyles in Wales: An Action Plan*,<sup>5</sup> *The Road Safety Strategy for Wales*<sup>6</sup> and *Respecting Others*.<sup>7</sup> The findings will also contribute to the wider strategic aims of the Welsh Assembly Government outlined in the 'better health' dimension of *Wales: A Better Country*<sup>8</sup> and to the health improvement recommendations of *The Review of Health and Social Care in Wales* (the Wanless report).<sup>9</sup>

## Methods

In 2001/02, 35 countries drew national samples of 11-, 13-, and 15-year-olds in accordance with the study protocol.<sup>3</sup> In the main, fieldwork took place between autumn 2001 and spring 2002. More than 160,000 young people took part and approximately 1,500 respondents in each age group were targeted in every country; pupils were sampled from schools and/or school classes. Pupils who were absent on the day of the survey were not followed up.

Data were collected by self-administered questionnaire. On completion of fieldwork, national data files were prepared using standard documentation and submitted to the HBSC International Data Bank at the University of Bergen, Norway. Data files were checked, cleaned and returned to countries for approval before being put in the international file. Further details of the methods used can be found in *Young People's Health in Context*.<sup>1</sup>

## The Welsh context

The main aim of this briefing is to present information on levels of bullying, fighting and injury in Wales compared to young people within the UK overall. Data from selected HBSC countries allow international comparisons.

A previous HBSC report on trends in Wales 1986 - 2000<sup>10</sup> showed that experience of being bullied declines steeply with age amongst both boys and girls such that among boys 38 per cent of 11-12 year-olds and 15 per cent of 15-16 year-olds reported being bullied at least once in the previous term. A different picture emerges for bullying other pupils with boys more likely than girls to report that they have bullied others. The highest proportions for boys and girls reporting having bullied others is by 13-14 year-olds.

## Bullying and fighting

Bullying has become a key issue for public policy in recent decades following widespread public and professional concern about the negative consequences for students' educational attainment and emotional well-being.<sup>11</sup> Aggression in schools is a problem in many countries across the world. Bullying, victimisation and fighting depict different types of involvement in violence during adolescence.<sup>12</sup> Fighting is an aggressive behaviour but unlike bullying, usually involves people of a similar age and strength.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the immediate effects of bullying, victimisation and fighting, there are long-term negative consequences for all involved; the bullies, victims, fighters and those who observe the interaction. The costs of involvement in bullying to individuals, families, schools and society are high.

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to tackling bullying and in 2003 published a circular, *Respecting Others*<sup>7</sup> providing guidance and direct practical solutions to both prevention and dealing with incidents of bullying in schools. This document represents the first element of the revision of the National Assembly for Wales' guidance on pupil support and social inclusion, currently contained in Circular 3/99<sup>13</sup> that provides general guidance covering aspects such as attendance and behaviour.

Understanding such behaviours is a critical policy issue. The prevalence and seriousness of bullying and victimisation have led researchers to examine the risk and protective factors associated with the initiation, maintenance and termination of these behaviours. The knowledge gained can be used to provide direction for social policy and design effective interventions for addressing the problem.

Within the HBSC survey, a definition of bullying precedes the questions.

*We say a student is being bullied when another student, or group of students, says or does nasty and unpleasant things to him or her. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a way he or she doesn't like, or when (he or she is) deliberately left out of things. But it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength quarrel or fight. It is also not bullying when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way.*

This definition helps to reduce as far as possible the challenge of translation, particularly into languages where there is no specific word to describe bullying. Two questions follow the definition, asking about being bullied and bullying others:

*How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?*

*How often have you taken part in bullying another student(s) at school in the past couple of months?*

Response categories for both questions were the same: *I haven't been bullied (or bullied another student(s)) at school in the past couple of months; It has only happened once or twice; 2 or 3 times a month; About once a week; Several times a week.*

A single question was used to assess fighting behaviour.

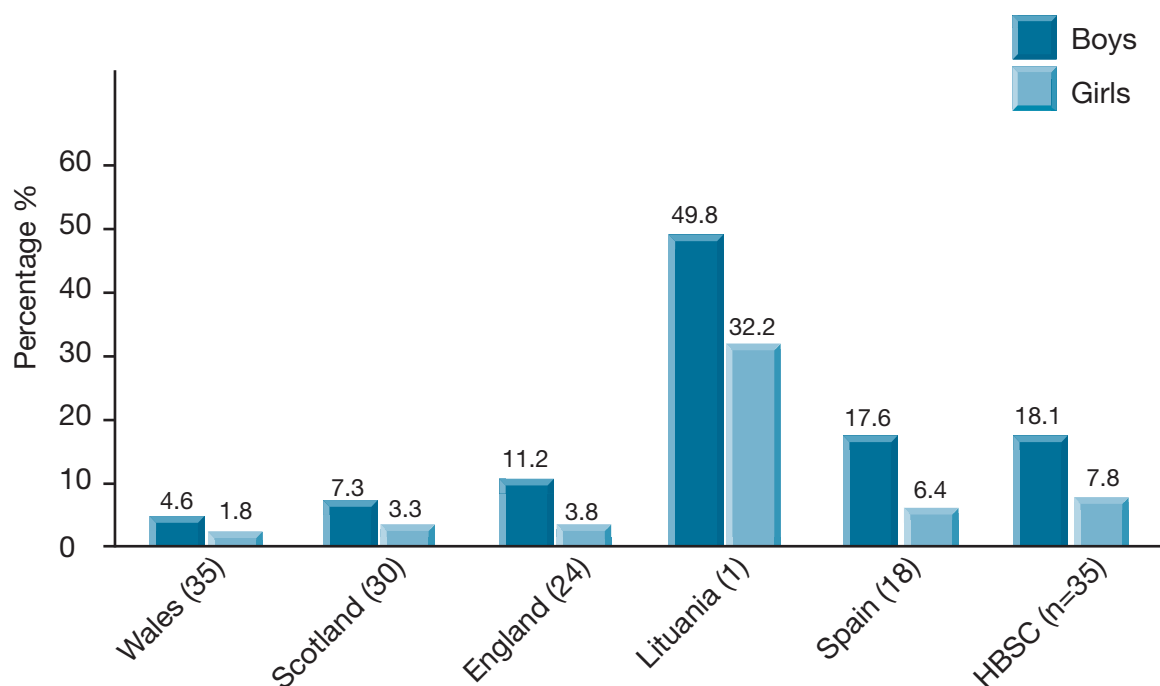
*During the past 12 months, how many times were you in a physical fight?*

Response categories: *I have not been in a physical fight; 1 time; 2 times; 3 times; 4 times or more.*

There is a wide variation in the percentages of young people reporting bullying, victimisation and physical fighting. The differences in the prevalence of these behaviours are striking and these behaviours may be more culturally sanctioned in some countries than others. Additionally, evidence indicates that bullying is hard to define in some languages so translation may be difficult. Thus, country variations should be interpreted with caution.

## Bullying others at school

The question on bullying others provides two main indicators, the number of young people reporting having bullied others at school at least once a month in the previous couple of months, and the number of young people reporting having bullied others at school at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months.



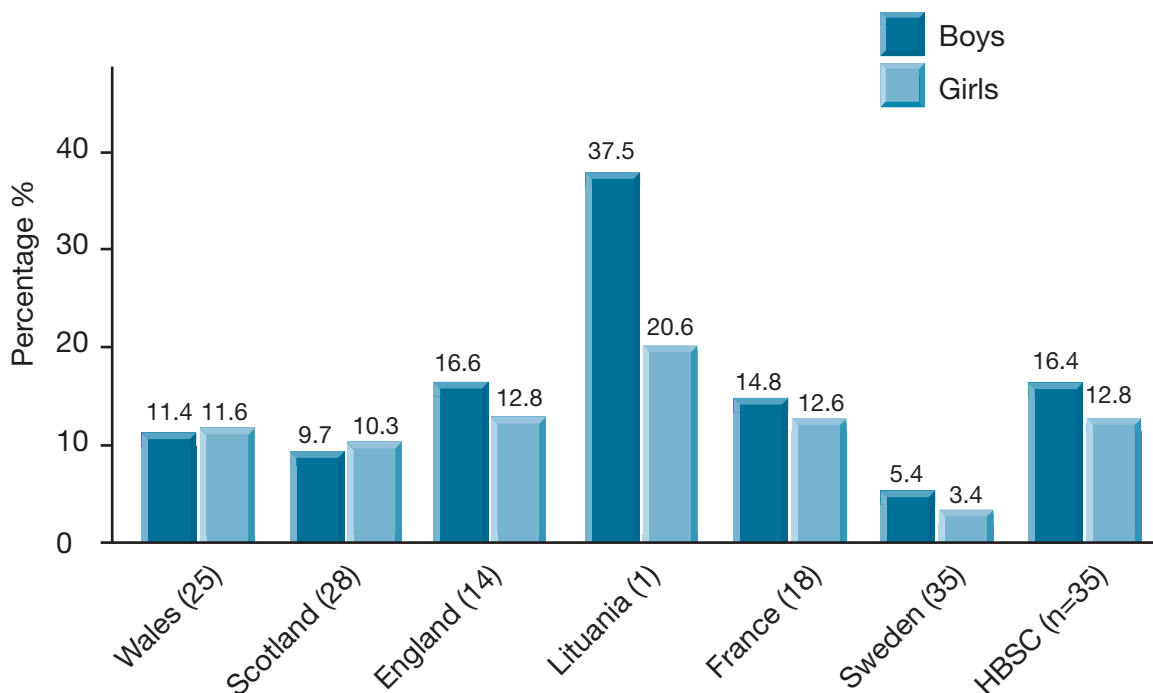
**Figure 1: Percentage of 15-year-olds who bullied others at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months**

Figure 1 shows the proportion of 15-year-olds that report having bullied others at school at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months. Wales is ranked lowest of all countries (i.e. 35th overall), with the proportions of boys and girls being slightly lower than those in England and Scotland. Highest levels of bullying others are found in Lithuania. A similar picture emerges for younger pupils. The highest rates in Wales of regularly bullying others are found among 13-year-olds (7 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls) compared with 11-year-olds (4 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively) and 15-year-olds (5 per cent and 2 per cent, respectively). Boys are more likely than girls to report bullying others across all three age-groups. These findings are similar to those reported from earlier surveys in Wales.<sup>13</sup>

Similar findings emerge for those having bullied others at least once a month in the last couple of months, although the gender difference is more pronounced. The proportion of 11-year-olds in Wales reporting bullying others at this level is 23 per cent of boys and 13 per cent of girls. These figures rise to 31 per cent and 19 per cent of 13-year-olds, dropping slightly to 26 per cent and 16 per cent of 15-year-olds.

## Being bullied at school

The question on being bullied provides two main indicators, the number of young people reporting being bullied at school at least once a month in the previous couple of months, and the number of young people reporting being bullied at school at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months.



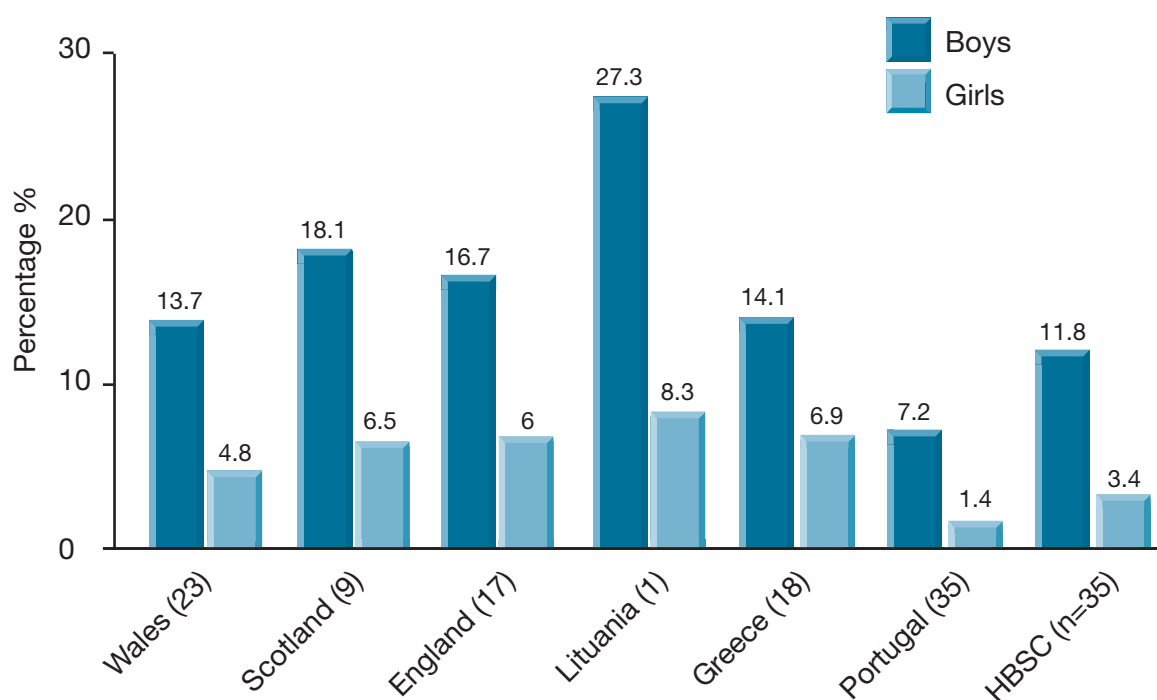
**Figure 2: Percentage of 11-year-olds who were bullied at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months**

Figure 2 presents information on the proportion of 11-year-olds that report being bullied at least two or three times a month in the previous couple of months. Being bullied at school two or three times or more during the previous couple of months is a measure of repeated victimisation, indicative of young people at higher risk. Wales is ranked 25th overall, with the proportion of boys and girls (11 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively) reporting to be regularly bullied being similar to Scotland and slightly lower than in England. Lithuania has the highest rates of being bullied; Sweden has the lowest. A similar picture emerges for those aged 13 and 15. Between the ages of 11 and 15, there is a decline in the proportion reporting to have been bullied two or three times or more during the previous couple of months, such that among 15-year-olds, 6 per cent of boys and girls report being bullied this often. As with bullying others, these findings are similar to those from earlier surveys in Wales.<sup>13</sup>

A similar pattern can be seen for those having been bullied at least once a month in the past couple of months in Wales, with similar proportions for both sexes and a decline with age. Among 11-year-olds, the proportion reporting to have been bullied this often is 37 per cent for boys and 36 per cent for girls. For 15-year-olds, the figures decline to 17 per cent of boys and 22 per cent of girls.

## Fighting

The question on fighting provides two main indicators, the number of young people reporting being involved in physical fighting at least once in the previous 12 months (fighters) and the number of young people reporting being involved in physical fighting three or more times in the previous 12 months (frequent fighters).



**Figure 3: Percentage of 15-year-olds involved in physical fighting three or more times in the previous 12 months**

Figure 3 shows the proportion of 15-year-olds involved in physical fighting three or more times in the previous 12 months. For this measure of frequent fighting, Wales is ranked 23rd (14 per cent of boys and 5 per cent of girls) and has slightly lower rates than England and Scotland who are ranked 17th and 9th respectively. However, the differences are small, particularly for girls. Furthermore, it should be noted that the rates in general are low, with a HBSC average of 12 per cent for boys and 3 per cent for girls.

The figures for young people who were involved in physical fighting at least once in the previous 12 months are higher than for the frequent fighters as these also take into account those who have engaged in one or two fights. Among 15-year-olds in Wales, 49 per cent of boys and 25 per cent of girls report being fighters. These proportions are slightly lower than in England and Scotland, although differences are minimal, particularly for girls.

For both fighters and frequent fighters, there is a strong gender difference with boys being involved in fighting more frequently than girls for all countries. The overall prevalence of fighting and frequent fighting across HBSC countries declines slightly as age increases, and this pattern can be seen in Wales. The highest and lowest levels of both fighting and frequent fighting among 15-year-olds are found in Lithuania and Portugal, respectively.

Boys report more bullying and physical fighting than girls, but it may be that girls engage in covert indirect aggression, which is not measured by the questionnaire at present.<sup>12</sup>

## Injury

Research has shown that injuries have replaced infectious disease as the largest cause of death in children and adolescents in some countries.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, unintentional and intentional injuries account for more than 70 per cent of deaths in young people and the rate rises dramatically as children enter adolescence.<sup>15,16</sup> A key theme of *Health Challenge Wales*<sup>17</sup> is accidents and injuries, which are recognised to constitute a significant proportion of preventable ill health. This is supported by one of the *National Health Targets for Wales*,<sup>18</sup> that child (aged 0-14) pedestrian injuries from motor vehicle accidents should be reduced by 35 per cent and that the incidence, severity and mortality ratios of these injuries should be reduced by 2012.

*The Road Safety Strategy for Wales*<sup>6</sup> outlines various initiatives that are in place in order to improve child road safety, including *Safe Routes to School*, *School Travel Plans*, *Travel Plan Co-ordinators*, *the Road Safety Wales annual newsletter* and *children's traffic clubs*. The Welsh Assembly Government, through its *Health Challenge Wales Voluntary Sector Grant Scheme 2004-2007*, funds Child Safe Wales, a registered charity aiming to promote the safety of children in Wales by the prevention of childhood accidents.

Young people are most at risk from injury through sport and risk taking behaviour.<sup>19</sup> They are most likely to become injured in one of four environments: the home; the school; organised sports facilities and fields; streets or roads.<sup>19</sup> It is also thought that poverty places young people at higher risk of injury.<sup>20</sup>

The 2001/02 HBSC study used a single question to measure the occurrence of injuries, preceded by a definition of an injury.

Many young people get hurt or injured from activities such as playing sports or fighting with others at different places such as the street or in the home. Injuries can include being poisoned or burned. Injuries do not include illnesses such as measles or the flu. The following (question is) about injuries you may have had during the past 12 months.

During the past 12 months, how many times were you injured and (did you have) to be treated by a doctor or nurse?

Response Categories: I was not injured in the past 12 months; 1 time; 2 times; 3 times; 4 times or more.

This question provides two key indicators, the number of young people reporting being injured at least once during the previous 12 months and the number of young people reporting being injured at least twice during the previous 12 months. Cross-national comparisons should be interpreted with some caution, as seasonal differences in injury rates exist and the survey is not undertaken at the same time of year in all countries.<sup>21</sup> There are also likely to be differences in exposure to hazardous activities and access to medical care.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that there is insufficient space in the HBSC questionnaire at present to look at specific types of injury in more detail, such as intentional injuries (self-harm) or sports related injuries. Furthermore it may also not be appropriate to investigate intentional injuries (self-harm) in this way.

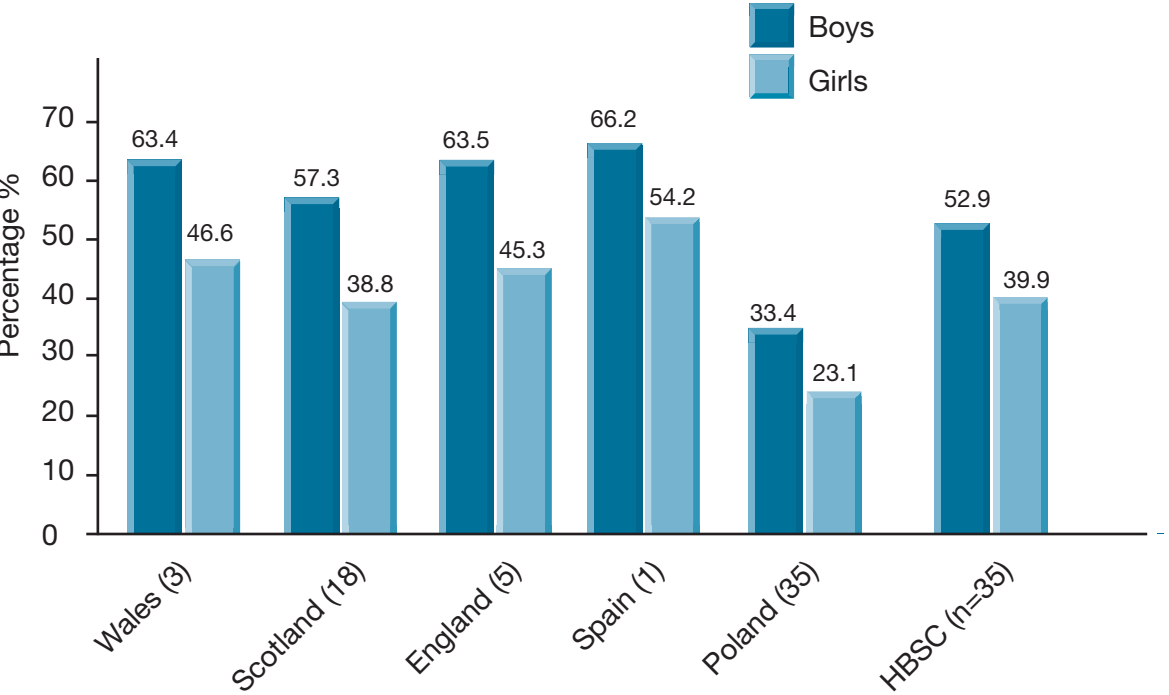


Figure 4: Percentage of 13-year-olds reporting being injured at least once in the previous 12 months

Figure 4 shows the proportion of 13-year-olds reporting being injured at least once in the previous 12 months. Wales is ranked 3rd overall, with the proportion of boys (63 per cent) and girls (47 per cent) being similar to England and slightly higher than in Scotland. The highest levels of injury among the 13-year-olds are found in Spain and the lowest in Poland. In all HBSC countries and for all three age-groups, boys are more likely than girls to report being injured at least once in the previous 12 months and there is a slight decline with age. Among 11-year-olds in Wales, 59 per cent of boys and 51 per cent of girls report at least one injury in the previous 12 months, the corresponding figures for 15-year-olds being 59 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively. The gender difference is greatest among older students.

The international pattern for those reporting being injured two or more times in the previous 12 months is similar to that for a single injury, with boys more likely to report being injured and little variation with age. In Wales, among 11-year-olds, 50 per cent of boys and 47 per cent of girls report being injured twice or more in the previous 12 months. The figures for older students are 56 per cent of boys and 47 per cent of girls (13-year-olds) and 53 per cent of boys and 43 per cent of girls (15-year-olds).

## The way forward

The international data from the HBSC study demonstrate that bullying, fighting and injury in young people are issues of concern in the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond. This short report has highlighted that there are a number of factors influencing young people's health in this area. These findings will contribute to collaborative initiatives, which address the focus on joint responsibility for health as set out in *Health Challenge Wales*.<sup>17</sup> Key findings for policy from this report, such as differences in rates of injury for boys and girls, may also suggest gender specific initiatives.

Concerns over the levels of bullying, fighting and injury among young people in Wales are being addressed through targeted policies and programmes. The health of children and young people is a priority for the Welsh Assembly Government as demonstrated through the appointment of the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the development of a *National Service Framework for Children*.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, children's health is one of the priority health areas in the *National Health Targets for Wales*.<sup>18</sup>

The HBSC surveys will continue to track and monitor health behaviour and inform the development of policies and initiatives for young people. In addition to these briefings on 2001/02 data,<sup>24-28</sup> a series of research reports based on data from the 2004 HBSC survey in Wales will follow.

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## Contact for information

HBSC@wales.gsi.gov.uk

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