

THE 'PaLS' STUDY

You are one of over 3,000 teenagers who took part in the 'PaLS' study last year. Its main aim is to examine how friendship groups affect levels of stress, health and well-being in teenagers.

54 pupils from 22 secondary schools and a very wide range of backgrounds in the West of Scotland took part in 'PaLS'. You all filled in a questionnaire telling us about your health and well-being, life at home and in school, and your friendships and membership of groups. We also asked you to chew on a cotton roll – this was to get two samples of your saliva. We used these to measure your cortisol levels. Cortisol is a hormone released when the body responds to everyday stresses. People who are more stressed usually have higher levels.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

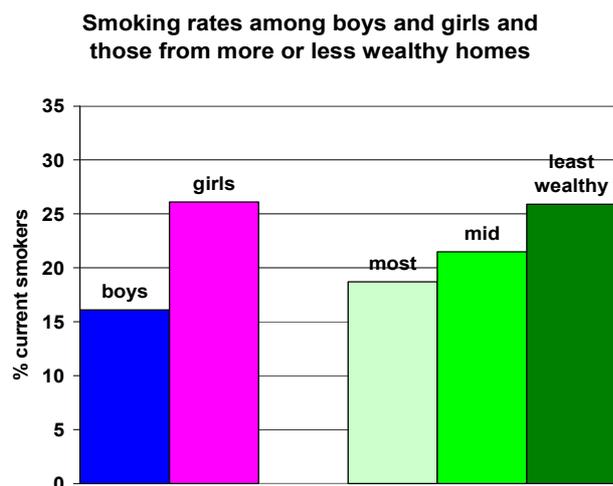
After we left your school, we removed your name and the names of all your friends and group members and replaced them with ID numbers. This means that everything you told us is completely anonymous. Your saliva samples were frozen and sent to a lab in Switzerland, where the levels of cortisol were measured.

SOME RESULTS

Cortisol hormone analysis is complicated and will take some time, but we thought you would like to see some of the first results from the questionnaires. The rest of this report tells you some of our findings about smoking, drinking, drugs, bullying, friendships ... and more.

Sometimes we highlight differences between boys and girls, or between those from more or less wealthy homes. We categorised you as wealthier if your family owned more cars and computers, and you had your own bedroom and took more family holidays.

Smoking



Around one-in-five of you were smokers.

Smoking was much more common in girls, who were also more likely to chain-smoke. Smoking was also more likely among those from less wealthy homes.

Drinking

Almost all of you had drunk alcohol, and a quarter drank at least once a week. There were no differences between boys and girls, or between those from more or less wealthy homes. Boys had drunk more in the week before our survey, but girls were more likely to say they had been really drunk in the past month.

Experience of drugs

A third of you had tried drugs (usually cannabis). There was no difference between boys and girls, but those from less wealthy homes were more likely to have tried drugs.

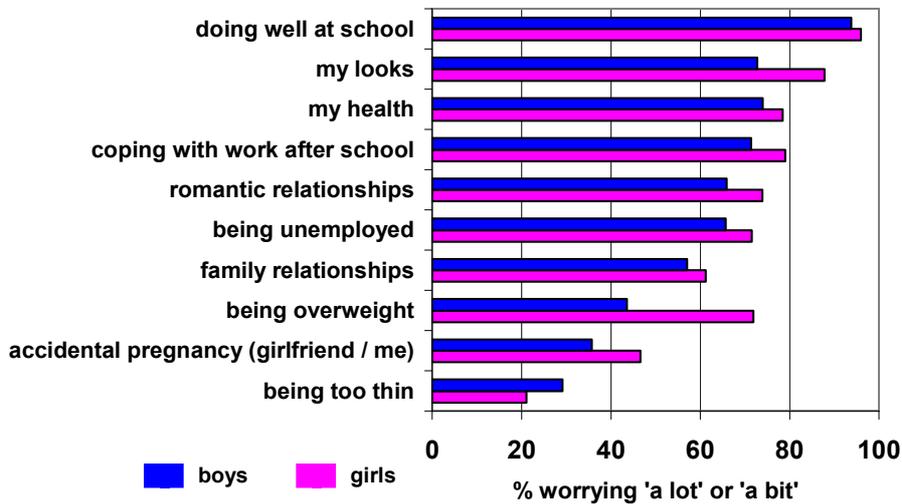
Mental health and self-esteem

Some of the questions were about your well-being and self-esteem. We found that girls were more likely to say they had psychological problems and to have lower self-esteem than boys.

Worries

Our questionnaire also included a list of ten common worries for teenagers. Almost all of you said you worried about doing well at school. A lot of you were also worried about your looks, health and coping with work after school. Being too thin wasn't a big concern for many of you.

Percentages worrying 'a lot' or 'a bit' about ...



Girls worried more than boys about everything apart from being too thin, and were much more likely to worry about being overweight.

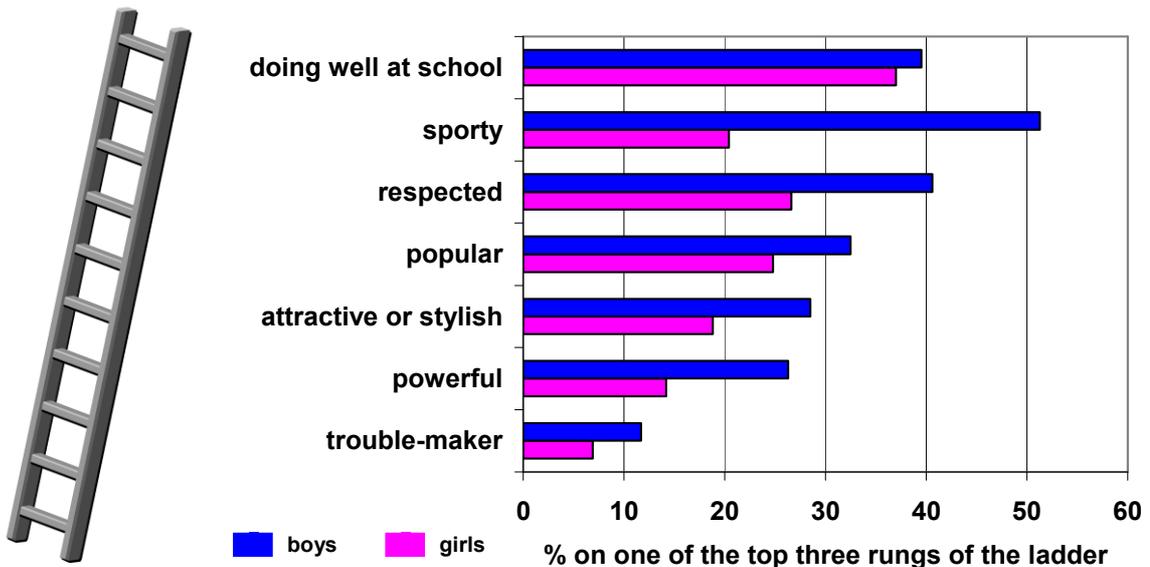
Although there were few differences between those from more or less wealthy homes, those from less wealthy homes were more concerned about unemployment. Those from wealthier homes said they worried more about their looks and romantic relationships.

How you saw yourselves

You told us how you thought you compared to other people in your year group by using the ladder pictures in the questionnaire. Each ladder was about something different – how well you were doing in school, how sporty you were, how respected you were etc.

Overall, most of you put yourselves nearer the top of each ladder, agreeing that you were doing well at school, sporty and respected. Most of you didn't see yourselves as trouble-makers.

Percentages putting themselves on one of the top three rungs of the ladder for ...



There were some differences between boys and girls, and between those from more or less wealthy homes. Boys put themselves much higher than girls on all the ladders except for 'doing well at school'. Those from wealthier homes also put themselves higher up each ladder apart from 'trouble-maker'.

Friends

You told us a bit about your friends. Those who saw themselves as more sporty, respected, popular, attractive or stylish and powerful tended to name more friends. Among boys, more friends were named by those who saw themselves as doing better at school. But among girls, those who saw themselves as trouble-makers named more friends.

Bullying

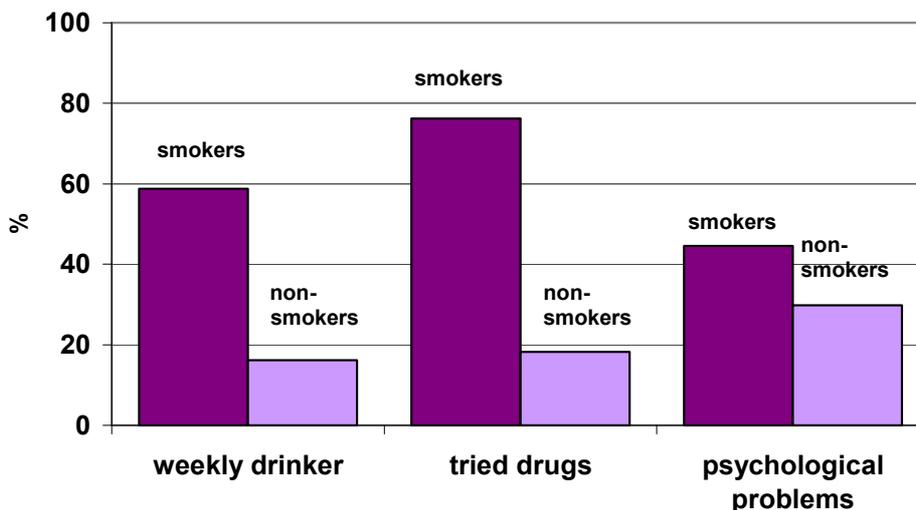
We also asked whether you'd been bullied. Just over one-in-ten of you said this happened weekly or more often, with name-calling, rumour-spreading and threats being most common. Getting bullied was equally likely among boys and girls, and those from more compared with less wealthy homes.

A small number agreed you were 'a bit of a bully'. This was more likely among boys (7%) than girls (4%). Those of you who got bullied were also more likely to describe yourselves as 'a bit of a bully' and to report psychological problems.

Smoking, drinking, drugs and psychological problems

Those of you who smoked also tended to drink and have tried drugs. Smokers, drinkers and those who had tried drugs were also more likely to report psychological problems.

Percentages of smokers and non-smokers who were weekly drinkers, had tried drugs and reported psychological problems



How did those who smoked, drank or had tried drugs see themselves?

Those of you who smoked tended to see yourselves as doing less well at school and as trouble-makers. Among the boys, smokers saw themselves as much less sporty and named fewer friends than non-smokers. Among the girls, there were no differences in the number of friends named by smokers compared with non-smokers. Girl smokers were more likely to see themselves as popular, attractive or stylish and respected.

Those of you who drank or had tried drugs tended to see yourselves as more popular, powerful, attractive or stylish, respected and 'a good laugh', but also as doing less well at school and as trouble-makers.

How did the way you saw yourselves link to worries?

If you saw yourself as doing well at school you were more likely to worry about exam results, but were less worried about unemployment after school.

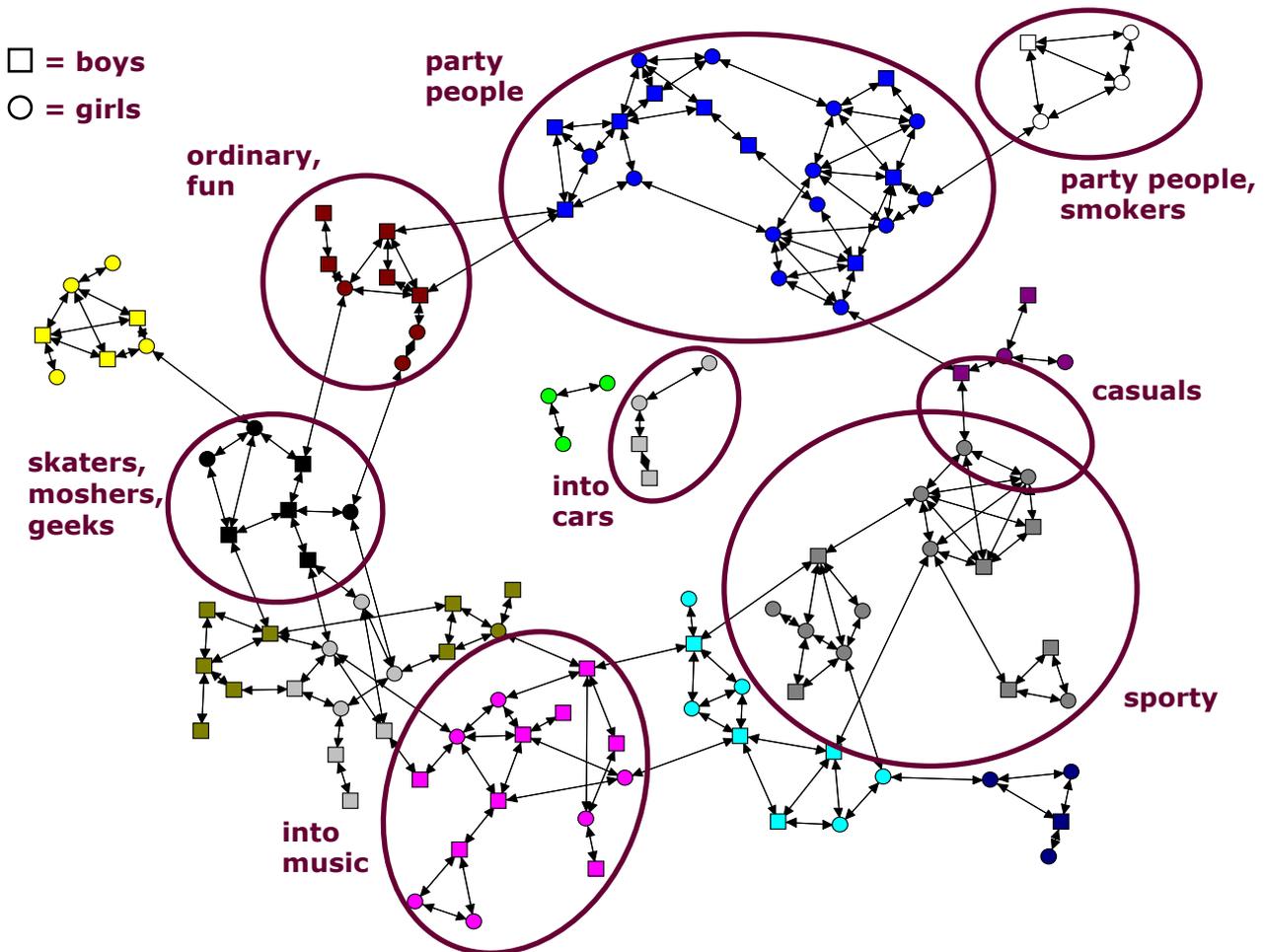
If you saw yourself as a trouble-maker, you were the exact opposite; you worried less about exam results, but more about unemployment. Trouble-makers also tended to be worried about their own, or a girlfriend's, accidental pregnancy. This also worried those seeing themselves as popular, powerful, attractive or stylish and respected, but not those of you who saw yourselves as doing well at school.

DIFFERENT GROUPS

Results like these tell us a lot. For example, they show how boys and girls see themselves in different ways, with boys generally more positive, reporting fewer worries or psychological problems.

But these results also highlight different groups of teenagers. Some are more focused on school and worried about exam results. Others may be trouble-makers at school, less concerned about results and more likely to smoke, drink and have tried drugs. They may see themselves as more attractive or stylish and fun. Different teenagers may become popular or gain respect from their friends or year group for different reasons.

The information you gave us allows us to draw 'maps' of friendship groups in each school. One of these is shown below. Each circle is one 'PaLS' participant, and the lines show links between friends and groups of friends. These maps will help us understand how teenagers in different types of groups vary in the ways they see themselves, and in their stresses, worries and behaviours. That is one of the things that makes 'PaLS' so unique.



AND FINALLY

'PaLS' is an important study; it will be the first in the world to examine whether friendship groups affect stress hormone levels as well as reported levels of stress, health and well-being. We will begin to present the results to other researchers, health professionals and policy makers very soon. We would like to thank all of you who took part. We hope that the exams have gone OK, and that you have a great summer.

Patrick West

Professor Patrick West

Helen Sweeting

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