

Written evidence submitted by HBSC England study team, Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire (BYC033)

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Executive summary

- Almost half of young people in England think that their body is either 'too fat' or 'too thin'.
- Poor body image affect young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds equally
- The proportion of young people in England who consider themselves to be either 'too fat' or 'too thin' has remained unchanged since 2002
- 15-year olds in England have relatively poor body image compared to same-age peers in other European and North American countries
- A significant proportion of young people who say that they are on a diet or doing something to lose weight do so even if they think their current body size is 'about right'
- Poor body image have stronger association with low life satisfaction and health-related quality of life in girls than in boys, but boys who see themselves as either 'too thin' or 'too fat' are more likely to be the victims of weight-related bullying
- Positive relationships with parents (particularly fathers), teachers and peers may be protective against poor body image in young people

About the authors

1. Fiona Brooks is professor of adolescent and child health at the Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire, and primary investigator for the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) England study. Also based in CRIPACC, Dr Ellen Klemra is a senior research fellow in adolescent, child and family health; Dr Josefine Magnusson is a research fellow in adolescent, child and family health; Kayleigh Chester is research assistant in adolescent, child and family health.

2. The four researchers are part of the HBSC England study team. The HBSC study is an international World Health Organization collaborative study, which explores the determinants of young people's health and wellbeing, and health behaviours. The study collects data from school students aged 11, 13 and 15 years, from 42 countries, through anonymous self-completed questionnaires which young people complete during class time. The University of Hertfordshire leads the HBSC survey for England. In the latest wave of data collection in 2014, 5335 young people aged 11-15 years (52% boys; 48% girls) participated in the study for England.

Groups affected by body image issues

Question addressed: (1) *Are particular groups of young people particularly prone to poor body image, or less likely to be offered or seek help with poor body image?*

3. The latest (2014) HBSC study in England revealed that almost half (44%) of young people aged 11-15 years thought their body was either 'too fat' or 'too thin'. Boys were more likely than girls to say that their body was 'about the right size' (60% of boys v. 52% of girls). Boys were also more likely than girls to say that they were 'too thin' (18% v. 11%), and girls more likely than boys to say they were 'too fat' (38% v. 22%). The full HBSC England study findings can be accessed [here](#).
4. HBSC measures socioeconomic status using the Family Affluence Scale (FAS) which groups young people into either low, medium or high affluence. In 2014, there was no noticeable difference in body image perceptions between young people in the three FAS groups.
5. The HBSC study in England has been carried out every four years since 2002. Over this time period, body image perceptions have not changed among young people. In 2002, 40% of girls thought they were 'too fat' compared to 38% in 2014 (full report [here](#)). The corresponding figures for boys were 25% in 2002 and 22% in 2014. Regarding seeing oneself as 'too thin', 19% of boys said they were so in 2002 compared to 18% in 2014, while among girls the corresponding figures were 12% in 2002 and 11% in 2014.
6. Body satisfaction did however decrease with age: in 2014, 64% of 11 year olds, 55% of 13 year olds, and 47% of 15 year olds said their body was 'about the right size'. The starkest gender difference is also noted at age 15 when more than twice as many girls as boys (50% v. 24%) think they are too fat, while 23% boys v. 9% girls think they are too thin (full report [here](#)).
7. Young people were also asked whether they were on a diet or doing something to lose weight. Among those who thought they were 'too fat', a similar proportion of boys (29%) and girls (32%) answered 'yes'. However, among those who stated that they were on a diet or doing something to lose weight, 27% of girls and 37% of boys

said that they thought their body was 'about the right size', highlighting that a significant proportion of young people who engage in weight loss strategies do so even if they do not perceive their body to be too fat.

8. Because the HBSC study is an international study, comparisons in body image can be made across all participating countries. In 2014 there were some noticeable age differences in the proportions of young people who considered themselves 'too fat' in England compared to 40 other countries across Europe and North America. English 11 year olds ranked 27th for saying they are 'too fat', 13 year olds ranked 17th, and 15 year olds ranked 14th. This means that compared internationally, 11 year olds are relatively positive about their size while 15 year olds are relatively negative. The HBSC international findings can be accessed [here](#).
9. Further analysis of HBSC England data from 2006 revealed that young people who reported greater ease of communication with their father, and who perceived their teachers to be interested in them as a person, had more positive body image (full paper [here](#)). This suggests the important role of relationships with significant adults, both in and outside the home. Data from HBSC in Ireland also suggest that young people with stronger friendship dynamics were less likely to consider themselves 'too fat', suggesting that positive peer relationships can have an impact on body image (full paper [here](#)).

Health implications

Question addressed: (10) *To what extent is dissatisfaction with body image contributing to the increase in mental health problems amongst children and young people?*

10. Girls with a negative body image, particularly those who considered themselves as 'too fat', were more likely than boys to report lower overall life satisfaction. Among those who thought they were 'too fat' 55% of girls and 70% of boys reported high life satisfaction, while 19% of girls and 11% of boys reported low life satisfaction. For those who said they were 'too thin', 69% of girls and 72% of boys reported high life satisfaction, while 9% of girls and 7% of boys reported low life satisfaction.
11. Boys were more likely than girls to report being the victim of weight-related bullying; this was true both for young people who saw themselves as 'too thin' and 'too fat'. Among those who considered themselves to be 'too thin', 21% of boys and 15% of girls reported experiencing this, while the corresponding figures for young people who thought they were 'too fat' was 33% for boys and 28% for girls. Boys were also more likely to be the victims of frequent weight-related bullying, with 7% of boys and 3% of girls who considered themselves 'too fat' saying that they had experienced this type of bullying 'several times a week'.
12. Further analysis of the 2010 HBSC data collected in Slovakia found young people who held a negative body image – in particular, those who thought they were "too fat" – were more likely to be victims of bullying. They also found that for boys, those who

reported being “too thin” were more at risk of becoming a bully-victim who is both a victim and perpetrator of bullying (full paper [here](#)).

13. Data from the HBSC study in the US shows that perceptions of being overweight is associated with poor physical and emotional health-related quality of life (HRQOL). They also found that for girls, those who had an accurate perception of their weight had better HRQOL than those who overestimated their weight (full paper [here](#)).

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