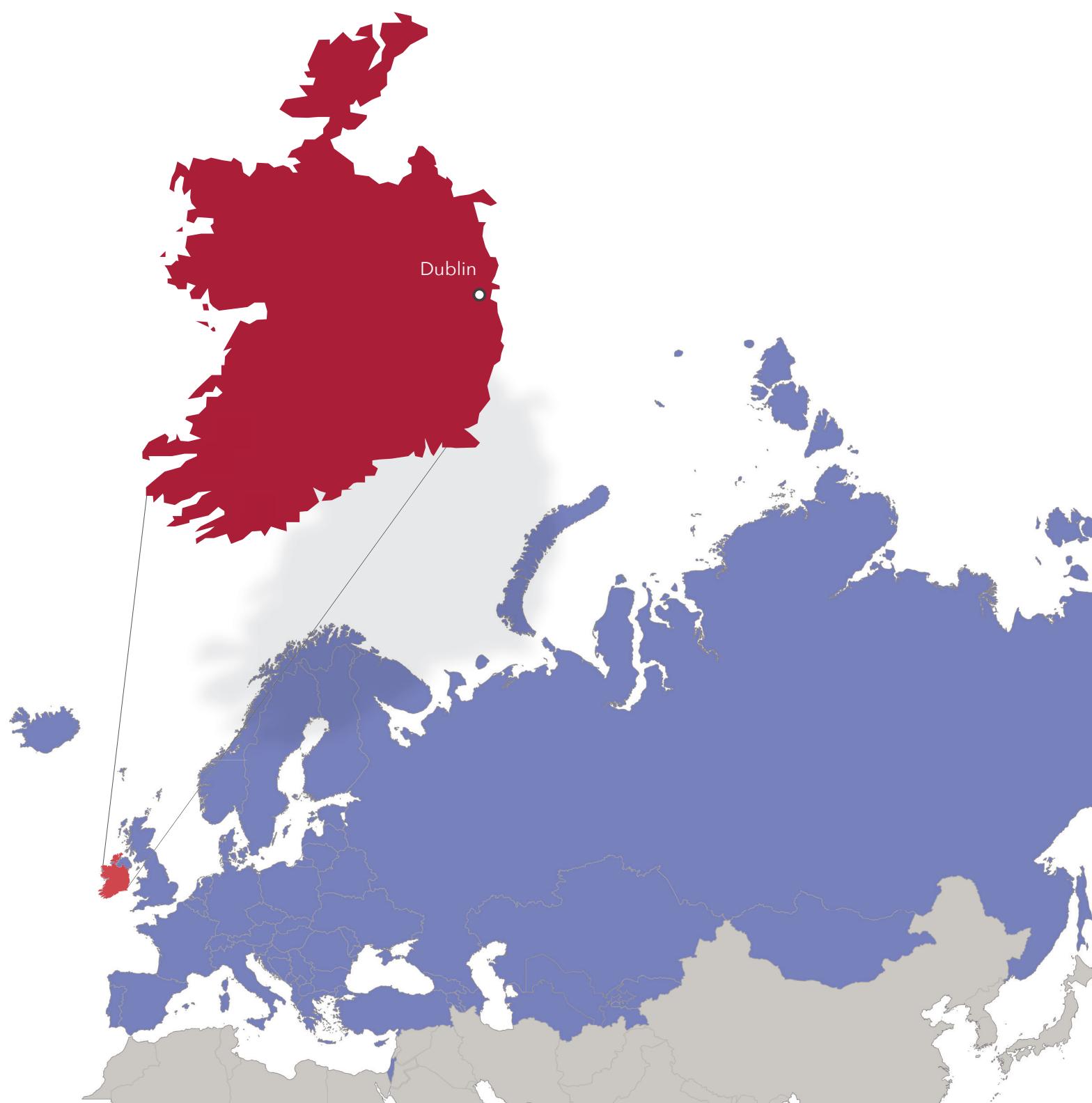


# Sexuality Education in the WHO European Region

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## IRELAND

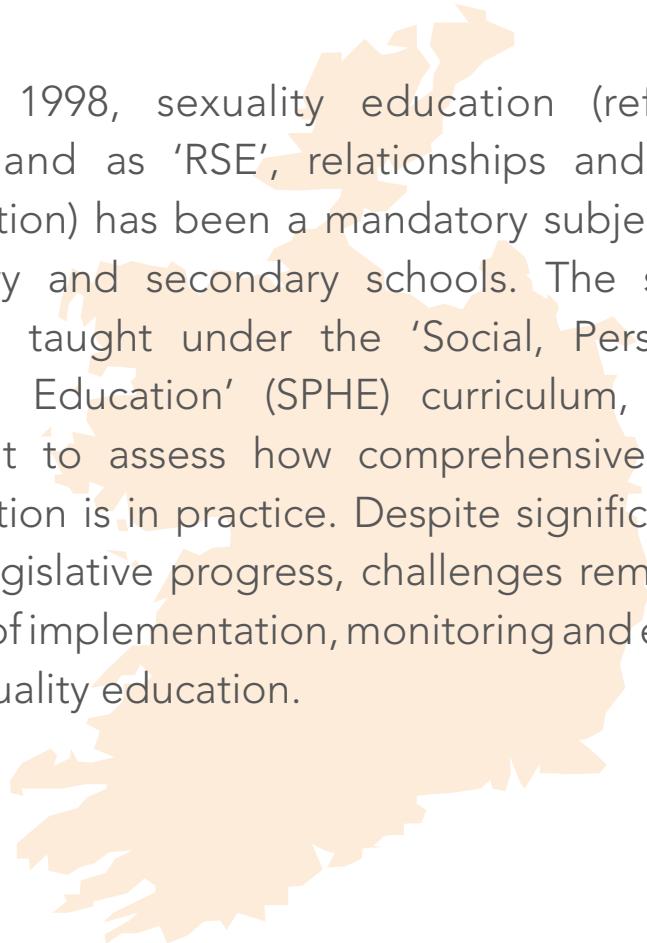


# IRELAND



## Status of sexuality education

Since 1998, sexuality education (referred to in Ireland as 'RSE', relationships and sexuality education) has been a mandatory subject in both primary and secondary schools. The subject is mainly taught under the 'Social, Personal and Health Education' (SPHE) curriculum, but it is difficult to assess how comprehensive sexuality education is in practice. Despite significant policy and legislative progress, challenges remain in the areas of implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sexuality education.





## Laws and policies

Under the Education Act of 1998, schools are obliged to promote the social and personal development of learners<sup>1</sup> and to provide them with health education. Following the 1998 Act, a new curriculum was introduced called Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is part of the SPHE curriculum, which also covers gender studies, mental health, substance use, physical activity and nutrition. In addition to the 1998 Act, the policy is updated by a number of departmental circulars related to sexuality education, which are treated by schools as directives. While there are guidelines on the content of sexuality education, issued by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), they are not binding, and schools can decide how to teach the content of the course, based on their own moral or ethical considerations.

dealt with, albeit in more detail. Nevertheless, specialists in the field report that, in practice, RSE is best characterised as ‘abstinence + prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV.’

Teachers ultimately have the responsibility for providing sexuality education, but many schools invite external agencies to deliver aspects of the RSE programme. Conservative Christian agencies, such as Pure in Heart and Love for Life, which advocate abstinence until marriage, can also deliver workshops in schools as part of the RSE programme.

A report<sup>3</sup> from 2013 showed that, with regard to RSE for senior-cycle students, a core teaching team had been established in 63 % of schools. But there was significant variation in the quality of RSE provision.

## Implementation of sexuality education

At the governmental level, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Department of Education and Skills are responsible for sexuality education and for developing the curriculum. At a local level, all schools are required by the Department to develop an RSE policy in consultation with teachers, parents/guardians, members of the board of management and students. According to the Department’s directives, the RSE policy should reflect a school’s core values and ethos, as outlined in its mission statement. This presents difficulties for the provision of evidence-based sexuality education, because the vast majority of schools in Ireland are faith-based, as reflected in each school’s mission statement.

RSE is sometimes taught as a stand-alone subject or in conjunction with other subjects, such as biology and religious education. According to the NCCA (1996)<sup>2</sup> interim curriculum and guidelines for post-primary schools (age 13–15), the following blocks of topics should be covered: human growth and development, human sexuality and human relationships. For senior cycle students (16–18 years old) only the first two of these subjects should be

## Training of teachers on sexuality education

The SPHE Support Service offers voluntary training to teachers delivering the SPHE curriculum. Furthermore, there is no system in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the training and to ensure that teachers receive adequate support after completing the training. Educational materials and teaching guidelines are developed by the National Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme within the Department of Education. They reflect a (minimal) comprehensive and participatory learning approach.



## Sexuality education outside the formal school setting

The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA, IPPF member association) runs a programme called Speak-easy, which is designed to provide parents, guardians or carers with the information, skills and confidence to facilitate open communication with children about relationships, sexuality and keeping safe.

Other non-governmental organisations that deliver talks or workshops on aspects of the RSE programme include local rape crisis centres, STI clinics and organisations supporting people living with HIV/AIDS. There are also many helpful state-funded websites aimed at young people for this purpose, notably b4udecide.ie and SpunOut.ie, as well as state-funded websites such as inkContraception.ie and positiveoptions.ie, which provide information on contraception and unplanned-pregnancy services, respectively.

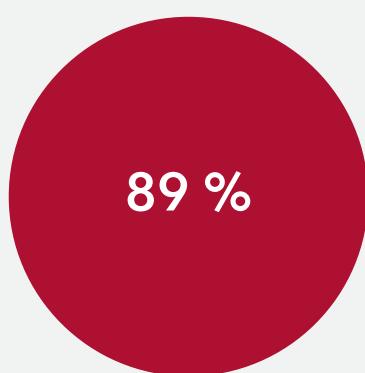
## Challenges

Some religious groups opposed to the provision of information about sexuality produce textbooks and videos for use in schools which give young people incorrect information about the efficacy of contraception and the 'consequences' of engaging in sexual activity before marriage. Some have developed RSE workshops that focus on the promotion of abstinence. These groups influence the context of individual schools but not at the political or governmental level.

Sexuality education is not subject to the same degree of scrutiny by the Department of Education as other subject areas, in particular exam-based subjects, resulting in fewer departmental inspections of school policies and programmes in this area. Additionally, the services established by the Department of Education to support schools with sexuality education face many challenges, such as a lack of staffing and other resources. Media reports have also highlighted a lack of transparency regarding sexuality education which does not exist for other areas of the curriculum.

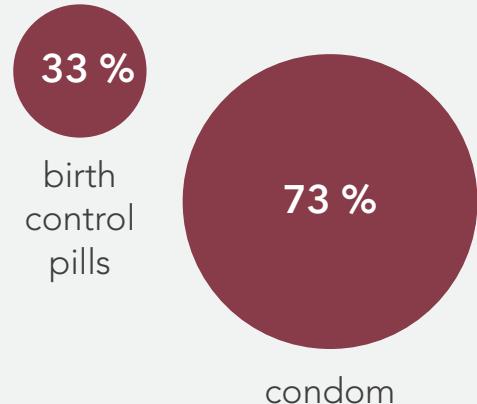
## Use of contraception<sup>4,5</sup>

at the first time\*



\* 18 – 25-year-olds, according to the ICCP-2010 survey<sup>4</sup>  
\*\* 15 – 17-year-olds who reported ever having had sex, according to the HBSC Study 2014<sup>5</sup>

at last intercourse\*\*



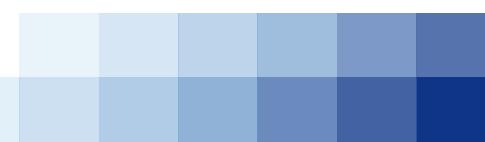


Ireland

# Country facts

|  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| Total population <sup>6</sup>  | 4 635 000                 |
| Population aged 15–19 years<br>(% of 15–19-year-olds in total population) <sup>6</sup> | 283 000 (6.1 %)           |
| Government expenditure on education<br>(% of GDP) <sup>7</sup>                         | 5.8                       |
| Youth unemployment rate<br>(% of labour force aged 15–24 years) <sup>8</sup>           | 20.9                      |
| Gender Inequality Index rating <sup>9</sup>  | 0.127                     |
| Births per 1 000 women aged 15–19 years <sup>10</sup>                                  | 10                        |
| % of 15-year-olds who have had sexual intercourse <sup>11</sup>                        | boys: 21 %<br>girls: 14 % |
| Average age of mother at birth of first child <sup>12</sup>                            | 29.4                      |

For references go to last page



## References / Definitions

- 1 **Learner:** a child or young person who is enrolled or attends classes in school, including primary (basic/elementary), secondary (middle) and high school.
- 2 Relationships and sexuality education: an aspect of social, personal and health education. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; 1996 (<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/1997-NCCA-Interim-Curriculum-Guidelines-for-Post-Primary-Schools-for-RSE-as-an-aspect-of-SPHE-.pdf>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 3 Looking at social, personal and health education: teaching and learning in post-primary schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills; 2013 (<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Looking-at-Social-Personal-and-Health-Education-Teaching-and-Learning-in-Post-Primary-Schools.pdf>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 4 McBride O, Morgan K, McGee H. Irish contraception and crisis pregnancy study 2010 (ICCP-2010): a survey of the general population (Crisis Pregnancy Programme Report No 24). Dublin: Health Service Executive Crisis Pregnancy Programme (CPP); 2012.
- 5 Gavin A, Keane E, Callaghan M et al. HBSC 2014: Irish health behaviour in school-aged children (HBSC) study 2014. Galway: Department of Health/Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland; 2015.
- 6 Population by age, sex and urban/rural residence, 2016 [online database]. New York: United Nations Statistics Division; 2017 (<http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tabCode%3A22>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 7 Human development report 2016: human development for everyone. New York: United Nations Development Programme; 2016 (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 8 Human development data, 2015 [online database]. New York: United Nations Development Programme; 2017 (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data#>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- Youth unemployment rate:** percentage of the labour force population aged 15–24 years that is not in paid employment or self-employed, but is available for work and has taken steps to seek paid employment or self-employment.
- 9 Human development report 2016: human development for everyone. New York: United Nations Development Programme; 2016 (<http://hdr.undp.org/en/2016-report>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- Gender Inequality Index:** a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. It varies between zero (when women and men fare equally) and one (when men or women fare poorly compared with the other in all dimensions).
- 10 Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1 000 women ages 15–19). Washington (DC): World Bank; 2016 (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.ADO.TFRT>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 11 Growing up unequal: gender and socioeconomic differences in young people's health and well-being. HBSC 2016 study report (2013/2014 survey). Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2016 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/growing-up-unequal-hbsc-2016-study-20132014-survey>, accessed 25 March 2017).
- 12 Women in the EU gave birth to their first child at almost 29 years of age on average. Luxembourg: Eurostat; 2015 [2013 data] (<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6829228/3-13052015-CP-EN.pdf/7e9007fb-3ca9-445f-96eb-fd75d6792965>, accessed 25 March 2017).

**Government expenditure on education:** current, capital and transfer spending on education, expressed as a percentage of GDP. Range in the region is approx. 2.0–8.5.