CHAPTER 2.
SOCIAL CONTEXT

FAMILY
PEERS
SCHOOL

FAMILY: COMMUNICATION WITH MOTHER

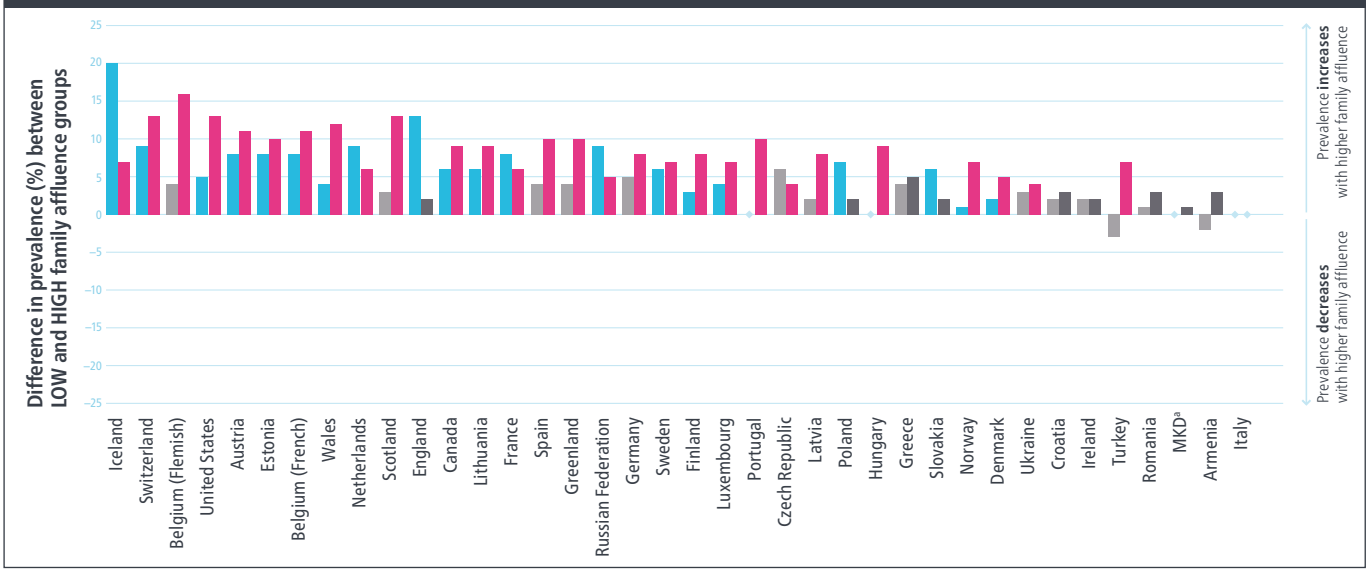
Parental communication is one of the key ways in which the family can act as a protective health asset, promoting pro-social values that equip young people to deal with stressful situations or buffer them against adverse influences. Young people (even those in older groups) who report ease of communication with their parents are more likely to report positive body image *(1)*, higher self-rated health *(2)*, not smoking *(2)*, higher life satisfaction *(3)* and fewer physical and psychological complaints *(4)*. They are also less likely to participate in aggressive behaviours and substance use *(5)*.

Factors that facilitate ease of communication with mothers include a mutually interactive communication style in which the mother and young person feel free to raise issues, effective non-judgemental listening by the mother and the mother being perceived as trustworthy *(6)*.

Communication with mothers is used commonly as a parameter for overall family communication; consequently, it is often not possible to establish the specific influence of each parent.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
FINDING IT EASY TO TALK TO MOTHER



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/−0.5%. *Note.* No data for Slovenia.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how easy it is for them to talk to their mothers about "things that really bother you". Response options ranged from "very easy" to "very difficult". The findings presented here show the proportions who reported finding it "easy" and "very easy".

RESULTS

Age

A significant decline in prevalence of ease of communication with mother was found in almost all countries and regions among boys and girls aged 11 and 15. The decrease was more than 10% in most and over 15% in around a quarter.

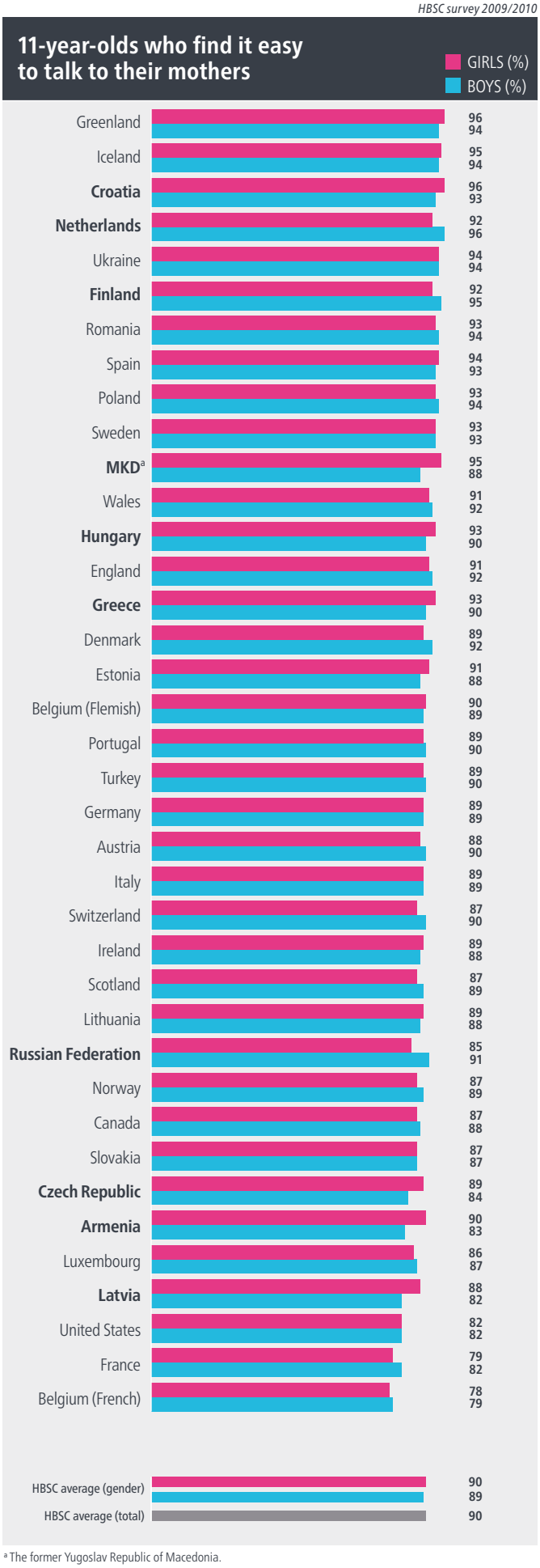
Gender

Differences in prevalence were small and were significant in only a few countries and regions in each age group.

Family affluence

Prevalence was significantly associated with higher family affluence in almost all countries and regions for girls andin most for boys. The difference was more than 10% in around half and more than 15% in a small number for both boys and girls.

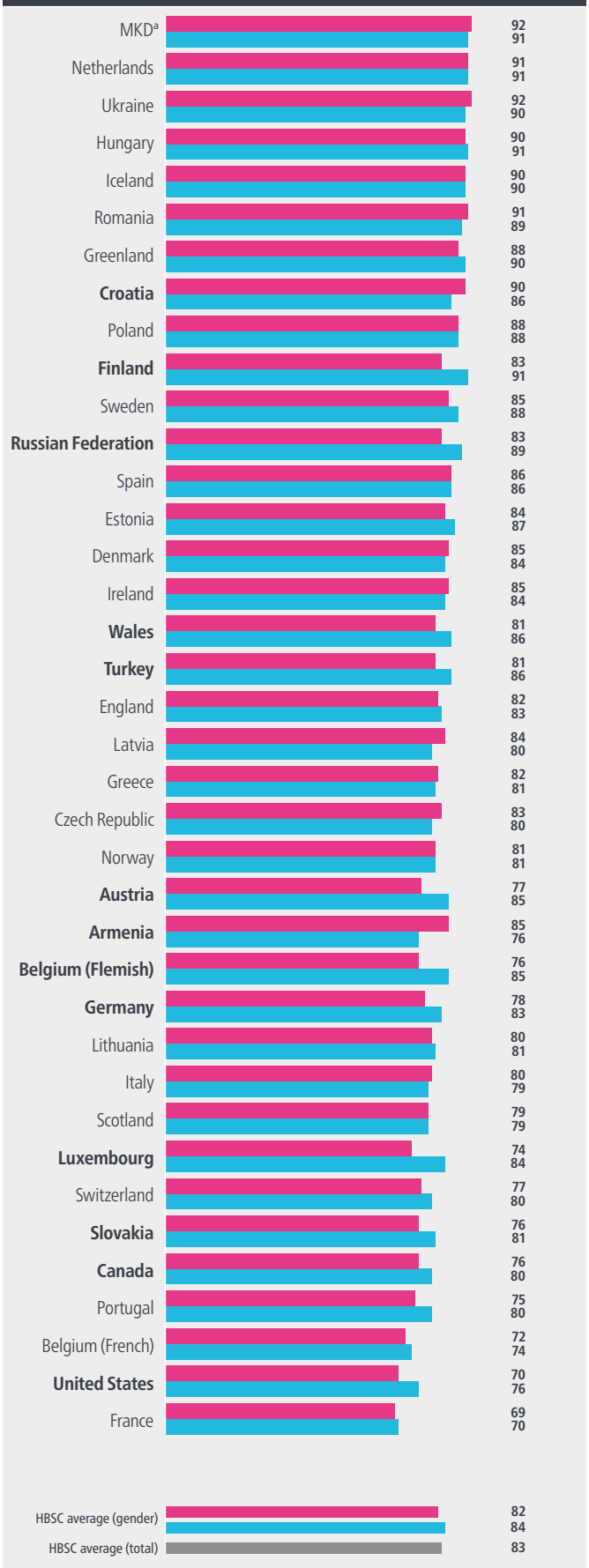
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

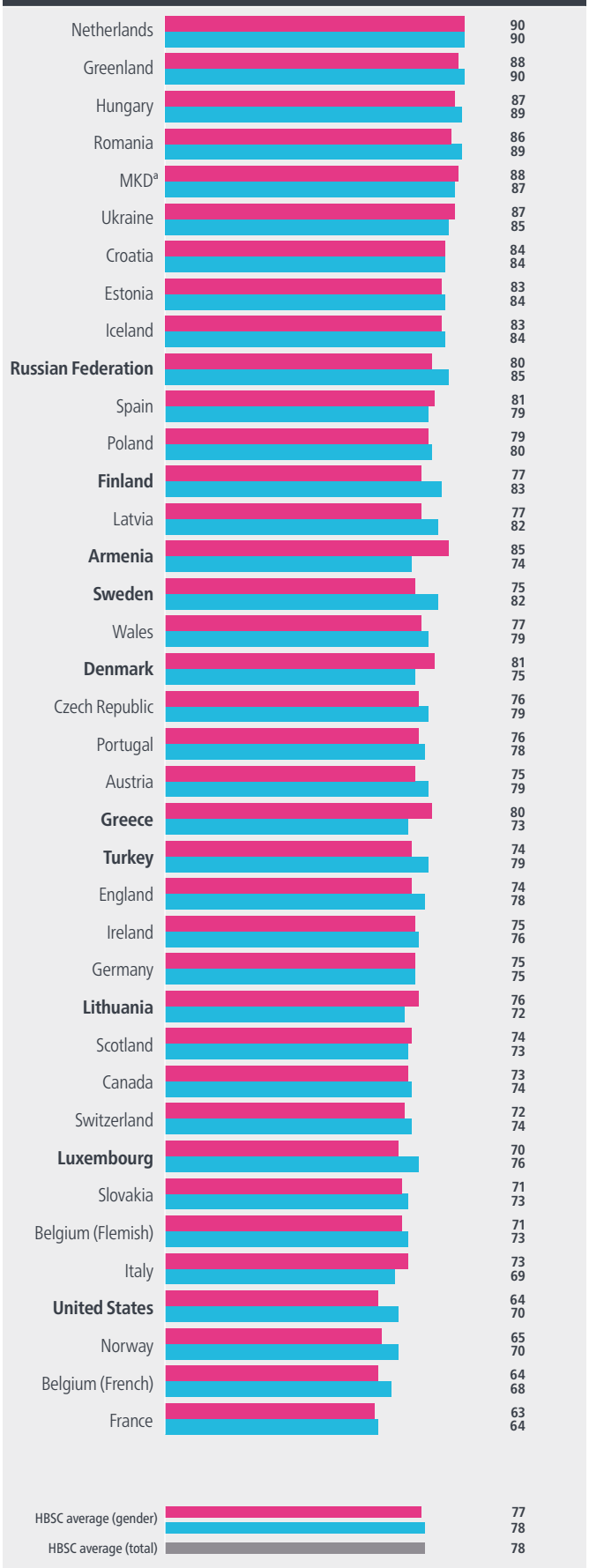
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who find it easy to talk to their mothers



HBSC survey 2009/2010

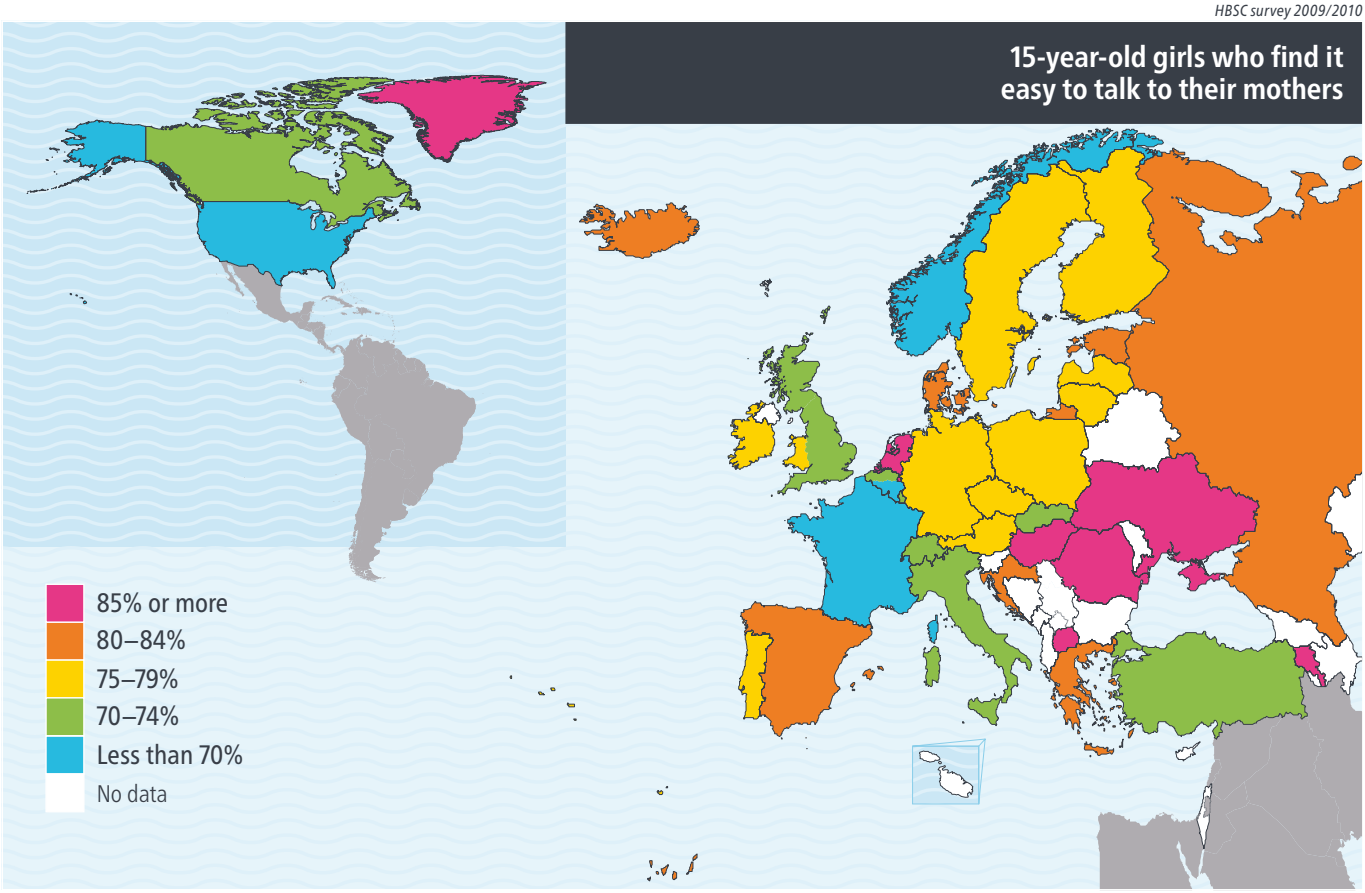
15-year-olds who find it easy to talk to their mothers



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05). No data for Slovenia.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

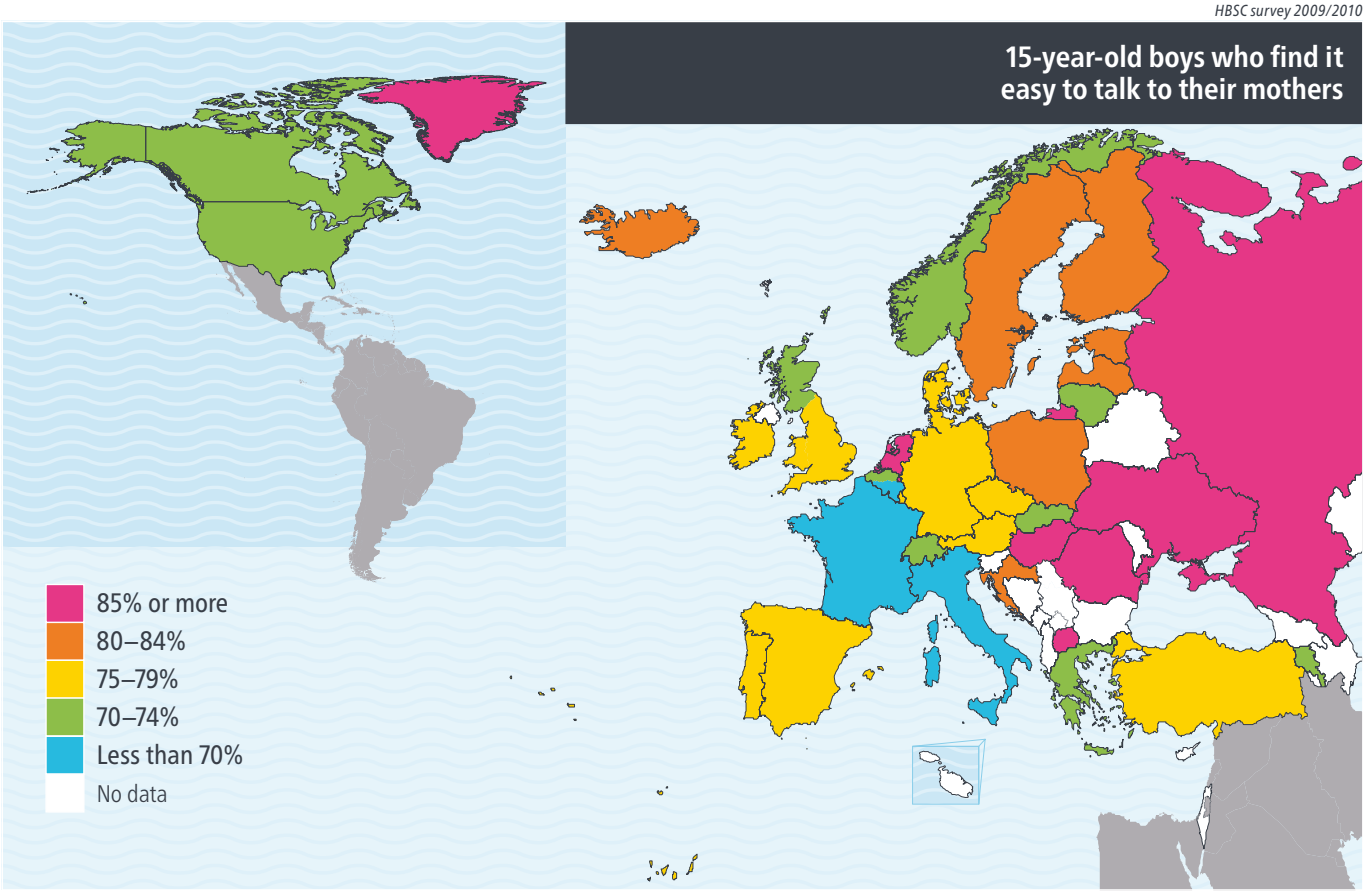
15-year-old girls who find it easy to talk to their mothers



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who find it easy to talk to their mothers



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

FAMILY: COMMUNICATION WITH FATHER

Fathers are generally less intimate with their children than mothers, and focus more on the development of instrumental objectives or enhancement of skills *(7)*. The quality of the relationship when the father does not reside in the main family home or is leading a single-parent household is found to have significant effects on young people's life satisfaction *(8,9)*.

Ease of communication with fathers has a protective role in maintaining emotional well-being *(8)* and a positive sense of body image, particularly among girls (*1*). A "warm, open" communication style is associated with less aggression and violence among boys *(10)* and with more communicative and supportive relationships with boyfriends among girls *(11)*.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
FINDING IT EASY TO TALK TO FATHER

[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/–0.5%. *Note.* No data for Slovenia.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how easy it is for them to talk to their fathers about "things that really bother you". Response options ranged from "very easy" to "very difficult". The findings presented here show the proportions who reported finding it "easy" and "very easy".

RESULTS

Age

There was a significant decline in prevalence between ages 11 and 15 in all countries for girls and almost all for boys. The change with age was more than 15% in almost all countries for boys and in a minority for girls.

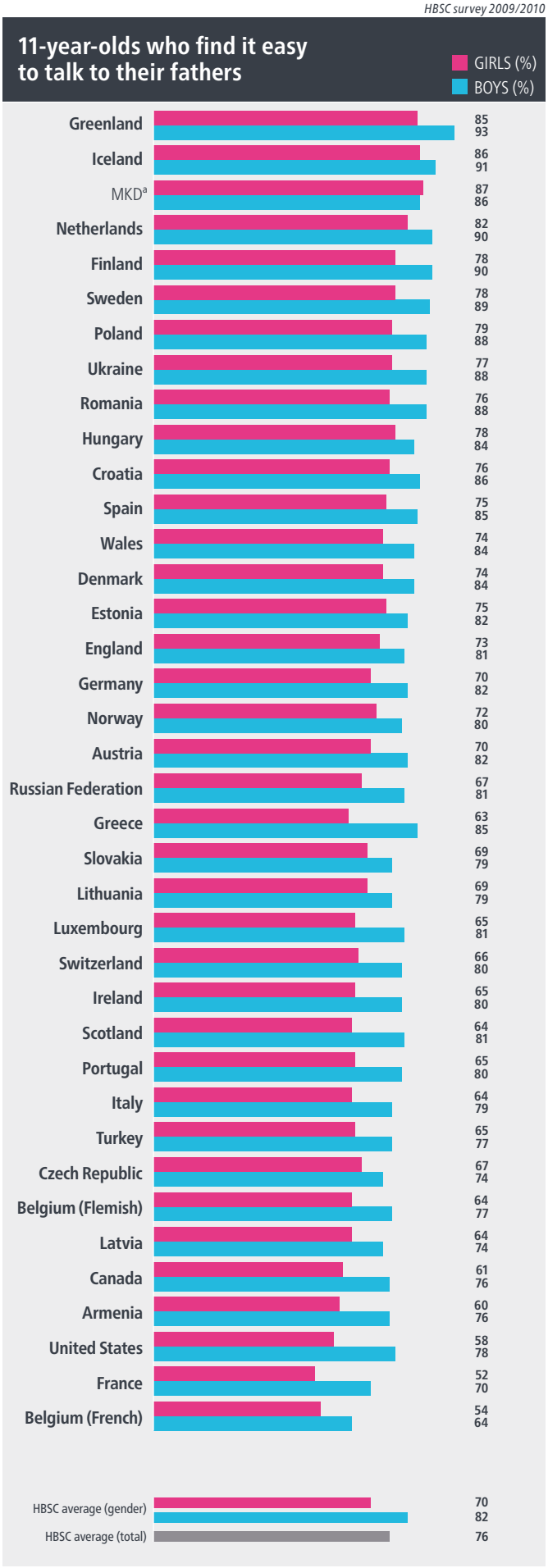
Gender

Boys at all ages in all countries were significantly more likely to report ease of communication with their fathers (except 11-year-old boys in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). The gender difference was greater than 15% in almost all countries at ages 13 and 15.

Family affluence

Prevalence was significantly associated with higher family affluence in almost all countries and regions for girls and in most for boys. The change in prevalence was more than 10% in almost all for girls and in less than half for boys.

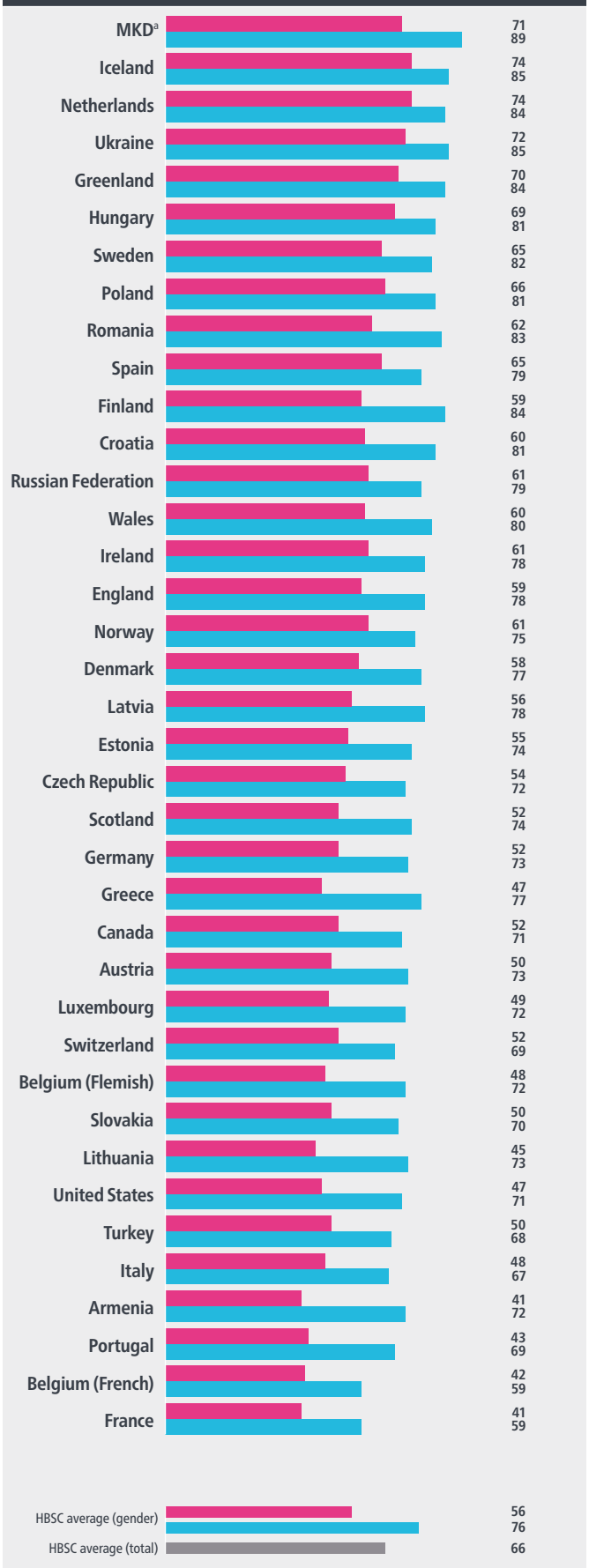
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

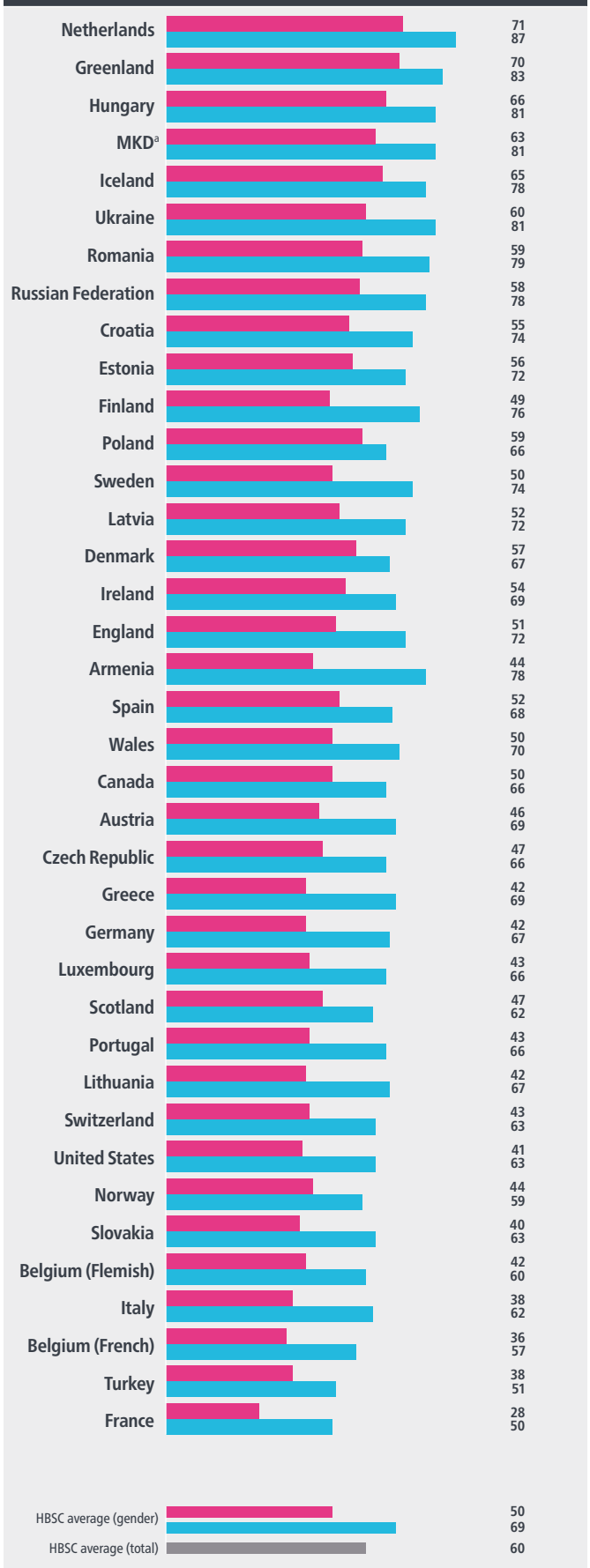
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who find it easy to talk to their fathers



HBSC survey 2009/2010

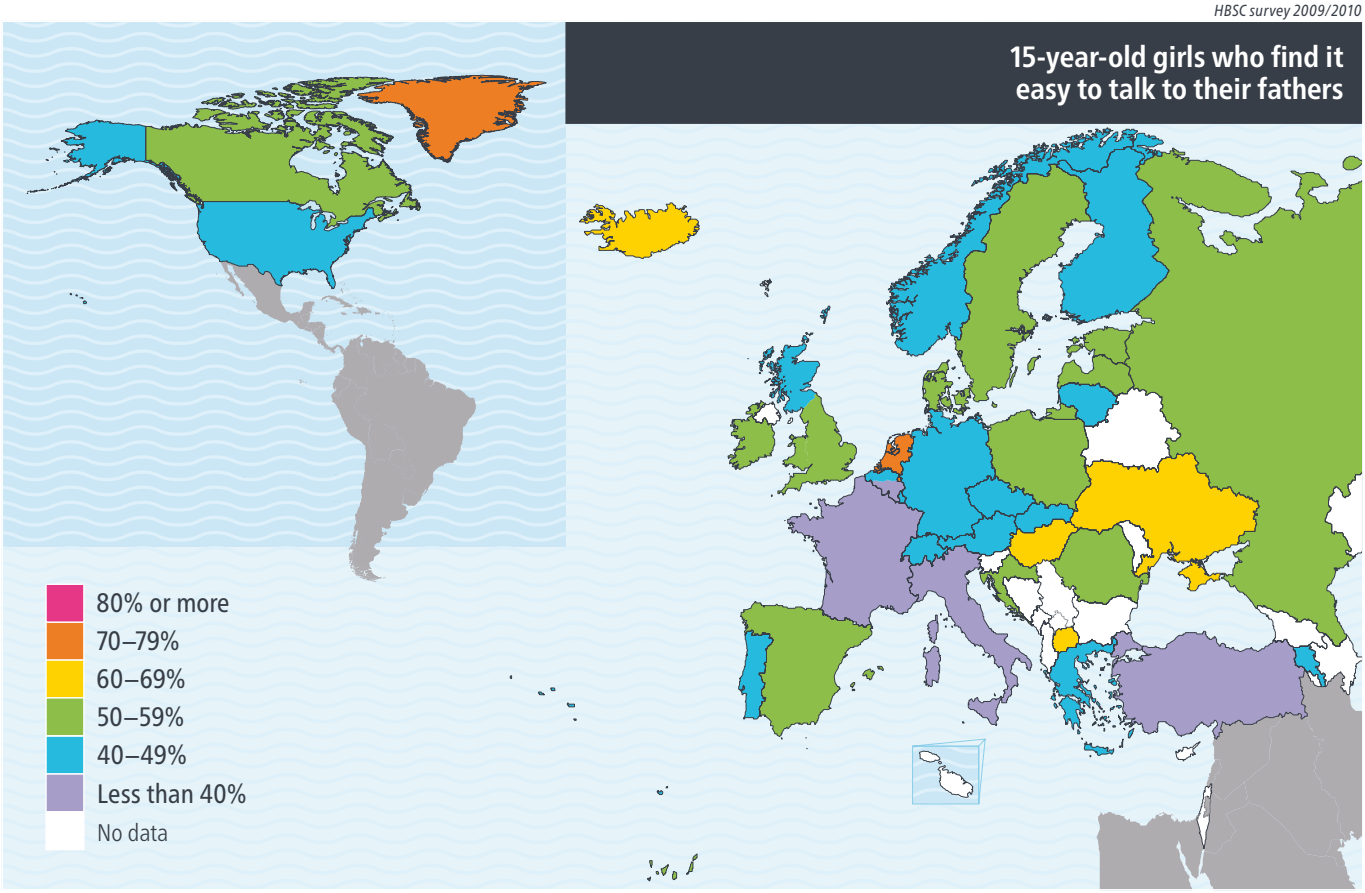
15-year-olds who find it easy to talk to their fathers



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05). No data for Slovenia.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

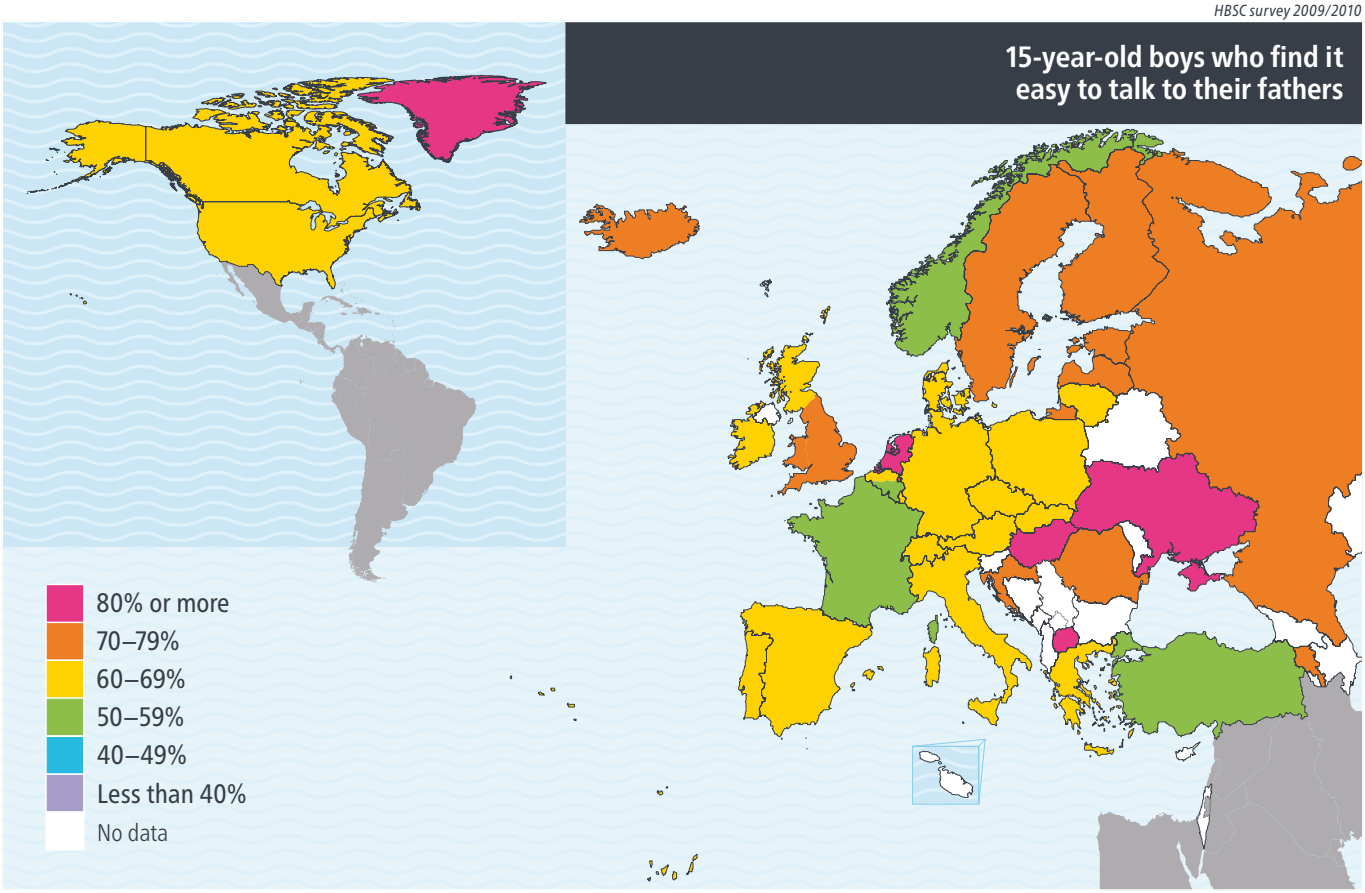
15-year-old girls who find it easy to talk to their fathers



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who find it easy to talk to their fathers



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

FAMILY: SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION AND POLICY REFLECTIONS

SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION

Proportionately more young people find communication with their mothers easier. Gender differences for ease of communication with mothers are small, but communication with fathers reveals some gender patterns, with boys and younger age groups reporting it to be easier than girls, especially older girls.

Young people spend more time with their mothers and consistently perceive them as more accessible for sharing feelings and worries *(12)*. Differences may be due to normative expectations of male and female roles in which mothers are expected to provide greater emotional support *(13)*.

Ease of communication with mothers and fathers decreases significantly with age: this is a normal part of growing up, with parents' influence decreasing as peers' influence increases *(14)*.

Students from more affluent families, particularly girls, report ease of communication more often in most countries. Family affluence is strongly linked to the availability of material resources for children, higher parental education and the possibility of creating an enriched learning environment *(15)*. Girls in low-affluence families who report disengaged relationships with their mothers are among those most at risk of negative health and education outcomes *(16)*.

The family can also act as a health asset. A study in Scotland, for example, found that while infrequent tooth brushing was more common among low-affluence groups, the effect was not significant among those who shared breakfast and meals with their families, suggesting that the family can play an important role in health promotion irrespective of affluence status *(17)*.

Girls in eastern and southern Europe are more likely to report ease of communication with their mothers than those in northern and western Europe and North America. Young people in eastern Europe are also significantly more likely to report it with their fathers.

POLICY REFLECTIONS

The findings highlight gender differences and show that ease of communication declines with age and is less likely to be reported by low-affluence groups. It would therefore be useful if policy-makers and practitioners considered the following issues.

- Parenting skills that may have protected and nurtured children in the early years need to evolve to guide young people through the transition to adulthood.
- Parents who invest in high-quality communication with their children can contribute to their overall health and well-being *(12)*. Public health policy targeting low-affluence families (as it is they report the least ease of communication) can support families to achieve this objective.
- At family level, individual- and group-based parenting programmes that improve psychosocial outcomes for teenage parents and their children may be effective in improving parent responsiveness and parent–child interactions *(18)*.
- The lower levels of ease of communication with father consistently identified in HBSC findings suggest that policy initiatives need to consider how to support fathers to improve the quality of their relationships with their children.
- Relationships between fathers and their children may be strengthened from early childhood by, for example, offering them the opportunity to care for their children and giving them the right to paternity leave, as is common in Scandinavian countries.

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PEERS: CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS

Establishing peer friendships is a critical developmental task for young people and may have a long-term effect on their social adjustment *(1)*. Friends provide a unique social context for the acquisition of essential social competencies *(2)*, afford different kinds of social support and help young people face new situations and stressful life experiences.

Friendship is associated with positive development, promoting higher levels of happiness, self-esteem and school adjustment *(3)*. Perceived peer support also represents a protective factor against feelings of depression and isolation *(4–6)*.

Young people with few friends may lack opportunities to learn social skills, face difficulties relating to others *(7)*, have low perceptions of self-worth and life satisfaction, and experience more frequent depressed mood. They are also more likely to become victims of bullying *(8)*.

Having good relationships with family and a positive experience at school can support the development of close friendships *(9)*, so programmes aiming to promote positive development among young people should involve multiple social contexts.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
HAVING THREE OR MORE CLOSE FRIENDS OF THE SAME GENDER

[a]The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/− 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how many close male and female friends they currently have. Response options ranged from "none" to "three or more" and were answered separately for male and female friends. The findings presented here show the proportions who reported having three or more friends of their own gender.

RESULTS

Age

Prevalence of having three or more close friends of the same gender decreased between ages 11 and 15 in most countries and regions. This decline was significant in half for boys and around two thirds for girls.

Gender

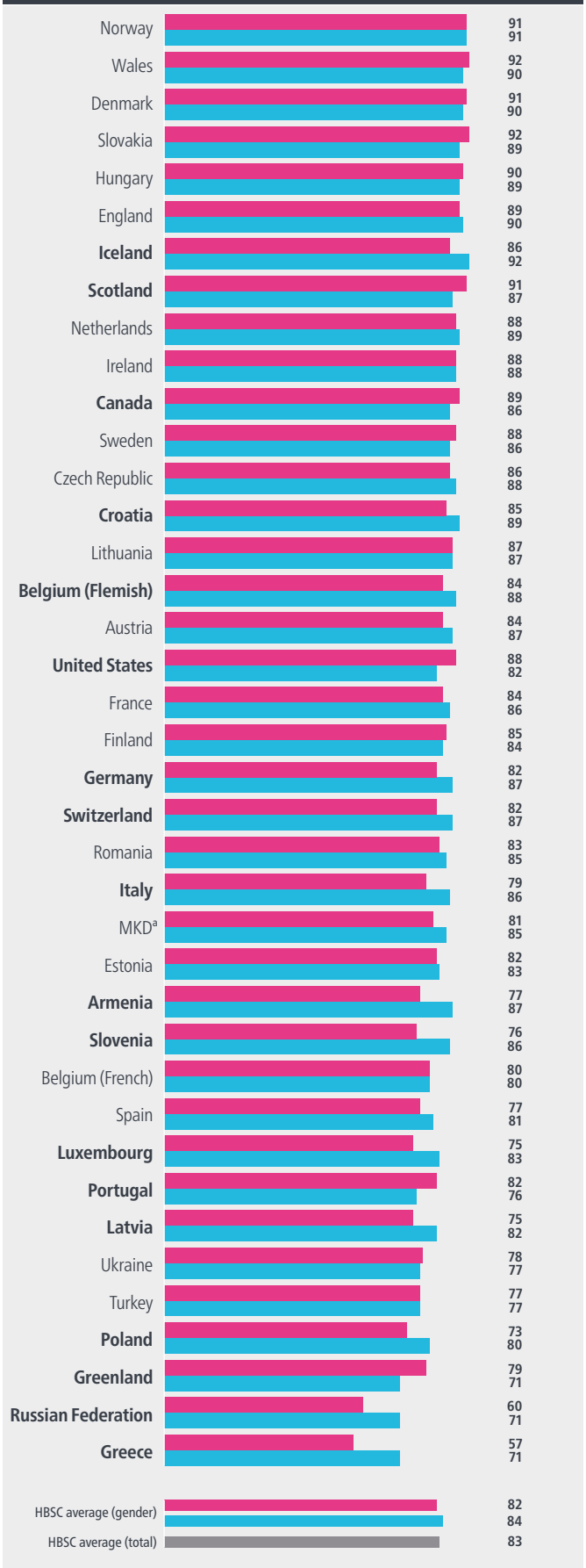
Boys were significantly more likely to report it in less than half of countries and regions, and girls in only a few. Gender differences tended to be more pronounced in older age groups.

Family affluence

Higher family affluence was significantly positively associated with having three or more close friends of the same gender in most countries for boys and girls.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

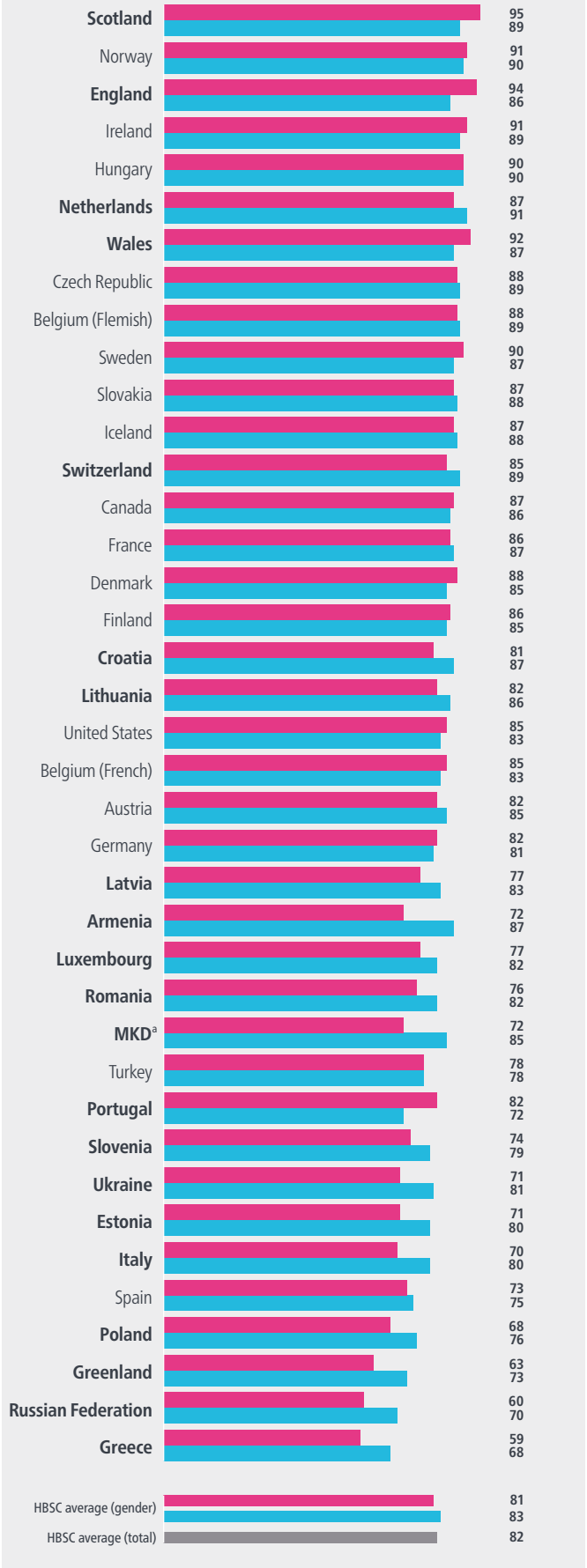
11-year-olds who have three or more close friends of the same gender



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

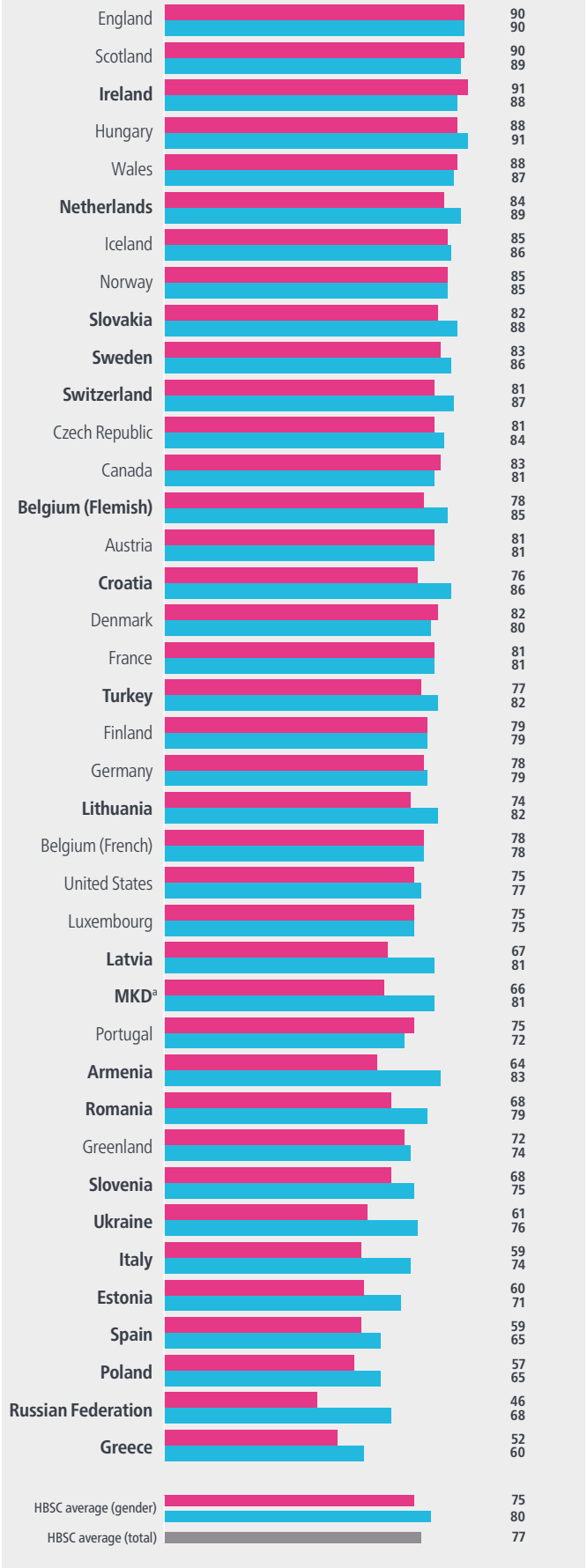
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who have three or more close friends of the same gender



HBSC survey 2009/2010

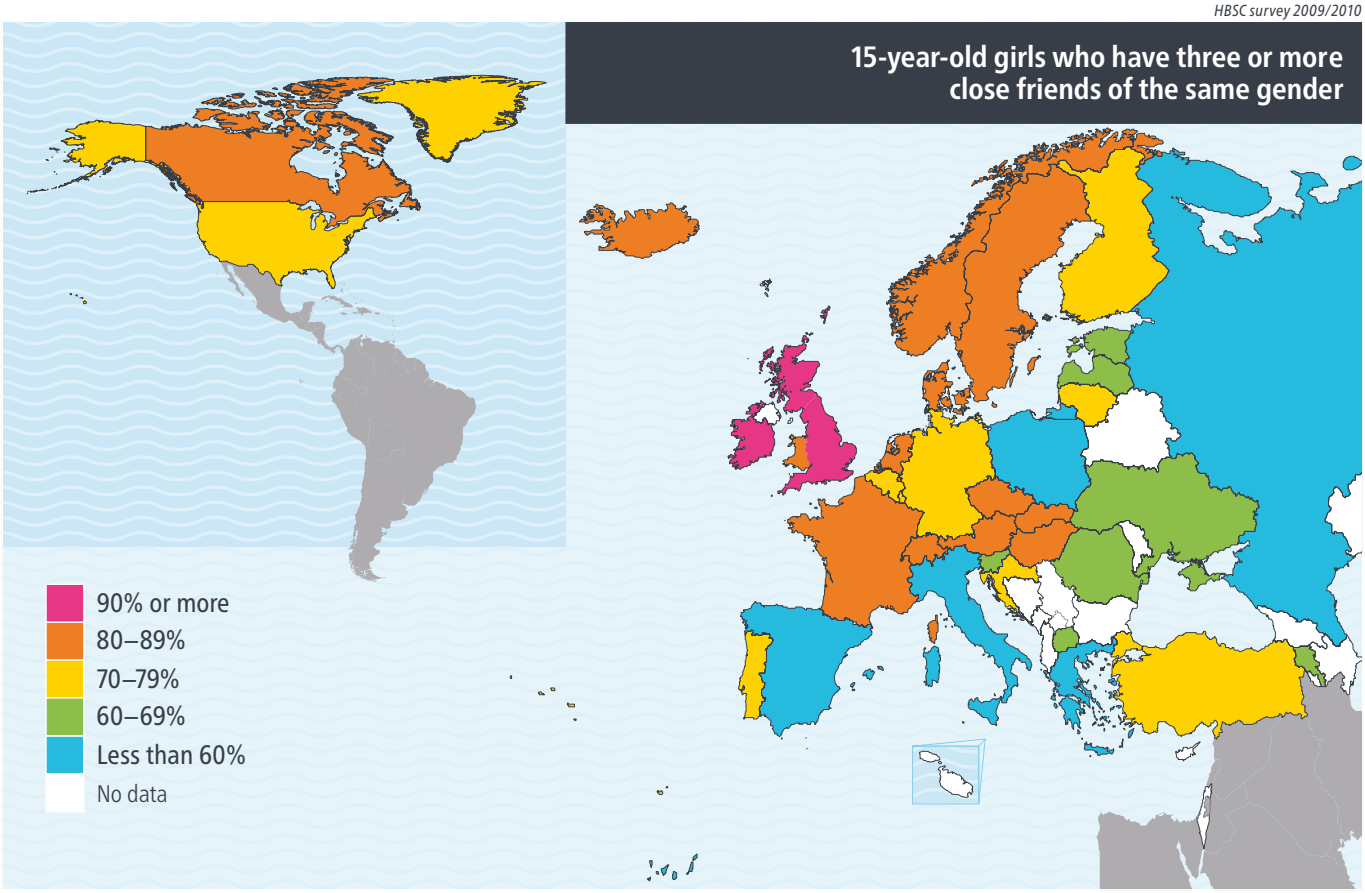
15-year-olds who have three or more close friends of the same gender



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010

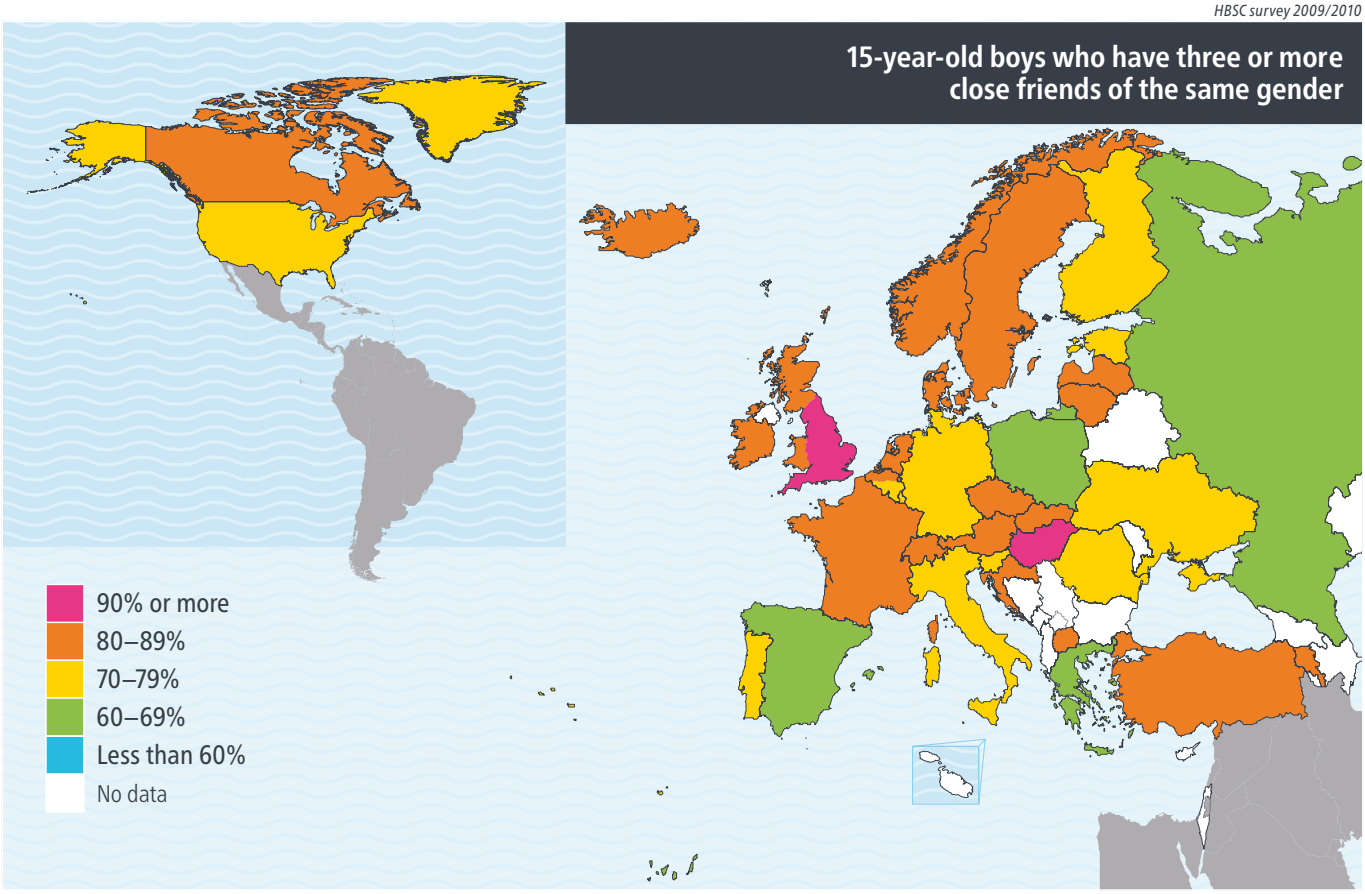
15-year-old girls who have three or more close friends of the same gender



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who have three or more close friends of the same gender



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

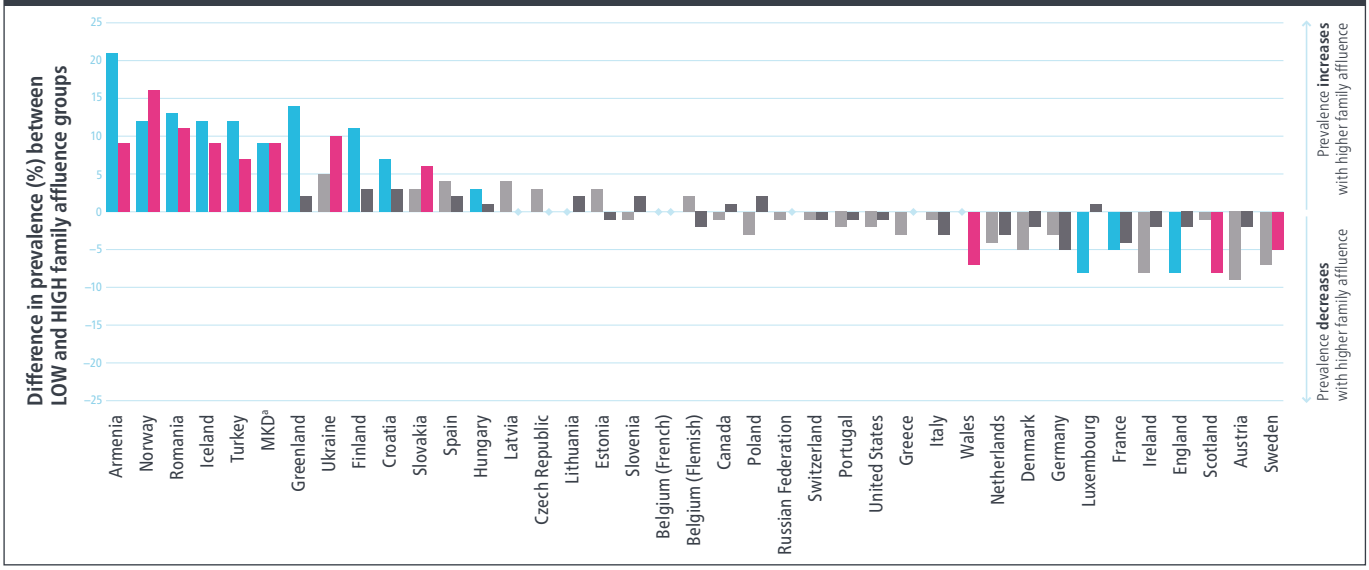
PEERS: EVENINGS WITH FRIENDS

Peers become increasingly important to young people during adolescence and the number of activities with peers outside the home environment increases (*7,8,10).* According to previous HBSC findings *(9)*, the frequency of spending time out with friends increases gradually with age. This is often associated with risk behaviours *(11).*

Peer contact is nevertheless important in the development of protective factors: young people who participate in youth clubs, for example, have been found to have more positive perceptions of their health and well-being and engage in more healthy behaviours *(6).* Contact with peers has an important effect on young people's ability to resist peer pressure and influence peer group behaviour to enable them to have fun and relax without engaging in risk behaviours *(12).*

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
SPENDING FOUR OR MORE EVENINGS PER WEEK OUT WITH FRIENDS



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/– 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how many evenings per week they usually spend out with their friends. Response options were "0" to "7" evenings. The findings presented here show the proportions who reported spending four or more evenings per week out with friends.

RESULTS

Age

Older students were more likely to have frequent peer contact in the evenings in most countries and regions. The association was significant for boys and girls in more than half.

Gender

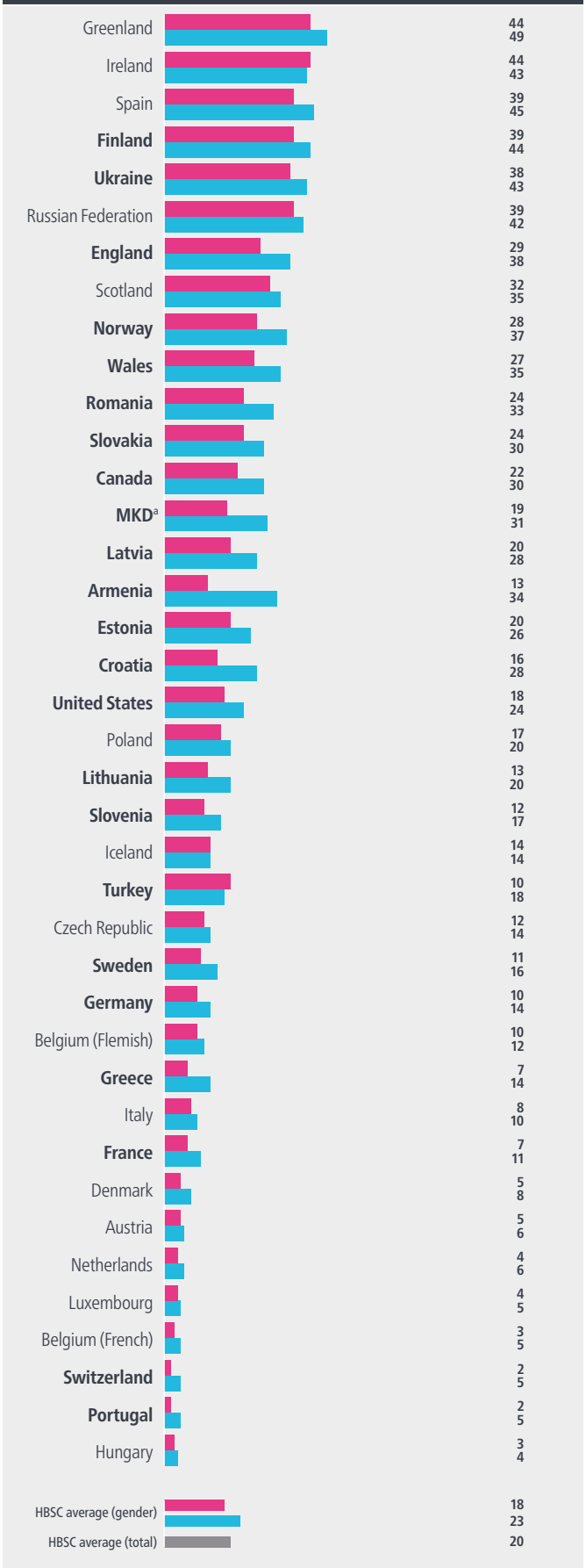
Boys aged 11 and 15 were more likely to go out with friends in most countries, a pattern that could be observed in only a minority of countries and regions for 13-year-olds.

Family affluence

There was a significant positive association with higher family affluence for boys and girls in a few countries and regions.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

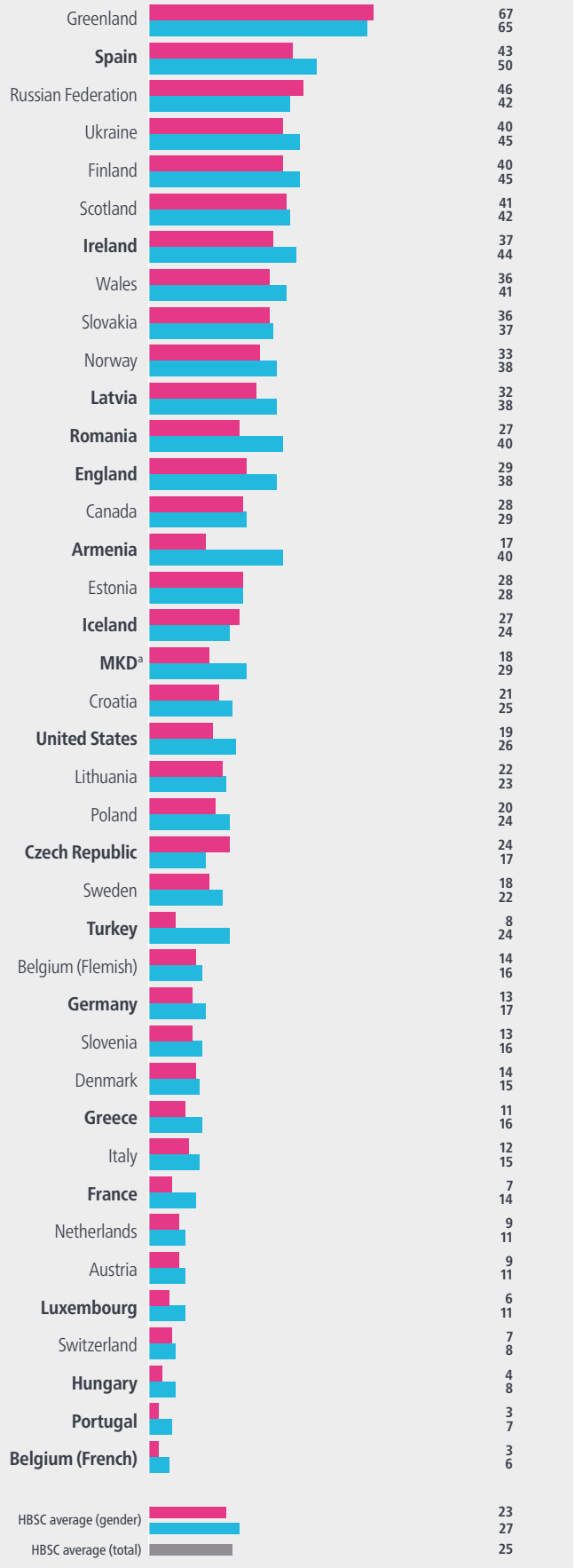
11-year-olds who spend four or more evenings per week out with friends



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

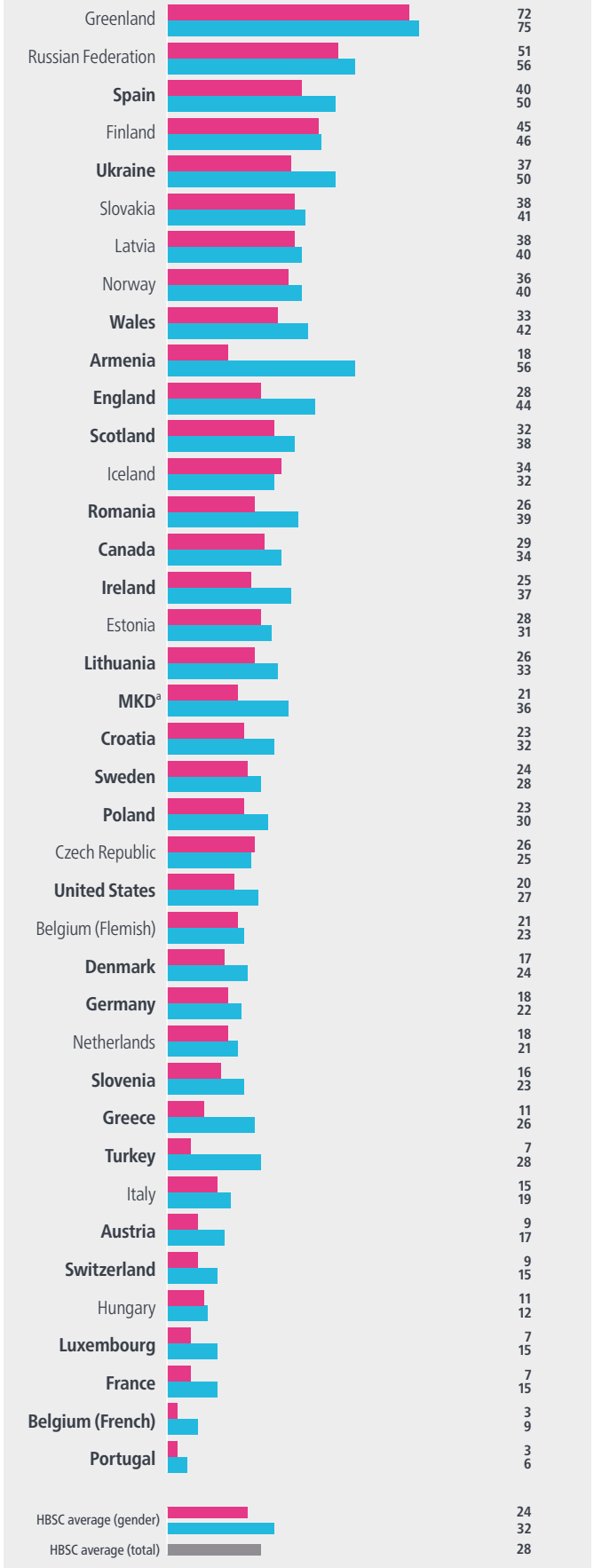
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who spend four or more evenings per week out with friends



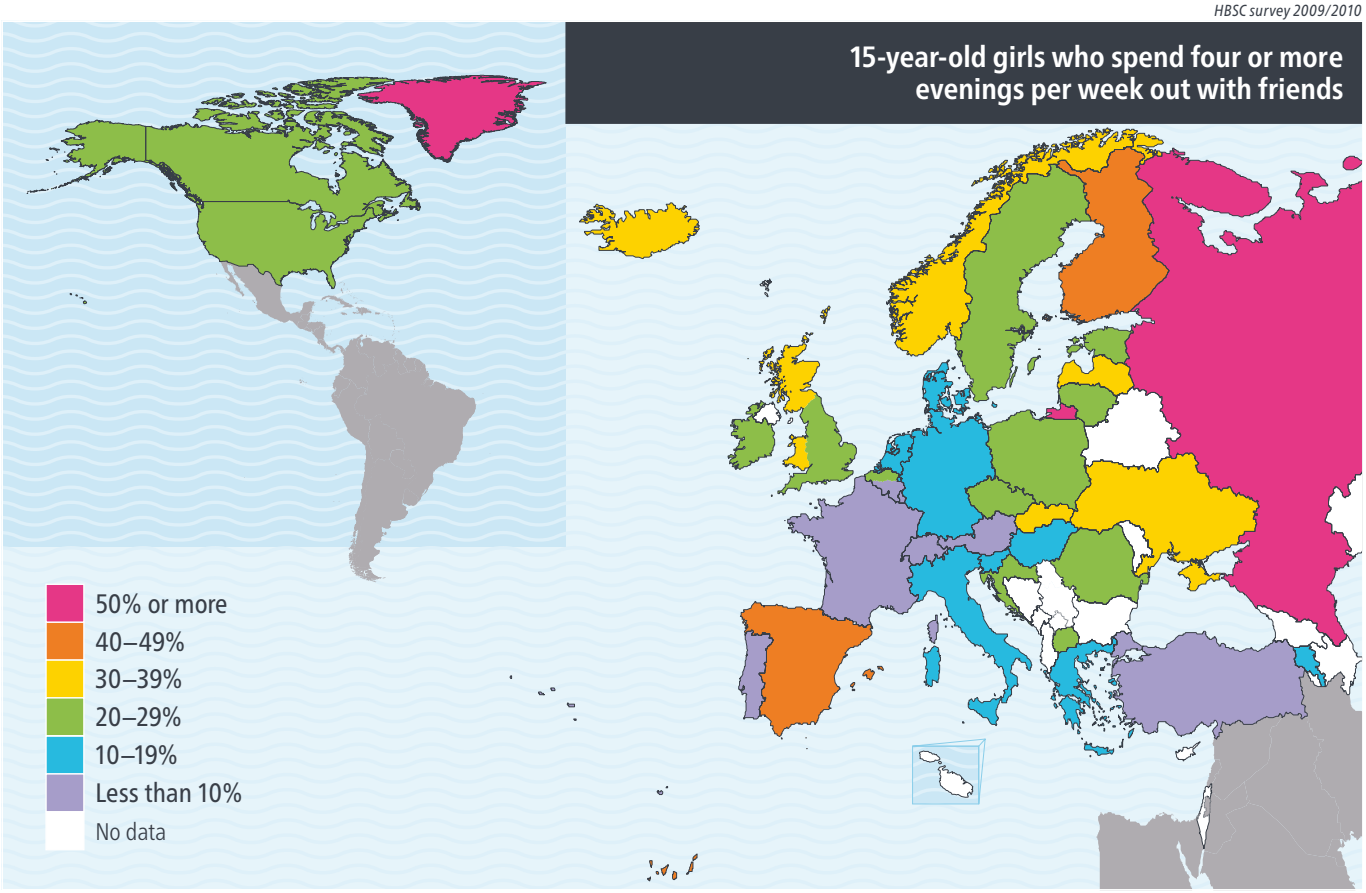
HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-olds who spend four or more evenings per week out with friends



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010



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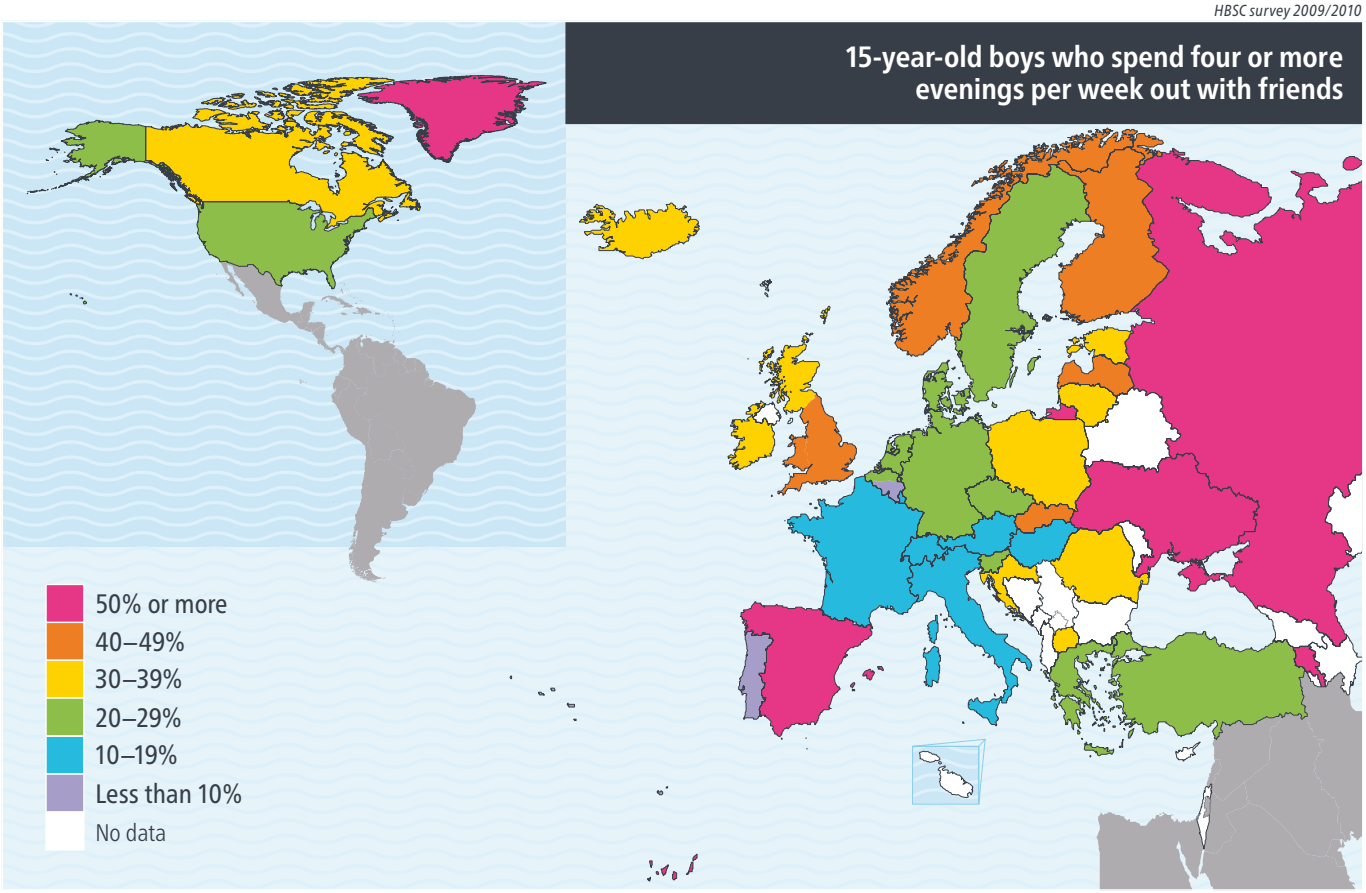
HBSC survey 2009/2010



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

PEERS: ELECTRONIC MEDIA CONTACT (EMC)

Use of EMC through the Internet and mobile-telephone technology has increased faster among young people than the rest of the population *(13).* EMC has become an integral part of their lives, enabling them to contact social networks irrespective of time and place.

EMC has been associated with potential benefits and risks. Cyberbullying is seen as a public health problem *(14)* that may threaten young people's social and emotional development *(15)*. Although Internet use has been related to loneliness *(16),* recent evidence suggests that greater use of EMC is associated with more face-to-face contact with friends *(13)*.

Intensive use of EMC has been associated with poorer perceptions of health, poorer sleeping habits *(17)* and engagement in risk behaviours *(18)*.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
DAILY EMC WITH FRIENDS

[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/– 0.5%. *Note.* No data for Norway.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how often they talk to friend(s) on the telephone, send them text messages or have contact through the Internet. Response options ranged from "rarely or never" to "every day". The findings presented here show the proportions who reported EMC with their friends every day.

RESULTS

Age

Prevalence of EMC showed a significant increase between ages 11 and 15 in all countries and regions. The increase was larger than 15% in almost all.

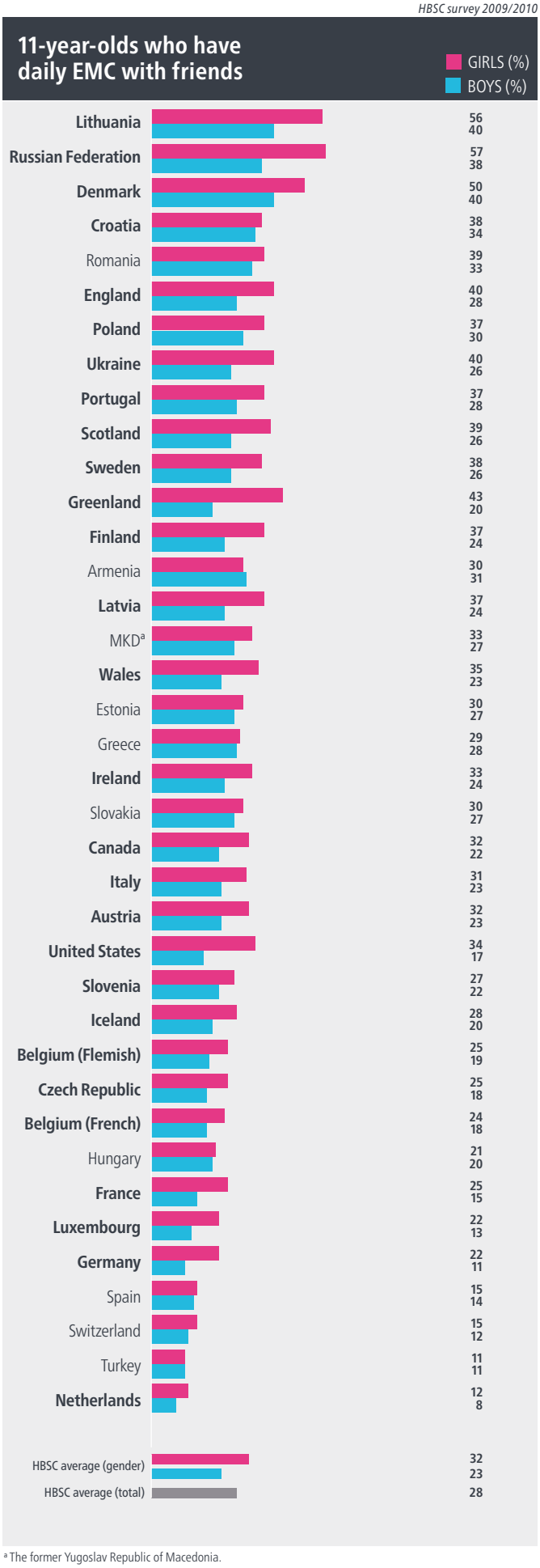
Gender

Girls were more likely to report it. The gender difference was significant for most countries and regions for 11-year-olds and almost all for those aged 13 and 15.

Family affluence

Daily EMC was significantly associated with higher family affluence in almost all countries and regions. The difference in prevalence between young people from low- and high-affluence families was over 10% in most and over 15% in around a third.

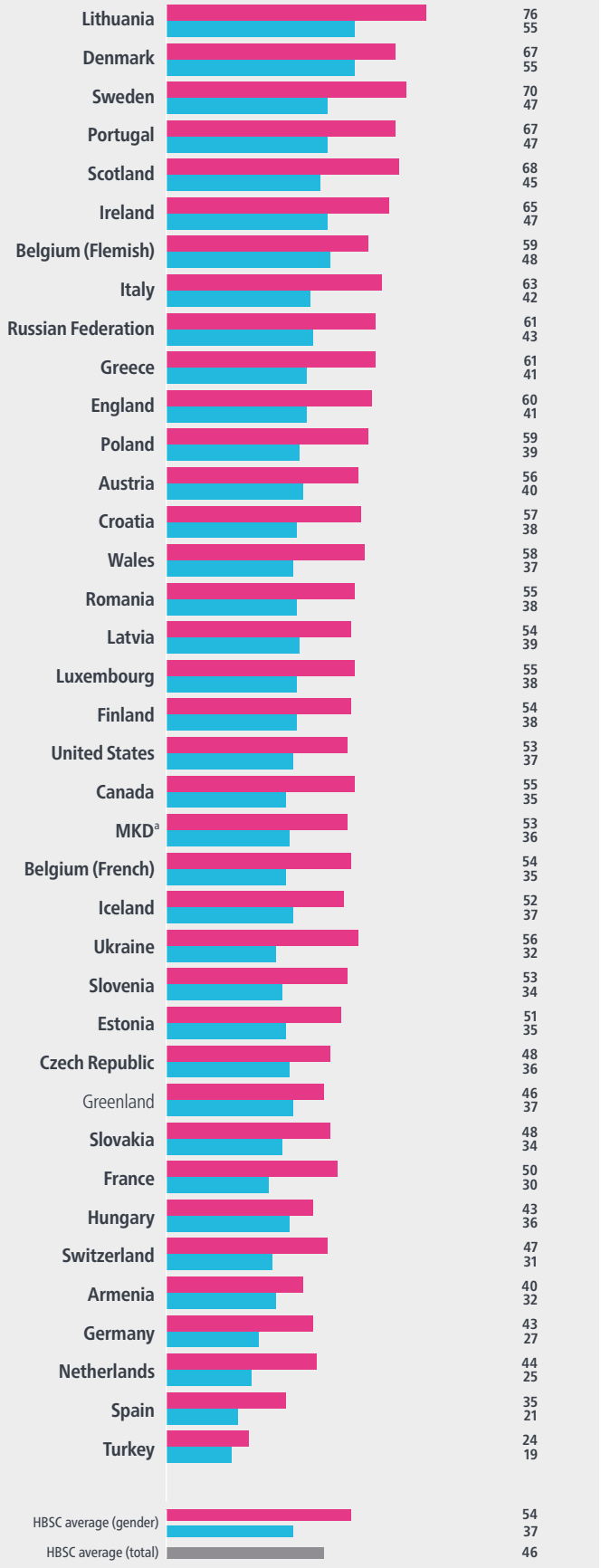
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

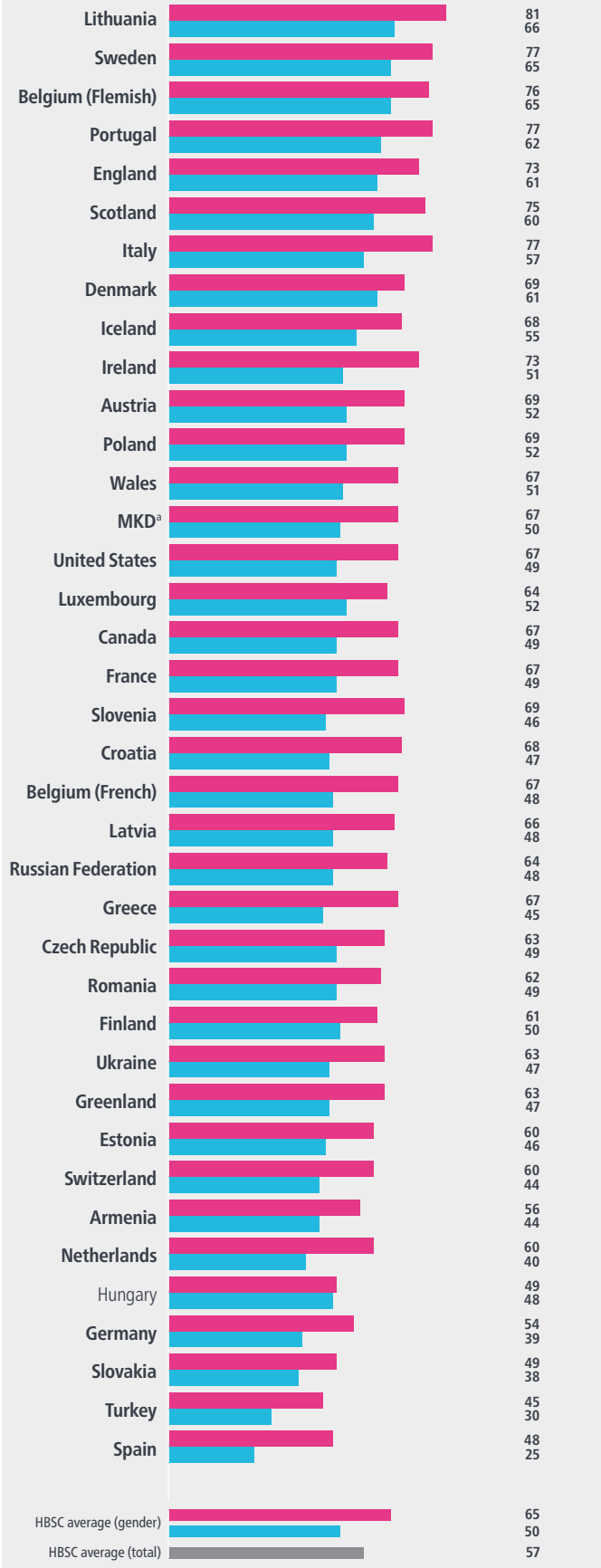
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who have daily EMC with friends



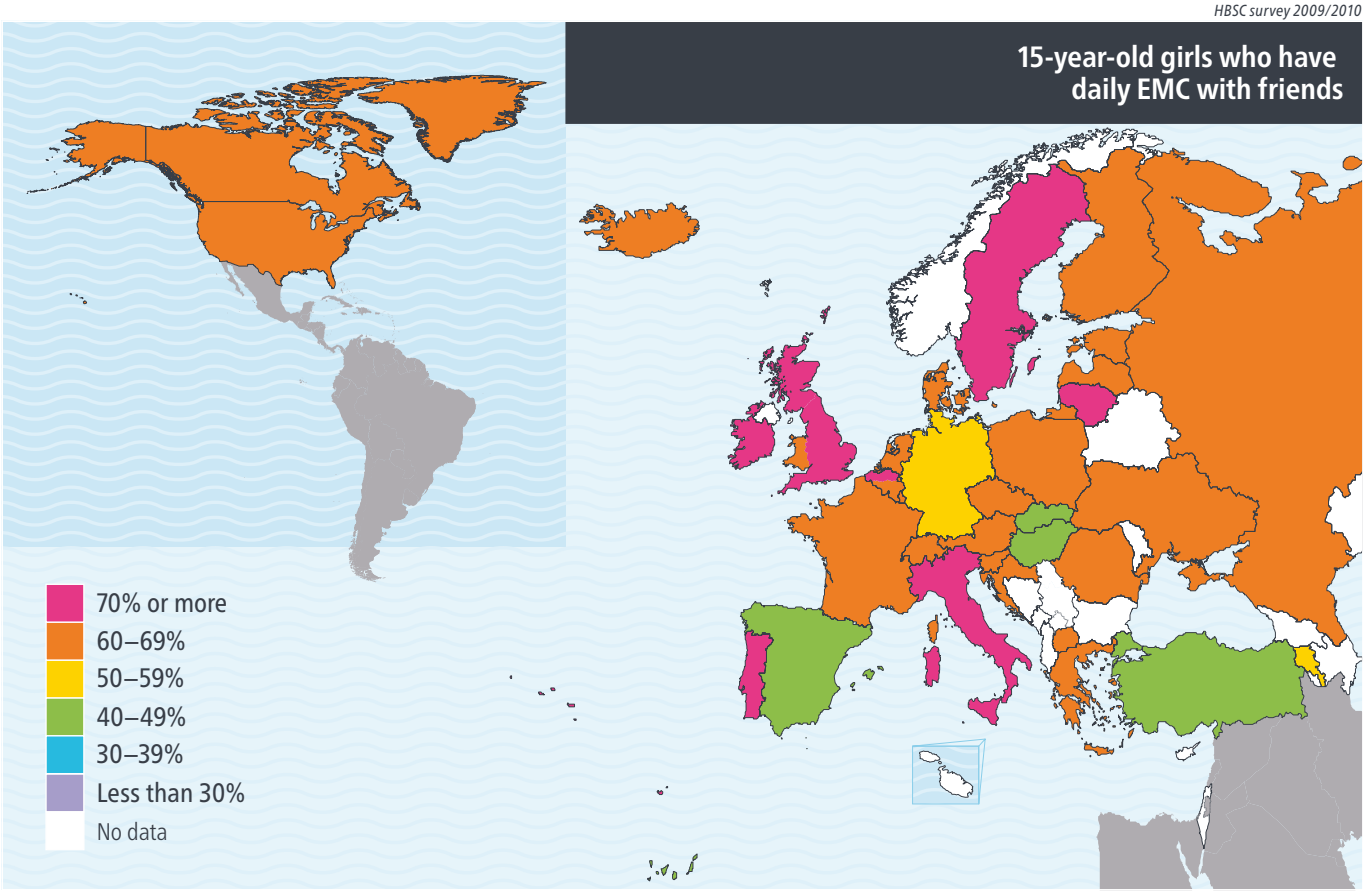
HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-olds who have daily EMC with friends



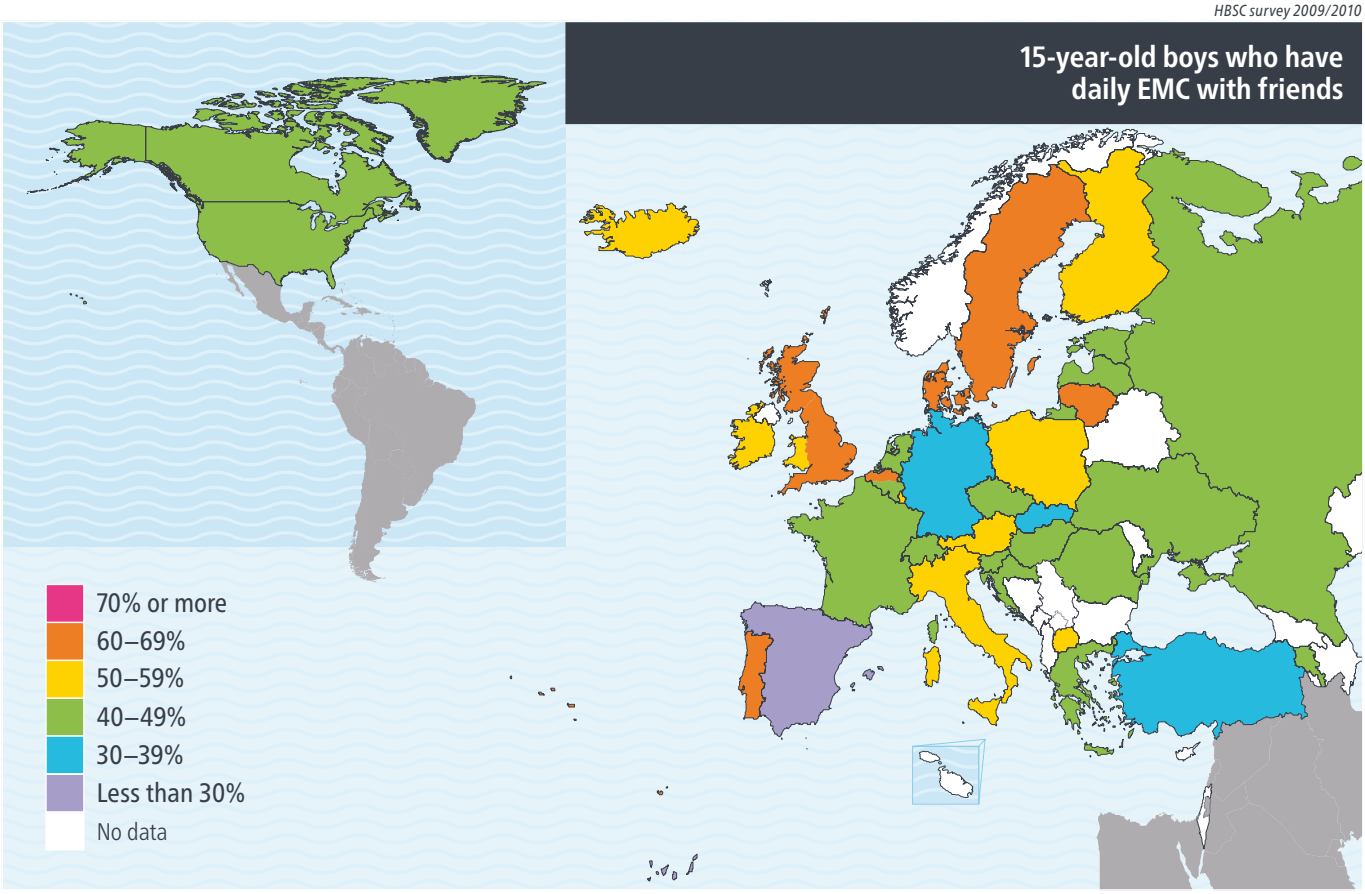
Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05). No data for Norway.

HBSC survey 2009/2010



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

PEERS: SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION AND POLICY REFLECTIONS

SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION

Close friendships

The results show that the likelihood of having three or more close friends decreases as young people grow older, which may be attributed to an increase in friendship intimacy in later years at the expense of having a large number of friends.

Girls tend to be more relationship oriented, forming closer relationships with a small select group of friends, while boys are in general more group-oriented and are therefore more likely to report greater numbers of friends *(19)*.

Young people in affluent families are more likely to have three or more close friends. Greater financial resources may enable them to participate in more activities with opportunities to establish friendships *(20)*.

Variation between countries and regions may be explained by cultural norms and expectations that may or may not encourage non-familial peer relationships. Lower national income and higher levels of socioeconomic inequalities in southern and eastern Europe may mean there are fewer opportunities for young people to engage in activities that support the creation of social ties *(21)*.

Evenings out with friends

Boys and girls have more evenings out with friends as they grow older, adult supervision declines and their social mobility increases.

Gender differences may be related to gender-specific socialization patterns and parental monitoring. Parents are more likely to ask their daughters questions *(22,23)* and therefore more likely to be aware of their daughters' whereabouts and how they spend their free time *(24)*.

Family affluence may influence how young people can spend their time, with those from more affluent families finding it easier to absorb the costs involved in frequent evenings out. Financial considerations cannot be the primary driver for time spent in the evenings with friends, however, as no such relationship is seen in many countries.

This indicator shows no clear geographic patterning.

EMC

The significant increase in use of EMC with age could be explained by the need for more contact with friends, reduced parental supervision and easier access to EMC for older age groups.

EMC use by boys and girls reveals differences. Boys are more frequent users of the Internet and online games, while girls tend to use mobile telephones more *(17)*. This parallels gender differences in communication, with girls more likely to spend time in social conversations and seeking emotional support *(25)*.

Differences in this measure by family affluence could be explained by the affordability of EMC devices.

This indicator shows no clear geographic patterning.

POLICY REFLECTIONS

Close friendships and evenings out with friends

The findings show that low affluence, increasing age and gender are associated with having fewer close friends.

Further research is required to identify the precise configuration of peer friendship that is most likely to have health benefits, in terms of both quantity and quality of relationships, but providing young people with the skills and competencies to enable

positive socialization processes can benefit health. Policy therefore has a role in facilitating better access to organized activities that enable young people to build health-promoting social networks. Particular attention should be given to networks that encourage those in lower-affluence and older groups and girls.

The findings highlight gender differences, with boys more likely to spend evenings out with friends. Being out with friends can provide young people with social-development experience that can build resilience, promote autonomy and encourage responsible and committed behaviour *(26)*. It is also, however, associated with risk behaviours such as substance use and early sexual activity.

Identifying effective ways of supporting young people's time spent with peers, encouraging positive behaviour and reducing risk-taking activity requires consideration of the provision of risk-reduced leisure activities, particularly for those from lower-affluence families *(27)*.

EMC

EMC allows young people to establish and maintain personal relationships that create real and virtual interactions. The prevalence of EMC among adolescents has increased over the last decade, mirroring what has happened throughout societies.

EMC helps young people to establish new contacts with peers that can later develop into friendships *(28)* and to maintain friendships through arranging appointments and coordinating and managing face-to-face contacts *(29)*. It can be an important means of social support through, for example, enabling discussion of problems with friends.

EMC can also be detrimental to physical and mental health, particularly in relation to reduced levels of physical activity and through cyberbullying, but it represents an important new environment whose role in promoting health should be taken seriously. Finding the right balance between protecting young people against Internet harassment and excessive EMC and efforts to use it to improve access to information and services is an important policy goal.

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SCHOOL: LIKING SCHOOL

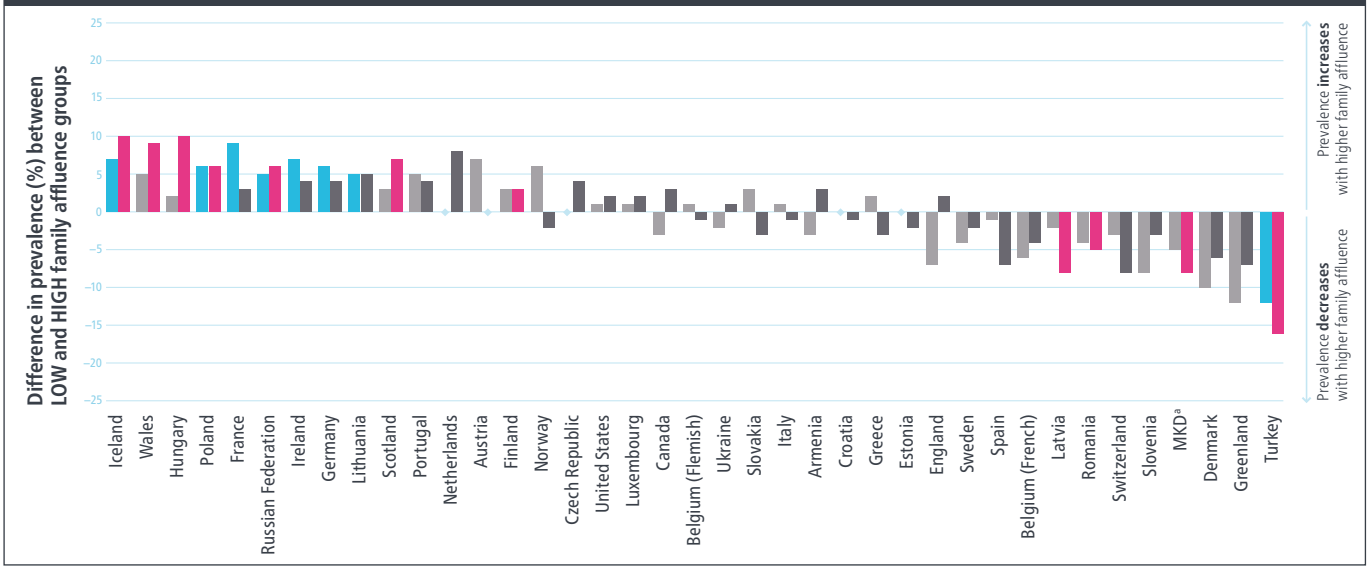
School experiences occur during crucial developmental periods in young people's lives and influence the development of their self-esteem, self-perceptions and health behaviours, with consequent effects on future health and life satisfaction *(1)*.

A positive school experience is considered a resource for health and well-being, while a negative experience may constitute a risk factor, affecting students' mental and physical health. "Liking school" has consequently been identified as a protective factor against health-compromising behaviours including bullying *(2)*, sexual risk-taking *(3)* and tobacco, alcohol and drug use *(4,5)*. Students who dislike school or do not feel connected to it are more likely to fail academically, drop out *(6)* and have mental health problems *(7)*.

Schools can positively affect children's health and well-being through the creation of positive developmental experiences, enhancing their enjoyment *(8)*. This may be particularly important for marginalized children *(9)*. National education and school-level policies and practices need to reflect schools' influence on young people's lives, especially as students get older and their connections with school typically decrease.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
LIKING SCHOOL A LOT



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/– 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how they feel about school at present. Response options ranged from "I like it a lot" to "I don't like it at all". The findings presented here show the proportion reporting that they like school a lot.

RESULTS

Age

Fewer students reported liking school a lot at age 15 than age 11. This change was significant in most countries and relatively large, with differences of over 15% reported.

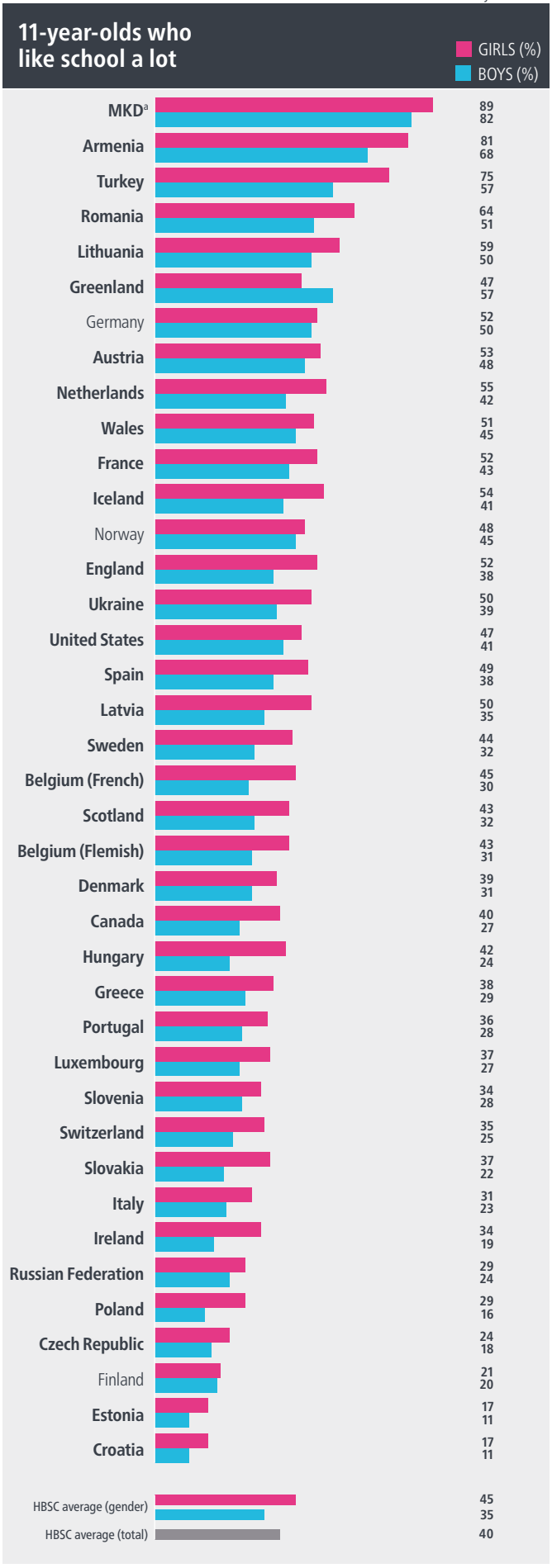
Gender

Girls were more likely to report it at all three ages. The gender difference was significant in almost all countries and regions at age 11, but in only around half at age 15. Differences were moderate, in generally around 5–10%.

Family affluence

There was no strong or consistent association between liking school and family affluence.

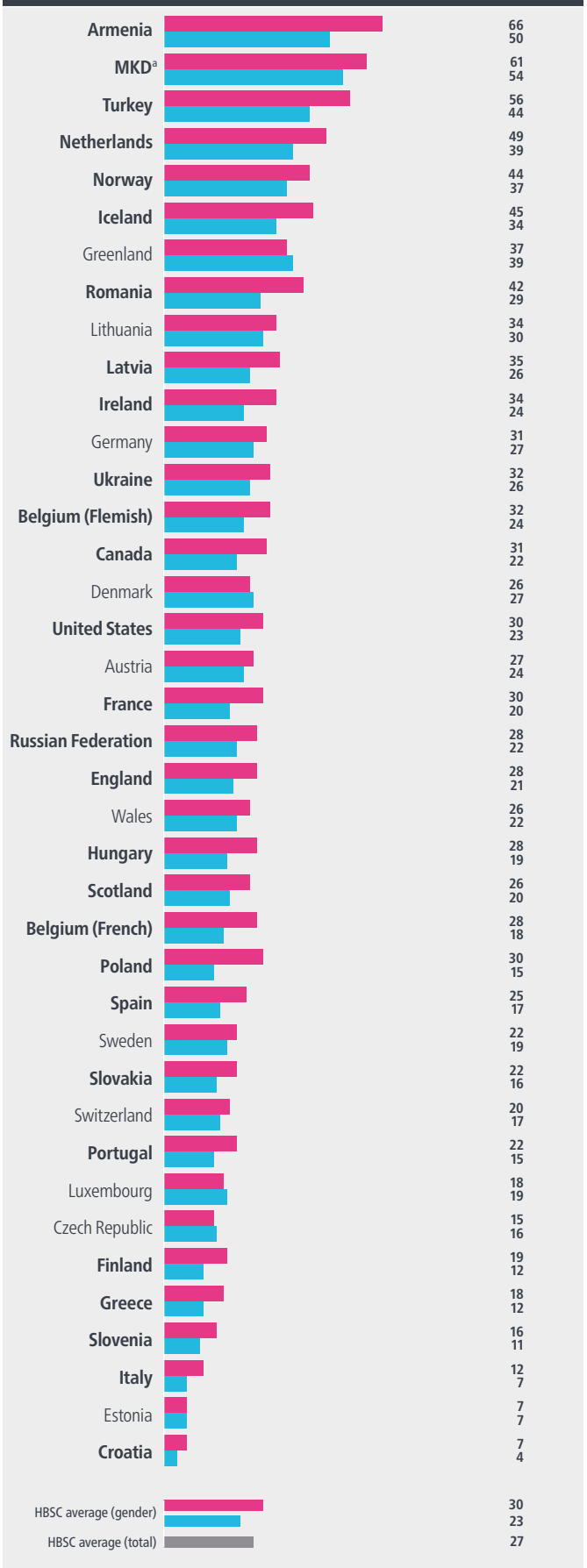
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

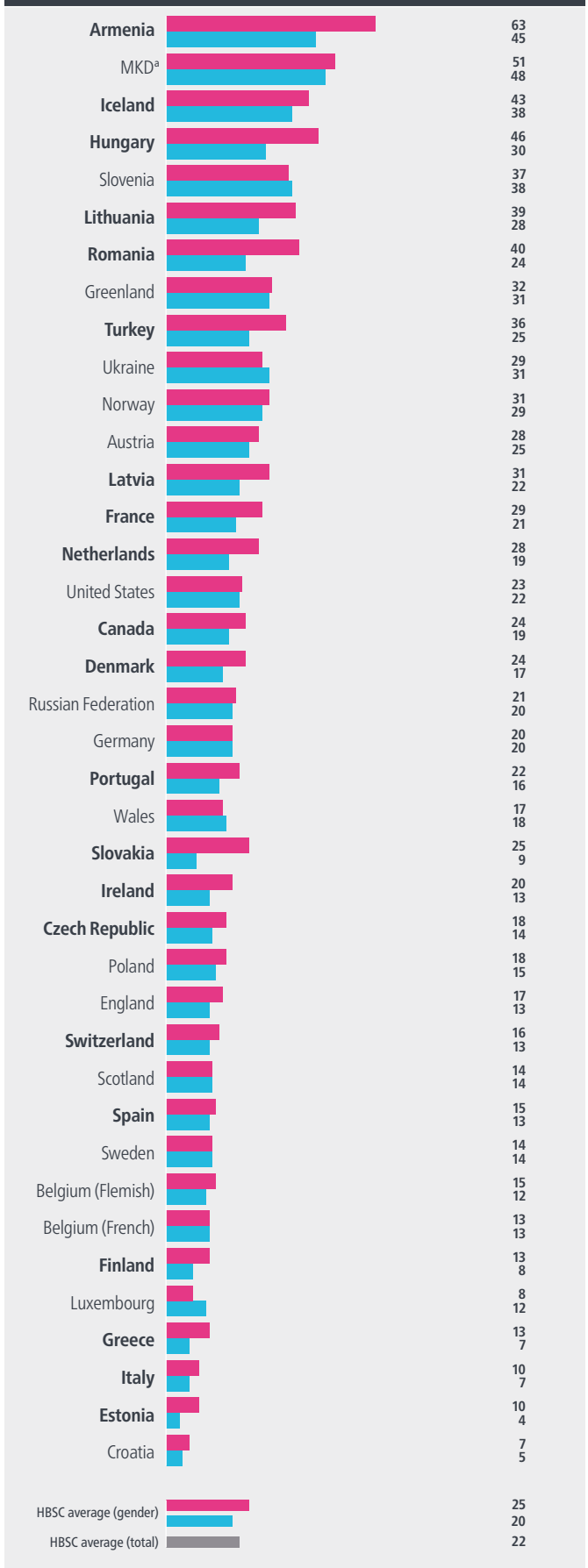
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who like school a lot



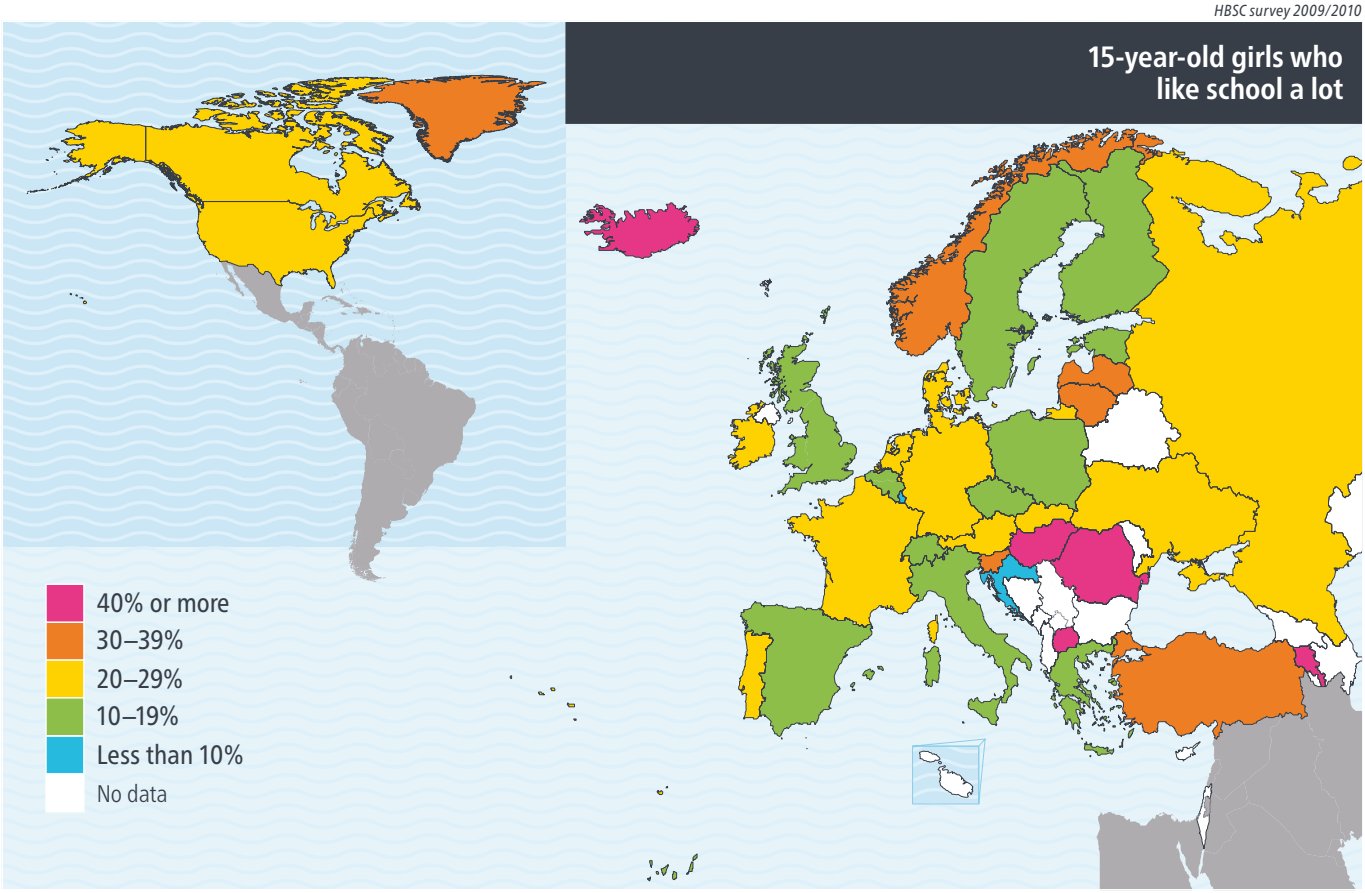
HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-olds who like school a lot



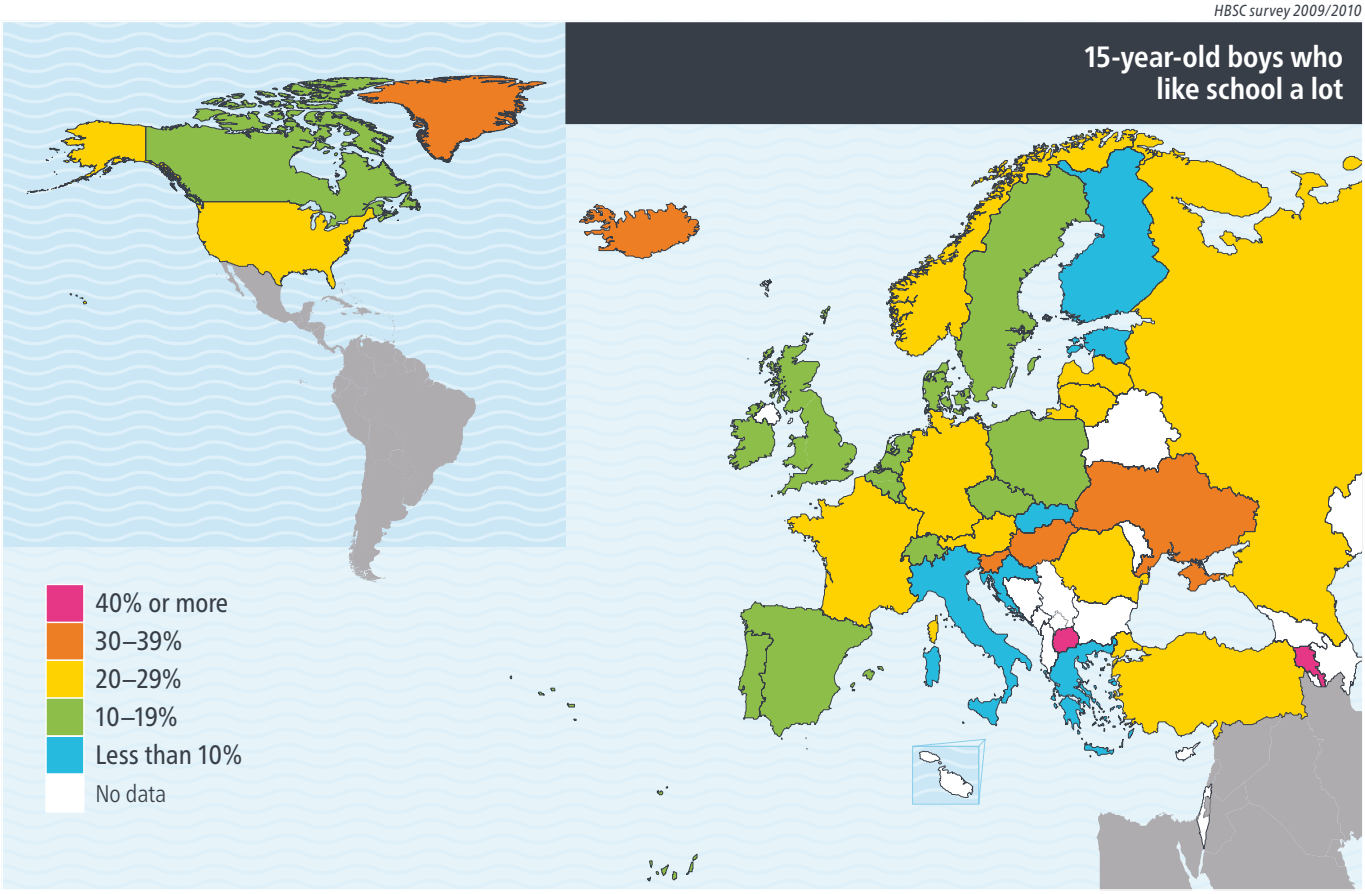
Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

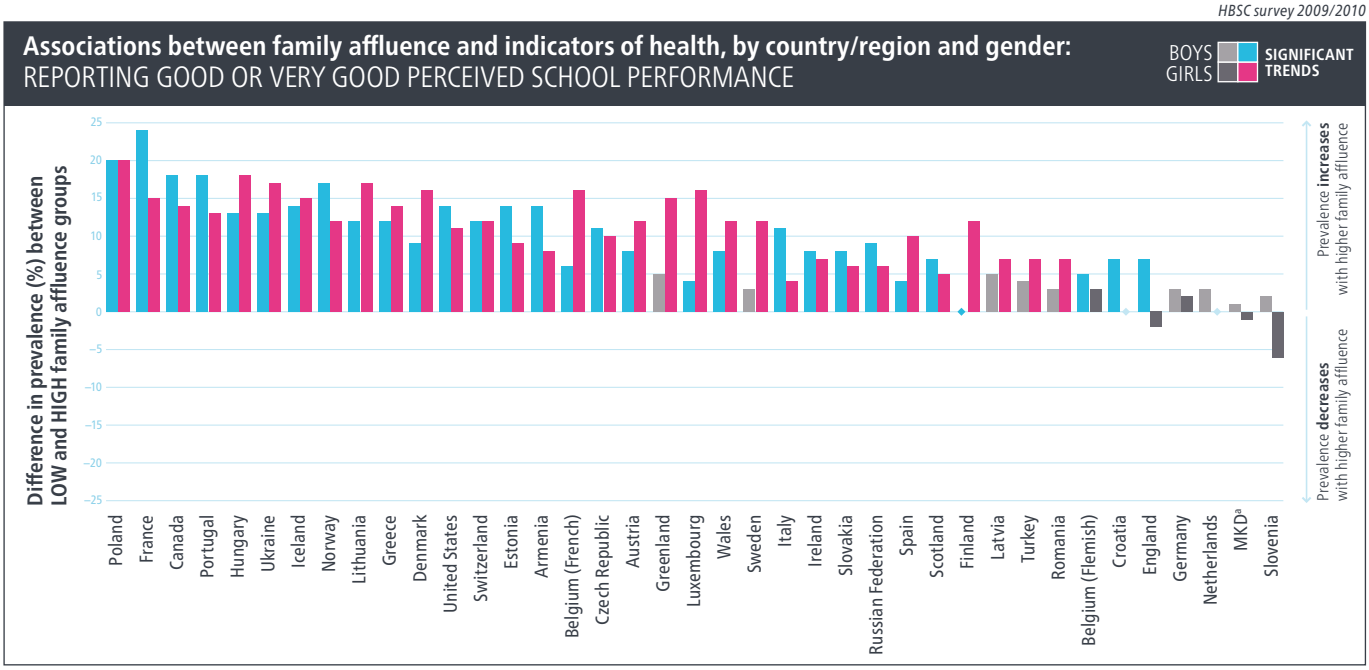
SCHOOL: PERCEIVED SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Young people's perceived school performance is a consistent and strong predictor of health and well-being *(10)*. Students who report higher levels of achievement also report higher levels of life satisfaction *(11)*, lower rates of bullying *(12)*, fewer subjective health complaints and lower levels of health-compromising behaviours and health risks *(13)*.

Peer relationships, school structures and teacher behaviours appear to affect students' academic achievement potential *(14)*. On the positive side, they support achievement and promote resistance to health-compromising activities and reduced emotional health and mental well-being *(14)*. As students enter later grades and are at greatest risk of engaging in behaviours that compromise their physical and emotional health *(15)*, they typically report lower levels of achievement.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
REPORTING GOOD OR VERY GOOD PERCEIVED SCHOOL PERFORMANCE



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/– 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked what, in their opinion, their class teacher(s) think(s) about their school performance compared to their classmates. Response options ranged from "very good" to "below average". The findings presented here show the proportion reporting their perceived school performance as either "very good" or "good".

RESULTS

Age

Perceived good academic achievement was significantly less prevalent with increasing age in almost all countries and regions for boys and girls. The decline was relatively large: over 15% between ages 11 and 15 in most countries and regions.

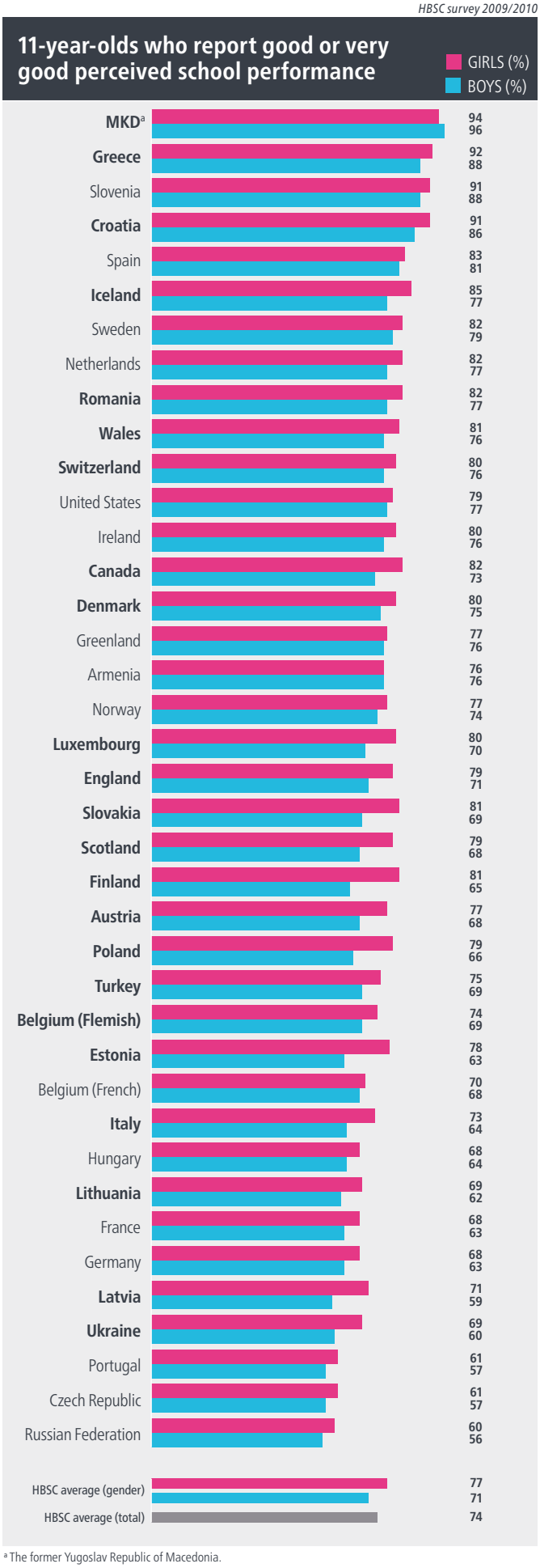
Gender

Girls were more likely to report good academic achievement. Gender differences were significant in around half of countries and regions, and across all three age groups. Differences in prevalence were around 5–10% in most countries, but they increased to over 10% by age 15 in around a quarter.

Family affluence

There was a significant positive association between prevalence and family affluence among boys and girls in most countries. The difference was more than 10% in almost half.

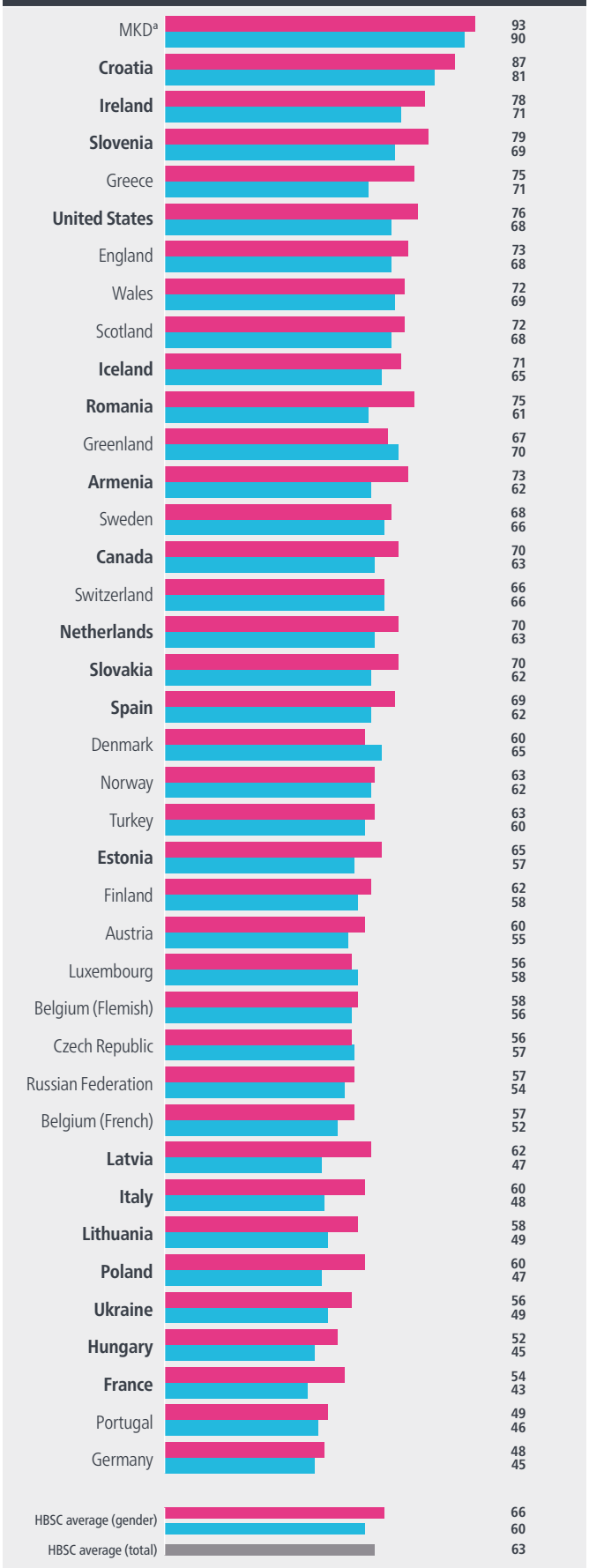
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

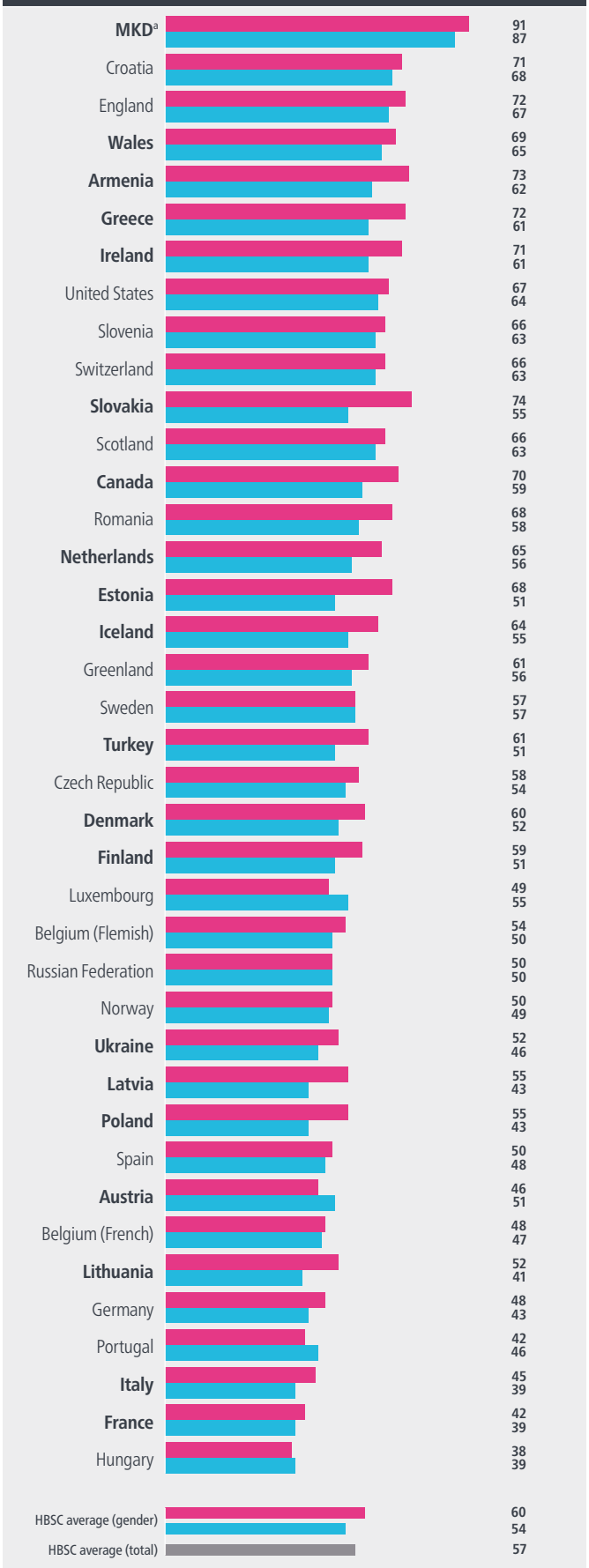
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who report good or very good perceived school performance



HBSC survey 2009/2010

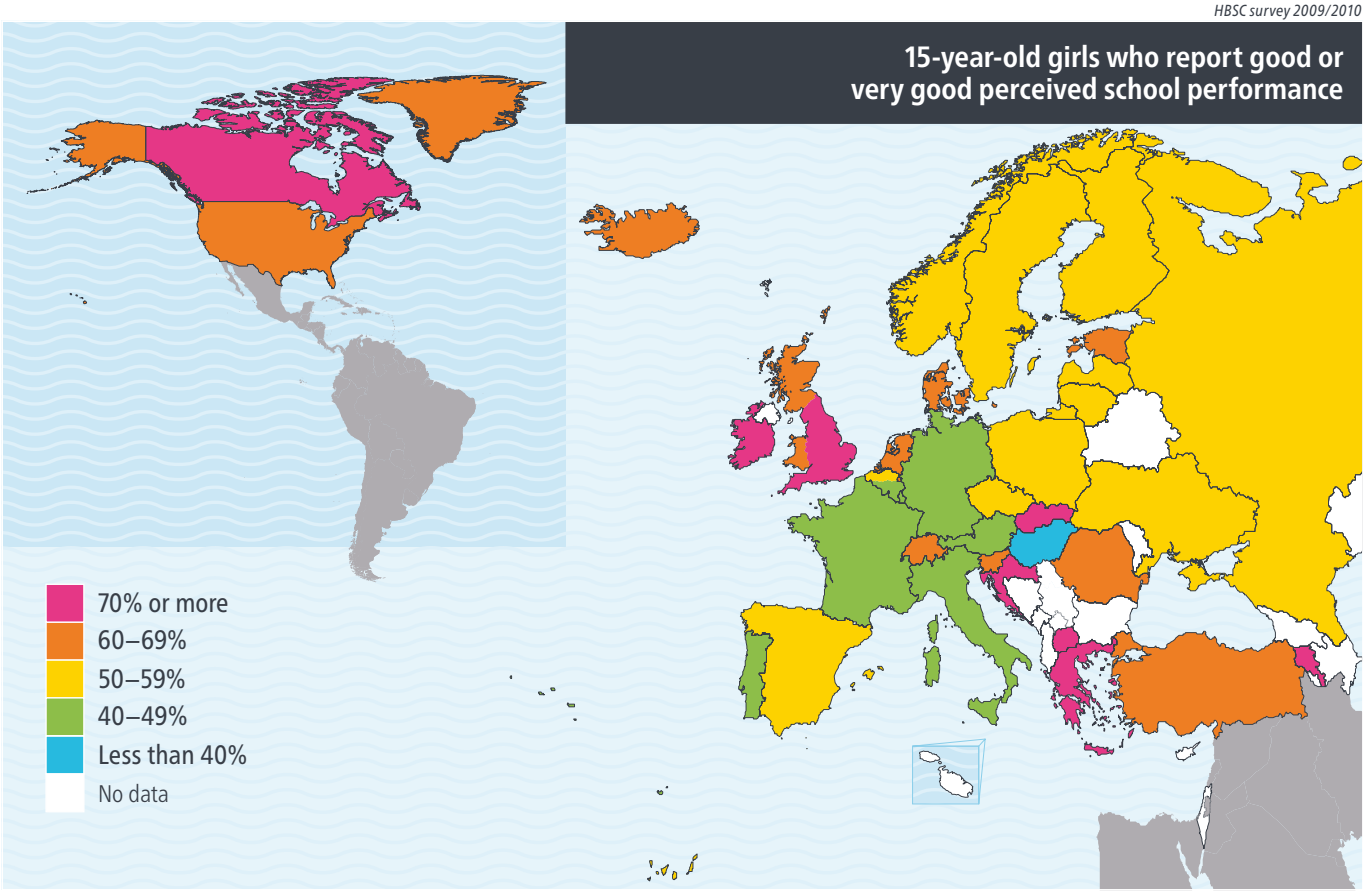
15-year-olds who report good or very good perceived school performance



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010

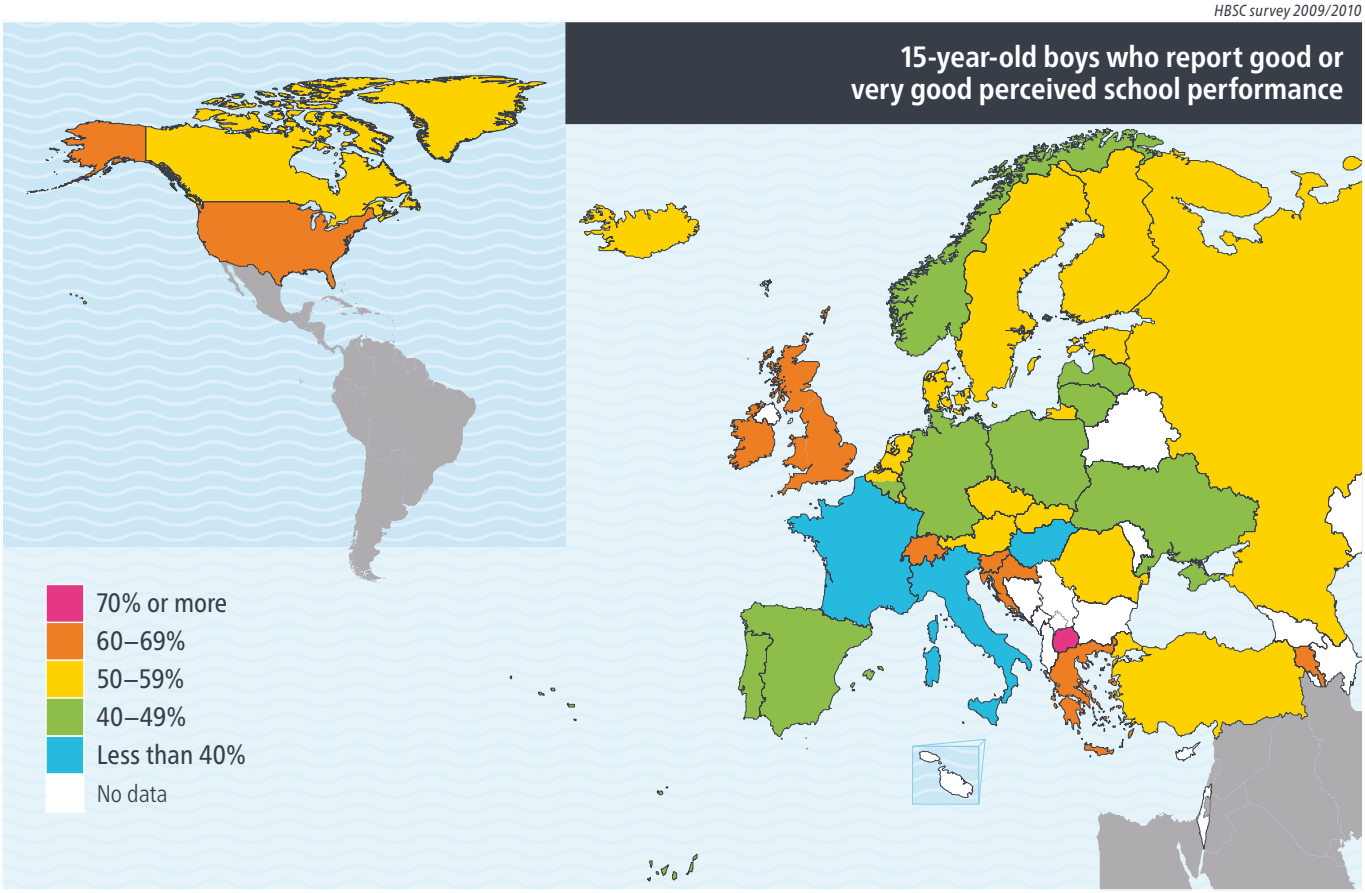
15-year-old girls who report good or very good perceived school performance



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who report good or very good perceived school performance



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

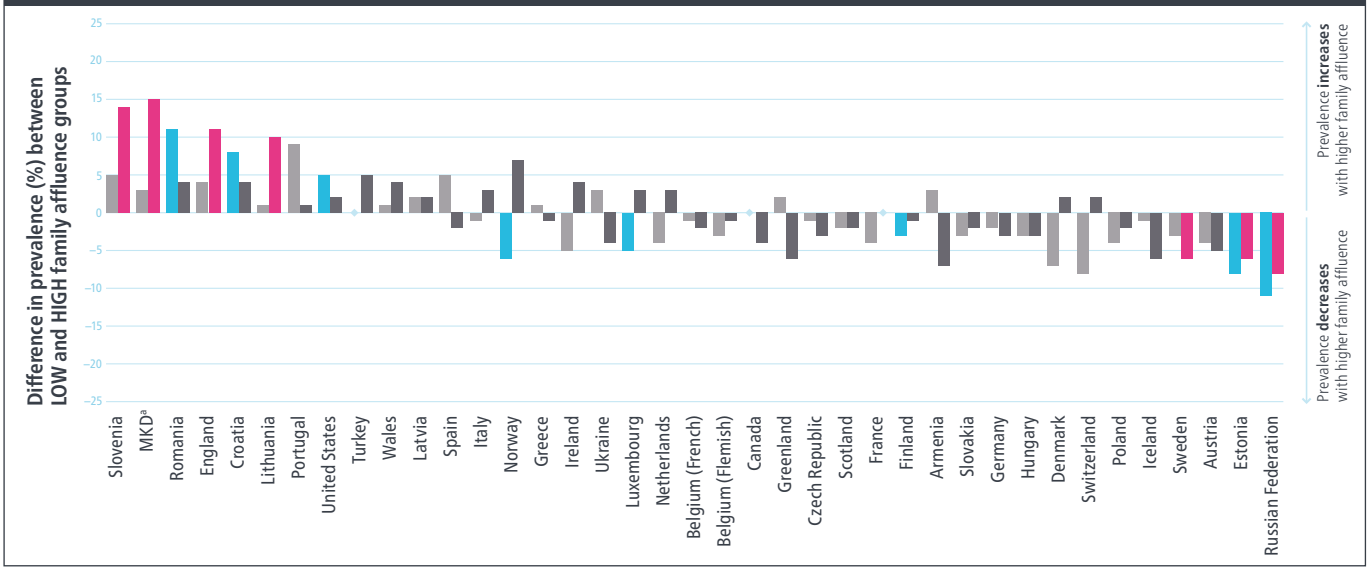
SCHOOL: PRESSURED BY SCHOOLWORK

Feeling pressured or stressed by schoolwork may not only negatively affect students' learning, but can also influence a wide range of non-academic outcomes such as health, health behaviour and well-being. Affected students characteristically engage in more health-compromising behaviours (such as smoking, drinking alcohol and drunkenness), have more frequent health complaints (such as headache, abdominal pain and backache) and experience psychological problems (such as feeling sad, tense and nervous) *(16,17)*. Associations with lower self-reported health and lower life satisfaction are also reported *(13)*

Protective factors can play an important role in decreasing the pressure students experience. A supportive school class climate, for example, can buffer the effect of school-related stress on health complaints *(16)* and teacher, classmate and family support may directly or indirectly influence students' experiences of demands at school *(18)*.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
FEELING PRESSURED BY SCHOOLWORK



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/– 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked how pressured they feel by the schoolwork they have to do. Response options ranged from "a lot" to "not at all". The findings presented here are the proportion who reported feeling pressured by schoolwork either "a lot" or "some".

RESULTS

Age

Perceived school pressure was significantly more prevalent with age in almost all countries and regions. The greatest increase was found among girls, where prevalence increased by over 15% between ages 11 and 15 in most countries and regions.

Gender

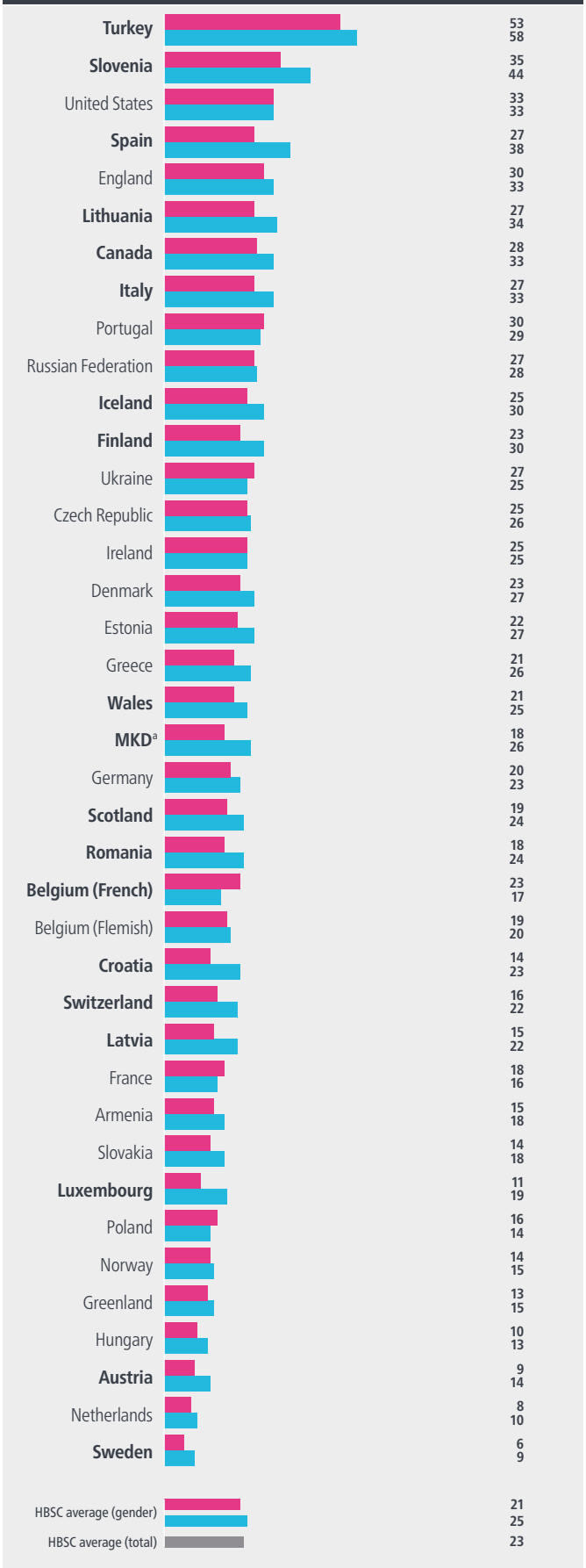
Gender differences changed with age. Boys were more likely to report it at age 11 (a significant difference in around half of countries) but, by age 15, girls were more likely to do so, with a significant difference in almost all countries and regions. The gender difference was bigger at age 15.

Family affluence

There was little evidence of an association with family affluence.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

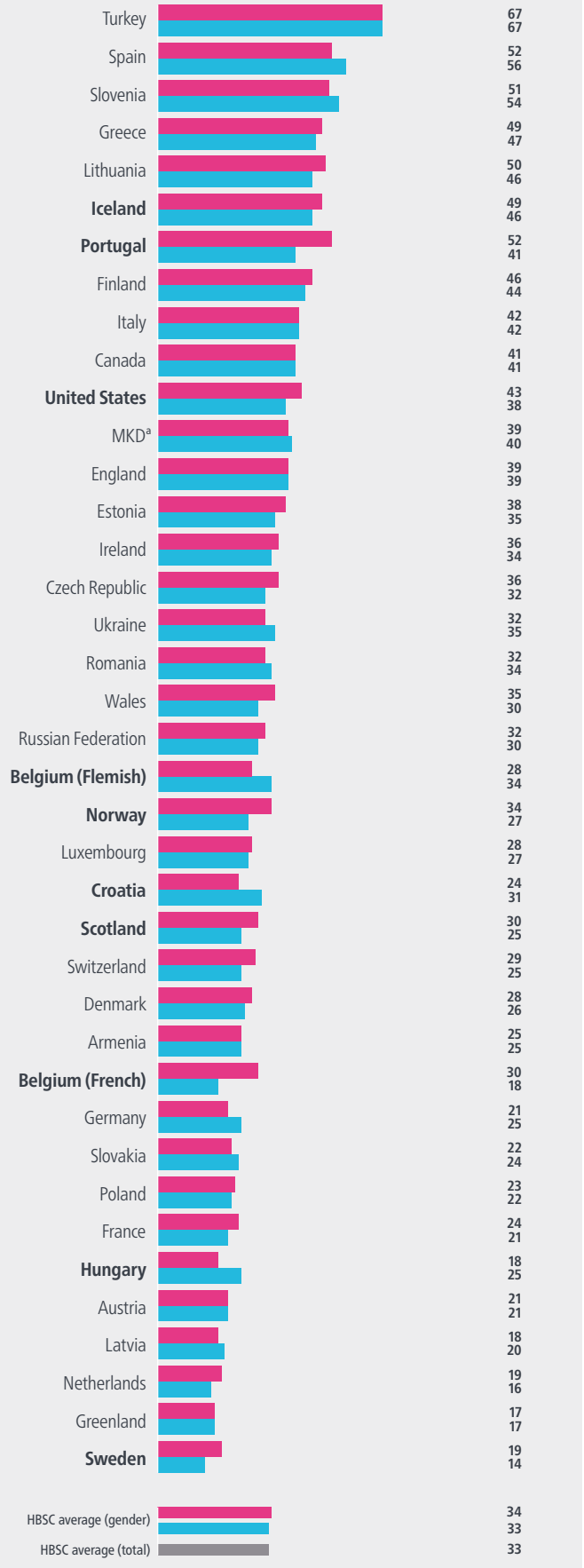
11-year-olds who feel pressured by schoolwork



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

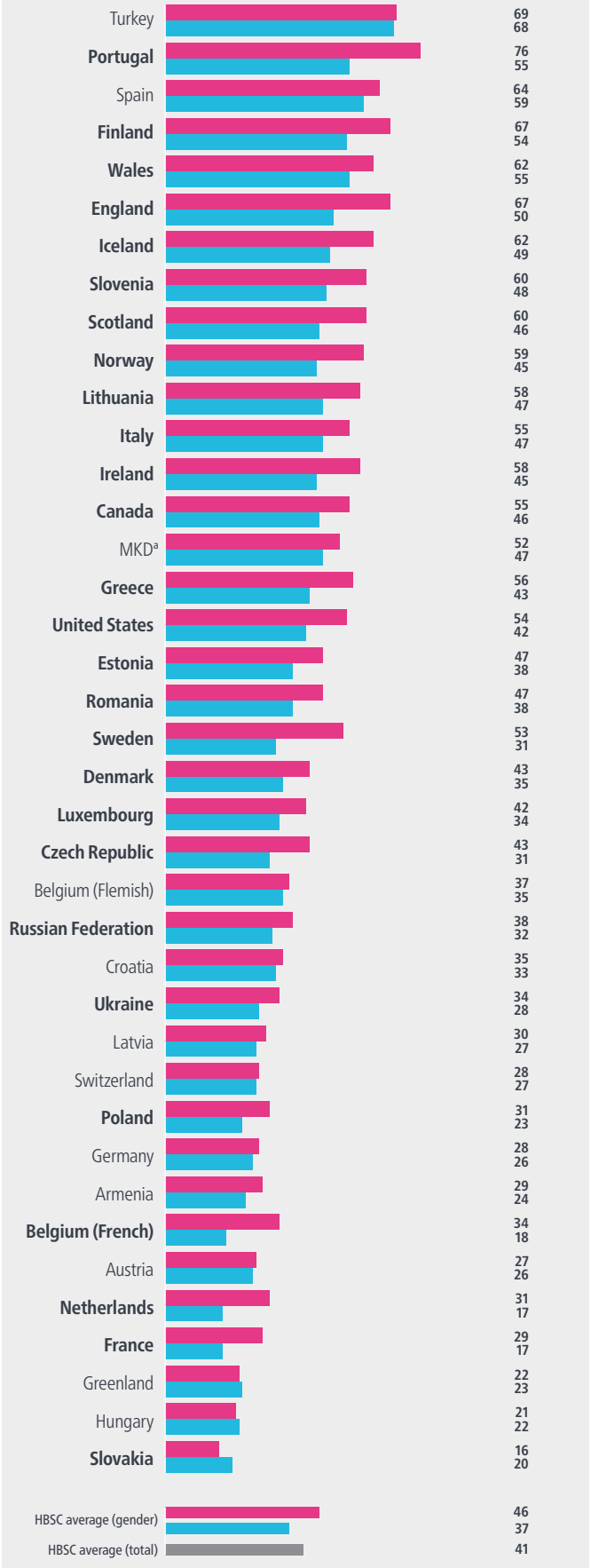
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who feel pressured by schoolwork



HBSC survey 2009/2010

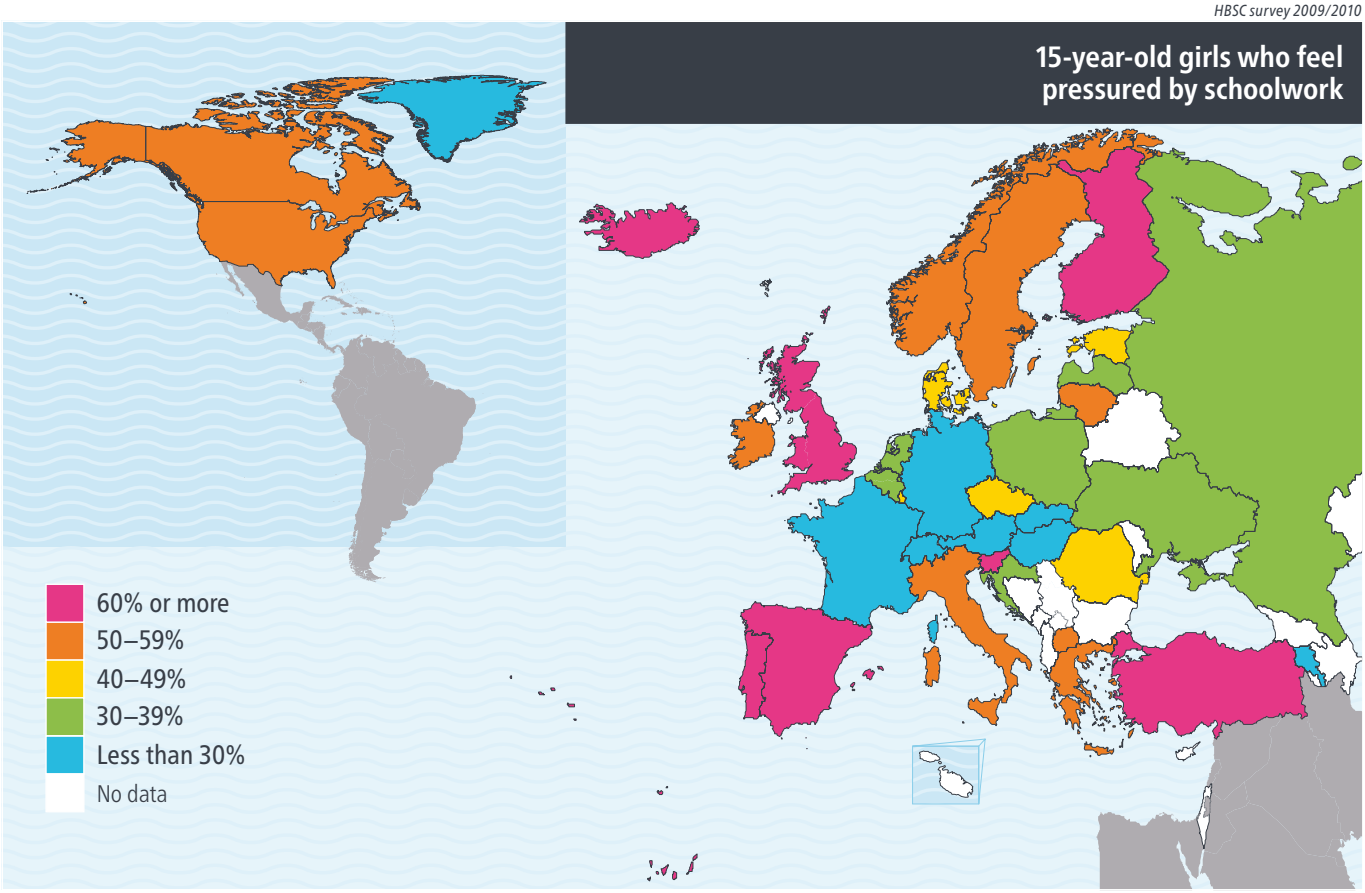
15-year-olds who feel pressured by schoolwork



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old girls who feel pressured by schoolwork



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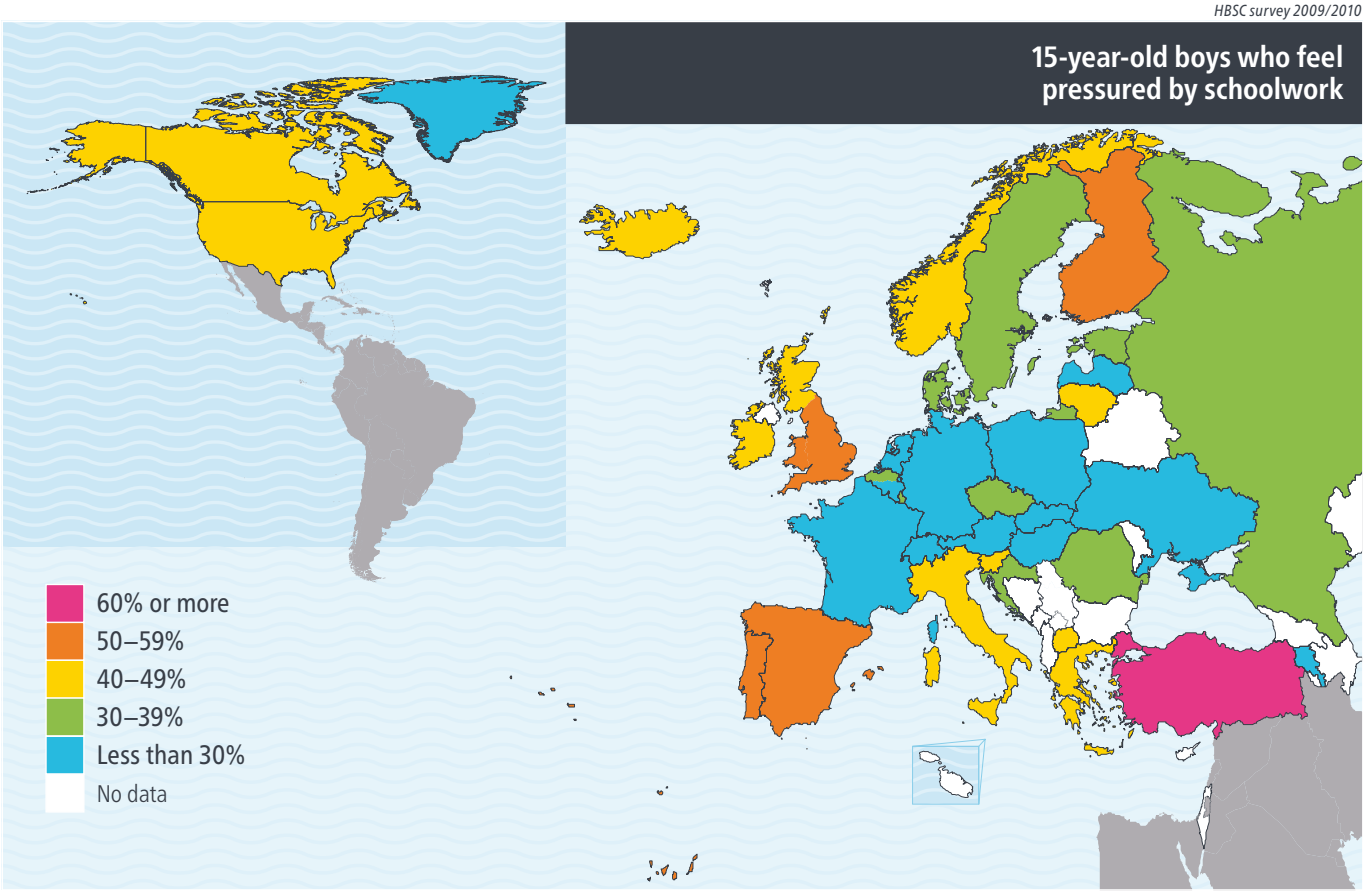
HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who feel pressured by schoolwork



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

SCHOOL: CLASSMATE SUPPORT

The peer group, particularly classmates, is of key importance to young people's social networks *(19)*. Support from classmates fosters feelings of "belonging" to a social group or setting *(20)*, while being deprived of such support may constitute a major strain.

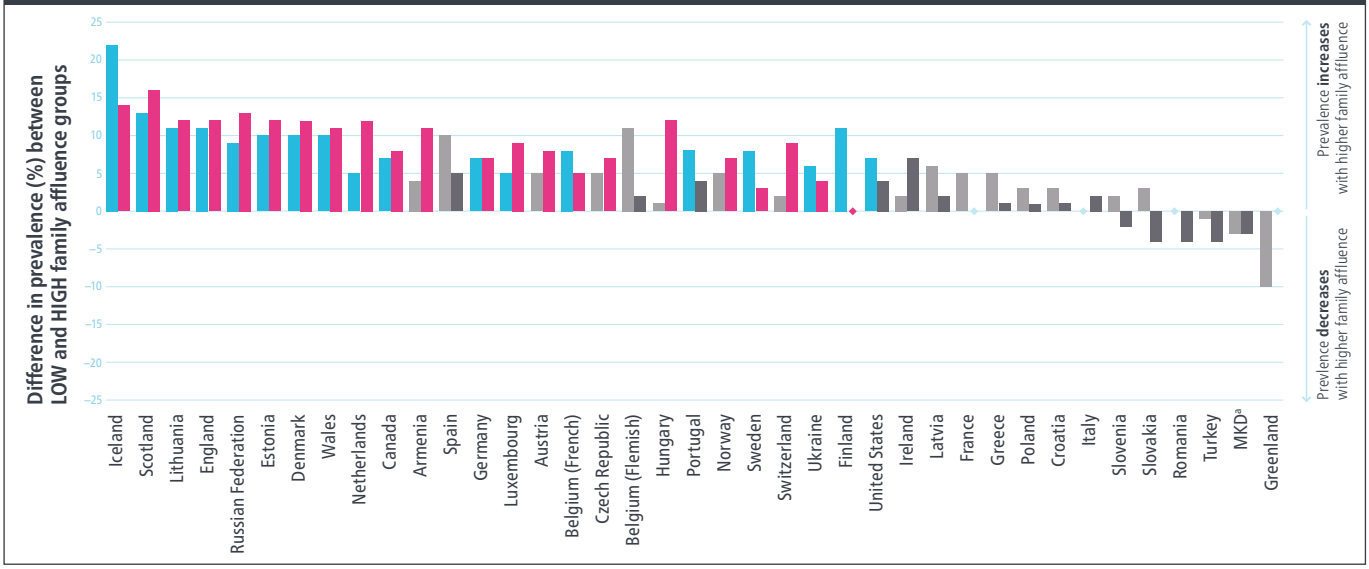
The level of perceived support from classmates is linked to aspects of school experiences including school satisfaction *(21)* and motivation *(22)*, school-related stress *(23)* and bullying *(24)*. Classmate support may mediate the association between experiences of being bullied and academic adjustment *(25)*.

Low perceived classmate support is related to somatic and psychological health complaints, such as headache, abdominal pain and depressed mood *(22,26)*, and greater prevalence of smoking and drinking *(27)*. High support is associated with high life satisfaction *(28),* increased self-efficacy *(29)* and increased levels of physical activity *(30)*.

Schools should strive to create supportive classrooms in which all students feel integrated by initiating school- and class-level practices for behavioural norms and pedagogical methods that promote cooperative learning strategies *(28,31)*.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

Associations between family affluence and indicators of health, by country/region and gender:
AGREE THAT CLASSMATES ARE KIND AND HELPFUL



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ◆ Indicates less than +/− 0.5%.

MEASURE

Young people were asked to show how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement "most of the students in my class(es) are kind and helpful". Response options ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The findings presented here show the proportion who agreed or strongly agreed.

RESULTS

Age

Perceived classmate support was significantly less prevalent with increasing age in most countries and regions for boys and girls. The age-related decline was less than 15% in almost all countries.

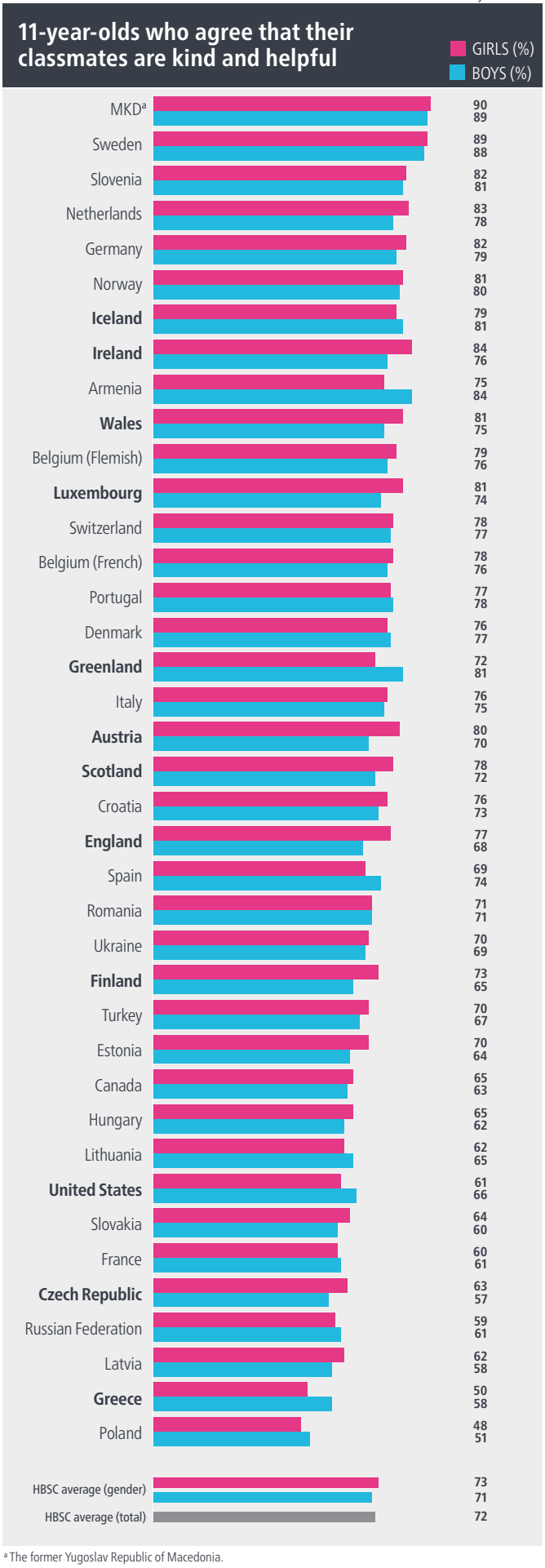
Gender

No clear gender patterns were found.

Family affluence

Increased prevalence of classmate support was significantly associated with high family affluence for boys and girls in around half of countries and regions. The differences in prevalence between young people in low- and high-affluence families were usually less than 15%, with larger differences more frequently observed for girls.

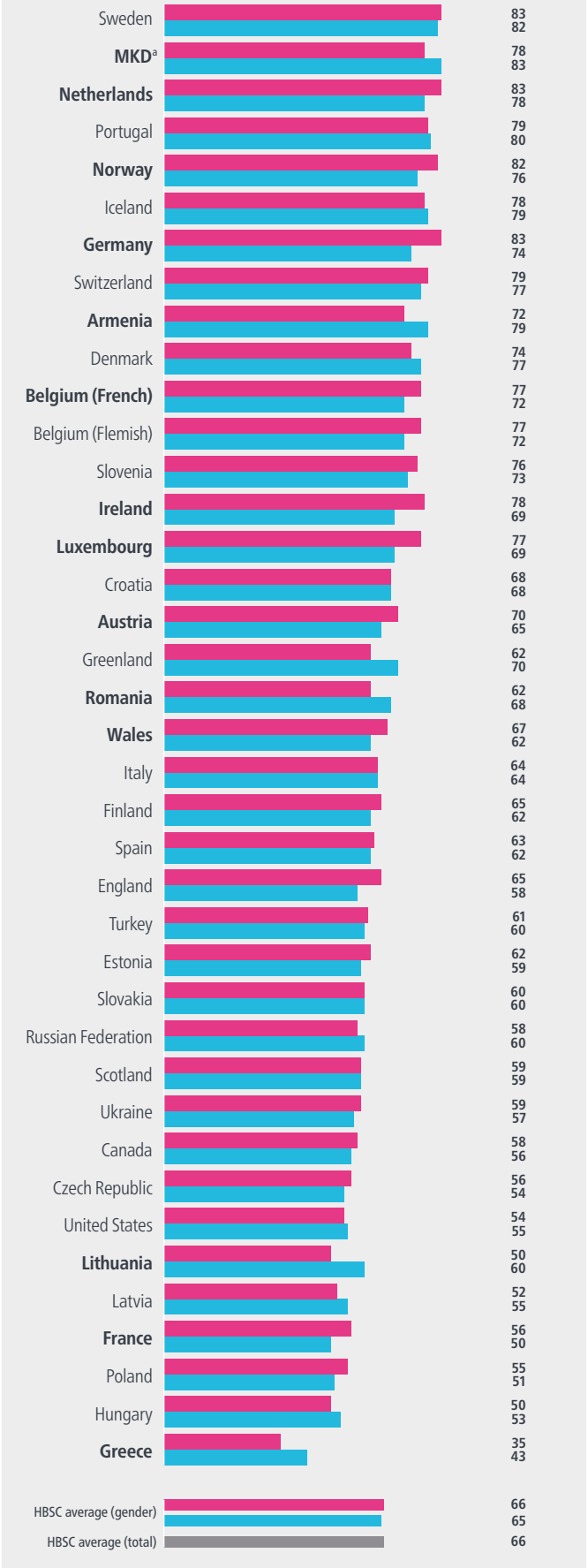
HBSC survey 2009/2010



[a] The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

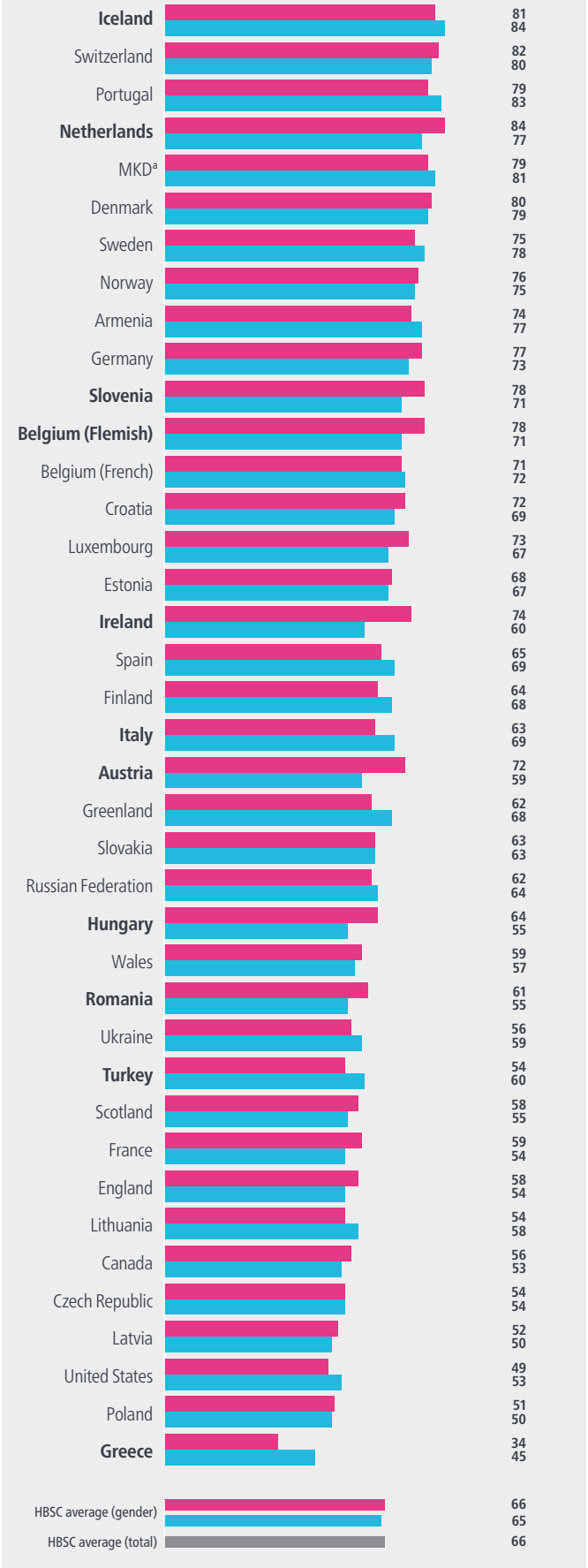
HBSC survey 2009/2010

13-year-olds who agree that their classmates are kind and helpful



HBSC survey 2009/2010

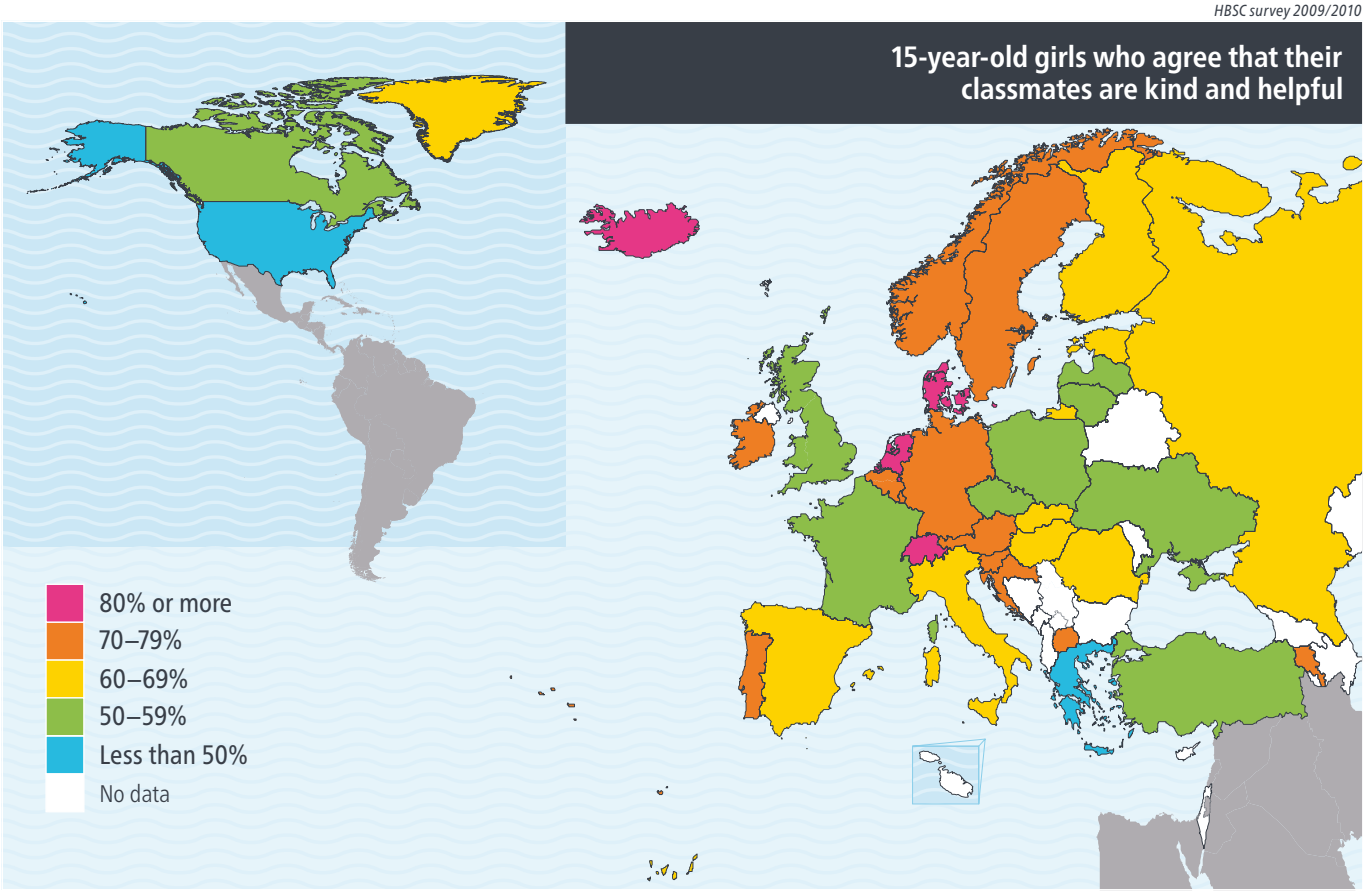
15-year-olds who agree that their classmates are kind and helpful



Note. **Indicates** significant gender difference (at p<0.05).

HBSC survey 2009/2010

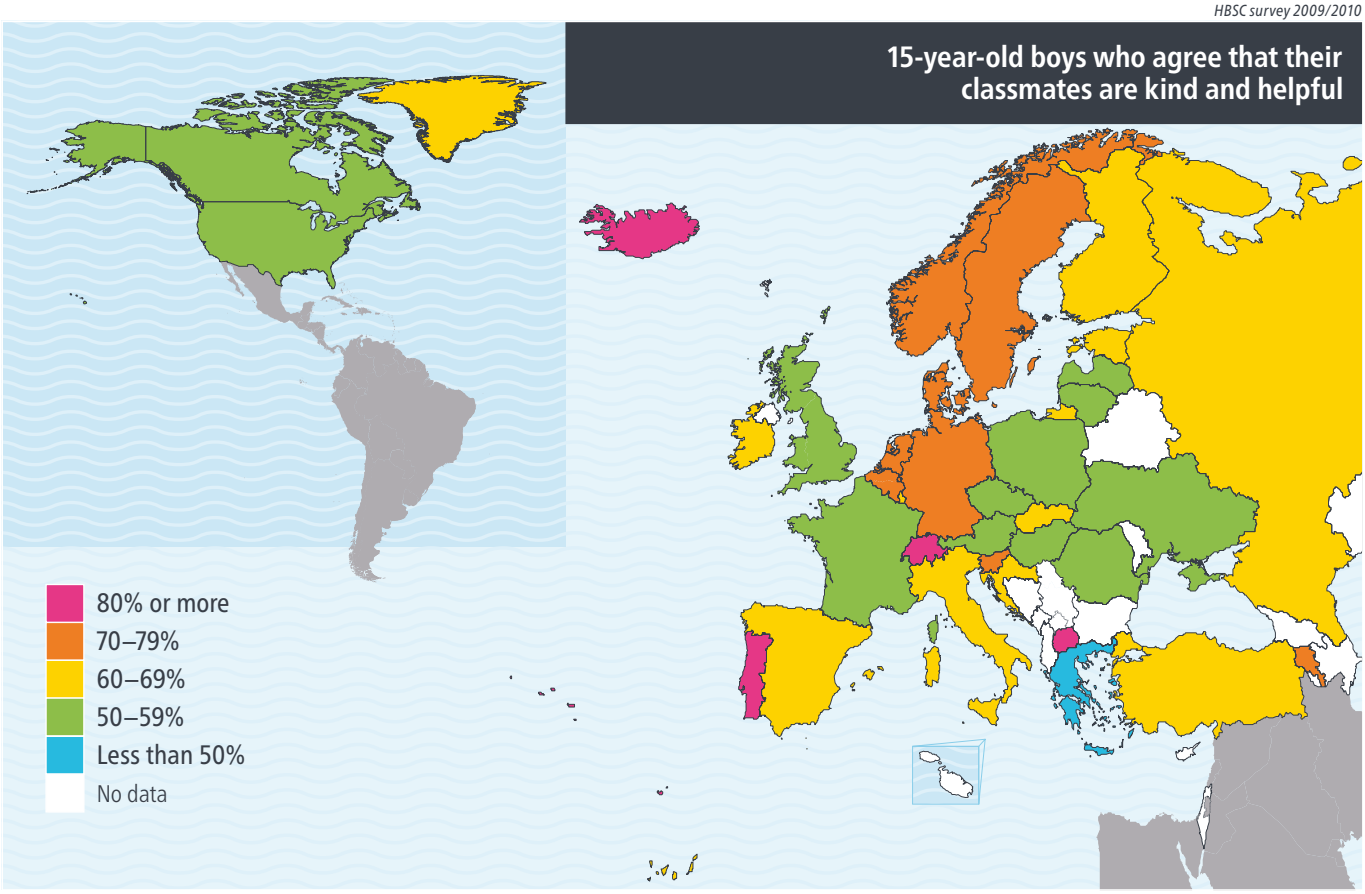
15-year-old girls who agree that their classmates are kind and helpful



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

HBSC survey 2009/2010

15-year-old boys who agree that their classmates are kind and helpful



Note. HBSC teams provided disaggregated data for Belgium and the United Kingdom; these data appear in the map above.

SCHOOL: SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION AND POLICY REFLECTIONS

SCIENTIFIC DISCUSSION

The school items represent different aspects of young people's school experiences, but share some important characteristics.

First, they provide a perspective on self-determination theory *(20)*, which can support understanding of positive health behaviours such as tobacco abstinence *(32)* and physical activity *(33)*. This theory posits the existence of three basic psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness – that must be met to provide optimal well-being. Competence is represented in the HBSC school items by perceived academic achievement, autonomy by perceived school pressure (in that autonomy acts as a buffer against perceptions of a high workload *(34)*) and relatedness by perceived classmate support, with liking school acting as a proxy for optimal well-being.

Second, perhaps because of their theoretical connections, the school concepts share similar patterns, particularly with respect to age. School perceptions worsen with increasing age across countries and regions, with liking school, perceived academic achievement and, to a lesser extent, classmate support decreasing and perceived school pressure increasing. There is therefore a systematic pattern of school increasingly not meeting students' basic psychological needs from ages 11 to 15.

These findings align with those of Eccles & Roeser *(35)*, among others *(36)*, who suggest that the pattern reflects the mismatch between the environment in middle and secondary schools and young people's needs. At an age when they would benefit from greater connectedness with their teachers and a more supportive school climate, the opposite occurs. School organization tends to become more depersonalized from primary and middle to secondary school, with different teachers for different subjects and, in many countries, different student groups for each subject, stratified by academic level and school.

This increasing lack of environmental fit with student age may be ameliorated through specific school strategies targeting teachers, classroom environments, school structures and education policies *(35)*. The HBSC data, in combination with complex analyses of education systems across countries, may yield insights into how certain systems are providing a more developmentally appropriate school environment.

The gender pattern is less clear. Academia has increasingly focused in recent years on understanding how and why the school environment is gender biased in favour of girls *(37)*. The findings support this view, to an extent: girls tend to like school better and report higher school performance, although there is virtually no difference in gender perceptions of classmate support. Nevertheless, girls' liking of school decreases more drastically across ages, with little difference found by age 15. Boys and girls report increasing school pressure with age, but girls experience more pressure by age 15.

The findings reinforce those of other studies *(38,39)* by showing that higher family affluence is consistently associated with higher perceived academic achievement. Family affluence is suggested to have a direct influence on school performance by enabling parents to reflect the relative importance they ascribe to education through providing more educational resources at home and possibly spending more time helping their children *(40)*.

A low-affluence background does not, however, automatically mean a poor school experience. Young people with high self-efficacy are more willing to invest in learning to overcome difficulties *(41)*, and strengthening relationships between young people and their classmates and teachers can develop self-efficacy *(29,41,42)*. The school environment can therefore be used to bolster young people's resources and, in turn, develop positive health and education outcomes irrespective of family affluence.

POLICY REFLECTIONS

Schools have roles beyond nurturing academic achievement, including promoting students' health and well-being *(40)*. The importance of studying school climate, sometimes called school culture or school environment *(41)*, has consequently gained

prominence. A positive school climate, including supportive, caring teachers, is associated not only with higher academic achievement but also with better self-reporting of students' health, well-being and health behaviours *(43)*.

A positive school climate can be created at classroom and school levels. In the classroom, teachers must be adequately prepared and motivated to meet students' needs through sensitive and responsive pedagogical interactions (*42*). Modifications that appear to have merit include:

- establishing a caring atmosphere that promotes autonomy;
- providing positive feedback;
- not publicly humiliating students who perform poorly; and
- identifying and promoting young people's special interests and skills to acknowledge that schools value the diversity they bring *(44)*.

Strategies and approaches to achieve a positive developmental atmosphere in schools are therefore recommended for pre- and in-service teacher training *(40)*.

At school level, implementation of the concept of the health-promoting school, which not only addresses lifestyle factors such as dieting and physical activity but also social factors, has shown promise in:

- creating a positive school climate;
- developing and maintaining a democratic and participatory school community; and
- implementing a diversity of learning and teaching strategies to better promote student engagement *(45)*.

Health-promoting school outcomes may be largely influenced by teachers' work, organization of the school and relationships with parents and the wider community *(46)*. They can also be influenced by the particular historical, political and cultural context of a school system. Achieving desired health-promoting school outcomes is more complicated and challenging in countries that, for example, have an unstable or highly competitive school system or maintain a more traditional focus on theoretical knowledge, to the detriment of practical competencies, group work and student interaction with teachers and other students.

Comparison of school systems and corresponding HBSC findings on students' school experience may aid identification of facets of school systems that seem to promote a positive school environment and experience for young people.

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