

Temporal trends in teenage relationship abuse among Welsh adolescents: analysis of the Student Health and Wellbeing Survey, 2017-2025

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Abstract

Objectives

Teenage relationship abuse (TRA) affects young people under 16 but remains largely invisible in national data. This study examines temporal trends in TRA prevalence among Welsh adolescents and the age gradient in TRA by school year group.

Study design

Descriptive analysis of repeated self-report cross-sectional data.

Methods

Data from four survey years (2017, 2019, 2023, 2025) of the Welsh School Health Research Network (SHRN) Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (SHWS) were analysed, comprising 345,796 pupils aged 11–16 from all maintained secondary schools in Wales. TRA victimisation and perpetration were measured using six items. Logistic regression tested for change across survey years, with year as a categorical predictor (2017 reference).

Results

Across the four survey years, one in five pupils reported TRA victimisation and one in eight reported perpetration. All six TRA outcomes increased between 2017 and 2023 (victimisation: 19.0% to 21.7%; perpetration: 13.1% to 14.6%), before declining in 2025. By 2025, any victimisation and

physical perpetration had returned to 2017 levels; emotional victimisation remained elevated; other outcomes fell below 2017 levels. Bidirectionality was the dominant pattern and sole perpetration remained rare across all year groups. TRA of any form was present from Year 7 (11.7%), rising to 29.6% by Year 11, including 19.3% of Year 11 pupils reporting both victimisation and perpetration in 2025.

Conclusions

TRA among adolescents in Wales increased between 2017 and 2023 before declining in 2025, with a mixed pattern. Bidirectionality is the dominant pattern, challenging simple victim/perpetrator framings. TRA is present from Year 7, indicating that earlier universal intervention is needed.

Keywords

Teenage relationship abuse, Dating and Relationship violence, Prevalence, Temporal trends, School survey

Introduction

Teenage relationship abuse (TRA) or teen dating and relationship violence, which includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse in young people's intimate relationships, is a growing public health concern. TRA has significant associations with other risk markers including (cyber)bullying, sexting and substance use,¹ as well as negative short and long-term health and social consequences.² Globally, around 24% of women and girls aged 15–19 have experienced intimate partner violence,³ yet the evidence base remains fragmented, largely drawn from North America, and particularly limited for those under 16 who fall outside the UK statutory definition of domestic abuse.² The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) finds that those aged 16 to 24 are more likely than any other age group to experience domestic abuse, but the questions are not extended to those under the age of 16, leaving a gap in understanding of prevalence.⁴ While the Youth Endowment Fund found 39% of 13–17-year-olds had experienced TRA,⁵ changes to the survey questions between years make trend analysis unreliable. Using the 2017 School Health Research Network (SHRN) Student Health and Wellbeing Survey (SHWS) in Wales, Young et al⁶ found that almost a quarter of 11–16-year-olds who had ever been in a relationship reported emotional victimisation and 16% physical victimisation. Trends in TRA, and longitudinal prevalence data covering TRA victimisation, perpetration, and bidirectionality, remain rare internationally for young adolescents.

This study therefore set out to address this gap, by a) presenting the temporal trends in TRA prevalence between 2017 and 2025 across Wales and b) examining the age effects in TRA prevalence by school year group.

Methods

Study design and respondents

The SHWS is a biennial self-completion survey for students aged 11 to 16 administered across all state-funded secondary schools in Walesⁱ. It has a repeated cross-sectional design with data

available for 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023 and 2025. The response rate among schools is over 90% per survey year, and between 65% (2017) and 75% (2023, 2025) among pupils in participating schools.⁷ Data from 2021 was excluded when TRA questions were not asked.

Measures

Questions around TRA victimisation and perpetrationⁱⁱ were asked to participants who answered yes to 'have you ever been 'seeing', 'dating' or 'going out with' someone?'. Based on measures designed by Barter et al,⁸ participants were asked to indicate how often each of the following had occurred: 'a partner has made hurtful comments towards me' (emotional victimisation), 'a partner has pushed, shoved or slapped me' or '... punched or kicked or beat me up' (physical victimisation). Perpetration was measured using equivalent items: 'I have made hurtful comments to a partner', 'I have pushed, shoved or slapped a partner' and 'I have punched or kicked or beat up a partner'. Response options were 'never', 'once', 'a few times', 'often' and 'I do not want to answer', with valid responses being combined into binary indicators of ever experiencing victimisation or perpetration of emotional and physical abuse. The whole-population sample (N = 345,796) was used for the main analysis, with pupils who reported never having been in a relationship coded as not having experienced TRA. Crossover was defined as reporting both victimisation and perpetration.

Statistical analysis

Logistic regression tested for significant change between survey years for each outcome, with year treated as a categorical predictor and 2017 as the reference category, reflecting the non-linear pattern observed across waves. Resulting odds ratios are reported with their associated 95% confidence intervals (Table 1 in Data Supplement). Survey year intervals are unequal due to the exclusion of 2021. Due to the census approach in data collection there were no design weights. Prevalence estimates should be interpreted as population-level proportions rather than individual-level probabilities.

Results

Figure 1A shows that, among the whole population, all six TRA outcomes have increased between 2017 and 2023, before declining in 2025. Prevalence of any victimisation rose from 19.0% in 2017 to a peak of 21.7% in 2023, before falling to 19.2% in 2025. Any perpetration followed a similar pattern, rising from 13.1% to 14.6% by 2023, then falling to 12.2% in 2025. The steepest rise in 2023 was seen in emotional victimisation, which increased from 15.9% to 19.2% before falling back to 17.2% in 2025. Physical victimisation showed the most modest change overall, rising from 9.9% to 11.1% in 2023 and falling to 9.5% in 2025.

Table 1 in the Data Supplement presents odds ratios from logistic regression with survey year as a categorical predictor (2017 as reference). All six outcomes were significantly elevated in 2023 relative to 2017. By 2025, this picture was more mixed: any victimisation and physical perpetration had returned to levels statistically indistinguishable from 2017, whereas emotional victimisation remained significantly elevated, and physical victimisation, any perpetration and emotional perpetration had fallen significantly below 2017 levels.

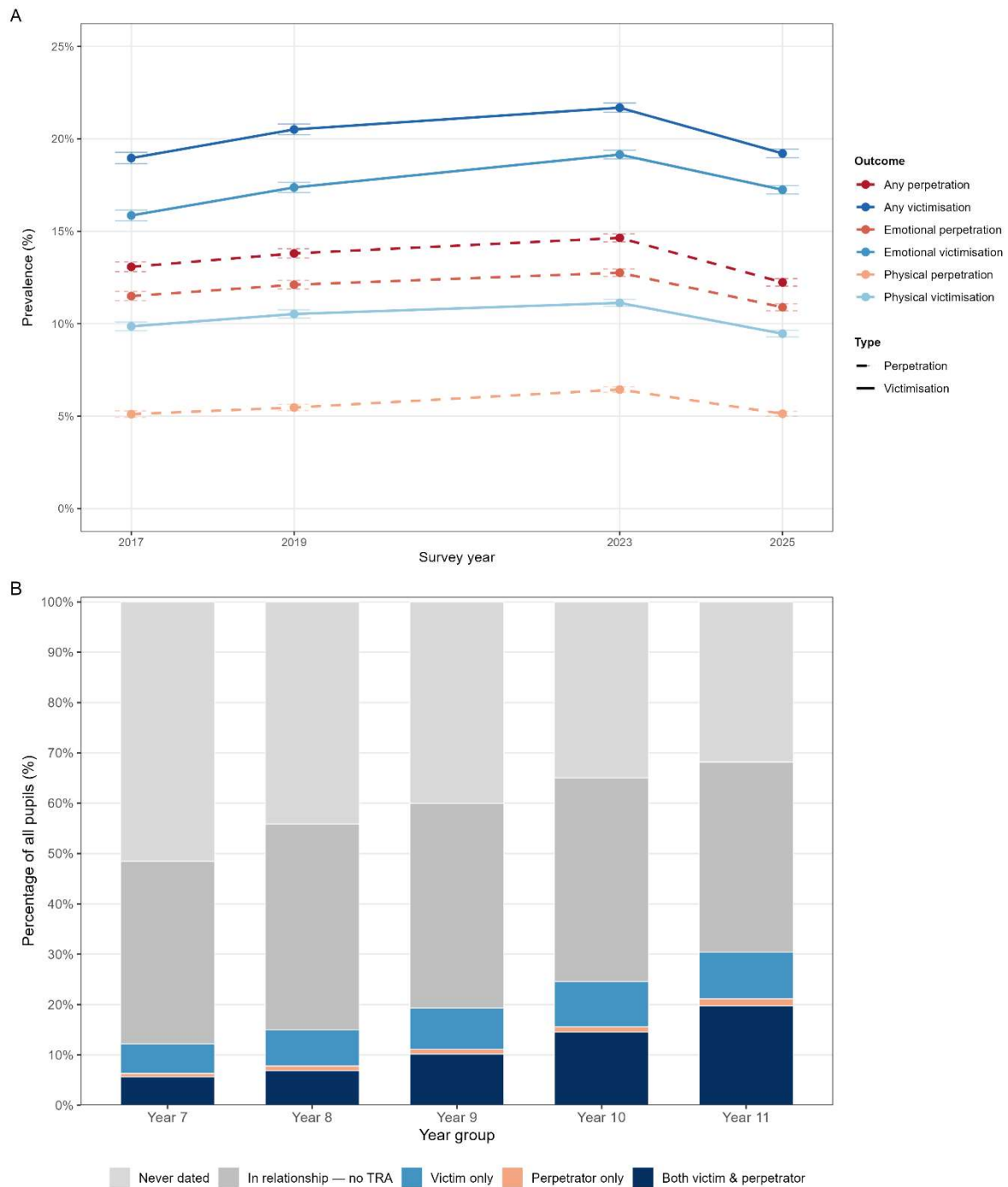


Figure 1. (A) Prevalence of TRA outcomes among adolescents in Wales across four SHWS years (2017, 2019, 2023, 2025) with 95% confidence intervals. Whole-population sample ($n=345,796$). (B) TRA by year group in 2025 SHWS.

Analysis by school year group shows that the proportion of those who have never dated reduces from 49.7% in Year 7 to 31.0% in Year 11 (Figure 1B). More pupils have TRA experience in older years, rising from 11.7% of all pupils in year 7 to 29.6% by year 11. These percentages reflect the proportion of all pupils in each year group, including those who have never dated. Perpetrators of

any form of TRA represent a small percentage across years ranging from 0.6% in year 7 to 1.4% in year 11, whereas being both victim and perpetrator grows from 5.4% to 19.3%, highlighting the predominantly bidirectional nature of TRA in this age group. Victimization increases more modestly from 5.6% in year 7 to 9.0% in year 11. The 2023–2025 decline seen in Figure 1A was broadly consistent across all year groups (Supplementary Table 2), suggesting it is not driven by a particular age group.

Discussion

Our analysis confirms that TRA victimisation and perpetration remain prevalent among 11- to 16-year-olds. TRA increased between 2017 and 2023 before decreasing in 2025. The exception is emotional victimisation which both rose faster and remained at increased levels.

The causes of both the upward trend to 2023 and subsequent decline are not possible to determine from this data. The rise to 2023 coincides with a period of intensified social media use and shifting online relationship dynamics. The 2023–2025 decline is harder to explain. It is consistent across year groups, which argues against a cohort-specific effect. One possible explanation is the substantial growth in public and media awareness of TRA during this time. Another possible explanation is Welsh Government intervention in the form of a mandatory roll out of Relationships and Sexuality Education in Welsh Schools as part of the Whole School Approach in 2022.⁹ Alongside this was the publication of Wales Without Violence in 2023: a shared framework for preventing violence among children and young people.¹⁰ While we cannot show causality, it will be useful to track changes in these indicators in upcoming rounds of the student survey, potentially linking it to whether or not schools received training in VAWDASV and RSE in the school environment questionnaire.

A key finding across all four survey years is the bidirectional nature of TRA in under 16s. Sole perpetration is rare, most perpetrators are also victims, which challenges a more simplistic victim/perpetrator binary. Interventions that separate young people into victim and perpetrator groups may therefore be inappropriate for this age group.

Our findings around age demonstrate that TRA already occurs in year 7 and increases thereon, demonstrating the importance of early and experience-near intervention.

There are limitations to this analysis. The findings are based on cross-sectional data and cannot establish causation or map individual trajectories. These findings are specific to Wales, where education and public health policy are devolved, and thus the generalisability to the whole of the UK is uncertain. The survey items do not capture contextual information or consequences such as severity and harm nor the nature of bidirectional TRA (e.g. which came first, self-defence). The TRA items used in this study were developed specifically for use with adolescents and are not directly comparable to measures used in adult domestic abuse surveys.

Conclusions

This study provides the first temporal trends in TRA among under 16-year-olds, finding significant increases in all TRA outcomes between 2017 and 2023, and a decline in 2025. The causes of this non-linear pattern cannot be determined from this data and warrant further investigation. Emotional victimisation had the largest increase in absolute terms, bidirectionality in victimisation

and perpetration was the dominant pattern across all survey years, and TRA was present from the first year of secondary school with the proportion affected increasing each subsequent school year. These findings have direct implications for prevention, with universal intervention and support needed before and continuing into secondary school which recognises the bidirectional nature of abuse among this age group.

Author statements

Ethical approval

These secondary analyses were approved by the committee at City St George's, University of London that considers low risk applications (ETH2526-0834).

Funding

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This paper forms part of a broader programme of research. A series of papers are planned or in preparation using the same dataset, including one on correlates of TRA victimisation and perpetration and another on social support and TRA. There is also ongoing research analysing TRA in police and social care data, alongside participatory research with young people with lived experience of TRA and practitioners working with this age group. Together these studies aim to build the evidence base needed to develop support, interventions and prevention for young people.

Competing interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material, including the full odds ratio tables, year-group breakdowns, and crossover analyses referenced throughout this paper, is included following the references below

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Supplementary tables

*Supplementary Table 1. Prevalence of TRA outcomes by survey year with odds ratios from logistic regression, whole-population sample (n = 345,796). The whole-population sample comprised pupils who either reported never having dated (coded as not having experienced TRA, n = 132,343) or reported dating and gave a valid response to the victimisation items (n = 213,453). A further 137,785 pupils were excluded: 127,696 with no valid response to the dating question, and 10,089 who reported dating but did not answer the victimisation items. Prevalence shown as % (95% CI). Year is treated as a categorical predictor with 2017 as the reference category. Survey year intervals are unequal. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.*

Any victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	19.0% (18.7–19.3%)	61,641	ref.
2019	20.5% (20.2–20.8%)	74,590	1.10 (1.07–1.13)***
2023	21.7% (21.4–21.9%)	104,395	1.18 (1.15–1.21)***
2025	19.2% (19.0–19.5%)	105,170	1.02 (0.99–1.04)

Emotional victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	15.9% (15.6–16.1%)	61,594	ref.
2019	17.4% (17.1–17.6%)	74,530	1.12 (1.08–1.15)***
2023	19.2% (18.9–19.4%)	104,306	1.26 (1.22–1.29)***
2025	17.2% (17.0–17.5%)	105,108	1.11 (1.08–1.14)***

Physical victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	9.9% (9.6–10.1%)	61,547	ref.

Physical victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2019	10.5% (10.3–10.7%)	74,463	1.08 (1.04–1.11)***
2023	11.1% (10.9–11.3%)	104,174	1.14 (1.11–1.18)***
2025	9.5% (9.3–9.6%)	104,975	0.96 (0.92–0.99)**

Any perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	13.1% (12.8–13.3%)	61,526	ref.
2019	13.8% (13.6–14.1%)	74,447	1.06 (1.03–1.10)***
2023	14.6% (14.4–14.9%)	104,203	1.14 (1.11–1.17)***
2025	12.2% (12.0–12.4%)	105,003	0.93 (0.90–0.95)***

Emotional perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	11.5% (11.2–11.7%)	61,536	ref.
2019	12.1% (11.9–12.3%)	74,458	1.06 (1.03–1.10)***
2023	12.8% (12.6–13.0%)	104,213	1.13 (1.09–1.16)***
2025	10.9% (10.7–11.1%)	105,012	0.94 (0.91–0.97)***

Physical perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	5.1% (4.9–5.3%)	61,539	ref.
2019	5.5% (5.3–5.6%)	74,469	1.07 (1.02–1.13)**
2023	6.4% (6.3–6.6%)	104,182	1.28 (1.22–1.34)***
2025	5.1% (5.0–5.3%)	105,004	1.00 (0.96–1.05)

Supplementary Table 1b. Ever-dated sample comparison. For comparability with prior SHWS publications (Young et al., 2021; Couturiaux et al., 2021), this table repeats the Table 1 analysis restricted to pupils who reported ever having been in a relationship (n = 213,453). This is not the denominator used in the main paper (see Table 1 which uses the whole-population sample).

Any victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	28.9% (28.5–29.4%)	40,378	ref.
2019	32.2% (31.8–32.6%)	47,534	1.16 (1.13–1.20)***
2023	35.9% (35.6–36.3%)	62,981	1.38 (1.34–1.42)***
2025	32.3% (31.9–32.7%)	62,560	1.17 (1.14–1.20)***

Emotional victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	24.2% (23.8–24.6%)	40,331	ref.
2019	27.3% (26.9–27.7%)	47,474	1.17 (1.14–1.21)***
2023	31.8% (31.4–32.1%)	62,892	1.46 (1.42–1.50)***
2025	29.0% (28.7–29.4%)	62,498	1.28 (1.24–1.32)***

Physical victimisation	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	15.1% (14.7–15.4%)	40,284	ref.
2019	16.5% (16.2–16.9%)	47,407	1.12 (1.08–1.16)***
2023	18.5% (18.2–18.8%)	62,760	1.28 (1.24–1.32)***
2025	15.9% (15.6–16.2%)	62,365	1.07 (1.03–1.11)***

Any perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	20.0% (19.6–20.4%)	40,263	ref.
2019	21.7% (21.3–22.1%)	47,391	1.11 (1.07–1.15)***
2023	24.3% (24.0–24.6%)	62,789	1.29 (1.25–1.33)***

Any perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2025	20.6% (20.3–20.9%)	62,393	1.04 (1.01–1.07)*

Emotional perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	17.6% (17.2–17.9%)	40,273	ref.
2019	19.0% (18.7–19.4%)	47,402	1.10 (1.07–1.14)***
2023	21.2% (20.9–21.5%)	62,799	1.26 (1.22–1.30)***
2025	18.3% (18.0–18.6%)	62,402	1.05 (1.02–1.09)**

Physical perpetration	Prevalence % (95% CI)	N	OR vs 2017 (95% CI)
2017	7.8% (7.5–8.1%)	40,276	ref.
2019	8.6% (8.3–8.8%)	47,413	1.11 (1.06–1.16)***
2023	10.7% (10.4–10.9%)	62,768	1.41 (1.35–1.48)***
2025	8.6% (8.4–8.9%)	62,394	1.12 (1.07–1.17)***

Supplementary Table 2. Prevalence of TRA outcomes by survey year and year group, SHWS 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025. Whole-population sample (never-dated pupils coded as 0/no TRA on every outcome).

Survey year	Year group	n	Any victim %	Emot. victim %	Phys. victim %	Any perp %	Emot. perp %	Phys. perp %
2017	Year 7	12,545	12.0	8.7	7.6	6.3	4.8	3.5
2017	Year 8	13,284	14.2	11.2	7.8	8.7	7.1	3.7
2017	Year 9	13,391	18.8	15.6	9.8	13.0	11.3	5.1
2017	Year 10	11,706	23.3	20.1	11.7	17.0	15.3	6.4
2017	Year 11	10,715	28.4	25.6	13.2	22.2	20.8	7.4
2019	Year 7	15,489	13.7	10.2	8.8	7.7	5.9	4.4
2019	Year 8	15,650	17.0	13.4	9.4	10.2	8.4	4.6
2019	Year 9	15,652	20.2	17.2	10.0	13.4	11.7	5.4
2019	Year 10	14,586	24.7	21.7	12.1	17.9	16.2	6.6
2019	Year 11	13,213	28.5	25.9	12.7	21.2	19.7	6.6
2023	Year 7	20,855	13.9	11.2	8.3	8.0	6.0	4.8
2023	Year 8	21,857	16.9	14.3	8.9	10.4	8.4	5.4
2023	Year 9	22,129	21.1	18.7	10.9	13.8	11.9	6.2

Survey year	Year group	n	Any victim %	Emot. victim %	Phys. victim %	Any perp %	Emot. perp %	Phys. perp %
2023	Year 10	20,219	26.9	24.1	13.6	19.2	17.2	8.0
2023	Year 11	19,335	30.7	28.5	14.3	22.8	21.2	8.0
2025	Year 7	20,633	11.6	9.5	6.9	6.3	4.8	3.8
2025	Year 8	21,339	14.2	12.2	7.2	7.8	6.4	3.8
2025	Year 9	22,671	18.5	16.6	8.8	11.1	9.8	4.8
2025	Year 10	21,364	23.6	21.6	11.4	15.6	14.3	6.1
2025	Year 11	19,163	29.0	27.1	13.4	21.2	19.9	7.4

Supplementary Table 3. Population-level distribution of TRA victimisation, perpetration and crossover by survey year, SHWS 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025. Values show n (% of all pupils with valid ever-dated and TRA responses). Never dated = reported never having been in a relationship. In relationship — no TRA = dated but no TRA reported. Crossover = both victim and perpetrator.

	Category	2017	2019	2023	2025
Victimisation	Never dated	21,263 (34.4%)	27,056 (36.2%)	41,414 (39.6%)	42,610 (40.4%)
Victimisation	In relationship — no TRA	28,986 (46.9%)	32,673 (43.7%)	40,956 (39.1%)	42,875 (40.7%)
Victimisation	Emotional only	5,527 (8.9%)	7,334 (9.8%)	10,827 (10.3%)	10,081 (9.6%)

	Category	2017	2019	2023	2025
Victimisation	Physical only	1,874 (3.0%)	2,290 (3.1%)	2,576 (2.5%)	2,016 (1.9%)
Victimisation	Both emotional & physical	4,146 (6.7%)	5,487 (7.3%)	8,927 (8.5%)	7,852 (7.4%)
Perpetration	Never dated	21,263 (34.4%)	27,056 (36.2%)	41,414 (39.6%)	42,610 (40.4%)
Perpetration	In relationship — no TRA	32,539 (52.6%)	37,522 (50.1%)	48,131 (46.0%)	50,021 (47.5%)
Perpetration	Emotional only	4,885 (7.9%)	6,189 (8.3%)	8,483 (8.1%)	7,409 (7.0%)
Perpetration	Physical only	950 (1.5%)	1,239 (1.7%)	1,911 (1.8%)	1,389 (1.3%)
Perpetration	Both emotional & physical	2,172 (3.5%)	2,817 (3.8%)	4,758 (4.5%)	3,983 (3.8%)
Crossover	Never dated	21,263 (34.6%)	27,056 (36.4%)	41,414 (39.9%)	42,610 (40.7%)
Crossover	In relationship — no TRA	33,070 (53.9%)	38,052 (51.2%)	48,705 (46.9%)	50,524 (48.2%)
Crossover	Emotional only	3,053 (5.0%)	3,904 (5.3%)	5,403 (5.2%)	4,757 (4.5%)
Crossover	Physical only	421 (0.7%)	626 (0.8%)	904 (0.9%)	601 (0.6%)
Crossover	Both emotional & physical	3,599 (5.9%)	4,652 (6.3%)	7,484 (7.2%)	6,295 (6.0%)

Supplementary Table 4. Breakdown of crossover TRA (both victim and perpetrator) by type, SHWS 2017, 2019, 2023, 2025. Denominator = all pupils with valid ever-dated and TRA responses who reported dating. Not crossover = dated but not both victim and perpetrator. Emotional only = emotional victim and emotional perpetrator only. Physical only = physical victim and physical perpetrator only. Mixed = victim of one type and perpetrator of another. Both emotional & physical = emotional and physical victim and perpetrator.

Crossover category	2017	2019	2023	2025
Not crossover	33,070 (82.4%)	38,052 (80.6%)	48,705 (77.9%)	50,524 (81.3%)
Emotional only	3,053 (7.6%)	3,904 (8.3%)	5,403 (8.6%)	4,757 (7.7%)
Physical only	421 (1.0%)	626 (1.3%)	904 (1.4%)	601 (1.0%)
Mixed types	154 (0.4%)	191 (0.4%)	194 (0.3%)	132 (0.2%)
Both emotional & physical	3,445 (8.6%)	4,461 (9.4%)	7,290 (11.7%)	6,163 (9.9%)

i 97.9% of students in secondary schools in Wales are in state funded education.

ii Throughout this paper we use the term 'perpetration' to describe harmful behaviours reported by young people in the context of intimate relationships. We recognise that this terminology carries connotations of intent and culpability that may not be appropriate for adolescents, many of whom are simultaneously experiencing victimisation themselves. The high prevalence of bidirectional TRA in this sample, where most young people reporting harmful behaviour are also victims, underscores the limitations of binary victim/perpetrator framing. Bidirectionality here reflects concurrent self-report of both experiences and should not be read as implying equivalence between behaviours; it cannot distinguish self-defensive or retaliatory acts from other patterns of abuse.