

The university and occupational aspirations of UK teenagers: how do they vary by gender?

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 14 Survey

MCS Age 14 Survey

The most recent survey of the Millennium Cohort Study was the Age 14 Sweep, which took place between January 2015 and March 2016. The participants were interviewed face to face and completed a questionnaire and two cognitive assessments.

The next sweep will take place in 2018 when the participants are aged 17.

You can find out more about the data collected from the Age 14 Sweep on our website. The data from this and all previous sweeps are available from the UK Data Service.

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Introduction

Despite substantial increases in more egalitarian attitudes and in the percentage of women in paid work over the last few decades, aspirations for the future start to differ between boys and girls from an early age.

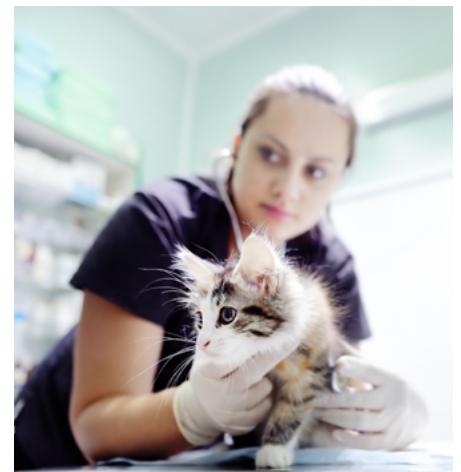
When boys and girls set their sights on career paths dominated by their own sex, this reinforces the gender divide. Even as increasing numbers

of young women succeed in higher education, there are substantial gender differences in today's teenagers' aspirations for a well-paid career, and in the types of jobs they want to do.

This briefing is part of a series on different topics, based on the most recent data from the Millennium Cohort Study.

Key findings

- Teenage girls remain significantly more likely to aspire to going to university, and to having a professional or managerial job, than otherwise similar teenage boys.
- Teenagers who are bigger risk takers are less likely to expect to go to university, but are more likely to aspire to jobs dominated by the opposite sex.
- In spite of aiming high in their education and careers, girls are more likely to aspire to typically female occupations, and to jobs that earn a relatively lower wage, than those boys aspire to.
- Teenagers' own university expectations, and those held by their parents, are both positively associated with aspirations for a professional or managerial occupation and for a higher earning job.



Our approach

We looked at the university expectations and occupational aspirations of over 7,700 teenagers in the Millennium Cohort Study who were surveyed at age 14. The teenagers were asked how likely it was, on a scale of 0-100%, that they would go to university. They were also asked what they would like to be when they grew up. This provided

information on whether they aspired to a professional or managerial occupation.

The teenagers' specific answers about their occupational aspirations were coded to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) codes. We then linked these codes to measures of labour market segregation and pay, using information from the Labour Force Survey. This enabled us to see if

there was a difference in the share of women and in the average hourly wages in the occupations teenage girls and boys aspired to.

We examined the differences in expectations between boys and girls and how far any differences can be explained by individual characteristics and family background, and which of these characteristics matter for young people's stated choices.

Findings

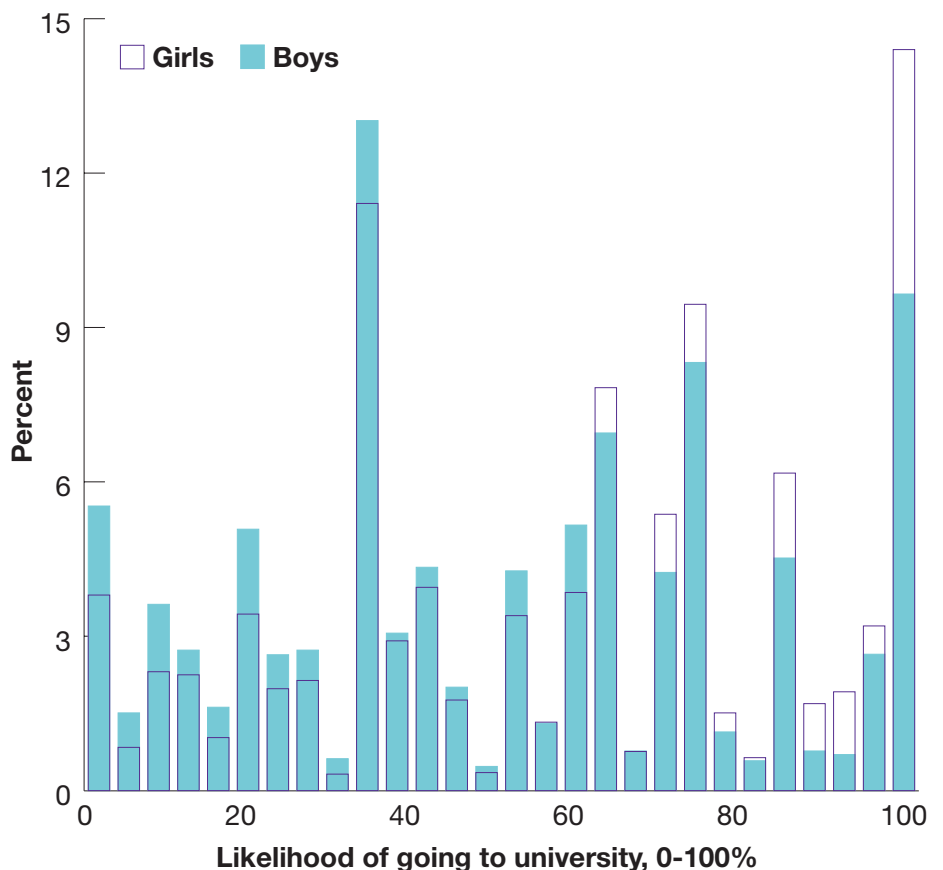
Teenagers' expectations of going to university

The teenagers were asked how likely it was they would go to university. Latest UCAS figures show that 42% of 18-year-old school leavers were accepted on to a university course in 2014¹. The expectations among 14-year-olds in 2015, when we surveyed them, were much higher than this.

As the chart here illustrates, only a few teenagers thought they had a less than 40% likelihood of going to university. A fair share thought their chances were around 50:50, but most thought their likelihood of going to university was 60% or higher.

On average, girls reported a 71% chance of going, whereas boys were less certain – their average expectation was 63%. More girls were 100% sure that they would go: 14.4% compared to 9.7% of boys.

FIGURE 1:
How likely do you think it is that you will go to university?



¹ <https://www.ucas.com/sites/default/files/eoc-report-2015-v2.pdf#page=37>

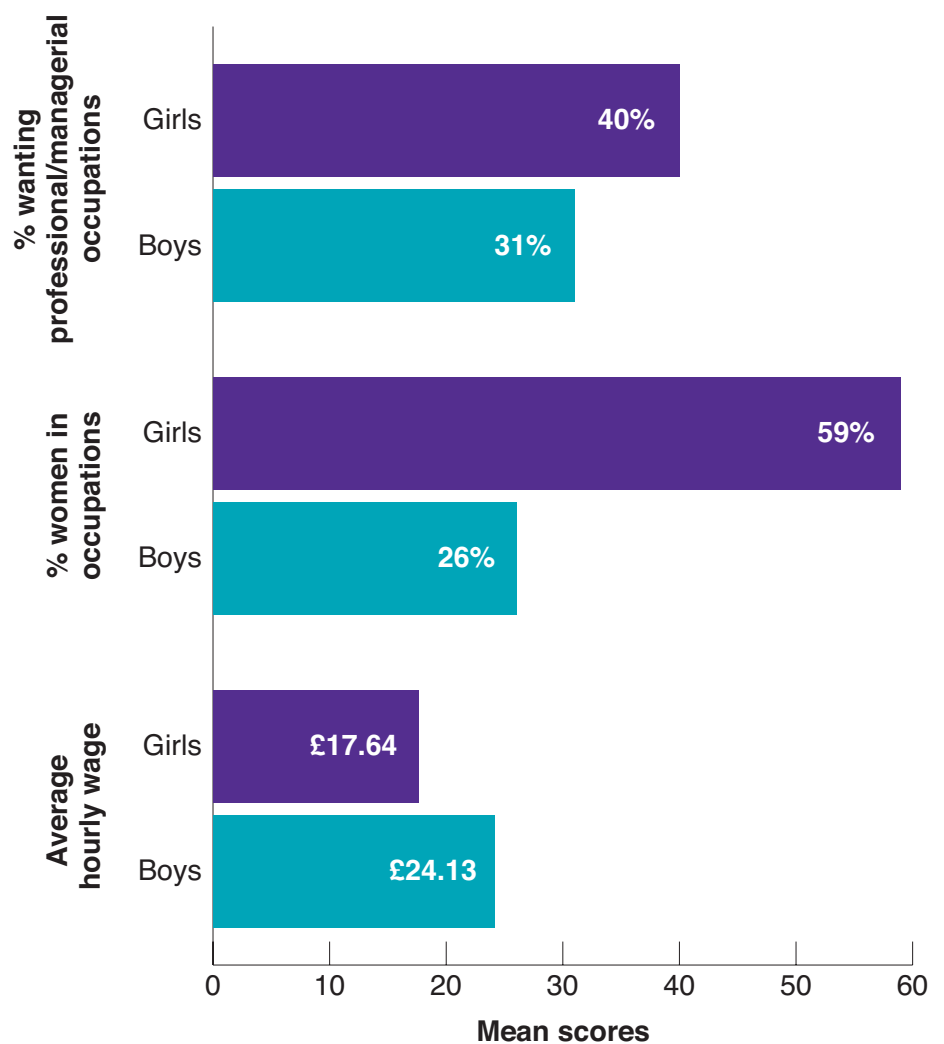
Occupational aspirations

Around 1 in 3 teenagers had aspirations for a professional or managerial occupation, but this was significantly higher for girls (40%) than boys (31%). Using information from the Labour Force Survey, we could identify the contemporary pay for the jobs the teenagers wanted to do and the share of women currently in those jobs.

Despite their higher aspirations for professional and managerial jobs, overall girls aspired to lower paying jobs: the average hourly wage for the occupations girls aspired to was a striking 27%, or £6.49, lower than that of boys.

Teenage girls were also more likely to want to work in occupations that were female-dominated; in the jobs they wanted to do, women currently account for 59% of the workforce. Boys wanted to work in male-dominated occupations, where women currently account for just 26% of the workforce.

FIGURE 4:
Occupation aspirations by gender



Can these differences be explained by other family and personal characteristics?

Even after controlling for a wide range of personal and family characteristics, teenage girls remained significantly more likely than boys to expect to go to university and to aspire towards a professional or managerial occupation, but also to work in a female-dominated occupation and earn a relatively lower wage.

We also found that if the teenager's parents had high hopes of them going to university, then they would

have higher university expectations themselves, even when taking account of other characteristics. Both parents' and teenagers' own university expectations were associated with teenagers having higher occupational aspirations.

Interestingly, we also found that boys who were bigger risk takers were less likely to aspire to go to university, but aspired to higher paid jobs and less male-dominated ones.

“Despite their higher aspirations for professional and managerial jobs, overall girls aspired to lower paying jobs.”

Conclusions

The findings suggest that today's teenagers continue to aspire towards strongly gendered career choices that will have implications for gender inequality and occupational segregation in the future. The study suggests that more work needs to be done with boys as well as girls to enable

them to consider different options and opportunities at the time they make choices that will shape their subsequent education and ultimately their job. The findings also show the continuing importance of parental expectations in shaping boys' and girls' plans for higher education and high status jobs.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study has been following the lives of over 19,500 children since they were born in the UK at the turn of the new century. It's one of four longitudinal studies managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

The study carries out regular surveys (known as 'sweeps') to collect information about participants' physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and

behavioural development over time, alongside detailed information on their daily life, behaviour and experiences. The data collected is a rich and unique resource for researchers across a range of disciplines.

The Millennium Cohort Study has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and a consortium of government departments. It would not have been possible without the important contributions of the participants and their families.

For more information

This briefing is a summary of the working paper, *Is the future female?* Educational and occupational aspirations of teenage boys and girls in the UK, by Lucinda Platt and Sam Parsons, available from the CLS website.

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“The findings show the continuing importance of parental expectations in shaping boys’ and girls’ plans for higher education and high status jobs.”

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