

Young people's experiences of unwanted sex

Findings from the 2021 Secondary Schools and Sexual Health Survey

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INTRODUCTION

The Australian government recently introduced compulsory 'consent' education into the Australian school curriculum, in part to address high rates of sexual violence in the Australian community. This study looks at experiences of unwanted sex and the context in which this occurred among a sample of Australian young people.

METHOD

We analyzed data from an Australian online **sexual health survey of 14–18-year-olds conducted in 2021 (n=6,841)**. Here we present findings related to experiences of unwanted sex and help seeking related to sexual violence. Pearson's Chi-squared analyses were used to compare differences between genders and sexual orientation.

RESULTS

When asked if they had **ever experienced unwanted sex, 23.7% (n = 1,618)** of young people indicated that they had.

Among non-binary young people, 26.5% (n = 129) reported they had experienced unwanted sex, while 28.7% (n = 1,277) of young women reported they had. This was a significantly higher number than young men (n = 212, 11.2%) (p<.001) (figure 1).

There were 844 (12.3%) young people who reported that they had been frightened of an intimate partner in the past 12 months.

Unwanted sex was more likely for LGBTQ people (27.5%, n = 784) compared to heterosexual people (21.0%, n = 829), $\chi^2(1, N = 6,793) = 39.1, p<.001$.

The average age at which participants had first experienced unwanted sex was 14.9 years (sd = 1.37).

Unwanted sex most commonly occurred in the context of a romantic relationship (figure 2), with 86.4% (n=1,375) reporting their most recent experience of forced sex was perpetrated by a male.

Verbal pressure was cited as contributing to unwanted sex followed by being worried about negative outcomes or being physically forced to have sex (Figure 3).

There were 366 (23.2%) young people who reported seeking help following unwanted sex. Non-binary people (41.8%, n = 51) were more likely to seek help than young women (22.3%, n = 276) and young men (18.3%, n = 39), $\chi^2(2, N = 1,575) = 27.1, p<.001$.

CONCLUSION

More than one in five young people in this study had experienced unwanted sex and, for many of these people, this occurred in the context of their romantic or sexual relationship. These findings underscore the urgency of school-based sexual consent and respectful relationships education.

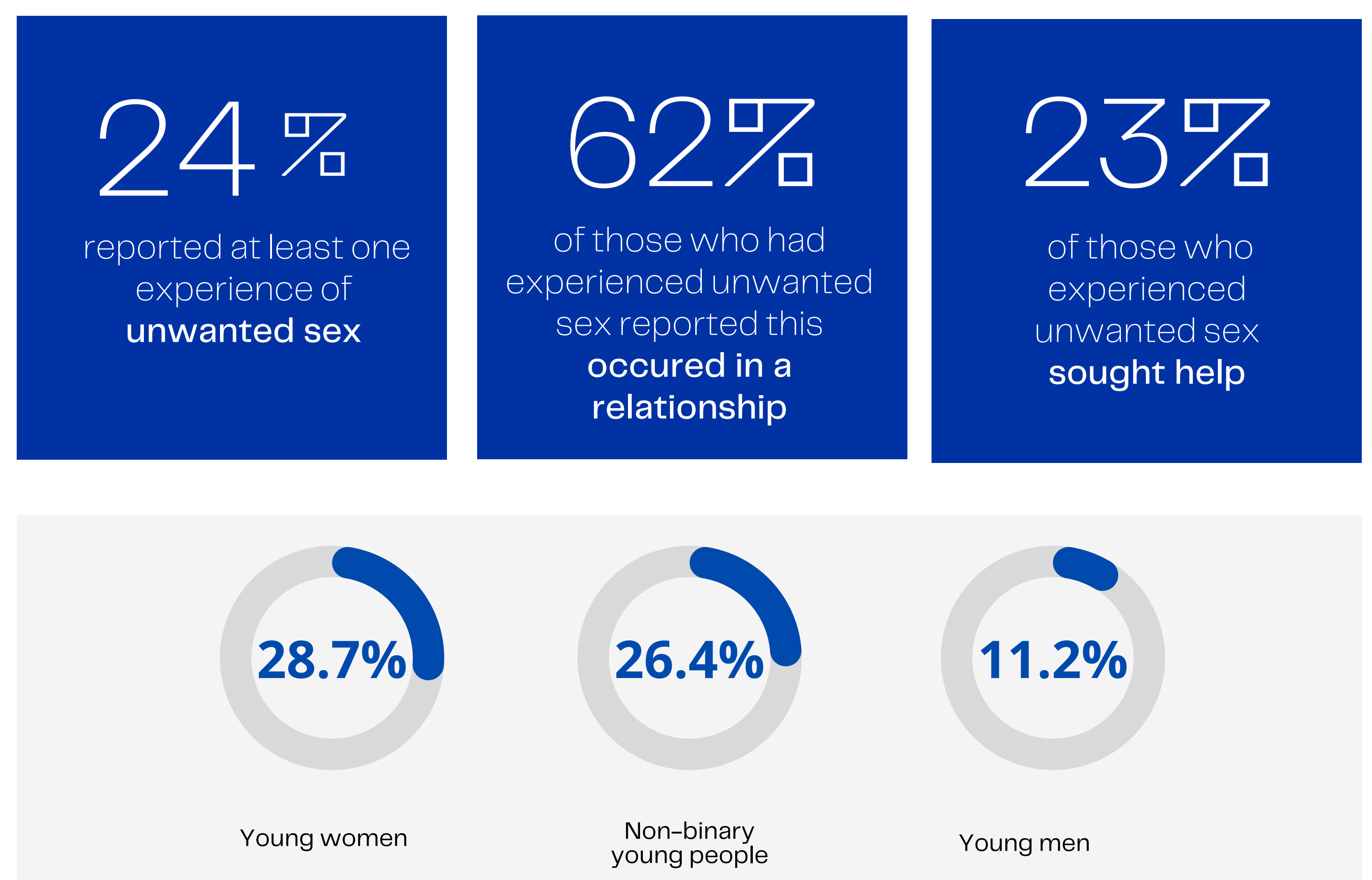


Figure 1. Percentage of young people who had experienced unwanted sex (n = 6,841).

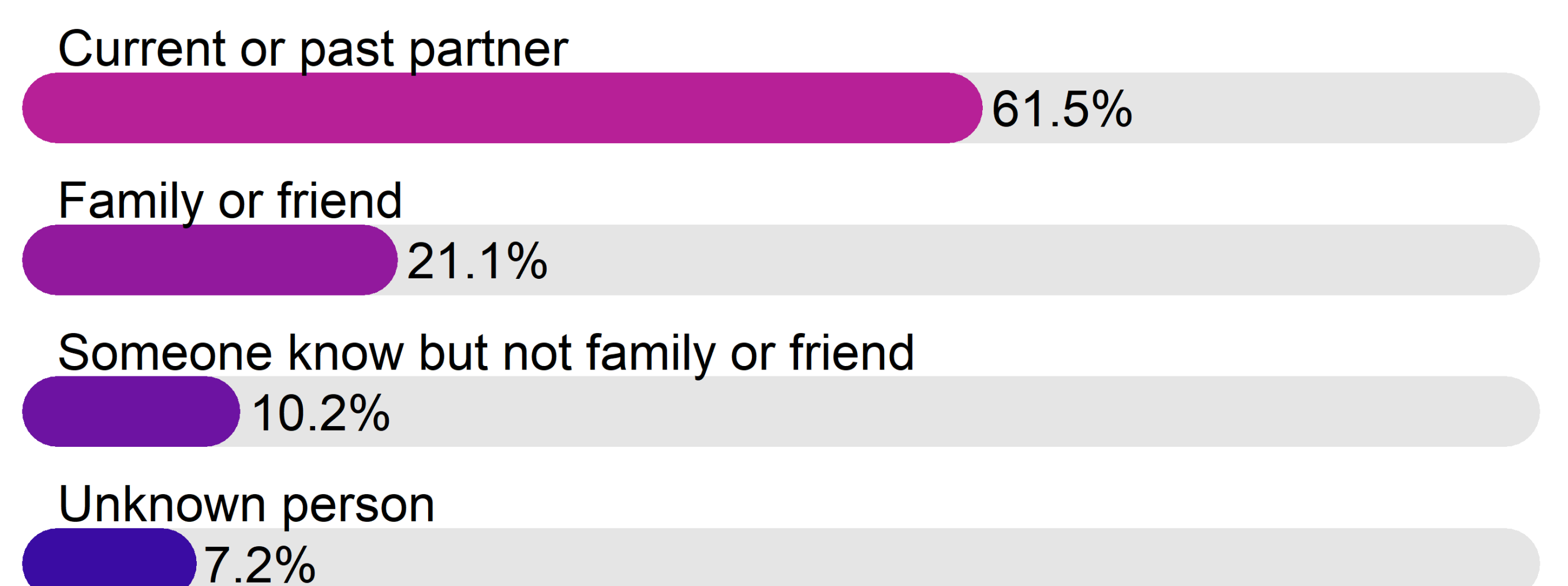


Figure 2. Relationship to perpetrator, most recent experience of unwanted sex (n=1618)

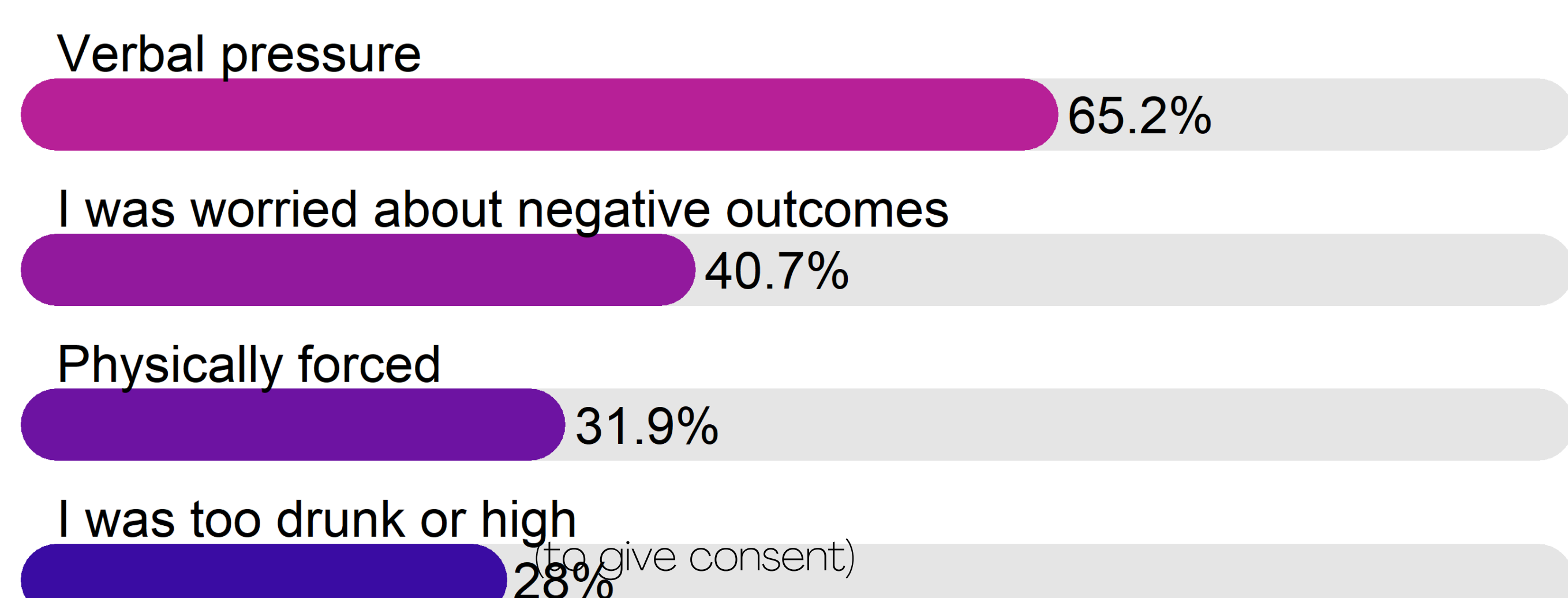
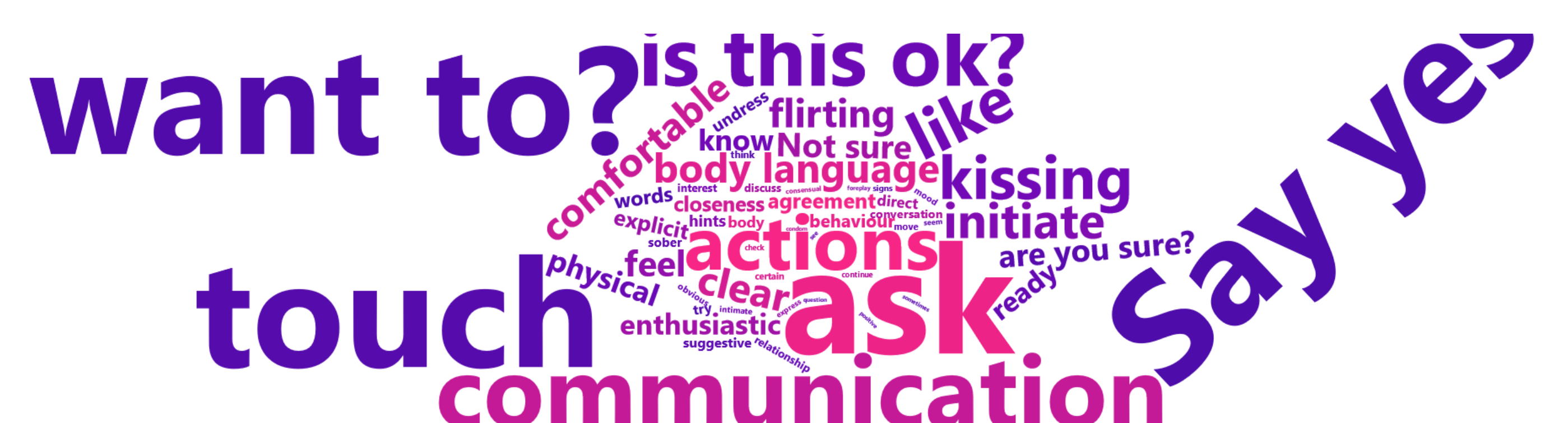


Figure 3. Context in which most recent experience of unwanted sex occurred (n=1618)



Young people's responses to the question "What words, phrases and behaviour might you or someone else use to show that sexual consent?" (n = 5,915)